



Living Love

Conversations along the way

Don Priest

Living Love

© Donald K. Priest BSc(Hons) DipEd GDipEd(EdComp) MEd(LeaderMgmt) MThSt, 2022.

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Introduction</i> | 1 |
| GENESIS AND REVELATION | 3 |
| Creation | 4 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Seven days | 4 |
| Act and story | 5 |
| New earth and new heavens | 6 |
| Woman and man, marriage and family | 7 |
| In the east | 7 |
| Not alone | 7 |
| Together | 8 |
| Forever | 9 |
| Death and suffering | 10 |
| Separation | 10 |
| Isolation | 10 |
| Anticipation | 11 |
| Cain and Abel | 12 |
| Reliance or refusal | 12 |
| Overcomer or overcome | 13 |
| Presence or absence | 13 |
| The self-sufficient society | 15 |
| East of Eden | 15 |
| Heroes and warriors | 16 |
| From the east | 16 |
| The people of God | 18 |
| Seth and Enoch | 18 |
| Noah and Abraham | 19 |
| God's covenant family | 20 |
| GOD IS NOT UP FOR RE-ELECTION | 21 |
| Introduction | 22 |
| God is sovereign | 23 |
| As God pleases | 23 |
| The Old Testament | 23 |
| The New Testament | 24 |
| Some questions | 25 |
| Jesus: Messiah, Servant and Lord | 26 |
| A coming king | 26 |
| Some prophecies | 26 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| The king came when Jesus was born | 27 |
| The prophecies were fulfilled | 27 |
| Some questions | 28 |
| Jesus: King of kings | 29 |
| Exalted king | 29 |
| God's nearby kingdom | 29 |
| Towards crucifixion | 30 |
| Crowned with glory and honour | 30 |
| Some questions | 31 |
| God the Father is sovereign | 32 |
| Father and Son | 32 |
| Jesus: The Father's king | 32 |
| The kingdom is the Father's | 34 |
| Some questions | 35 |
| God's Holy Spirit is Lord | 36 |
| Messiah and God's Holy Spirit | 36 |
| God's Promises | 36 |
| The Lord is the Spirit | 37 |
| Some questions | 38 |
| Life under God's sovereignty | 39 |
| God is not mocked | 39 |
| On earth as in heaven | 39 |
| God's kingdom people | 40 |
| Some questions | 41 |
| KNOWING GOD | 42 |
| Coming alive | 43 |
| Introduction | 43 |
| False knowing: Idolatry and Adultery | 43 |
| Knowing God is living and loving | 44 |
| Conclusion | 45 |
| God has spoken | 46 |
| Introduction | 46 |
| God's messengers | 46 |
| Jesus – God's living Word | 47 |
| Spirit of living God | 47 |
| Conclusion | 48 |
| The living God | 49 |
| Introduction | 49 |
| The word of the living God | 49 |
| God's word and God's Holy Spirit | 50 |
| Conclusion | 50 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Extra note on <i>word and</i> , and <i>words of</i> passages | 51 |
| Jesus the true Son | 52 |
| Introduction | 52 |
| The Son and his Father | 52 |
| The Son and the Spirit | 53 |
| Conclusion | 54 |
| Extra note on Jesus as Son of God in the book of Hebrews | 55 |
| Being like Jesus | 56 |
| Introduction | 56 |
| No longer orphans | 57 |
| The Spirit of Jesus' sonship | 57 |
| Conclusion | 58 |
| Pressing on | 59 |
| Introduction | 59 |
| God is with us | 59 |
| Sharing in suffering: taking up the cross | 60 |
| Conclusion | 60 |
| Extra note on guidance | 61 |
| Some questions | 62 |
| THE DECEIT OF EVIL AND THE MYSTERY OF GOD | 63 |
| Creation and deceit | 64 |
| Freedom | 64 |
| Life | 65 |
| Revealing the mystery – 1 | 66 |
| Anticipation | 66 |
| Disclosure | 66 |
| Revealing the mystery – 2 | 69 |
| Listening | 69 |
| Looking | 69 |
| Revealing the mystery – 3 | 71 |
| Hearing and seeing | 71 |
| Death wins and loses | 71 |
| Agents of the mystery – 1 | 73 |
| God's creative and redemptive message | 73 |
| God's reconciling and renewing ministries | 73 |
| Agents of the mystery – 2 | 75 |
| Wisdom, revelation and proclamation – 1 | 75 |
| Wisdom, revelation and proclamation – 2 | 75 |
| Agents of the mystery – 3 | 78 |
| Wisdom, revelation and proclamation – 3 | 78 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Agents of the mystery – a summary | 80 |
| Re-creation and revelation – 1 | 81 |
| Faith, hope and love | 81 |
| Worship and restoration | 82 |
| Re-creation and revelation – 2 | 84 |
| Transformed communities – 1 | 84 |
| Transformed communities – 2 | 84 |
| Transformed creation | 85 |
| PATHWAYS OF PEACE | 87 |
| Introduction | 88 |
| Covenant and peace | 89 |
| From Genesis to exile | 89 |
| Wisdom's message and other writings | 90 |
| The prophetic voice | 91 |
| Christ Jesus: peacemaker | 94 |
| His life and ministry | 94 |
| His death and resurrection | 95 |
| Proclaimers of peace | 98 |
| The good news of peace | 98 |
| The reign of peace | 99 |
| Greetings and benedictions | 101 |
| LIVING IN GOD'S LOVE AND PEACE | 102 |
| Introduction | 103 |
| An overview | 104 |
| The Father of glory – 1 | 106 |
| Greetings | 106 |
| The Father's blessings in Christ – 1 | 106 |
| The fullness of time | 107 |
| The Father of glory – 2 | 108 |
| Review | 108 |
| The Father's blessings in Christ – 2 | 108 |
| The body of Christ, the Father's fullness | 109 |
| The blood of Christ | 110 |
| Review | 110 |
| Cosmic rebellion and divine mercy | 110 |
| Access through Christ, in one Spirit to the Father | 111 |
| The fullness of God | 112 |
| Review | 112 |
| The mystery of Christ | 112 |
| Before the Father | 113 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| The unity of the Spirit | 115 |
| Review | 115 |
| Filling everything | 115 |
| Equipping the saints | 116 |
| The fragrance of Christ | 118 |
| Review | 118 |
| Imitators of God | 118 |
| Trinitarian life | 119 |
| Benediction | 120 |
| Extra notes: Other mentions of the Ephesian church | 120 |
| A SYMPHONY OF LIGHT, LIFE AND LOVE | 121 |
| Heard, seen and touched | 122 |
| The word of life | 122 |
| Walking in the light | 122 |
| Advocates together | 123 |
| Walking, loving and living | 124 |
| Walking as Jesus did | 124 |
| Living in light and love | 124 |
| Anointing, confessing and abiding | 125 |
| From death to life | 127 |
| Unashamed and confident | 127 |
| The Father's love | 128 |
| Freedom from sin | 128 |
| Knowing love | 130 |
| Truth, action and reassurance | 130 |
| Believing and receiving | 130 |
| Confessing and conquering | 131 |
| Love is from God | 133 |
| Knowing God's love | 133 |
| Living God's love | 134 |
| Confessing God's love | 135 |
| God's testimony is in us | 136 |
| As Jesus is, so are we | 136 |
| Conquering worldliness | 137 |
| Believing, knowing and understanding | 138 |
| Extra notes: On atoning sacrifice | 140 |
| REFLECTIONS | 142 |
| On being wise and knowing truth | 143 |
| Discerning wisdom | 143 |
| Job and wisdom | 143 |

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| Wisdom in Proverbs | 144 |
| Ecclesiastes and living wisely | 145 |
| Paul and God's renewing wisdom | 145 |
| God is | 147 |
| Absent or present? | 147 |
| Creator and parent | 147 |
| Person and community | 148 |
| Bringing many to glory | 149 |
| Being persons, together | 151 |
| Divine visitations | 151 |
| Full humanity, together | 152 |
| Fulfilling vocations, together | 152 |
| Falling and standing | 154 |
| Discerning truth | 156 |
| Paradigms and frameworks | 156 |
| Beginning with God | 157 |
| A liberated mindset involves ... | 157 |
| Appendix | 160 |
| Other reflections | 161 |
| The creation and evolution debate | 161 |
| Rituals and renewal | 164 |
| <i>Conversations along the way</i> | 168 |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | 169 |
| <i>References</i> | 170 |

Introduction

Living Love looks at aspects of the ways God's self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ informs our journey of endeavouring to live in love and hope by faith and with joy as the people of God.

Descriptions of Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and pre-ascension life outlined in the Gospel narratives and related early biblical writings provide the context for these reflections. Understandings and appreciations of theologies of the triune God's presence among us in the humanity of Jesus inform and are informed by considering Jesus' sufferings, death, resurrection and ascension.

These ancient texts are best considered as theological reflections that included oral and written narratives shared and developed over many years. It is wise to work with their substance in their own contexts before considering perspectives from elsewhere in Scripture and other related documents. Biblical and theological studies provide opportunities to focus on worship confident that application to life situations flows readily from our relationship with God.

Living Love was written in the belief that the stories recounted by the Bible's authors provide valuable insights into trusting God and living meaningful and fruitful lives in ever-changing communities.

Living Love includes study series and some additional reflections. These series were shared in church, homegroup and/or camp settings and have been revised and in several cases expanded for this book. They are invitations for further exploration of their thoughts and themes by considering social, historical and theological contexts, forms of narrative and literature, and the reader's own experiences of life and faith.

Genesis and Revelation considers several themes that are common to these two books, *God is not up for Re-election* explores living together under God's sovereignty, and *Knowing God* focuses on God's relationships with humanity. *The deceit of evil and the mystery of God* looks at God's plan to renew and fill all things in Christ. *Pathways of peace* reflects on God's peaceful, non-violent, non-violating purposes, *Living in God's love and peace* provides an outline of the letter to the Ephesians, and *A symphony of light, life and love* gives an overview of themes from the first letter of John.

This book is the first of three similarly structured collections. *Travelling Together* includes series on God's presence and actions (*The living God*), Genesis and Exodus (*Nations and covenant*) and *Wonder, worship and work*. *Towards Eternity* covers studies on the sayings of Jesus from the cross (*One cross: seven sayings* and *Meditations on Jesus' crucifixion*) and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (*From grave to glory*). Each collection finishes with several reflections.

Living Love

Living Love is a lay-person's journal, written and shared in the hope that it will encourage growth in community and understanding as we care for one other in this beautiful but troubled world. It is published as an expression of thanksgiving for the people and communities in which we lived and for the opportunities I was given to participate in their life and worship. I hope that this reading book encourages exploration of biblical themes and passages in their historical and theological settings, and that, in so doing, readers find encouragement, joy, peace and hope. I hope that reading my book deepens worship, encourages relationships, and enriches application to everyday life.

Don Priest
February 2022

Genesis and Revelation

Creation

Introduction

Genesis 1 and Revelation 21 and 22 provide insights into Hebrew, Jewish and early Christian perspectives on creation's origins and destiny in the context of the triumphs and troubles of those communities. While these authors were obviously not conducting modern scientific or historical research, they were thinking about living faithfully as God's people in their own situations.

Reading creation accounts in Isaiah, Psalms and other Old Testament passages increases our understanding of the Genesis narratives. The book of Revelation is the third part of the Johannine writings and uses apocalyptic language similar to that found in the book of Daniel and parts of Matthew's Gospel.

The following passages are two examples of readings that link with Genesis and Revelation:

Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfil my intention' (Isaiah 46:8–11).

Jesus answered, 'I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going' (John 8:14).

God has personally revealed himself from the beginning (cf. Genesis 1:2, 6:3, 16:7ff, 32:24ff, 48:15, 16; Job 1:6; Psalm 8:5; Isaiah 40:14; Hosea 12:3ff).

God's plan for the fullness of time is realised in a renewed creation (cf. Isaiah 65, 66; Romans 8:18ff; Ephesians 1:1ff; John 17:5, 24; Revelation 4, 21, 22). This fullness comes by God's grace releasing humanity from the toil, striving and death that result from failure and evil. The original calling given to humanity was to cultivate and keep the earth creatively while living in harmonious, mutually dependent communities. Nurturing children and passing on rich inheritances to succeeding generations was central to family life. Marriage was identified as more than a means to this end. It was a relationship where co-helping embraced each other as vocational goals were explored and sabbath rest was enjoyed.

Seven days

The first day in the creation narrative indicates that creation is other than God, but not self-existent without God. Creation depends on God's word (cf. John 1:1–4; Psalm 139:4; Colossians 1:15–17; Hebrews 1:2, 3; Proverbs 8:22ff). There is light before there is mention of a sun and there is separation and differentiation as light shines (cf. John 1:4, Revelation 22:5; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Ecclesiastes 11:7; Isaiah 60:1; 1 John 5:7).

Living Love

The description of a second day where the creation of a dome separates the waters above from the oceans, lakes and rivers below links with passages such as Job 22:14, 37:18, Psalm 19:1ff and Isaiah 40:22.

The third day account correlates with Genesis 2:5–6, and describes the earth as dynamic, rich and fertile.

The sun is visible on the fourth day, with the sun, moon and stars all linked with earth's seasons (cf. Genesis 8:22; Leviticus 23:4; Deuteronomy 4:19; Psalms 8:3, 74:16, 17, 104:27; Matthew 5:45; Acts 1:7, 14:17).

Job 41, Psalm 104:26 and Isaiah 27:1 are passages with similarities to days five and six, where animals thrive in their different environments. The terms 'bring forth', 'living creatures', 'let us make' express divine intimacy, involvement and intention (cf. Genesis 1:11ff, 2:7). God's 'image' and 'likeness' relate to God's parental relationship with humanity – relationships that are still evident after the disobedience of Adam and Eve (cf. Genesis 9:6; see also James 3:9; Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24; Matthew 22:20, 21). The 'us' is perhaps not the angels as humanity is the image of the divine 'us' (cf. Genesis 1:2, 3, 3:22 5:1ff; see also Isaiah 40:14; John 14:23). The failure of the first couple recalibrates the earlier notions of dominion (Genesis 1:28, 3:14ff, 9:2).

The very good creation described on the seventh day is fully functional (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25; cf. 1 Timothy 4:4, 5; Hebrews 3:7–4:11, 8:1, 10:12; Psalm 150:6; Jeremiah 10:16; Psalm 148:5; Revelation 4:11).

The order of creation changes in the second creation account, as does the primary focus of the narrative. The description of the creation of plants, birds, fish and animals in chapter two lacks the detail provided for the creation of humanity. While the word 'created' is used in Genesis 1:1, 21 and 27, there is no indication of the process that resulted from God speaking! In Genesis 2:6 and 7, the mist (or flood) rises (or surges up). In that narrative, humanity is formed from the earth and the LORD God breathes life into them (cf. Genesis 1:2, 7:22; also see Job 33:4, 34:17, 18; Psalm 33:6, 104:29; John 20:22).

Act and story

Genesis 1 and 2 are not the only references to God creating the heavens and the earth (See Job 38ff; Psalms 33:7, 104:1ff, 136:1ff, 148:5; Proverbs 8:22ff; Isaiah 40:26, 45:7ff; Jeremiah 10:16; John 1:1–3; Romans 1:20ff; Colossians 1:15ff; Hebrews 11:3; Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:5).

There is no dualism or purely random sequence of events. Everything other than God is created by God, by God's word, from no 'thing' (cf. Acts 17:22ff where God's ongoing presence is stated).

The first creation narrative is set in space-time as a richer sequence of events than either a mythical legend or a literalistic recitation (cf. John 20:20ff; Luke 1:1ff; Joshua 23:3ff). It is written as a poetic hymn, as an eyewitness song of someone standing on the ‘earth’, and not from some remote or external view.

The earth is initially described as ‘a formless void’ with ‘darkness’ covering ‘the face of the deep’ (Genesis 1:2). Formless suggests chaos and lack of structure, void means empty and lacking purpose, while deep implies profound and incomprehensible, like the oceans (cf. Job 38:16ff; Psalm 36:5ff, 42:7; Ephesians 3:8; Romans 8:39, 11:33; 1 Corinthians 2:10).

The ‘spirit of God’ or ‘a mighty wind’ or a ‘wind from God’ is a feminine birthing description preceding mentions of a divine voice initiating creation into existence (cf. Deuteronomy 32:11; Psalm 104:30).

The six days are in two sequences of three. Light and darkness come to fullness with lights for both days and nights. Sea and sky are homes for water and air creatures, while the fertile earth provides habitation for land creatures.

The words ‘day’ and ‘week’ relate to the sabbath and can refer to times of different lengths (Genesis 2:4; Luke 25:4, 8; Psalm 90:4; Isaiah 4:2).

The word ‘created’ is only used of the initial creation (Genesis 1:1), of the creation of conscious creatures (Genesis 1:21) and of humanity (Genesis 1:27, cf. Genesis 5:1,2).

The word ‘Let’ identifies critical aspects of the divine creational action. Given its context about God speaking and that the first ‘Let’ statement follows the reference in verse two of the birthing spirit or breath of God, it seems reasonable to infer that this spirit is present to and involved in everything God says and does: no divine words without divine breath, and no divine breath without divine words.

New earth and new heavens

New Testament references to God as Word and Spirit and Jesus’ question to Nicodemus after speaking to him about new birth provide insights into early church understandings that build on themes in Genesis 1 (John 1:1ff, 3:8, etc.).

The book of Revelation, in emphasising the renewal of creation, urges those in the seven churches to ‘listen to what the Spirit is saying’ and concludes with ‘The Spirit and the bride’ wanting Jesus to come (Revelation 1:10, 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22 and 22:17, cf. Revelation 1:2, 9, 10, 6:9, 11:7, 12:11, 17, 19:10, 20:4, where testimony to Jesus or the testimony of Jesus are mentioned and linked with the spirit of prophecy and the commandments of God).

This new – renewed – creation is heralded in chapters 4, 5 and 7, and is then realised in chapters 19 to 22. It comes down from heaven and does not return creation to its original state but is a fulfillment of its first genesis!

Woman and man, marriage and family

In the east

The first creation account ends with God blessing the seventh day and declaring it to be holy. Several themes seem to be implicit in this description of the final day of the week. The narrative identifies creation as God's dwelling place, as the place where God rests, and so as God's tabernacle-temple where God's sacred presence is known. Humanity lives in and is custodian of God's sanctuary with the vocational purpose of ensuring everything flourishes according to life's times and seasons for the honour and glory of its creator-God. Subduing and having dominion relate to reigning in harmony with God's mandate for goodness, and doing so by *processes* and *ways of living*, as well as by achieving *outcomes* and *destinies* (cf. Psalm 23:1–6), rather than by exploitation and tyranny (cf. Psalm 2).

The sanctuary theme provides a transitioning to the second creation narrative where God is not simply *God* but the LORD God, Israel's covenant God. This naming of God aligns with the accounts of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph that follow, and then, in the book of Exodus, with Moses and the people of God. Exodus ends with a lengthy description of Israel's first tabernacle after a brief account of the idolatrous worship of the golden calf.

Another theme implicit in the seventh day description relates to a sense of goal and purpose; a pointing beyond an initial creative action to a future reality. This eschatological nuance is also evident in the second account in the placement of Eden in the east. East signifies the place of beginnings. It suggests sources and departures, as with rivers flowing from an unmentioned mountain – a further temple-tabernacle reference.

The two trees in Eden nominate the *nature* of free choice rather than simply state prescriptive *outcomes*. The two people were not automatons or robots. They had the freedom of *choosing* to eat the fruit of the tree of life with the potential of knowing freedom in eating its fruit. The rivers and the minerals, and the sustainable and careful cultivation of the earth, all indicate the diverse ambit of human vocation and the sacred seasons of rest and refreshment.

Not alone

The first creation account describes God saying: 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'. A short song in the creation poem – the first one in the Bible – informs us that: 'God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' and then the author adds that 'God blessed them'. In case we miss this message, the poet adds that 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was *very good*' (Genesis 1:26–31, italics added)!

Living Love

The second creation narrative expounds this theme of goodness by stating that ‘LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner”’ (Genesis 2:18). The divine announcement was that it was not good for man to be alone *in this vocation*. His helper was to partner with him and was suitable in every way and completely corresponding to him for this calling. She could only correlate with him if he too was *built* for helping, if he was *ready* to help her without condescension, superiority or arrogance, if their giving and receiving, their honouring and sharing were fully *mutual*.

This companionship also explores nuances about word and spirit from the first verses of chapter one. Both partners were to help each other. Both were to speak, birth, nurture and fulfil what was needed in their collaborative, cooperative vocations – and to do so together as male and female, as women and men in the fruitfulness of human generations.

The writer records that Adam grew tired when naming the creatures that God formed ‘out of the ground’ and brought to him (Genesis 2:18ff). Adam’s deep sleep indicated that he had no active role in the creation of the woman. The closing of his side after the creation of the woman realised his masculinity and her femininity. The taking of the woman from his side does not imply she is less than or subordinate to him, any more than Adam was less than or subordinate to the ground from which he was made! Chapter one has each successful day *building* on and *enhancing* the previous one and the same thought permeates this narrative!

The creation of the woman *within* Eden and the man *outside of* Eden similarly does not indicate subordination or inferiority. If Eden is the dwelling place of covenant-God, then the man is to remain *eternally humble* for being placed in God’s sanctuary while the woman is to have *full participation and partnership* in it. She is not to be marginalised and excluded in or from her created *milieu*.

Together

Adam’s cry ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken’ points to Adam’s waiting and anticipation *before* the tragedy that follows and mirrors the song in verse 27 of chapter 1 (Genesis 2:23).

God’s bringing of the woman to Adam identifies a parental identity with the LORD God. In the cultural setting in which the narrative was written, a son left his parents and cleaved to a daughter brought by her parents: both were to leave and cleave in a pure union described as ‘unashamed’. It is impossible, because of sin, to express this union other than by negatives.

These scenarios were *genesis* or *beginning* gender and marriage-wedding statements to be explored and expressed in the diverse cultural settings that would emerge as creation flourished and fruitfulness brought fulness.

Living Love

The man was not to be over her as dominator or sole initiator but was to receive her as his much-needed companion and to be together in a relationship of mutual glory. Their union is consistent with Genesis 1:27, and is presumed to be exclusive, permanent and heterosexual (1 Corinthians 11:8, 9; 1 Timothy 2:13). Questions as to whether alternative marriage constructs would emerge in a fruitful creation lacking the disobedience that follows require careful study of the Hebrew Bible and subsequent Christian Testament rather than by truncated reductionism of this narrative.

Of the two trees in the garden, one is absent in the Paradise outlined in the Apocalypse of John (Genesis 3:22; Revelation 2:7, 22:2,14). This destiny ends any concept of a dualistic universe of good and evil (Habakkuk 1:12, 13; 1 Peter 1:16). The tree of *knowledge* meant discerning good and evil by oneself, rather than in communion with God (Genesis 4:7; Habakkuk 2:4; Matthew 6:24, 7:13, 7:24ff; Galatians 6:8; Matthew 7:13; John 10:10; 17:3).

Fruitfulness in family and community environments involves inheritance and wisdom. Chapters 1 to 9 of Proverbs provides an ancient commentary on what fearing the LORD means in that setting, and a basis for each generation to explore living faithfully and generously in their cultural contexts.

Forever

The theme of helping that is profiled in the second narrative is not one of servility or enslavement. It does not indicate structural or relational subordination and is not allocated only to one gender, as in ‘women help men and men are helped’. If God is *helper*, then *being helper means caring for, acting in the interests of another person and not creational or ontological subordination* (cf. Genesis 49:25; Deuteronomy 33:26; 1 Samuel 5:1 and 7:12 where Ebenezer means stone of help; Psalms 7, 40, 42, 46, 146, etc.; Isaiah 41:10ff; John 14:16, 26, 16:7; Romans 8:26). The theme of mutuality is explored in 1 Corinthians 11, Philippians 2 and Ephesians 5 (and elsewhere). Care is needed not to use these passages to infer inadequacy or subordination (cf. Ephesians 5:2 and 5:25). Mutual submission was for everyone ‘out of reverence for Christ’ (Ephesians 5:21; cf. Philippians 2:1–4).

Revelation 7 and 19ff describe eternity with an emphasis that the original flourishing mentioned in these two initial biblical narratives will be realised and will involve openness, diversity, abundance and community, all lived in God’s embrace and presence.

Death and suffering

Separation

Eve is not mentioned by name in the Old Testament after Genesis 4:1 and only referred to in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 11:3 and 1 Timothy 2:13. Apart from several references in the Apocrypha, the only Old Testament reference to Adam is in Hosea 6:7. Paul mentions Adam in Romans 5:12ff, 1 Corinthians 15:20ff and 45ff, and 1 Timothy 2:13ff. Adam is also mentioned in verse 14 of Jude while Revelation 12 is usually understood as an apocalyptic account of Genesis 3. It therefore seems reasonable to see Christian emphases on Adam often arising from its understanding of Jesus fulfilling references in Genesis 3. The focus seems to be theological rather than historical-literal.

The serpent's first step was to ask a question that disputed God's word (cf. Matthew 4:1–11, 16:22, 23; Mark 1:12, 13; Luke 4:1–13). Eve's correction of it indicated that she saw God's word concerning the tree in question as a matter of strictness. The serpent's reply was a blatant, mocking lie. Her alignment with it meant that death was assured. Unity with the serpent meant separation from God (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; Romans 5:12–19; Hebrews 2:13 and 14; Isaiah 53:10). The Old Testament narratives about the 'deaths' of Enoch, Elijah and Moses were perhaps intended to be seen in terms of this life-death presentation (cf. John 17:3; 1 John 1:1ff, 3:14).

To be *like* God reveals humanity's highest quality; to want to be *as* God is to indulge in rivalry and enmity, and to assume a capacity and ability to handle an innate knowledge of good and evil. God *is* good, and in always knowing, being and doing good, knows that evil is inauthentic as it lacks any valid creational reality and purpose (cf. Genesis 1:31). God, in this way, does not *know* evil.

The couple showed their blindness to the impact of impending death on the material, aesthetic, mental and moral areas of human being (1 John 2:16; John 8:44; James 1:14,15). Taking and eating was in stark contrast to the nourishment available by eating the fruit of the tree of life (cf. John 6:35, 48–58; Psalm 34:8; Luke 22:14–23; Revelation 19:9, 21:6, 22:1–5, 14).

They thought their eyes were opened but God knew they were closed. Rather than being clothed with innocence and embraced in communion they saw themselves separated by division and naked (cf. Titus 1:15; 1 Corinthians 15:53, 54; 2 Corinthians 5:2, 4; Psalm 104:1; Isaiah 63:3; John 19:23; Revelation 3:18, 7:13; 19:13). Knowing had been altered forever (cf. Genesis 4:1).

Isolation

Why did they think they could hide themselves? Their so-called self-awareness hid a future horror rather than revealed a coming delight and joy (e.g. Psalm 16:11;

cf. Revelation 6:16, 22:4; Exodus 33:20; 1 Corinthians 13:11; John 1:18). There was no mistake on God's part. God remained as good as God's word. The outcome of their disobedience was consistent with God's word. God's word was not God's last message: death would not be their final terminus – God always had something else in mind.

God's gentle lament to Adam highlighted the man's awful abdicating absence from his wife. A tacit message in the narrative is that Adam saw the serpent and walked away. Eve's story and her dialogue were not the first ones. Adam's fear was evident in his abandoning of his responsibilities as her helper, companion and friend (cf. Genesis 2:23, 24; 1 John 4:18). Their lack of unity was sadly exacerbated between Cain and Abel and those who followed (Genesis 4:6–10)!

Anticipation

While God questioned the couple and explained to them the consequences of their actions, he sentenced the serpent to degradation and doom. God's verdict was more than a promise; it was a declaration of his own vindication: 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel' (Genesis 3:15; cf. Ezekiel 36:22). The New Testament identifies the fulfilment of this promise with Christ (e.g. Romans 16:20; Revelation 12:9, 20:2; Matthew 1:23; Galatians 4:4).

God's word to Eve finds expression in all humanity, but especially in the people of God, who, with creation, await their liberation (Revelation 12:1ff, 21:4; Isaiah 54:1, 65:20,23, 66:7; Matthew 24:19; Romans 8:18ff). Desire is about ruling and contrasts mutual submission (Genesis 4:7; 1 Corinthians 7:1–4, 11:1–12, 14:34–36; 1 Peter 2:11–14, 3:1ff; Titus 2:1ff; Ephesians 5:22ff; Colossians 3:18ff; 1 John 2:15ff). Exploitation is evident in the domination of those with power and authority *and* in those they demean and denigrate. Christ revealed God's response by his cross (cf. Galatians 3:28; Philippians 2:1ff).

The Genesis passage indicates that the ground was cursed because of sin, with Cain later cursed by the ground (Genesis 3:17, 4:11, 5:29; Psalm 90; cf. Matthew 13). The thorns and thistles become signs of humanity's failures. The bread and the dust become indications of mortality, not life (cf. Job 34:14, 15). We are not told whether the fact that 'the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them' meant that God made an animal sacrifice before clothing them (Genesis 3:21). God's choice of clothing contrasted theirs (Genesis 3:7; cf. 1 Peter 1:19, 20; 1 John 2:1, 2).

The tree of life is reached by faith and not by flesh and blood. The cherubim who guard this holy place, this holy garden, are pictured in the Holy of Holies (Exodus 37:7–9; cf. Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:19ff). Genesis 2:22–24 summarises the rebellion and defiance of humanity and ends the two creation accounts. Entry to the garden and access to the fruits of its life-giving tree was changed forever.

Cain and Abel

Reliance or refusal

The description of sexual union as knowing indicates mutual intimacy and is a reminder of the two creation narratives (Genesis 4:1). Eve's comment about God's involvement in Cain's birth is aligned with earlier ideas of fruitfulness. It may have expressed her hope that Cain would crush the serpent's head. Although Abel's birth is stated as a matter of fact, the thoughts about Cain's birth may be implied. Abel's life and death prophesied of one who would be born and who would defeat evil.

Abel's vocation is listed before Cain's, initiating a pattern of sibling priority that continues throughout Genesis. God's disapproval of Cain's sacrifice was not because it was agricultural rather than pastoral. The Pentateuch indicates that Israel's cycle of festivals was based on seasons of sowing and harvesting while including animal sacrifices (Leviticus 23; Numbers 28, 29; Deuteronomy 16; cf. Deuteronomy 8:3, 26:1–11; see also Matthew 23:35; John 1:29; Hebrews 11:4, 12:24; 1 John 3:12; cf. Genesis 3:21).

Cain's response to God's verdict about his sacrifice was of someone caught open handed: 'Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell' (Genesis 4:5). There was no middle ground for Cain and no way of ameliorating God's judgement when God declared he had 'no regard' for Cain's sacrifice. God's verdict regarding Cain's grain offerings would have been highlighted by God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice of the 'fat portions' of the 'firstlings of his flock' (Genesis 4:4).

God's question to Cain was significant. It focused on sacrifice:

The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry [about my response to your grain offerings], and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well [in offering sacrifices], will you [and your sacrifices] not be accepted? And if you do not do well [in offering sacrifices], sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it' (Genesis 4:6, 7).

Cain's attitude was for some unexplained reason a problem *when* he offered his sacrifice and so *before* God announced his verdict and not simply happened *while* God spoke to him. The failure of Cain's parents remained latent: 'sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it' (Genesis 4:7). Notions of desire were embedded in the divine narrative with Cain's mother after his parents defied God's command about fruitfulness (cf. Genesis 3:15).

Human failure did not negate human responsibility. It also did not mean divine absence or abandonment. The reference to Eve testifying to God's presence with her when Cain was born links with the temple-tabernacle theme profiled earlier and has significance in this passage.

Overcomer or overcome

Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’ And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper’ (Genesis 4:8, 9)?

Abel went onto Cain’s territory at his brother’s invitation. Yet Cain’s domain was in God’s world and the LORD was not absent from them or oblivious to what occurred. Cain’s violence is profiled using three thoughts: he ‘rose up’ indicating domination, he was ‘against’ his brother revealing hostility and aggression, and he ‘killed him’ exposing his relentless ruthlessness and lack of restraint.

The contrast with the initial creation and Eden narratives is clear. God’s seventh-day peace and rest, and creation’s harmony were replaced with lurking sin emerging as Cain brutally over-powered his brother. The divine ‘Let us’, the LORD’s walking with the first couple in Eden, and their mutual joyful embrace, were contrasted with Cain being ‘against’ and not *with* or *for* his brother. The tragic deadly outcome opposed every life-giving generosity in-built into creation and humanity.

Whatever Abel’s weakness were – as for example we later read about regarding Joseph – and whatever responsibilities Abel had for his own welfare, Abel was, like every other human person, created in God’s image and likeness and so born with innate dignity. While therefore Cain’s protest might be seen to have a twisted logic to it, Cain had his own responsibilities as a person in God’s inter-connected and inter-related world: Cain’s own dignity was involved.

Cain could have been kind and compassionate towards his brother (cf. Philippians 2:1-4). Cain could have loved his brother, his closest neighbour (cf. Matthew 5:43, 19:19, 22:39; Mark 12:31ff; Luke 10:27; 1 John 3:11ff). And Cain could have forgiven his brother and been gracious (cf. Romans 12:9ff, Galatians 6:10).

The LORD’s question to Cain was a reasonable one. Cain’s answer was not. God’s next question exposed Cain’s evil and indicated God’s concern for Cain’s welfare by explaining Cain’s situation to him (Genesis 3:9ff). Cain could choose one of two ways: relate to and rely on God for life or presume to know good and evil only from his own resources and researching. This principle of reliance or refusal was built into creation, and so into God’s plan and purposes. Human actions are subject to God’s personal goodness and generosity, and not to any abstract morality or law to which God is subject or which God has externalised beyond God’s own self (Psalm 115:3, 135:6; cf. Romans 6:16).

Presence or absence

Abel’s life and death witnessed to God’s person and were prophetic of God’s plans and purposes. Their revelation was ultimately realised in Jesus. Abel’s prophetic

Living Love

witness and prophecy are noted in the book of Hebrews (Hebrews 11:4, 12:24). Celestial themes in this second passage are also explored in the book of Revelation, along with references to testimony, witness and prophecy (Revelation 1:2ff, 2:13, 3:14, 6:9, 11:3ff, 12:11ff, 15:5, 17:6, 19:10, 22:16–20).

The overcomers are those whose witness and testimony is one with Abel and the people of God (cf. Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21, 12:11). God's eternal city is one where God is with humanity and not remote from his people (Revelation 21:1–22:5).

Cain's story is outlined in 1 John 3:12ff and Jude 1:11 in the context of authentic love. Cain was 'cursed from the ground'. He would 'be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth', haunted forever by the wailing of his brother's shed blood 'from the ground' and frustrated by lower abundance when reaping (Genesis 4:9ff; cf. Romans 8:18).

Cain's punishment related to his area of work. He had no natural home. The creation – like Abel – reminded him continually of God, even though Cain saw himself as hiding from God and went 'away from the presence of the LORD'. He knew that his act of murder was avenged by physical and spiritual death. His guilt was transparent (Genesis 4:13–16; cf. Genesis 9:6; 1 Peter 2:24). God's protective marking of Cain to prevent him being killed was little comfort to him. Although East of Eden was not a place of rest and recovery, something remarkable happened in its settlements. Yet while music and technology flourished, evil was rampant and lacked restraint.

The self-sufficient society

East of Eden

Cain's relationship with the earth changed. He was 'cursed from the ground' and saw himself 'driven away from the soil' and 'hidden from [the LORD's] face'. Even though something was seriously askew with Cain's worship, he understood that his grain offering connected his vocation with his God, and that soil, grain and harvest were part of God's world (cf. Matthew 13:1ff; Mark 4:1ff; Luke 8:4ff). Cain thought this linkage was so dynamic that he would now be hunted and forever restless (Genesis 4:11–16, cf. 2:4b–20, 3:17–19).¹

The LORD assured Cain of safety from murder and Cain left 'the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of [wanderings], east of Eden'. His departure was different from the one referred to in Eden. There is no mention of the grief his *exodus* and Abel's murder brought their parents (Genesis 2:24; cf. Exodus 32:34, 33:12–23; Jonah 1:1–3; Matthew 27:46; Luke 9ff).

The reference to the LORD's presence continues the underlying tabernacle-temple theme that is embedded in both creation narratives. The garments that the LORD gave the first couple, Cain and Abel's sacrifices, Cain's murder of his brother, and Cain's move to the East away from the family's sacred place are all inter-related. The divine silence and absence say more about Cain than God. It was Cain and not God who departed. The commencement of the first creation story describes 'a wind from God [sweeping] over the face of the waters' and God speaking (Genesis 1:2, 3; cf. Psalm 104:29).

The birth of Cain's son, Enoch, lacks the context given to Cain's birth (Genesis 4:1, cf. 2:23, 3:21). His wife is unnamed and does not speak – the patriarchal narrative identified in the LORD's explanation to Eve after the first two people had sinned is active. She is subordinate and silent (cf. Genesis 3:16).²

Cain's dynasty was established. His son and his city had the same names and therefore had similar characteristics. Cain's legacy through his son Enoch contrasted with that of another Enoch (Genesis 4:17; cf. 5:21–24). The identification of Cain's settlement as a city has military and political overtones. Nations, rulers and palaces emerge with different characteristics to the regal tone of Eden and the apocalyptic outcome described in Revelation 19 to 22.

¹ The mention of the presence of other people groups in this part of the story of Cain may unfortunately be easily overlooked. The creation of humanity in Genesis 1 may be unnecessarily seen as just referring to two initial people rather than a general overview of the creation of humanity while the Genesis 2–4 narrative may be focusing primarily on the creation of humanity in Eden rather than just on two individuals. It may also be emphasising the way that the people of God were set apart from the other humanity that is referenced in the story of Cain.

² The source of Cain's wife and accessing the resources needed for building a city are not described.

A ‘biased’ account of Cain would ascribe no good to him or his descendants, but the truth is more complex and not completely binary. His culture is described as diverse and rich in technology and arts. His offspring presumably relate to and intermarry other neighbouring people groups (Genesis 4:19–24). The image of God was defaced but not eliminated. Their achievements could be used for good or ill by any community. Later accounts in the Hebrew Bible describe Israel suffering and benefiting from the technologies of other nations.

It is worth noting the emphasis on God’s mercy regarding Cain. While Cain thought his ‘punishment’ was greater than he could endure, there would be opportunities ahead for him and his descendants to know the LORD’s grace by ‘doing well’ in regard to God’s gracious mercies and by recognising God’s provision of safety and shelter amid the death and decay that occurred as a result of violence and murder (Genesis 4:6, 7, 15).

Heroes and warriors

Genesis 6:1–4 may be alluding to beliefs about angels and humans, describing Cain and Seth’s descendants, or explaining something else (cf. 1 Peter 3:19, 20; 2 Peter 2:4–6; Jude 1:6). Like Genesis 1:1–2:4a, 2:4b–3:24, 4:1–26 and 5:1–32, Genesis 6:1–9:11 gives theological and anthropological understandings which primarily relate to human welfare and destiny rather than provide a formal history. The narrative precludes literalism and invites imagination.

In this introduction to the Noah story, God regrets creating ‘humankind on the earth’. The ancient ‘heroes’ were famous ‘warriors’ with whom divine tolerance was limited. Wickedness was so prevalent that the LORD declared:

I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them (Genesis 6:1–7)

God’s refusal to strive forever with evil humanity without any restorative judgement is emphasised. God is described in human terms as being sorry and as not only reducing the span of human life but eliminating it all together. Like the Noah narrative, hyperbole is used to emphasise the writer’s perspective that God was active in achieving God’s purposes (cf. Genesis 4:7, cf. 8:21; Psalm 14:1–3; Romans 3:1ff, 7:18).

From the east

Genesis 11:1–9 is a further post-Cain and Abel narrative and describes an early attempt at collective self-glorification. It follows an account of Nimrod as the warrior who built Babel and other cities (Genesis 10:9ff). Nimrod’s apparent fear and insecurity are consistent with Cain’s character. Human potential is not seen as lessened by the failure of Adam and Eve (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Living Love

When the LORD said ‘Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech’, the plural parallels Genesis 1:27ff. Division, confusion and dispersion rather than unity, harmony and diversity result from anger, arrogance and ambition. God achieves God’s goals by being present and consistent (cf. Genesis 4:7).

The tower was to reach up to heaven – the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven (cf. Genesis 28:17; Deuteronomy 30:11ff; Revelation 19:1ff). The city of God is different from the cities of Cain, Nimrod and their descendants, as well as the cities built by Israel, including Jerusalem. The links between building Babel and the flood are like the connections between the disobedience of Adam and Eve and the closure of the garden of Eden. The resultant confusion through different languages is reversed at Pentecost not by imposing a single language but by enabling understanding and mutual acceptance to flourish (Acts 2:1ff; cf. Isaiah 14, 47; Daniel 3; Zephaniah 3:9).

Jesus lived as a wanderer, abandoned and rejected by the religious and political leaders. Rather than succumb to evil torments and derision, he defeated them and invited people to be with him in a post-resurrection Paradise (Luke 9:57ff, 23:39ff; John 12:9ff, 12:31ff; Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15, 4:4). The world system with its cities and cultures seemed all conquering and permanent. But judgement comes through the actions of a non-violent and life-giving Messiah, and evil’s enterprises collapse in one hour (Revelation 18:1ff). A new Jerusalem descends from heaven and creation reaches its destiny, recreated and renewed under the lordship of the resurrected Lamb (Revelation 19:1ff).

The people of God

Seth and Enoch

The first four chapters of Genesis conclude with an affirmation of hope following Seth's birth, which also introduces an outline of 'the descendants of Adam [and Eve]'. Chapter 4 begins and ends with birth accounts (Genesis 4:1, 2a, 25, 26).³

Both birth narratives describe Eve's response (while, as previously mentioned, Cain's wife is silent and unnamed in the description of their son's birth). Eve declared that Cain was born with the LORD's help and that Seth replaced Abel by God's appointment. We are not told of Eve's response to Abel's birth, but she presumably also saw the LORD at work when he was born.

Invoking 'the name of the LORD' is the first mention of family or community worship. It gives another gentle window into the spirits, minds and hearts of Adam and Eve after their disobedience and exile from Eden. It also continues the sanctuary theme and provides a positive affirmation of fulfillment, peace and rest (cf. Genesis 1:31, 3:15). Seth's son's birth evokes a new witness to God's purposes, and some insights into God's family begin to be revealed.

In the chronicling of significant generations from Adam to Noah, Enoch provides a picture of what the end of life might have been without human defiance and disobedience. The lifespans in the genealogy seem pre-emptively symbolic of the crisis about to be outlined (Genesis 6:3).

The listing of Seth's descendants in Genesis 5:1ff follows that of Cain's in Genesis 4:17–19. While the earlier listing ends with escalating violence and sets the scene for the story of Noah, the latter one indicates that God's people were a faith community in a violent context that mirrored that of Cain and Cain's descendants. These people of faith struggled with their own frailties, as is evident regarding Noah and his descendants.

The listing 'of the descendants of Adam' re-emphasises the first creation narrative and then describes Seth as a son in Adam's 'likeness, according to his image'. This mention of image and likeness might say something about the way Adam and Eve passed on their story and encouraged Seth to be a man of faith (cf. Genesis 2:15). It is noteworthy that Cain and Abel are not mentioned in this listing (cf. 1 Chronicles 1:1ff; Luke 3:23–38).

Enoch is twice described as having 'walked with God'. This reminder of God walking in Eden anticipates Enoch's 'death' as something of a transformation or

³ The reference to other people groups in the story of Cain establishes a one-and-many theme which is further developed in the stories of Noah and Abraham, and which then continues throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

transfiguration, one perhaps inbuilt to creation's fruitfulness cycles (Genesis 5:21–24, cf. Genesis 3:8; Deuteronomy 34:6; 2 Kings 2:1–12; Luke 24:50–52).

Noah and Abraham

The divine revulsion against human decadence in Genesis 6:1ff is preceded with a reference to Noah's birth and is interrupted with the mention of Noah finding 'favour in the sight of the LORD' (Genesis 5:21–24, cf. 3:17–19). God was concerned with every generation (Genesis 6:8ff, cf. 4:26). God fulfilled his covenant by re-enacting creation (Genesis 6:18, 8:20–22; cf. Isaiah 54:4–10; Jeremiah 31:31–37; Luke 22:20).

God's initiatives and Noah's actions include references to Noah *going* into the ark and *taking* the animals which *went* into the ark with him, suggesting that the LORD brought the animals to Noah. This description identifies Noah as a second Adam (cf. Genesis 2:19)! The LORD also shut the ark's door, completing the process. The 'fountains of the great deep burst forth' and later stopped at God's command, reminding readers of the formlessness and chaos described in the first creation story. Unlike the flood narrative, sin was not mentioned in that initial account as a reason for the lack of form and fullness (Genesis 7:11, 8:2, cf. 6:11). The flood story uses numerous anthropomorphisms and many hyperboles: for example, the ark rose 'high', 'the waters swelled and increased greatly ... the waters swelled so mightily ... that all ... under the whole ...' (Genesis 7:18ff).⁴

God re-explained the original creational order after the flood in the context of re-establishing and restoring sinful humanity. Noah responded to the grace of the LORD as one of Abel's 'descendants' by offering a sacrifice. Flesh was now given for food, Seth's worshipping community was renewed, and the principles enunciated to Cain were expressed (Genesis 8:20–9:17; cf. 4:7–15).

The next genealogies link Noah and Abraham and bring an ongoing focus on the creational and people vision to one man and his wife but do so only with a view to God realising his plan for the nations and all creation (Genesis 10:1–32, 11:10–32, cf. 9:18–27). Abraham left home for a new start.⁵ The stories of Ishmael and Isaac, and Esau and Jacob, further explore God's purposes and build towards the promise of Genesis 49:10 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'.

⁴ The anthropomorphic God language, the way natural disasters are seen to occur, the historical precision about the flood narrative and its link with humanity's failures all suggest care is needed in interpreting these records of ancient stories.

⁵ Adam and Eve were placed in Eden and Noah's family was given a new starting place.

God's covenant family

The New Testament writers creatively link the stories of Noah and Abraham with Jesus and God's people. Matthew and Luke quote Jesus connecting the 'days of Noah' with 'the coming of the Son of Man', while the author of Hebrews praises Noah's faith, and Peter's letters identify Noah as 'a herald of righteousness' and a reason for divine patience (Matthew 24:37ff; Luke 17:26ff; Hebrews 11:7ff; 1 Peter 3:18–22; 2 Peter 3:4ff).

References to Abraham believing God and being reckoned righteous include Romans 4:1ff and Galatians 3:6ff. The synoptic Gospels highlight Abraham as Israel's ancestor (e.g. Matthew 1:1, 2, 17, 3:9, 8:11, 22:32; Luke 1:55, 73, 3:8, 34, 13:16, 28, 16:22ff, 19:9, 20:37). John's Gospel devotes a significant section to the Jews as Abraham's children while the book of Acts twice profiles Israel's God as Abraham's God (John 8:33ff; Acts 3:13ff, 7:2ff; cf. Romans 11:1ff; 2 Corinthians 11:22; Hebrews 2:16).

The book of Hebrews mentions God's promises to Abraham and Abraham's relationship with Melchizedek (Hebrews 2:16, 6:13ff, 7:1ff). Hebrews 11:1–12:2 (cf. 1 Peter 1:10–2:12) nominates Abraham as a significant person in God's family because of his faithful obedience.

God's covenant victory is fulfilled in the New Jerusalem where revelation of the people of God heralds the nations bringing their glory into the eternal city which is the holy dwelling place of God with humanity – and humanity with God – forever (Revelation 21:1–22:21).

The temporary shutting of the ark door contrasts the permanent opening of New Jerusalem's gates and the invitations that whoever wants to enter the city that comes to earth from heaven is free to enter and be refreshed with water from the river of life, nourished by the twelve types of fruit from the tree of life, and healed by its leaves. The curses mentioned in Genesis no longer apply and these blessings and more are for the renewed and recreated people of God (Genesis 3:14ff, 4:11, 5:29, 8:21, 12:3; cf. John 3:16, 8:12, 12:46; Acts 2:21; Revelation 22:17).

God is not up for re-election

Introduction

The truth that God is sovereign would appear to be straightforward. How could God be God unless God rules in God's universe? Asking this question invariably generates some restlessness, and on occasions, heated debate. There is, of course, the matter of human and demonic rebellion. How can God be sovereign in a universe where 'we are God's children' while 'the whole world lies under the power of the evil one' (1 John 5:19)? To suggest God rules where humans rebel is contrary to much thinking. To quote Scriptures which indicate that God sometimes sends calamity is understandably unpopular and rarely, if ever, appropriate. These matters are not primarily intellectual. Only as we submit to God as Creator-King of all things and learn more of God's ways will we cease to fight God's sovereignty over the presence of sin, while always remembering that God never initiates or endorses evil. We will not reject God's rule over human will by deciding that everything is fatalistic. And we will not opt for a simplistic opinion that ultimately sometimes God *wins* and sometimes God *loses*, presumably to us or the Devil! God *always* acts according to God's own nature and does not and *cannot* do anything that contradicts God's essential being (cf. Numbers 23:19; 2 Timothy 2:13).

The theme of the kingdom of God shaped my initial draft of these studies. I aimed to consider God's reign from a biblical Godward stance, rather than by analysing issues in human society in the context of God's reign. My emphasis was on God's redeeming action in the death of his Son, and in the outpouring of God's Spirit through God's resurrected Lord. I believed that life in God's kingdom was too dynamic for building other empires.

The need to relate God's love, purity and grace to God's authority is basic to a discussion about God's sovereignty. We gain most as we come to know that not only does God reign, but that this is God's delight and pleasure. It is not so much a struggle but a joy for God to exercise his authority. God does that which affirms and expresses his restorative and reconciling, holy and loving sovereignty amid intense human suffering in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God shows us that the true nature of authority is in honouring, serving, giving and loving. The cross of Christ indicates that God's displeasure against rebellion is best seen in the context of the patient pleasure and gentle joy of his grace. The sovereignty of God in the presence of the most intense evil is evident in the death and resurrection of God's Messiah.

Our lives are not primarily about *us* choosing Jesus as *our* Lord, but about God embracing humanity into God's initiating, elective love. Humanity refused to accept God at Golgotha, but God worked this rejection as a basis for inviting all humanity to be his people through his Messiah, Saviour and Lord. God is not now up for re-election. The end day of reconciling judgement and the new creation provide full and final evidence of that.

God is sovereign

A brief survey of some biblical testimony to the sovereignty of God.

As God pleases

There are many biblical references to God's authority and power, and to God's sovereignty over creation, including humanity and spiritual powers. Despite intense rebellion against God and the hold of the dominion of darkness, God is spoken of as doing 'as he pleases'. (Psalms 115:3, 135:6; cf. 1 John 5:19). Since the nature of any kingdom reflects the person and character of its ruler, we will focus on some of the ways God achieves God's own purposes (e.g. Ephesians 1:3–14). This study scans some Scriptures to see glimpses of their testimony to God's sovereignty.

The Old Testament⁶

Moses. Moses rejoiced in God's strength, power, majesty and glory after crossing the Red Sea. God was seen to have authority over creation and nations (Exodus 15:1–18 cf. Hebrews 11:23–28). Moses heard from God that Israel was to be a 'kingdom of priests'. This priestly reign partly involved demonstrating to other nations *who* God is and the *way* God acts (Exodus 19:5–6). Moses later foresaw the nation's desire for a human king (Deuteronomy 17:14–20) and when this eventuated Samuel was told that this meant God had been rejected as king (1 Samuel 8:7). The people wanted rulers like other nations (cf. Numbers 22–24, especially 23:21).

David. Israel reached its peak as a nation when David, and later Solomon, ruled much of the territory promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:18–21; 2 Chronicles 9:26), so it is no surprise to hear David speak of God as king (1 Chronicles 29:10–13). Many psalms repeat this theme (e.g. Psalms 10, 22, 24, 44, 45, 47, 93, 95–99, 103, 145). God is praised as ruler and owner of everything. Israel was to trust their creator God rather than the idol-gods of other nations. They were to remember that God judges the world righteously, with no-one able to escape his verdicts. Psalm 103 gives David's testimony to life lived in willing obedience to God as creator and king, and Psalm 145 refers to God's goodness, God's kingdom's permanence, and the ways God's people 'speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power' (Psalm 145:11).

The psalmist affirmed that God rules by God's trustworthy, kind and gracious holy love and power, by lifting up the oppressed and disadvantaged who trust him, by providing food for them and by dismantling the empires of the wicked.

⁶ There are valuable questions about the authors, editors and dates of the Old Testament books. Answers to these questions help shape our understanding of the Scriptures. Examples of these insights relate to Old Testament perspectives on the appropriateness of Israel's longings for a king.

The former and latter prophets were similarly convinced that God is sovereign (1 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6:5; Jeremiah 10:7; Zephaniah 3:15) and that the time would come when God's appointed king would rule (Isaiah 32, Ezekiel 37:15–23). God's ruler would be empowered by God's Spirit (Isaiah 42) and God would be sovereign over all the earth and its nations (Zechariah 14:9ff; Isaiah 66:1).

Daniel, like Moses, had great confidence in God's power, even though Israel was in a foreign land under a pagan king (Daniel 2, especially 20–23, 44, 47, 7:9, 10). Nebuchadnezzar and Darius, unlike Pharaoh, are recorded as sometimes acknowledging God's sovereignty (Daniel 4:31–37, 6:26–27). Belshazzar refused to obey God's warnings and was overthrown (Daniel 5).

These prophecies reinforce the truth that God is sovereign, and that God does as God pleases, *always* acting in love and with justice according to God's own person and being. Despite what often appears to be the case, God ultimately renews those who want righteousness, while those who insist on doing evil come under the judgement of their own failures (Habakkuk 2:4, Genesis 4:6ff).

The New Testament

John the Baptist preached that the coming of God's kingdom called for radical changes (Matthew 3:1–12; Mark 1:1ff; Luke 3:1ff; John 1:19ff).

Jesus preached God's kingdom after being tempted about other kingdoms (e.g. Matthew 4:8–11; Mark 1:14). Jesus taught about God's heavenly kingdom and prayed for it to come on earth (Matthew 5:1ff; Luke 11:1ff). He told many parables about God's kingdom (e.g. Matthew 13), demonstrated it (Luke 11:17ff) and predicted its final victory (Matthew 24), having promised it to his disciples (Luke 12:32, 22:29). He was crucified as its king and for his testimony that his life involved doing his Father's will and demonstrating God's authority (John 5:31–47, 6:35–40).

The Book of Acts begins and ends on the theme of God's reign, and **the Apostles** keenly affirmed Jesus, rather than Caesar, as Lord (Acts 17:7). They did as Jesus did and the nature of God's kingdom was expressed. They eagerly awaited the full evidence of the kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:24; Philippians 2:5–11; 1 Timothy 1:17; Revelation 1:6, 11:15, 12:10, 15:3–4, 17:14, 19:16, etc.). They believed life was now best lived in this future experience (Romans 8:28–39). Each of the seven churches in the book of Revelation received a promise for those who overcome the pressures of empires and rulers opposed to God's sovereignty through Jesus' lordship and the Spirit's power (Revelation 2–3).

God reigns as creator and re-creator. God's power and authority are most vividly seen in Jesus. Jesus revealed the nature of God's kingdom and lived under God's authority as Father by the power of God's Holy Spirit (John 16:15). When conflict with earthly kingdoms was most intense, the fact and character of God's reign was

Living Love

evident: as with the accounts of Moses in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, and Jesus and his disciples under Roman tyranny (e.g. 2 Timothy 4:18; Exodus 3:11ff; Daniel 7:9; John 8:54–59; Revelation 1:9, 11:15).

Some questions

1. Select a psalm about God's sovereignty (e.g. Psalms 24, 44, 47, 93, 95–99, 103, 145), and discuss what it says about the ways God rules over creation, those who do evil and practice idolatry, and those who see themselves as God's people.
2. Read the song of Moses in Exodus 15 and share insights about ways this passage expresses how God rules the nations (cf. Deuteronomy 32, 33).
3. Reflect on the ways Israel's LORD God was seen as sovereign when the first Jerusalem temple was dedicated (e.g. 2 Chronicles 7:1ff, 36:15–23).
4. Consider Daniel's understanding of God's sovereignty in Daniel 9.
5. What was John the Baptist's view of God? Why did John talk so much about personal and national repentance?
6. Select a parable about the kingdom of God and examine what the parable indicates about God's sovereignty (e.g. Matthew 13–25; Luke 10–18).
7. Reflect on God as ruler over everything (e.g. Psalms 115, 135). Do you find it easy to live under God's authority (cf. Galatians 5:13–6:10)?
8. In what ways do you understand the implications of God always acting according to God's own nature? In what ways do you understand God not doing anything that contradicts God's essential being as relational love, truth, holiness, righteousness and goodness, and God's eternal insistence on acting with grace, mercy, kindness and compassion (cf. Numbers 23:19; 2 Timothy 2:13)?
9. Research the sources and dates scholars assign to selected passage/s and their relationships with the understandings of God's sovereignty that you have considered.

Jesus: Messiah, Servant and Lord

Tracing the unfolding of God's plan to show his sovereignty in Jesus.

A coming king

God's intention that humanity would defeat evil is revealed from the first pages of the Scriptures. This outcome is the only way human dignity can be fully restored and the serpent's deceit denied success. The promises to Abraham (Genesis 15:1–6, 17:1–18) and Jacob's blessing to Judah (Genesis 49:7–10) point to the coming of one who would secure the people's obedience – yet not without suffering (Genesis 3:15, 22:1–18).

The prophets' messages reminded God's people of their God-given covenant and emphasised the need for a ruler who would reign lovingly, truthfully, peaceably and fairly. The New Testament highlights Jesus' fulfilment of these prophecies and that these prophecies were partly given to prepare people for his coming (e.g. Amos 3:7–8; 1 Peter 1:10–12; 2 Peter 1:12–21; Revelation 1:2ff, 12:17, 19:10).

Some prophecies

Prophet. Moses indicated that God planned to raise up a prophet to whom the people would listen (Deuteronomy 18:14–22; Acts 7:37–38). Moses was keen for the Spirit of God to anoint all God's people for prophesy (Numbers 11:16–17, 23–29)!

Messiah. David was told that one of his offspring would be an anointed one, a Messiah who would establish God's kingdom (2 Samuel 7:13; Psalms 89, 132). Psalms 2 and 110 tell of a Messiah-King ruling the nations, and that he would be God's son. This son would be a priest like Melchizedek. Other prophets mentioned a 'righteous Branch' coming from David's lineage (Isaiah 4:2–6, 9:6–7, 11:1–10, Jeremiah 23:5–6, Zechariah 3:8–10, 6:12 cf. 4:6).

Suffering servant. Isaiah was briefed before he wrote (Isaiah 6:1–10). He told of a king who would bring righteousness as a prince of peace (Isaiah 9:1ff, 32:1ff). The second section of Isaiah indicates that this king, anointed by God's Spirit, would be God's servant (Isaiah 42:1, 52:13, 61:1–3). God would delight in him, he would bring justice to the nations and God would be known as a creator who restores, a ruler who delivers, a father who forgives and a shepherd who comforts (Isaiah 40:1–2, 42:15–25, 51:12, 63:16, 64:8; cf. Ezekiel 37:15–28).

This revelation was not only for Israel as God's people. It was intended to reach the 'ends of the earth' and renew all of creation (Isaiah 42:6–7, 44:1–3, 49:6–7, 65:17–66:2). Everything was focused on God's servant-king obtaining this glory by obediently suffering the righteous judgements of God's people with God's people (Isaiah 42:2–3, 51:13–53:12, 63:1–6; cf. Zechariah 9:9, 12:10, 13:7). Pathetic idols can never match such majesty (Isaiah 42:8, 44:6–28, 46:5–10). The

prophetic testimony throughout the book of Isaiah is that this *is* good news (e.g. Isaiah 40:9, 52:7, cf. 53:4 ‘*Surely* he has borne our griefs ...’ (italics added))!

Son of man. Daniel 7:13–14 describes one like a human being given power over the nations and establishing a kingdom. Saints receive this kingdom, and reign and live in it forever (Daniel 7:18, 22, 27). Daniel was told while praying for Israel’s restoration from exile of an anointed one who would ‘finish transgression and seal up prophecy’ (Daniel 9:24).

The king came when Jesus was born

Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit at the right time (cf. Galatians 4:4) and was told that her child would save God’s people from their sins (cf. Matthew 1:18–23). God declared that Jesus was the ‘Son of the Most High’ and that he would be given ‘the throne of his ancestor David’. Jesus would establish an everlasting kingdom. Jesus was called ‘Son of God’ when Mary was told that the Holy Spirit would ‘come upon you’ (Luke 1:32–35, cf. 1:15–17, 41).

The angels declared Messiah’s birth (Luke 2:11). Wise men worshiped the king (Matthew 2:1–12). Simeon and Anna recognised Jesus as Messiah by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bethlehem murders were a stark reminder of Jeremiah 31:15 (cf. Matthew 2:18; cf. Luke 1:33. Rachel was Jacob’s wife).

The prophecies were fulfilled

Jesus was known as a prophet, though without honour in his own hometown (Matthew 21:11; Luke 1:76, 4:24; Mark 6:15; John 6:14). He was the servant who offered his life to ransom many people (Matthew 12:15–21, 20:28). Even demons acknowledged him as God’s Son (Matthew 8:28–34). Peter confessed, crowds debated, a centurion declared, and Gospels were written – all agreeing about who was God’s Messiah, God’s Christ, God’s Anointed One (Matthew 16:13–20; John 7:37–43; Matthew 21, 27:54; John 20:31).

Jesus revealed himself to two disciples from Emmaus (Luke 24:26, 46). He often referred to himself as Son of Man during his ministry. He forgave sins, healed, was crucified and died, and promised his resurrection and future coming in glory (Matthew 9:1–6, 12:32, 16:27ff, 24:30–44, 25:31–46; Mark 8:38; John 5:24–27, 9:35; Luke 9:18–27).

Jesus came according to Old Testament prophecies. He was testified to as Messiah, God’s Son. He was identified as the human-like person or son of man in Daniel and the suffering servant in Isaiah. He was Word-made-flesh, revealing his Father’s glorious grace and truth. Although

the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.
He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him (John 1:10, 11).

Living Love

In, by and through Jesus' coming, God did God's will by God's Spirit, and all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12, 13, cf. 3:1–8; 1 John 1:1–3; Hebrews 2:13).

He was the good shepherd who cared for the sheep, and he was the true vine whose branches bore abundant fruit (John 10, 15; cf. Isaiah 5; Ezekiel 37).

Some questions

1. In what ways does Isaiah 52:13–53:12 describe God's servant being exalted as God's king?
2. Consider Jesus' comments on Psalm 110 in Matthew 22:41–46.
3. Select a passage from Acts and share the significance of the names given to Jesus (e.g. Acts 4:23ff, 5:29ff, 7:54ff, 8:26ff, 13:32ff).
4. Meditate on the songs of Mary and Zechariah (in Luke 1) in the light of Old Testament prophecies about God's coming king.
5. Compare Daniel's vision of a human-like person or son of man in Daniel 7:9–14 with Matthew 26:64 and Acts 1:11.
6. The prophets gave God's king various names. Share what, if anything, is said about the death and resurrection of Jesus for each of these names.
7. God the Son was Lord before his birth. Why did he become *Jesus* (John 1:14–18; Hebrews 1:1–3; Romans 8:1–3 etc.)?

Jesus: King of kings

The cross declares Jesus as Lord and reveals God's majesty.

Exalted king

Jesus was God's exalted king (Isaiah 52:13; Philippians 2:9). The book of Revelation states that everyone, 'even those who pierced him', will see him when he returns. Meanwhile, Jesus is Lord of history, and his church is those who have been freed from their sins to be victorious with him. John gave us majestic descriptions of king Jesus and wrote of how God's Christ (Messiah, Anointed One) will rule over this world's kingdoms (Revelation 1:4–20, 5:1–14, 11:15–18, 12:1–13:1, 19:6–18).

We can better understand Jesus' life, death and resurrection by being mindful of the prophetic build up to his birth, and the revelation of his exaltation. We also learn more of living under the Father's authority and being filled with the Holy Spirit's power.

God's nearby kingdom

When John the Baptist came preaching God's kingdom, he exhorted people to prepare for the Lord and Messiah's coming. God's kingdom would bring forgiveness and justice and involve being baptised with or in God's Holy Spirit (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; John 1).

Jesus identified with all these themes at his baptism and declared that he would fulfil 'all righteousness' (Matthew 3:15). God the Father declared his delight in his Son as the Holy Spirit descended (cf. Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 42:1). Jesus was tested in the wilderness as both Messiah and servant (Matthew 4:1ff). He returned in the Spirit and preached God's reign by the Spirit's power (Luke 4:14–19, 43; Matthew 4:17, 23; Mark 1:14; cf. Acts 10:38). His ministry was powerful. Demons admitted who he was, sick were healed, storms were calmed, and several dead people were raised (Luke 4:38–44, 5:17–26, 8:26–39; Matthew 8:23, 14:22, 9:18–26). Even though he had no palace or bed, a centurion recognised that Jesus was under God's authority (Matthew 8:5–20).

When Jesus' disciples went out to preach and demonstrate what life in God's kingdom involved, they, and Jesus, were filled with joy. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, praised his Father for what he was doing as Lord of heaven and earth (Luke 9:1–6, 10:1–24; Matthew 10, 11:25–30; cf. Psalm 135:6). The way of discipleship was demanding, and many, including John the Baptist, were perplexed. Yet Jesus was clear about what was happening (Mark 9:49; Luke 9:62, 14:25–33; Matthew 11:1–19; John 6:60–70 cf. Matthew 21:23–27).

Towards crucifixion

Having taught openly of God's kingdom (e.g. Matthew 5–7), Jesus used many parables (e.g. Matthew 13:25; Luke 10–18). Aware of the impact of God's kingdom on those nearby, he often withdrew to the desert (Matthew 12:15, 14:13; cf. Isaiah 42:1–4, 32:15; John 6:15). He emphasised the spiritual conflict that was occurring (Matthew 12:22:32; Luke 11:14–28; John 8:42–46). Peter confessed who Jesus was, and some firm words came from Jesus about God's kingdom (Matthew 16:13–28).

A turning point in Jesus' ministry was when, transfigured on the mountain, he talked with Moses and Elijah about his coming suffering and death. God reaffirmed his Son at that time (Luke 9:28–36; cf. John 12:23,24).

Jesus linked God's kingdom to God's final judgement, taught about the Holy Spirit's coming, and mentioned his coming death prior to his crucifixion (Matthew 24–26; Luke 21–22; John 14–16). He spoke of the need to enter the kingdom as children and went into Jerusalem on a donkey (Matthew 18:1–5; Mark 11:10; Luke 19:38; John 12:15; cf. Zechariah 9:9; Psalm 118:26; cf. John 3:1ff). He washed his disciples' feet and identified the Passover meal with the new covenant and his Father's kingdom, which the disciples were to receive (Matthew 26:28–32; Luke 12:32, 22:29).

A key question at his trial was 'Are you Messiah?' (Matthew 26:63–64; cf. Luke 23:2). Though born to be king, his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36–37). He was crucified as king of the Jews (Matthew 27:37). Yet this heralded his victory and glory (John 12:20–36, 17:1–5).

Crowned with glory and honour

God demonstrated his authority over death through his Son's crucifixion. This act of divine 'weakness' was central to God's purposes (1 Corinthians 1:22–25). Jesus continued to explain carefully how essential the cross was to God's plans after his resurrection (Mark 15:43; John 19:39; Luke 24:44–49; cf. Acts 2:23–34). He taught more of God's kingdom and imparted the Spirit before ascending to 'sit at God's right hand' (John 20:22; Acts 1:1–8; Mark 16:19–20).

The Father's majesty was in and with his Son. God's saints received God's kingdom (Revelation 1:4–8) and many people joined God's reconciled family (John 1:12; Romans 8:11, 14; Revelation 7:9–17). The ruler of this world was overthrown, and creation awaits its liberation with fresh anticipation and significant agony (John 15:18f, 16:33; 1 John 4:4, 5:19; Romans 8:18–23).

No wonder Jesus' disciples were inspired to describe Jesus' exaltation in such majestic language. Paul wrote of 'the incomparably great power for us who believe'. That power was the resurrection power which placed Jesus as Lord over all things, including his church (Ephesians 1:18–23). Jesus 'disarmed the powers and

authorities' by his cross and made 'a public spectacle of them' (Colossians 2:13–15). The anthem in Philippians 2:2–11 describes the way Jesus was exalted to 'the highest place' and given 'the name that is above every name'. The writer of Hebrews similarly affirmed that Jesus, as a priest like Melchizedek, has done away with sins 'once for all' and awaits 'for his enemies to be made his foot stool'. Jesus was 'crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God, he might taste death for every one' (Hebrews 2:5–9, 7:26–8:1, 10:12–14).

Some questions

1. Examine Jesus' temptations using Genesis 49:10, Psalms 2 and 110, and other passages.
2. The transfiguration and the events that immediately followed reveal the majesty of God. Consider some ways in which this revelation occurs using Luke 9:43 and 2 Peter 1:16–18.
3. Reflect on what ways, if any, God is threatened by evil. In what ways does God respond to evil? Does God avoid conflict and, if so, how?
4. Jesus 'rescued us from the hand of our enemies' (Luke 1:74–75). Share what these 'enemies' are, why Jesus delivered us from them and the ways he delivered us and continues to deliver us from them.
5. How does the declaration in 1 Corinthians 8:5–6 affect living in God's kingdom (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11)?
6. Nicodemus and Joseph cared for Jesus (Mark 15:43; Matthew 27:57ff; Luke 23:50f; John 19:38–42; also see John 3:1ff, 7:50–52). What can we learn from them about life's crises and struggles?
7. In what ways do the biblical references to Jesus as shepherd, vine and lamb relate to his crucifixion (John 10:1–18, 15:1–8; 1 Peter 2:24–25; Hebrews 13:20–21)?

God the Father is sovereign

God's majesty is in being Father to his Son, and, by the Holy Spirit, to us.

Father and Son

Humanity was to reflect its creator. God's people were reminded that God the 'Rock', the 'LORD', the 'Most High', rules and redeems with justice and 'without deceit' as their father and creator (Deuteronomy 32:4–9). Having 'created the heavens' and 'spread out the earth and what comes from it', they were told that God 'gives breath ... and spirit' to humanity (Isaiah 42:1–7). The latter Isaiah wrote that 'you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name' and that 'O LORD, you are our father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand' (Isaiah 63:16, 64:8).

Malachi also connects God's parenting of Israel with God being their creator (Malachi 2:10; cf. Hosea 11:1ff)). Many passages indicate that God would redeem his people through his son (e.g. Psalms 2, 89; Isaiah 9:6–7).

Jesus taught that God was not only historically father to his people but is always eternal Father to his Son. Jesus said he always works with his Father, that he lived in the fullness of his Father's love, and that what he did reveals his Father's glory, authority and majesty (John 5:17–20, 6:46, 57, 17:1–5, 24).

The apostles, in harmony with the testimony of John's Gospel, emphasised the significance of this relationship. Jesus, full of grace and truth, revealed his Father. He was the 'reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word'. This was seen when Jesus was exalted after providing 'purification for sins', so enabling us to become God's family (John 1:1–3, 14–18; Hebrews 1:3; cf. 1 Corinthians 8:6; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:5–11; Colossians 1:15–20).

The majesty of God as Father involves God's cleansing, pure love which enables us to be his family now and in the new creation (John 1:10–13; James 1:16–18; 1 John 3:1–3; Ephesians 3:14–21).

Jesus: The Father's king

Jesus' ministry. Jesus was about his Father's business from his birth. God affirmed Jesus as his Messiah-Son at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration (Luke 1:32, 2:49, 4:22, 9:35).

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel records Jesus teaching people the way their heavenly Father wanted them to live. This sermon contains many references to God parenting his people. God was Father, creator and king and so was able and willing to supply their needs. They were free to live in God's kingdom and act according to God's truth. The resources for every aspect of life as God's family would come from their heavenly Father (Matthew 5–7).

Living Love

Jesus was filled with joy and praised his heavenly Father for what happened during his disciples' preaching trips. God's kingdom was shown to be powerful and personal as God worked with and through his Messiah-Son (Luke 10:17–24; Matthew 11:25–30).

Jesus offered release from bondage to false fathers. The true Son, from God, encouraged God's people to live in the freedom and reality of knowing God as Father (John 8:31–47).

Jesus' death. The heavenly Father's love (and that of his Son) was evident in Jesus' testimony while crucified as a criminal. Jesus prayed to his Father that ignorant and rebellious people would be forgiven. Then, after suffering the isolation of knowing God was not rescuing him from that human torture, he committed himself to his heavenly Father (Matthew 27:38–50; Mark 15:25–39; Luke 23:34, 46; cf. Jesus' Gethsemane prayer: Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:39–46; cf. John 17:1ff, 18:11).

The prince of this world was judged in his death (Hebrews 2:14; John 12:31, 14:30, 16:33). Humanity's enemies, including sin, death and God's 'wrath', were defeated (1 Peter 2:24; 1 Corinthians 15:54; Romans 3:25). Our tendency to do evil was broken (Romans 8:9f). Our consciences were cleansed, freeing us to serve the living God (Hebrews 9:14). Abundant life was given to those who trust Jesus as the good shepherd (John 10:1–30; cf. Hebrews 13:20–21).

Counterfeit kingdoms were destroyed as Jesus, at his Father's initiative, suffered a victim's death. Nothing can now hinder the ultimate coming of the new creation where the full glory of God as Father will be seen in and with his Son and God's family by and in God's Holy Spirit (1 John 3:8, 4:14; Romans 8:19–21, 29–32).

Jesus' exaltation. Jesus spoke about God's kingdom after his resurrection and before his ascension. This divine realm will enrich and renew the entire creation (Acts 1:3; Matthew 28:18f; Ephesians 4:8–10).

As ascended Lord, Jesus was crowned with glory and honour and God's family is made pure and glorious (Hebrews 2:9–13).

As ascended Lord, Jesus is uniquely worthy to be Lord of history because by his blood he purchased people from all nations to be God's family (Revelation 5; Ephesians 1:22–33).

As ascended Lord, Jesus received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father, and pours out God's Holy Spirit on God's people (Acts 1:4; 2:33–39; Luke 24:49), sending them as he had been sent having breathed God's Holy Spirit upon them (John 20:19–23).

As ascended Lord, Jesus intercedes with the Father for God's people (Hebrews 7:23, 8:2, 9:24–28; 1 John 2:1ff).

As ascended Lord, Jesus ‘sat down at the right hand of God’ and waits ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet’. His victory is because of one offering that has permanently ‘perfected’ everyone who is sanctified.

As ascended Lord, the Holy Spirit also testifies to us about his victory by affirming that Jesus’ covenant with redeemed humanity will embed and write God’s ways of living on their hearts and in their minds (Hebrews 10:12–16; cf. Mark 16:19–20; Psalm 2).

As ascended Lord, Jesus was given ‘the name that is above every name’ so that at his name everyone should worship him and acknowledge his majesty ‘to the glory of God the Father’ because he did not exploit his equality with God but emptied himself into ‘human form’ and ‘humbled himself and became obedient to … death on a cross’ (Philippians 2:6–11).

The kingdom is the Father’s

Jesus told his disciples that his Father was pleased to give them God’s kingdom (Luke 12:30–32, 22:29–30; Matthew 26:29; cf. Matthew 6:10). They heard that he was going to prepare accommodation for them in his Father’s house, and that he would return to take them ‘to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also’.

Jesus expanded his message about taking them to himself by telling them that he was the only way to his Father, and that he was his Father’s incarnate truth and life with them. Knowing Jesus meant knowing his Father – and since they had seen him and knew him, they had seen and knew his Father (John 14:1–6; cf. 1:10–18).

Paul taught the Philippian community that they were citizens of heaven, from where their ‘Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ’ would come and

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 3:20–21).

God has transferred us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his beloved Son. In that kingdom we have fellowship with the Father and his Son, by the Spirit. We are more than God’s servants; we are God’s family (Colossians 1:9–14; Ephesians 2:18; 1 John 1:3; Revelation 1:6; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 10:11).

All humanity will acknowledge Jesus as Lord when ‘the Son of Man comes in his glory’, so glorifying his Father. The ‘righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father’ and everything will be subject to his Son, who will hand God’s kingdom to God so that the triune God may be ‘all in all’ and God’s inner harmony and unity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit will be eternally evident in

God's renewed creation (Philippians 2:11; 1 Corinthians 15:21–28; Matthew 13:37–43, 16:24–28, 24:31–46; Revelation 12:10).

Although the times and seasons of these things are hidden from us, we are assured that God will keep us in the midst of seemingly unending seasons of awful distress and difficulty, when all hope appears to us to be forever lost, and that we will be presented 'before his glorious presence' with purity, honour and joy (Acts 1:7; Mark 13:32; 1 Timothy 1:17; Jude 24, 25).

Some questions

1. Why are family relationships crucial to life in God's kingdom (cf. Malachi 4:5, 6; Luke 1:17; Ephesians 6:1–4)?
2. Matthew 6:33 identifies God's kingdom as our first priority. What does this mean about other priorities (cf. Matthew 6:24; Mark 12:28ff)?
3. In what way is the kingdom of heaven entered (cf. Matthew 7:21–23; Luke 18:15–17)?
4. What does the Sermon on the Mount tell us about our heavenly Father's kingdom (Matthew 5–7)?
5. What does it mean for us to 'submit to the Father of spirits and live' (Hebrews 12:9; cf. John 17:3).
6. What does Matthew 13:37–43 and 25:31–46 teach about God as Father?
7. Identify some of the ways our heavenly Father wants to bless us (cf. Luke 11:11–13; Romans 8:26–34).
8. What does Jesus' intercession with the Father mean for us (cf. Hebrews 7:23–8:2, 9:24–28; 1 John 2:1–2; Romans 8:32; also see Isaiah 59:15–21, 63:1–6)?

God's Holy Spirit is Lord

God's Holy Spirit is rebirthing creation and is sent to God's people by God's Messiah.

Messiah and God's Holy Spirit

God's Spirit is sovereign over all creation and throughout history (cf. Genesis 1:2; Psalm 33:6, 104:29–30). The prophets prophesied that God's life-giving Spirit would renew the entire creation and not just Israel, and that this renewal would happen during the reign of God's anointed ruler (Isaiah 32, 63:10; Ezekiel 36–37; Daniel 9:24–25; Zechariah 4:6; Joel 2:28ff).

God's Holy Spirit was powerfully present at both Jesus' birth and baptism. Jesus was God's anointed Messiah-Christ and did everything during his ministry under his Father's authority and in the power of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:18, 28; Mark 1:10–12; Luke 1:35, 4:18; Acts 10:38).

John recorded that Jesus received 'the Spirit without measure' and had authority over everything (John 3:34, 35). Paul wrote that 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' in Messiah Jesus (Colossians 1:19).

When Jesus was 'exalted and lifted up ... very high' in his death, resurrection and ascension, everything was accomplished in the same way as Jesus had been already living (cf. Isaiah 52:13ff). Jesus was lifted up on the cross in the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 9:14), lifted up from the grave by the Holy Spirit (Romans 1:4, 8:11), and ascended by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:18–21). Jesus' victory was demonstrated in the same way as it was achieved (cf. John 7:37–39, 12:27–33; Revelation 22:17).

God's Promises

Jesus spent forty days teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God prior to his ascension, telling them they would soon be baptised in the Holy Spirit, and that they would be his witnesses 'to the ends of the earth' (Luke 24:45–49; John 20:17–23; Matthew 28:20; Acts 1:2–8; cf. Psalm 2:8; Isaiah 49:6).

Jesus shared with his disciples before his death that God's reign would be fulfilled on earth by his returning to his heavenly Father (Matthew 16:19; Luke 12:32, 22:29; John 14:12–14, 16:23), by his sending the Holy Spirit to be upon and in them (John 14:16–17, 15:26, 16:13–15), and by their adoption into God's family (John 14:1, 18, 23).

These promises were given in the context of God's covenant with his people (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Luke 22:20). They relate to Jesus' life and ministry as God's Messiah, Servant and Son. God's people are sent into the world just as Jesus came into the world. Jesus was our trailblazer and, as Messiah, secured all God's promises, and now, by the Spirit, involves us in the outworking of these promises (John 20:21–23; Hebrews 12:1–3; 2 Corinthians 1:20–22).

Many passages enlarge on these promises, telling of the

- presence and future of God's reign (Acts 14:22, 19:8, 20:23f, 28:23–31; Romans 16:26; Colossians 1:9–14; 2 Timothy 4:18; Revelation 5:10, 11:15, 12:10, 15:3, 4, 19:6).
- presence and power of God's Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33ff, 4:23–31, 5:32; Romans 14:17; Galatians 5:21–6:8; Ephesians 2:18; 1 John 4:13–16; Hebrews 10:11–18).
- present reality of our life now, and in the new creation, as God's family (Galatians 3:27–4:6; Ephesians 3:14–21; 1 John 2:6–14, 3:1–24).

To be involved in the fulfilment, culmination and goals of the ages of human history is not something to be taken casually or flippantly (1 Corinthians 10:11, 12). We are surrounded by 'a great cloud of witnesses', are disciplined as God's family, and 'receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken' (Hebrews 12:1, 28). God is preparing 'an administration suitable for the fullness of time' and his mighty strength is at work in us (Ephesians 1:10 NASB). Creation agonises as it awaits its liberty. God's sovereign Spirit binds us inseparably to God as his family, and looks forward, with us, to Jesus' final return. The last promises in Scripture affirm the validity of our eager expectation: God's anointed king is coming soon (Romans 8:12–39; Revelation 21:1–22:21).

The Lord is the Spirit

As prophesied in Zechariah 4:6 and Joel 2:28ff, God's victory is actualised by the Spirit. The gospel comes 'in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction', turning us from counterfeit kingdoms to 'serve the living and true God' (1 Thessalonians 1:4–10, cf. 2:12).

The change in us is total. The church is God's temple, with his Holy Spirit anointing its worshippers and dwelling in them (Ephesians 2:21, 22; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16ff). Our calling, as God's household, is to declare our joy at being released from spiritual darkness to live in God's 'marvellous light' (1 Peter 2:4–10). Our proclamation is to be powerfully evident in God's community and by God's people living in the world. As well as practical mutual support and interaction, the family of God is to seek everyone's welfare and speak prophetic good news to every nation (1 Corinthians 3:16, 4:20, 6:9–20; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18; Ephesians 2:18–20).

Although this life as a 'kingdom of priests' is fiercely contested, God's Holy Spirit enables God's people to overcome evil's strongholds (Ephesians 6:10–20; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Romans 8:18–27). The promises to those in the seven churches in Revelation chapters 1 to 3 are strongly linked with obeying the Holy Spirit, and with living in accord with God's reign.

God's Spirit counsels and encourages us, just as God's Spirit did Jesus. God's Spirit equips us with Messiah's gifts so that God's plan is accomplished in and through us. *We are the body of Messiah, the Father's family: God's Spirit is with us.* The church is to testify to the accomplishments of God in Christ Jesus our Lord to every authority across the world throughout history (John 14:12–17; 2 Corinthians 1:3–7; 1 Corinthians 12:1–13; Ephesians 3:10).

We are to reflect Christ's glory as a result of the Holy Spirit's work and are to be prepared for our citizenship in heaven when our whole being will be reformed and conformed to Jesus, God's ascended and glorified Messiah (2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3; Ephesians 1:17; 1 Corinthians 15:1ff; Hebrews 10:11–18).

Some questions

1. What is the Holy Spirit doing when the Holy Spirit moves as the Holy Spirit wills (John 3:8, cf. Genesis 1:2; Psalm 135:6)? See Romans 8:9–28.
2. Contrast the picture of futility in Ecclesiastes 1:2–11 with the promise of fullness in Ephesians 1:23 and 4:7–10. (cf. Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30).
3. When Jesus, John the Baptist and Jesus' disciples preached the kingdom of heaven (of God, of Jesus' Father), what was their message (cf. Romans 15:13–21)?
4. What can we learn about Jesus' humanity by comparing Philippians 2:7 and 2 Corinthians 8:9 with John 3:34 and Acts 10:38. In what ways does this relate to us today?
5. Consider ways in which the work of the Holy Spirit in Zechariah 12:10 and John 16:8–11 affects our relationships with other people.
6. Why did the evil spirit respond as indicated in Acts 19:15 (cf. 1 John 4:4; Colossians 1:13–14, 2:15 and Ephesians 2:1–5)?
7. What will the Holy Spirit be doing during Jesus' final coming (cf. 2 Corinthians 3; Romans 8 and Revelation 22)?

Life under God's sovereignty

God's family expresses his success as the Sovereign One.

God is not mocked

Paul insisted on and described the nature of God's sovereignty over human activity (Galatians 5:13–6:10). Human choice is not between good and evil categories, but life and death (cf. Genesis 2:9ff). People everywhere and in each generation either reap the harvest of eternal life that the Spirit brings those who 'sow to the Spirit' or reap 'corruption from the flesh' as they indulge their passions. Freedom involves not simply being able to choose preferred alternatives. It means being God's community and family and living in harmony with God's sovereign purposes in his grace and mercy by his Spirit's power and presence (Matthew 8:21, 11:30; Galatians 5:1; 1 John 5:3–5).

Other passages suggest some of the various ways in which God encourages people to make wise choices in the light of the consequences our actions bring (Genesis 12:3; Exodus 34:6–7; Habakkuk 2:4; Matthew 7:24–27, 10:32–33). God does not remain passive when humanity rebels against him (e.g. Job 7:17–19; Psalm 7:11, 73:18; Genesis 4:6,7; Deuteronomy 32:30; Proverbs 16:9; Romans 1:18–32). Although God's authority is challenged and defied, God remains intimately involved and sovereign (Acts 14:15–17; Romans 8:28; Psalm 135). God does not rule mechanically, indiscriminately, randomly or unfairly, but personally – as Father, Son and Spirit (cf. Psalm 42; Romans 2:11, 9:10–33; Jonah 1:17; Job).

The mystery of God's sovereignty is seen in Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. God was pleased to show his displeasure at all evil in order that, in Christ, all humanity could share in the joy of his love (Acts 2:22–36; Isaiah 53:4,10; cf. Ezekiel 18:23). Ephesians 1:3–14 speaks of the glorious grace which has been lavishly and lovingly given 'according to the good pleasure of his will'. Hebrews 10 similarly exhorts God's people to persevere and receive God's promises by accepting the Spirit's testimony of Jesus' obedience to God's purposes. We can hear the Father's words to his Messiah-Son as God's messages to us (Luke 3:21; Colossians 1:9–23).

On earth as in heaven

Although God does not force us to obey him, the time is coming when God's purposes will be fully 'done on earth as in heaven' (Matthew 6:10; cf. Matthew 11:25; Luke 2:14, 11:2ff; 20:21). Yet God's kingdom is already present (cf. Hebrews 12:28). The apostles were reminded just prior to Jesus' ascension that they would live in the kingdom-realities of Jesus' death and resurrection and the kingdom-fruits of Pentecost, and that they would be impacted by Messiah's future coming reign (Acts 1:3–11; Romans 8:18–25, 14:7–18; 1 Corinthians 10:11, 11:26; 1 Timothy 6:14–16; 2 Timothy 1:12; Revelation 6:10, 12:12).

As history moves to this goal of God's renewed earth where God's redeemed humanity will live, life on the one hand will seem normal, while by contrast, seasons will be so severe that they will need to be shortened. While fake and false messiahs will appear, God's restorative, reconciling and renewing good news will be declared throughout the earth 'as a testimony to all nations' (Luke 17, 21, 24:46–49; Matthew 24; cf. Psalm 2; Revelation 1:5, 9, 12:17, 19:10). All coastlands will wait for his teaching (cf. Isaiah 41, 42, 49)!

The book of Daniel records a glimpse of the last days (Daniel 7–12). God's people resist intense attack as they await their inheritance. God overrules those who oppose his purposes and refines and purifies his people (Daniel 7:9–27, 10:12–14, 12:3–10; Malachi 3:2; 1 John 3:1–3).

Similarly, the book of Revelation indicates that God's rule and victory will be effective even though world rulers oppose God (Revelation 16:10–14, 17:1–18; cf. Matthew 4:8). The true and authentic splendour of the nations will be evident in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 1:5, 6:1–5, 19:1–21, 21:22–27).

1 Corinthians 15, 2 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, 2 Thessalonians 2 and 2 Peter 3 also tell of this coming day. Its date is not given even though God has fixed the time when Jesus' prayer will be fully answered (Matthew 6:9, 10, 24:36; Acts 1:7; Daniel 12:9).

God's kingdom people

The universe is described as pregnant with a new humanity: a holy, royal and priestly community which is spoken of as inheriting God's kingdom (Daniel 7:22; Luke 12:32, 22:29; Romans 8:19; Revelation 1:6; Titus 3:7; James 2:5). This community is God's family, the body and bride of God's Messiah-Son, and is being prepared for life in God's renewed creation (Ephesians 2; 2 Corinthians 5). The people of God are to do God's will, be led by the Holy Spirit, and testify as ambassadors of Messiah Jesus (Revelation 12:10–12, 17).

God's church witnesses to God's purposes and testifies to God's victory. It declares God's wisdom to the principalities and powers (Ephesians 3:8–13; Colossians 2:13–15). This wisdom is a mystery to a world which sees scandal and foolishness in God's actions in Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:13–25). The message of Jesus' death and resurrection tells the people of God of God's plans and pleasure and encourages them in their considerable difficulties (Acts 14:22; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:3). With this encouragement they are more than able to overcome the opposition they encounter, even though the opposite often appears to be their reality (Romans 8:31–39; 2 Corinthians 10:4; Ephesians 6:10–18; Revelation 2, 3).

Abundantly equipped by the Spirit, the people of God declare Jesus' great victory and share in the grace of 'him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his

Living Love

blood' (Revelation 1:5; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; 1 Peter 4:7–11; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; 1 Thessalonians 2:10–12). This proclamation is the overflow of lives growing together 'into a holy temple in the Lord' (Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Corinthians 6:18–20; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18; Revelation 21:3). Forgiveness, reconciliation, justice and righteousness are basic to relationships in the kingdom (cf. Romans 14:17).

God's people are to avoid quenching God's Spirit. They are to drink the water from the fountain of life (1 Thessalonians 5:19; Revelation 22:17; Psalm 36:9). God's king is coming soon: God's people are to be ready (Matthew 25; Luke 16; Revelation 7:9–17, 22:20–21)!

Some questions

1. 'The kingdom of God is not a democracy where we may choose to accept God's rule. He elects us, not us him'. 'We are free to obey or disobey, but not free from the consequences'. In what ways do you see these comments aligned with biblical insights to the reign of God in Messiah Jesus by and through God's Holy Spirit?
2. In what ways is our behaviour affected by the coming day of the Lord?
3. What 'equipment' does God provide (e.g. Ephesians 6:10ff)?
4. In what ways does justice come to the nations? Consider Isaiah 11:1–4; 32:15–20, 42:1–4; Zechariah 7:8–12; Luke 1:46–55, 4:13–19 and other passages.
5. Reflect on God's forbearance using Romans 2:4, 5, 3:25; Acts 17:30; Lamentations 3:19–58 and other passages.
6. In what ways can God's 'eternal kingdom' be richly entered (cf. 2 Peter 1:3–11; 1 Corinthians 3:10–17; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Luke 12:33, 16:1–13; Matthew 5:3; Revelation 2:9, 3:17)?

Knowing God

Coming alive

Introduction

Knowing about God and knowing God are different. The Bible records testimonies of people who believed they knew God. The author of Hebrews wrote that approaching God involves believing that God is, and that God rewards true seekers (Hebrews 11:6). Atheists, who say there is no God, and agnostics, for whom God, if God is, remains unknowable, may appear out of harmony with God's self-revelation. Biblical descriptions of God as beyond knowledge should caution our responses to atheists and agnostics (cf. Job 38; Psalm 139:1–18; Isaiah 40:12ff; Romans 11:33ff). The writer of Hebrews urged readers to open themselves to God, who is, and who blesses those who seek God. Opening ourselves is more than a self-initiated and self-activated action – it involves a work of God's Holy Spirit (Psalm 14:1ff, 53:1ff; Romans 3:9ff; cf. Romans 1:4, 15:17–20).

God talked with humanity after creating them male and female in God's image and according to God's likeness (Genesis 1:28). Their rejection of relational knowing proved devastating and deadly, and they forfeited their access to the tree of life and its surrounding abundant environment (Genesis 2:17). That door closed and they saw themselves alone, hiding from God and filled with shame (Genesis 3:8–24). Although God's presence and ample evidence of God's creativity remained, they set about replacing this life-giving reality with futile thoughts and sinful actions (cf. Romans 1:18–32). Thanksgiving for God's goodness abated, appreciation for God's generosity was suppressed, and thinking about God's truth was emptied of authentic meaning. Human society became saturated with defiance, rebellion, sensuality and idolatry.

False knowing: Idolatry and Adultery

Micah 4:5 states that while everyone has their own gods, God's people can know freedom from idolatry. The prophets contrasted human substitutes for God – humanity's manufactured gods – and the living God (Deuteronomy 29:16–18, 31:16–18, 32:15–23; Psalms 115, 135; Isaiah 2:8, 40:18–20, 44:6–20, 48:3–8. See also Habakkuk 2:18,19; Jeremiah 2:13, 26ff, 10:1–10, Ezekiel 14). While all of us need to be careful about thinking we are free from idolatry, we can be free from their tyranny in Jesus, and know and worship the true and living God (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:5, 6; Acts 17:22ff, 19:23ff; 1 John 5:20, 21).

Hosea described the rebellion of God's people as adultery. He wrote of the way God would allure them and bring them to know the LORD (Hosea 2:1–23). He stated that 'there is no knowledge of God in the land and God's people are destroyed for lack of knowledge' (Hosea 4:1–6). The prophet pleaded for true

knowing and genuine recognition of the LORD God and had confidence in God's faithfulness (Hosea 6:1–3; cf. Jeremiah 2:1–13).

Knowing God is living and loving

The Scriptures include testimonies of people who were seen to have known God and who walked by faith. There are many psalms that express the joys and sorrows of endeavouring to 'walk in his ways' and live by his laws and will (Psalms 1:1ff, 40:1ff, 101:6, 128:1ff; cf. Deuteronomy 5:33, 8:6, 10:12, 11:22, 19:9, 26:17, 28:9, 30:16; Joshua 22:5).

While the Old Testament has abundant testimony about knowing and fearing the LORD, it also looked to a future time when more complete relationships with God would eventuate. When this knowing of God happens, God's people will have a 'heart to know him', the earth will be filled with God's glory, sins will be forgiven, and God and God's ways will be obeyed (Isaiah 11:9; Jeremiah 9:23, 24, 24:7, 31:31ff; Daniel 11:32; Ezekiel 36:25; Hosea 6:1–3, 2:20; Habakkuk 2:14). People living this way practice justice and live in harmony and peace, and God's purposes for humanity and creation flourish (Jeremiah 22:16; Isaiah 2:1–5). One aspect of being prepared for that time involves being still and knowing God (Psalm 46:10; Habakkuk 2:20).

Knowing God is living, living is loving God and neighbours, and loving God and other people is obeying God and living well. The Old Testament picture took fresh clarity when Jesus prayed for his disciples to receive eternal life:

Now this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3; cf. 17:24–26; 2 Peter 1:3ff).

This life is made real by and through the Holy Spirit (1 John 3:24, 4:13–16). Its origins are not in our necessary human efforts but in God's grace in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:8–14). Jesus has delivered humanity from sin and death and so from shame, failure and futility.

Jesus' prayer in John 17 indicates that Jesus longed for his Father to glorify him so that people would know God as Father and Jesus as his Son (John 17:3). This involved Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection (John 17:1, 12:23–33). That pathway reveals the extent of Jesus' yearning that God's people live in personal relationships with him and his Father (John 17:20–26; cf. Luke 10:21, 22; Matthew 11:27; John 15:15–21). We live in harmony with God's ways as we know and love God, and God is praised and worshipped as we share God's gifts of love, kindness and mercy with other people.

The apostolic testimony affirmed this good news. It explored ways in which we come to know God, are filled with hope, share in God's love, obey God and do God's will (cf. Ephesians 1:17ff; Philippians 3:7–11; Colossians 1:9–13; 1 John 2:3, 3:10ff, 4:8, 5:2ff, 20). Knowing God is a growing process worked out on these

Living Love

foundations. God's knowledge of us ceases to threaten us and becomes a basis for reverence and awe (cf. Proverbs 1:7 etc.). Our sure hope is in God knowing, forgiving and reconciling us to God's own self, to God's humanity and to God's creation (1 Corinthians 8:6; Galatians 4:1–9; Romans 8:29).

Conclusion

We are to know the living God! God will refresh us and give us a 'heart to know him' (cf. Jeremiah 24:7). Anything less than fully loving God leads to adultery and idolatry (Matthew 7:21–23, 6:23, 25:1–13, 22:37; John 14:21; 1 John 5:1–5ff). We are to press on to maturity as God's people, awaiting that day when knowing will be a full expression of love (Ephesians 4:10–13; 1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2; Ephesians 3:14–20; cf. 1 John 4:8).

God has spoken

Introduction

We cannot know God unless God makes God's-self known. This revelation is essentially God's grace to humanity. Peter wrote to his readers that they were born again through 'the living and enduring word of God' (1 Peter 1:10, 23; cf. James 1:18, 21). Our existence is because God forms and sustains us, yet we so quickly and so often attempt to shut ourselves off from God (Psalm 104:27–30, 33:6, 148:5, 6; Hebrews 11:3). Divine revelations, therefore, are gracious, unmerited, undeserved acts of generosity solely coming at God's initiative (cf. Psalm 139; Jeremiah 1:5; Daniel 2:20ff; Exodus 33:17; John 10:14ff, 27ff; Galatians 4:9). God's self-revelation is enormous in breadth and width, and depth and height, and is everlasting. Our lives are brief glances at its various aspects from within our limited perspectives and using our partial understandings and insights.

Paul wrote that God's personal qualities are visible in creation. What can be known of God is 'plain' (Romans 1:19). Not only do the heavens reveal God's glory, but we are structured so that we will reach out for God (Psalm 19; Acts 17:22–31). God wants the earth to be filled with the 'knowledge of the LORD' (Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14). Our rejection of God's self-revelation leads to distorted views of creation and the everyday realities of our communities.

God's messengers

Jesus nominated Abel as the first prophet (Matthew 23:33–39). Although Abel and the later prophets were rejected, their memories and testimonies remained. Even when 'the word of the LORD was rare', the residue of what God had previously said – along with creation's witness – was always present (1 Samuel 3:1ff; cf. Psalms 8, 19). Amos pointed out that God did nothing without telling his prophets, and that God's messages impacted God's messengers so strongly that they communicated and obeyed these revelations (Amos 2:7, 8; cf. Amos 7:14–16; Jeremiah 1:5–9, 20:9, 23:29; Daniel 11:32; 1 Corinthians 9:16; 2 Corinthians 5:14). The prophets believed that the truth of their prophecies would eventually be evident even if they were rejected at the time they were given (e.g. Revelation 10:7; Matthew 26:54).

Their prophetic messages were linked with God's revelations in creation (Psalm 19; Matthew 5:17, 18). The divine law in the Pentateuch was part of this revelation. It told God's people the way they could live in harmony with each other and God's created universe. Moses, God's nominated lawgiver, was a prophet – so much so that Jesus was called a 'prophet like' Moses (Acts 3:17–23, 7:37, 38; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15, 16; 29:29; Exodus 7:1, 2).

Peter wrote that the prophets spoke in order to help people. Since they were 'carried along by the Holy Spirit', we must be careful to listen to what God has

said and to be shaped by God's messages (2 Peter 1:19–21 ESV; 1 Peter 1:10–13; 2 Timothy 3:14–17).

Jesus – God's living Word

The prophets' oracles were signposts to the incarnation. Jesus came with all God's fullness in him, he was the 'radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being'. He was described as 'the image of the invisible God', 'the Lamb of God', 'the Son of God' and 'Immanuel' (Hebrews 1:1–3; Colossians 1:15–20; 1 John 1:1–4; Isaiah 7:14, 9:2–7; 2 Timothy 1:8–10; Romans 1:2–6). He was the full expression of God in a human being – 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. John declared that although no-one had ever seen God, Jesus had made God known by revealing and explaining God to humanity (1 John 1:1–18). Jesus showed humanity everything God can reveal of God's own being in a human person. Jesus' whole life was a declaration of the character, nature and action of God.

God has declared God's-self and we are left without any valid excuse. We are to turn from foolishness to know God. We are to live with God as our shepherd and hear God's voice (John 10:14–18, 25–30). We are set free by Jesus' death to know God, just as the Old Testament prophets had testified (cf. John 17). Yet, like those travelling to Emmaus, we need a revelation which breaks these realities through to us by God's Spirit (Luke 24:13–35, also Luke 24:36–49; Revelation 19:10).

Spirit of living God

Jesus was keen throughout his ministry to press on and be lifted up by dying on the cross, rising from the grave and ascending to heaven. This lifting up was so that he could receive the Father's promised gift of the authority to send God's Holy Spirit to God's people (Acts 2:33). Jesus longed for the Holy Spirit to lead his disciples into the truth of God's being and purposes by working 'in' them. Jesus knew that they often misunderstood him and his goal (John 14:6ff, 15–17, 25–27, 15:26, 27, 16:13–15).

This revelation is deep, and Paul assured his readers that the Holy Spirit searches God's own depths and shares them with us, even though God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and God's ways are not our ways (1 Corinthians 2:6–16; Romans 8:26, 27; Isaiah 40:13, 14; Isaiah 55:8, 9; 1 John 4:13). We are to receive 'what the Spirit says to the churches' as a personal revelation from God in Christ Jesus (Revelation 2, 3).

We are to reflect God's glory and to reveal who God is in our daily lives, just as God called Israel to do (Exodus 19:5, 6; 1 Peter 2:9, 10; cf. Matthew 5:16; John 14:12ff; Romans 8:18ff; Matthew 28:19, 20; Acts 1:8; etc.). The identity of the people of the living God will be fully evident in the new creation (Revelation 19:1–10; 21:1–27, 22:1–6).

Living Love

The biblical testimony is God's record through human authors in their cultural and historical settings of God's ongoing involvement with humanity. Its authenticity, reliability and validity in the original contexts does not pass away. We can let it inform and correct us, rather than seeking to amend it to suit our own priorities. Intellectual arrogance and proud spirits towards the Bible are major barriers to knowing God. God's word is not separate from God like captions attached to cartoon characters. God's word reveals the will and mind of God. It is from God's heart. It is eternal and will not fade away, unlike our earthly lives (Psalm 119; Hebrews 4:12ff; Ephesians 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:14–17; Revelation 22:18, 19). We may think that God's word is susceptible because it comes to us through human words, but we can learn about receiving God's living word from the early Thessalonian believers (1 Thessalonians 2:13–16, cf. 1:4–10).

Conclusion

God has spoken and God is still speaking. We are to humble ourselves and to listen. We are to 'be still and know', we are to 'hear his voice' and to 'seek the LORD while he may be found'. It is to our peril that we ignore God. The whole creation is from God, through God and to God. The grace of God has appeared to all humanity in this creation, calling us to true and godly life (Isaiah 55:6ff; 2 Chronicles 7:13–22; Titus 2:11–14).

The living God

Introduction

God acts with God's Holy Spirit working in harmony with God's word. This is the way God reveals himself and his plan for his creation and his people. To know God therefore means hearing God's word – listening to God's voice – and letting God's Holy Spirit open us to the different ways in which God works (Genesis 1:2, 3; Psalm 104:30; Hebrews 1:3, 11:3; 1 Timothy 4:4, 5; 2 Peter 3:7; cf. Amos 3:7; 1 Peter 1:10, 11; Revelation 1:2, 2:7).

The word of the living God

God is always and in every place present to creation (cf. Acts 17:27, 28). Since humanity was created in God's image and likeness, our lives reflect or reject God's life. Jeremiah wrote of God as the 'fountain of living waters' while Proverbs urged people to keep their hearts 'with all diligence for from [them] flow the issues of life' (Jeremiah 2:13; Proverbs 4:23; cf. Matthew 12:33–37). God is the giver and sustainer of life and knowing God means consciously being thankful for God's gift of life. Jesus spoke of God's Holy Spirit coming so that rivers of 'living water' would flow from within us (John 4:14, 6:35, 7:37–39; cf. Isaiah 55:1; Revelation 7:17, 22:17; 1 Corinthians 12:13). A psalmist wrote that

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God (Psalm 42:1, 2, cf. Psalm 84:1, 2)?

God's people were urged to be careful not to turn from God since

the LORD spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness (Deuteronomy 5:23–27; Hebrews 3:12, 10:31, 12:18–29; cf. Joshua 3:9, 10; 1 Samuel 17:26; Daniel 6:26ff; 1 Timothy 3:15).

The prophets were gripped by their messages and warned about false prophets. True prophets are mouthpieces of the living God (Jeremiah 1:9; Ezekiel 2:7, 3:4; Luke 3:2; cf. Deuteronomy 18:14–22; Jeremiah 23:20–29, 28:9).

Jesus was God's living word-among-us (John 1:1, 14; 1 John 1:1). Some listeners recognised Jesus' authority and that he spoke God's word (Luke 5:1; John 10:34–38, 14:24; Matthew 7:28, 29). The parable of the sower illustrates the way Jesus saw people receive God's word (Matthew 13:1–23; Mark 4:14).

The apostles believed they spoke God's word and that they saw what Jesus had said and done being confirmed. They were demonstrating the authenticity of Jesus' life and ministry, and many accepted their message and confessed faith in Jesus as their Lord (Mark 16:20; cf. John 2:22; Luke 24:8; Acts 6:27, 8:14, 11:1,

13:7, 44ff; 17:11, 19:20; Romans 10:8–11; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Philippians 1:14).

Paul urged his readers to stand firm on what God had said in Jesus and to let God's word so dwell in them and that they found themselves worshipping and praising God with deep and abiding joy and thanksgiving (2 Thessalonians 2:13–17; Colossians 3:15–17).

It is this ever-present word of God that accomplishes God's purposes. It is this divine message that will remain without alteration or amendment long after this current heaven and earth pass away. It is this living voice that declares victory, and which warns us not to be ashamed of such a majestic and mighty communication. We are sure to suffer because of our commitment to God's living word among us, but it is this divine word that prevails (Mark 8:38, 13:31; Luke 21:33; Isaiah 40:8, 45:23, 55:11; Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 1:9, 6:9, 12:11, 17, 20:4, 22:18, 19; Proverbs 30:5, 6; John 15:20).

God's word and God's Holy Spirit

God fulfils God's purposes by God's Holy Spirit taking God's word and effecting it in God's world through and in God's people. The early Christians 'were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness' when they prayed after John and Peter were released from prison (Acts 4:27–31; cf. Acts 10:44).

Paul shared his gospel message with the Thessalonian believers in words and power 'and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction'. He reminded them that 'the word of the Lord' had 'sounded forth', with people turning 'to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead' (1 Thessalonians 1:5–10; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1–4).

Paul's message to the Ephesian church was about wearing God's armour in their battle against the devil's malevolent schemes. Their only offensive weapon was the peaceful 'sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Ephesians 6:11, 17; cf. Hebrews 4:12).

Jesus declared that 'the spirit gives life' and that the 'words I have spoken to you are spirit and life' (John 6:63, 68). He warned against spurning God's word and blaspheming God's Spirit (Matthew 12:32; Luke 12:8–10; cf. Isaiah 5:24).

Conclusion

'God's word is not chained' (2 Timothy 2:9). Nor will we be, if we 'let the word of God dwell richly' in us and 'listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches' (Colossians 3:16; Revelation 2:7, etc.). It is then that we know God and hear and obey his word in the power of the Spirit (1 John 5:2–4; cf. Revelation 3:20).

We are not to forget both the damage that our tongues – our words – can do and the delight that they can bring (James 3:1–12; Matthew 12:33–37). Let us

Living Love

remember Peter and receive the Holy Spirit's gifts as we give testimony to what God has done (John 13:38; cf. Revelation 12:17; 2 Timothy 2:11, 12). Let us be in God's action by God's grace (James 1:19–27).

Extra note on *word and*, and *words of* passages

Some references to *word and*, and *words of* include:

- hope (Psalm 119:49, 74, 81, 114, 123, 166).
- light (Psalms 105, 130).
- truth (Psalm 119:86, 142; Colossians 1:5; John 17:17; Revelation 21:5).
- life (Psalm 119:93, 144; Philippians 2:16; 1 John 1:1, 2:14).
- sustenance (Psalm 119:28, 175).
- understanding (Psalm 119:104, 169).
- joy (Psalm 119:111).
- obedience (Psalm 119:129, 134; Luke 11:28; Romans 15:28).
- love (Psalm 119:41, 113, 124, 127).
- comfort (Psalm 119:52).
- praise (Psalm 119:171; Colossians 3:16ff).
- delight (Psalm 119:174),
- power (Luke 4:36, 7:7, 24:19; 1 Corinthians 4:20; 1 Thessalonians 1:5).
- judgement (Jeremiah 5:14, 6:19; John 12:47–50).
- grace (Acts 20:32).
- cleansing (John 15:3; Ephesians 5:26).
- faith (Romans 10:8–11; Hebrews 4:2; John 17:20).
- new birth (1 Peter 1:23).

Jesus the true Son

Introduction

Jesus, as God's Messiah and Christ, renews humanity's relationships with God and renews God's creation. Every Old Testament prophetic testimony reaches its goal in him. According to the New Testament writers, the creation exists through him and for him, is sustained and renewed in him, and fulfils God's reconciling purposes in him:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:19, 20; cf. John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:1–4, 2:10; Revelation 1:2, 4:11, 19:10; 1 Peter 1:10–12).

Jesus made God known as the 'pioneer of [our] salvation', the 'pioneer and perfector of our faith' and the full human expression of who God is (Hebrews 2:10, 12:2; John 1:14–18; Colossians 1:15ff; 2 Peter 1:3ff). He is the way God achieves God's purposes, and he accomplishes them as Son of God and Son of Man. He is fully God and fully human (cf. Mark 1:1, 2:10, 28, 8:31ff, 9:9ff, 10:45ff, 13:24ff, 14:21ff).

The Son and his Father

John the Baptist, according to the angel that spoke to his father Zechariah, would 'turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God'. He would have the spirit and power of Elijah, would precede God's Messiah and would prepare people for him by reconciling parents with their children and by leading disobedient people to accept the wisdom of those who were righteous (Luke 1:15–17; Malachi 4:5, 6).

Mary heard from the angel that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that her child would 'be holy; he will be called Son of God' (Luke 1:35). The boy Jesus went about his Father's business (Luke 2:49). God affirmed his Son's ministry at Jesus' baptism, transfiguration and before the cross by a voice from heaven (Luke 3:22, 9:35; John 12:28).

The Sermon on the Mount emphasised seeking the heavenly Father's earthly kingdom and his righteousness, as does the Lord's prayer (Matthew 5–7). Jesus linked himself with Daniel's prophecies on many occasions by calling himself Son of Man. He spent much time praying to his Father (e.g. Matthew 11:25ff; Mark 14:36; Luke 11:1ff).

His disciples heard Jesus say that:

- his Father had delegated everything to him and that only his Father truly knows him, and that his Father remains unknown other than to Jesus unless Jesus reveals him to them (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22).
- his Father loves him and everything the Father is doing is revealed to him (John 3:35, 5:20).
- he had come in his Father's name and so with this authorisation (John 5:43).
- they would understand who he was as Son of Man when he was crucified. This awareness would be that he had not acted or spoken on his own authority, but only as his Father had instructed him. 'And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28, 29).
- he would liberate people from being slaves to sin into the true and complete freedom of being Abraham's authentic descendants. This liberation would fulfill what he had witnessed in his 'Father's presence' (John 8:34–38).
- he was one with his Father (John 10:30).

They also witnessed Jesus, during his last supper with them, and 'knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God', get up from the table, take off his outer robe, wrap a towel around himself, pour water into a basin, wash the disciples' feet and wipe them dry with the towel that he had wrapped around himself (John 13:3ff).

Jesus challenged them to test whether he did his Father's will (John 5:36ff, 6:35ff, 7:28ff, 8:19ff, 54–56, 14:11ff). It was on that basis that he wanted them to 'Believe me 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). He said they did not know God, despite their familiarity with their own Scriptures.

The implications of Jesus' teaching are profound. His disciples would truly know Jesus' sonship only by knowing God as Father. Jesus' discussion with Philip and Thomas was significant. Jesus indicated that they would know him more fully when they saw him as the way to the Father, the truth concerning the Father and the life of the Father (John 14:5–14). No wonder the Epistles emphasise Jesus' obedience (cf. Hebrews 5:7–10; Philippians 2:5–11).

The Son and the Spirit

Paul wrote that Jesus did not consider divine equality with God something to be grasped, clung on to or exploited. So secure was the eternal Son of God that he 'emptied himself' and adopted the profile of an obedient servant, up to and including his 'death on a cross'. Paul taught that God declared Jesus' lordship was based on Jesus' crucifixion and that Jesus glorified God as his Father by being this

servant-sacrifice (Philippians 2:5–11; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24; John 12:27, 13:31, 17:1–5; Revelation 11:15 and chapters 5, 19 and 21).

Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit from his conception onwards. He was anointed as Messiah to be servant, saviour and Lord (cf. Isaiah 42, 44, 49, 53; Acts 10:34–43; Romans 1:4; 2 Corinthians 8:9). The Holy Spirit enabled Jesus to do everything he did as a human person (e.g. Luke 1:35, 4:1, 14, 18, 10:21). John wrote that God gave Jesus ‘the Spirit without limit’ (John 3:35). Indeed, the name Messiah or Christ refers to this divine anointing and to his full and authentic humanity. Just as the breath or spirit of God gave birth to creation and life to Adam and Eve, and now creates and births each one of us, so we are reborn by and for the abundant life we see in Jesus (Genesis 1:1ff, 2:7, 23; Job 33:4, 34:14; Psalm 104:30; cf. Genesis 2:17; John 3:5–8, 6:63, 10:10).

Jesus knew his crucifixion would declare his Father. He understood it as the climactic act of his willing obedience and the ultimate test of the authenticity of his sonship. Jesus’ dying thirst was relieved not so much by those present but by the Spirit of the living God (Psalm 42:1ff; cf. Jeremiah 2:13). He died having completed everything he had been given to do and did so while God ‘abandoned’ him by not saving him from dying (Matthew 1:21, 20:27, 26:26–32; Luke 2:28–32; John 12:23–33; Mark 15:34; John 20:30). He committed his spirit to his heavenly Father fully conscious and in total harmony with his Father and the Holy Spirit. His death was a victorious defiance of death and the defeat and demise of death as humanity’s perpetual enemy (Luke 23:46,47; 1 Corinthians 15:53–57; 1 Peter 2:22–25).

Conclusion

Jesus’ self-offering to the living God was only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, as were his resurrection and ascension. His sacrifice brings us life, joy and hope (Hebrews 9:11–14; Romans 8:11; Acts 1:2).

His death enabled and revealed the basis on which he gives the Holy Spirit to us. The Holy Spirit, promised and given to Jesus by the Father, is now, through and by Jesus, given to people in every culture in every generation (John 14:15–17, 26, 15:26, 16:7–15, Acts 1:4, 8, 2:31–33).

Jesus has fully received his Father’s promises:

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink (John 7:37ff).

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (Luke 11:13; cf. 1 John 2:20, 3:24, 4:13; Ephesians 1:3–6, 2:18, 5:1, 2)!

Extra note on Jesus as Son of God in the book of Hebrews

The author of Hebrews wrote that Jesus was God's Son, and that Jesus sustains 'all things', even though we do not yet see everything subject to him. Jesus not only sustains all things; he 'made purification for sins'. He shared our humanity, suffered temptation and torture, and tasted death for everyone. He 'learned obedience through what he suffered' and was sacrificed for humanity's sins 'once for all when he offered himself' (Hebrews 1:1ff, 5:8, 7:27, cf. 2:9–18).

This vast and deep identification with us was fundamental to him being high priest. He made 'a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people' 'as a 'merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God'. It is because he 'was tested by what he suffered, [that] he is able to help those who are being tested' (Hebrews 2:17, 18, cf. 4:14–16). His once and for all atoning obedience by his priestly and filial sacrificial service was and is forever more than adequate to meet our every need – not by removing us from our own distresses and sufferings but by being restoratively present with us in them. His Holy Spirit comes to us to remove our shame and to cleanse our consciences so that we may serve the living God with thankful and peaceful hearts in the middle of irreconcilable crises (cf. Hebrews 5:1–10, 6:19, 20, 7:11ff, 9:11ff, 10:11ff).

Since Jesus is the pioneer who saves us, we are to put aside our wearisome burdens, remove closely attached sin and resolutely and tenaciously run the race ahead of us with our eyes fixed on Jesus who was the first to complete this race successfully. He finished the course by 'enduring the cross' and by 'disregarding its shame'. He did so 'for the sake of the joy that was set before him and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God'. If he 'endured such hostility against himself from sinners', we can aim with his help and encouragement to 'not grow weary or lose heart' (Hebrews 12:1–3).

Being like Jesus

Introduction

Jesus' invitation for weary and heavily burdened people to come to him for rest is well known, as are his requests immediately following that those listening to him learn from him and become yoked to him since he was 'gentle and humble in heart' and provides rest and refreshment: 'For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:28–30).

These words of comfort and encouragement come immediately after Jesus said that he chooses those who will know his Father. This choice relates to Jesus declaring God to be his Father and 'Lord of heaven and earth' – which is something of a reminder of Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek, along with other passages from the Scriptures (Genesis 14:18, 19, cf. 24:3, 31:17; Deuteronomy 10:14; Psalm 124:8, 134:3; Luke 10:21–24).

His Father's choice was to hide revelations about his co-relationship with his Son from wise and intelligent people and to disclose it to very young children. Jesus also declared that everything 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).

The yoke which Jesus mentioned is primarily that of his own relationship with his Father. It would be known by infants growing up to maturity in God's family. The apostle John wrote of this future fullness when he urged his readers to notice the Father's love-gift that identified them as God's family, and to do so even though the world neither knew them or God:

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is (1 John 3:1, 2).

His later comment that God's 'commands are not burdensome' is set in the context of living in love as God's family and echoes Jesus' statement about his yoke being easy and his burden being light. John, like Jesus, was aware of life's struggles and conflicts (1 John 5:3–5; cf. Matthew 11:1–24).

Matthew reported that this result of Jesus' relationship with God was available to everyone in God's family. Through his death on the cross, Jesus destroyed every barrier between us and God and enabled the Holy Spirit to bring life, love and liberty to God's family through forgiveness and reconciliation (cf. John 3:1ff; Hebrews 2:14–18, 9:22–28).

No longer orphans

Jesus called himself the ‘bread of life’ and explained that he would welcome and accept everyone who came to him as being a personal gift from his Father, and that they would be raised up ‘on the last day’ (John 6:35–56). Jesus explained that because he drew his life from the ‘living Father’ who sent him, those who fed on him would live (John 6:57–65). His ‘true food’ and ‘true drink’ would bring spiritual nourishment according to his Father’s will:

It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ... no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father (John 6:63, 65; cf. 3:34).

The disciples found this difficult to grasp, especially when he spoke so freely about his coming death (cf. John 6:66–71).

More encouragement came later in Jesus’ promise that the Father and the Son would make their home with those who knew God’s love and who loved God. God’s family would not be orphaned because of Jesus’ sufferings and death. The Holy Spirit was promised as the one by whom this family would be established. The Holy Spirit would be in them, would testify about Jesus and would reveal and bring to them what belonged to Jesus as God’s beloved Son (John 14:17–26, 15:15, 26ff, 16:13–15, cf. 1:10–13, 3:1ff).

This relationship informs Jesus’ high priestly prayer. He prayed that his disciples would be in him even as he was in his Father and his Father was in him. His longing was that God’s family would know their God (John 17:1–3, 24–26). The upper room discourse and this prayer helps explain why Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Hebrews 12:1–3).

The Spirit of Jesus’ sonship

Paul wrote that God’s family was ‘justified by faith’ in Christ Jesus. He also explained that they called God ‘Abba! Father!’ because God had sent ‘the Spirit of his Son’ into their hearts. This gift meant they were God’s family and not slaves, and so were eligible for a divinely sourced inheritance (Galatians 3:26, 4:7; cf. Romans 8:14–16).

The intended fruits from living in God’s family are clear: ‘life and peace’, life for ‘your mortal bodies’ through God’s ‘Spirit that dwells in you’, and ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control’. Not only are there no laws against this harvest – the Holy Spirit is within us so that ‘the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us’ (Romans 8:4–11; Galatians 5:22, 23). This way of living is in stark contrast to being under the law and gratifying ‘the desires of the flesh’ with a mind ‘set on the flesh’ and ‘hostile to God’ (Galatians 5:16–18; Romans 8:5–13).

Jesus was never a slave to sin and did not fear death because of his own sin. Being adopted into God's family brings freedom from sin and death (Romans 8:14).

This 'law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' is so fundamental that the whole creation agonises for its own liberation when God's family is fully revealed (Romans 8:2, 18–25). The revelation of God's family has been God's goal for the world from before its foundation (Ephesians 1:3–14).

Jude exhorted his readers to 'pray in the Holy Spirit' (Jude 1:20). Paul taught that God has prepared what is invisible to human eyes, unheard by human ears and not imagined by human hearts or minds for those who love him. God has revealed these things to us by the Holy Spirit who searches everything, 'even the depths of God' (1 Corinthians 2:9, 10). We, who 'groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies', do not know how or what we ought to pray, but God's Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses and intercedes for us 'with sighs too deep for words' in tune with God's will (Romans 8:22–27). True prayer is conscious harmony with the Spirit of the living God who prays for us within us according to the will of God. Such prayer will surely be heard and answered – by strengthening, encouraging and enabling and not by simply manipulating events and changing scenarios.

Paul prayed that the 'God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory' would grant the Ephesian church 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation' as they came to know God and be enlightened about the hope to which God had called them, and regarding 'the riches of his glorious inheritance' and 'the immeasurable greatness of his power' (Ephesians 1:17–19; cf. Colossians 1:9–13; Revelation 2:7, 10, 11, 17, 26–29, 3:4–6, 9–13, 19–22).

God's family have been given many gifts and each person in God's family is a gift to the whole family, in the Spirit. These gifts enable ministry among and beyond God's people and mature God's family in 'the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God ... to the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Ephesians 4:11–13).

Conclusion

We see this at best 'in a mirror, dimly' (1 Corinthians 13:12). Yet we are to purify ourselves because 'we shall be changed to be like him, for we shall see him just as he is' (1 John 3:1–3). This change is certain and death-defying. Jesus revealed and demonstrated God's plan for humanity in his humanity. What died in Adam, is made alive in Christ. We will be changed, imperishable will replace perishable, immortal will be exchanged for mortal:

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:53–57).

Pressing on

Introduction

God has always taken the initiative with humanity. God made himself known and demonstrated his holy love through Jesus' death on the cross. God's Holy Spirit now comes to people in every generation and in every situation, revealing *this* God and birthing new life in those who had previously refused to know God. As a result, we are freed to do God's will and receive forgiveness, justification and reconciliation by faith (Isaiah 59:1; Exodus 34:6,7; John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1–3; Romans 1:18–24, 3:21–26, 5:6–11, 8:1–3, 15–17).

God is with us

God's gracious action in 'bringing salvation to all' educates us about godly living 'in the present age' while we anticipate the disclosure of God's majestic glory in Jesus Christ. This great glory is because Jesus donated himself for us to release and rescue us from wickedness and impurity and to make us into a community enthusiastic for good deeds (Titus 2:11–14).

Paul wrote of 'encouragement in Christ, ... consolation from [God's] love, [and] sharing in the Spirit' (Philippians 2:1; cf. John 14:17ff, 15:1ff). This deep relationship with the triune God flows both ways. We are in Christ and Christ is in us (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 1:27). This 'fellowship' is both the 'fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' and 'the communion of the Holy Spirit' (1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 13:14).

John's letter similarly describes 'the word of life' which 'was from the beginning' and which 'was revealed' to enable us to have fellowship 'with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' and with each other (1 John 1:1–3). John added that 'we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ... God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God' (1 John 4:13–15, cf. 3:24).

God's plan for salvation involved sending his beloved Son, who, because of his death, resurrection and ascension now sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and with us so that we can avoid what is corrupt and self-indulgent and become 'participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4).

The cares of this world need no longer determine our horizons (Revelation 2:26–29, 3:5, 6, 21, 22, 21:1–7; 1 John 2:9–11, 15–17, 3:11–15, 18–20, 4:7–12; cf. Luke 6:27–36, 18:18ff).

We are yoked with Jesus for shared tasks. We are united with Christ and receive God's Holy Spirit. While God's family is vibrant, creative and corporate in action, it also knows life's struggles, strains and stresses. The body of Christ is called to do God's will and to demonstrate Jesus' victory over death and evil (John 14:12, 13,

20:21–23; Matthew 28:18ff; Ephesians 2:10, 3:10, 11, 4:11–16; Philippians 2:12, 13; 1 Peter 2:9–12; 1 John 2:6; Revelation 1:5, 6).

God's people 'have been anointed by the Holy One' who creates our community with each other and with God (1 John 2:20). Since God's Spirit draws us to God, we receive profound confirmation of who we are as God's family. This dislocates us from the world system and enables the fruits of unity and love to flourish from the Spirit's gifts (Romans 8:13–17, 26, 27; 1 Corinthians 2:10–16; Galatians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, 18–20; 2 Corinthians 3:17, 18, 5:5; Ephesians 2:22; 1 John 2:20–23, 3:21–24, 4:13–16, 5:6–12).

Sharing in suffering: taking up the cross

Biblical authors constantly reminded their readers that life occurs in the realm of spiritual conflict (e.g. Ephesians 6:10ff; 2 Corinthians 10:4). When Paul wrote that he wanted to know Christ, he mentioned his desire to be like Jesus, even in his death. He mentioned the fellowship that was his by sharing in Christ's sufferings, meaning that he wanted the sharing that comes from suffering as Jesus did (Philippians 3:10; cf. Romans 8:32ff).

Those who were sent the letter to the Hebrews were told that discipline comes with belonging to God's family, that it is confirmation of God's love and care, and that even though it is unpleasant and painful it eventually 'yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' (Hebrews 12:11–13; cf. 1 Peter 1:3–9; Romans 8:17).

Jesus called his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. He was speaking not so much of his death, but of a life lived in harmony with God. Following him means saying *no* to the world and *yes* to God (Matthew 16:24; Romans 12:1ff; John 15:18–25).

Conclusion

Overwhelming as it may seem, God wants us to know him. This *is* life, for God is the glorious Father, the wonderful Saviour and the liberating Spirit. God has declared open season for salvation from those judgements which we otherwise bring on ourselves (Luke 4:18, 19; 2 Corinthians 6:1, 2).

To know God is to have eternal life, and when we know him, our confidence is in nothing less (cf. Jeremiah 9:23, 24; Philippians 3:7–11; John 17:3). This life of knowing God is not all sunshine and smiles, but as we abide in him and he in us, we become more like him. Our yearning is for the day when 'we shall see him as he is' and when will be fully like him (1 John 3:1–3; cf. Jeremiah 31:31–34; John 15:1ff; Revelation 21:1–7; 2 Timothy 1:12).

Pressing on can be seen in the context of Hosea's exhortation for his nation to return to the LORD for healing and recovery. Where they had known God's refusal

Living Love

to participate in their evil ways, God would revive them after two days and restore them on the third day. Hosea saw these promises as an excellent reason to

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

Extra note on guidance

True guidance comes as the overflow of a life lived knowing God. It is obedience and trust in practise. We are to avoid being preoccupied with signs, words and coincidences and are to rest in a relationship with God where we hear God's voice. We are not puppets or robots. God has revealed and still reveals much, and is gracious, generous and merciful. We can avoid being too naïve about God's leading by listening and learning what the will of the Lord is from wise counsellors and caring friends, by reading the Bible, by reflecting on Christian history and by engaging in thoughtful meditation and prayer.

Three tests for good guidance include:

- Is Jesus Christ declared Lord by this action?
- Will the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit be evident?
- Does God's family endorse this leading?

We are to delight in doing God's will and to be ready to do it (cf. Psalm 40:8; John 10:1–18; Galatians 5:22; 2 Corinthians 3:17, 18; John 4:1–6; 1 Corinthians 12:1–11, 14:26–33; Ephesians 4:11–16, 5:15–21; James 2:17).

Some questions

1. In what ways do worship and service express thankfulness by God's family to their heavenly Father (John 4:24; Ephesians 5:17–20; Colossians 3:15–17; Romans 12:12)?
2. What was God teaching the Israelites during their Exodus sufferings by saying to them that they were not to 'live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'? In what ways does this message refer to them being disciplined as God's family (Deuteronomy 8:2ff; cf. Luke 4:4)?
3. Explore other references to the way the living God leads and guides his people (e.g. Matthew 16:16; Acts 14:15; Romans 9:26; 2 Corinthians 3:3, 6:16; 1 Timothy 3:15, 4:10; Hebrews 3:12, 9:14, 10:31, 12:22; Revelation 7:2; cf. Psalm 40:9 re. the 'fountain of life').
4. What is the relationship between 'the testimony of Jesus' and 'the Spirit [or spirit] of prophecy'? In what ways does prophecy witness to Jesus and declare God's plans (cf. Revelation 1:2, 9, 12:11, 17, 19:10; 1 Peter 1:10ff; 2 Peter 1:12–21; Philippians 2:5–11)?
5. In what ways are we to understand verses that speak of the people of God as God's children in the light of other verses about being mature (e.g. Romans 8:14ff; Galatians 3:36, 4:6; Ephesians 5:1; Philippians 2:15; Hebrews 2:10ff, 12:7; 1 John 2:14, 2:29–3:3, 4:4, 5:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:6; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 1:28; James 1:4)?

The deceit of evil and the mystery of God

Creation and deceit

Freedom

The first Genesis creation narrative has a song-line of goodness, climaxing in the creation of humanity as being very good and God resting after completing this sanctuary-temple. The second narrative introduces a named God – the LORD – and ‘the tree of life … and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ (Genesis 2:9). This contrastive good-evil dichotomy about man not remaining alone differs from the comparative good-best profile of humanity created to image God in a harmonious, mutual, flourishing partnership.

The primary focus is not on continually choosing good or evil but on ‘life’ rather than the ‘knowledge of good and evil’ – on life without being locked into a destructive and deadly good-evil dichotomy. The alternatives posed are the freedom of obedience and the bondage of choice.

While humanity now perpetually wrestles with good-evil dilemmas and crises, Jesus spoke not only of a good life, but of himself as the source of an abundant life – a message that was central to the apostolic proclamation (cf. John 1:4, 3:15ff 4:14ff, 5:21ff, 6:27ff, 8:12ff, 10:10ff, 11:17ff, 14:6, 17:3; Acts 10:38).

While profiling a higher order understanding of free obedience and good-evil tyranny may be helpful, the presence of a speaking serpent in Eden is unexpected from the perspectives of God and goodness in either creation narrative. Why was it there? Who created it? Where did it come from?

The notion of evil having a source suggests evil was somehow created, in which case it is not evil if creation is good. It also implies some sense of reasonableness and truth to evil, which, while evil may appear brilliantly logical, it is ultimately neither reasonable nor truthful.

These creation accounts, like other passages in Psalms, Proverbs and Isaiah, introduce the divine mystery of God and the inexplicable deceitfulness of evil (cf. Psalms 1, 65, 100; Proverbs 3:13–20, 8:22ff, Isaiah 45:9ff, 51:13ff).

There is a vast difference between goodness and greatness – we learn that it is great to be good but that it is rarely good to be great. Goodness is God-like. It involves relating to creation as co-creatures with a creational pre-fall lifespan, to one another as co-citizens and to God as creation’s birthing spirit, communicating word and caring parent. Notions of domination in the first creation narrative relate to imaging God’s sovereignty by being fruitful through lives focused on service and sustainability, community and co-existence.

The trees in Eden were therefore indications of living in and being of the Spirit or of the flesh; understandings later explored in various books of the Bible (cf.

Living Love

Galatians 5:13–6:9 and Habakkuk 2:4; Genesis 4:6, 7; Matthew 6:24, 7:24–27; Psalm 1, 14; Deuteronomy 28, 30:11–20, cf. 32:39; Joshua 24:15).

Life

As so often happens, the second creation narrative is abruptly and perhaps unexpectedly interrupted and invaded by a speaking serpent sliding unannounced into a peaceful sanctuary-temple. The poor judgement of the first couple, profiled by his silent absence and her conversation, led to a joint failure to remain true to the divine presence who was relating to them by word and spirit in their vocations, recreations and mutual relationship.

The parabolic nature of this account can enhance a sense of transcendent and immanent mystery regarding God and of evil's irrational ever-delusional deceit. On the one hand, God remains true to God's being by remaining with them, speaking to them and promising restoration with and by them. On the other hand, evil acts to usurp God's presence and purpose by perversely mocking, seducing and seeking to destroy everything God communicated and did, and to contradict and pervert everything God gave and shared.

Descriptions of the loss of human dignity to the deceit and degradation of evil continue throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, interwoven with God's promises of atonement, community and destiny. The Christian Testament declares Jesus as *the* man of dignity, decency and delight who brings goodness, love, holiness, righteousness and truth by being God's gift and wisdom filled with God's creative and re-creative Holy Spirit (cf. Genesis 1:26–28, 2:7, 25, 3:15; Isaiah 35:1ff; John 1:1ff; 2 Corinthians 4:1ff; 2 Peter 1:1–21).

Jesus takes the curse of sin and suggestions relating to the tree of death – of the knowledge of good and evil – are transformed into references to or inferences about the tree of life (Galatians 3:10–29; Revelation 2:7, 22:2; cf. Romans 3:21ff, 8:1ff; Ephesians 2:1–22; 1 Peter 1:1ff, 3:18ff).

The gifts of renewal that enable the flourishing linked with the tree of life and similar thoughts are embedded into insights regarding the renewal of creation and the restoration and reconciliation of humanity with itself, with the rest of creation and with God (e.g. Isaiah 32, 35, 55; 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, 35–58; 2 Corinthians 5:11–21; Revelation 21:1ff).

Revealing the mystery – 1

Anticipation

The former prophets – those in Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings – wrestled with issues relating to theocratic and monarchical governance. The prophetic commentary changed once the Davidic dynasty emerged, focusing on the extent to which these regimes were aligned with the beliefs, values and practices outlined in the pre-Mosaic and Mosaic covenants (e.g. 1 Samuel 8:1ff, 12:1ff, 16:1ff; 2 Samuel 11:27bff; 1 Kings 18:1ff).

The latter prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve ‘minor’ prophets – looked for someone who would restore the nation after the Babylonian exile, and whose reign would establish righteousness, justice, mercy and peace as expressions of the nation’s faithfulness to God’s covenants (e.g. Isaiah 9:1ff, 32:1ff, 40:1ff, 42:1ff, etc.).

The wisdom writings – including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and many psalms – explore ways in which living in the ‘fear of the LORD’ aligned with the wisdom revealed in the nation’s history. Numerous psalms also profile expectations based on prophetic discernments (e.g. Psalms 1, 2, 14, 89, 110; Proverbs 1–9). The remaining writings include Daniel with his expectations of a human ruler ‘coming with the clouds of heaven’ and to whom ‘the Ancient One’ would give

dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13, 14).

These anticipations surface in the Gospel stories, the Pauline and other letters and the events in the book of Acts, as for example Peter’s address after healing a man who was crippled and poor (Acts 3:17ff; also e.g. Luke 1:68–79, 2:29–32; Acts 7:1ff; 1 Corinthians 15:3ff; 1 Peter 1:10–12, 2 Peter 2:12–21).

Disclosure

These anticipations and their related expectations were mainly faith-struggles resulting from understandable doubt, distress and dismay at troubling and traumatising events in their personal, community and national experiences. The issues they faced related to pain from their own failures and from the unwelcome actions of other people.

The prophets sought to expose deceit, idolatry, harlotry and injustice by stating God’s responses in terms of judgement and mercy. They set God’s revelations in the context of God’s own covenants and emphasised the self-destructive consequences of defiance and dishonesty along with the rich abundance that they hoped would come from trust and faithfulness. Behind this seemingly certain

retribution-prosperity narrative lay the inexplicable and incompressible majesty and love of God and the irrationally false logic of self-indulgent evil (e.g. Numbers 23:19; Deuteronomy 29:29, 32:4; Jeremiah 6:13–19, 23:1–40; Isaiah 5:13–25; Habakkuk 1:5, 13, 2:3, 4 and 3:1, 2, 17, 18).

The stories of Jacob at Bethel and Moses at the burning bush were part of a tradition which Amos later summarised by quoting God speaking to the nation of Israel of God's unique relationship with them and asking whether two people 'walk together unless they have made an appointment'. Amos then makes his own declaration:

Surely the LORD God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. ... The LORD God has spoken; who can but prophesy (Amos 3:1–8; Genesis 32:22–32, 35:1–13, Exodus 3:1ff)?

The second part of the prophecies recorded in Isaiah promised comfort and restoration because God is coming

with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep (Isaiah 40:10, 11).

The questions that the prophet asks focus on the LORD's transcendence and on the impossibility of counselling or directing God's spirit. Idols are of no worthy comparison and the earth's human inhabitants are 'like grasshoppers' while the celestial realms are to be understood in terms of God's sovereignty and majesty (Isaiah 40:22).

This expansive discourse may appear to end with a chapter division, but it is best read up to the introduction of the first servant song. The prophet wanted God's people to understand that the transcendent God is the immanent – present to and within – God and that the immanent God is transcendent – sovereign and heavenly. God's servant suffers with God's humanity, and God participates with and embraces human suffering and creational discord – and reveals God's eternal character as creator, redeemer and father (Isaiah 11:1ff, 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–7, 52:13–53:12, 63:1–66:24; cf. Micah 5:1ff; Lamentations 3:19–33; Zechariah 9:9ff).

Mystery in the book of Daniel relates to Daniel's gifts of interpreting dreams. His actions contrast the disingenuous and deceitful efforts of royal advisers to reveal divine mysteries (Daniel 2:1ff, 4:1ff).⁷

⁷ Cf. 'secret mysteries' in Wisdom of Solomon 14:23. The book of Sirach profiles wisdom seekers who can avoid other tasks, seek 'out the hidden meanings of proverbs' and who are 'at home with the obscurities of parables':

Living Love

The sense of anticipation related to God's intentions to restore and renew God's people and God's creation is accompanied by an awareness of divine disclosure – a revelation of God's mystery that breaks out of and breaks up a binary zero-sum framing of human circumstances and reaches beyond a mechanical cause and effort analysis of God's world. Evil's deceit so often appears victorious throughout the historical journeys described in the Old Testament, yet the mystery of God is that God is transcendent *and* immanent and that just as Daniel was urged to rest and wait, secure in God's providential care, so can those who hope in, love and trust the LORD (Daniel 12:9).

In the middle of immeasurable and incalculable sufferings, psalmists affirm the faithfulness and goodness of the LORD while aching for God's mercy and deliverance (e.g. Psalms 14, 31, 41, 42-43, 46, 62, 63, 65, 130, 131, 144, 146).

If the great Lord is willing, [such a wisdom seeker] will be filled with the spirit of understanding; he will pour forth words of wisdom of his own and give thanks to the Lord in prayer. The Lord will direct his counsel and knowledge, as he meditates on his mysteries (Sirach 38:24–39:11).

Revealing the mystery – 2

Listening

Jesus ended the parable of the sower by urging ‘anyone with ears’ to listen, just as he began it by asking the crowd to listen! The disciples asked Jesus why he spoke to the crowds in parables. Jesus answered by quoting from God’s commissioning of Isaiah during which Isaiah was distressed about his sin after seeing the LORD enthroned in God’s celestial temple.

The disciples, like Isaiah, had some insights into ‘the secrets of the kingdom of heaven’ and of the abundance that is given to ‘those who have’. Those who see and do not see and hear without hearing ‘have nothing’ and lose ‘even what they have’: blessings for some and barrenness for others (Matthew 13:9–17; cf. Isaiah 6:1ff; also Mark 4:1ff; Luke 8:4ff).

Jesus pointed out that understanding the kingdom of heaven’s mysteries is a gift – just as Isaiah’s gift of purification signified that his experience in the temple was like being in Eden and needing purification. Jesus was highlighting the danger of not believing, of turning from ‘the living God’ and of being ‘hardened by sin’s deceitfulness’ (Hebrews 3:12–14; cf. Romans 1:18ff, 3:9ff).

The Edenic account of the two trees frames this discourse. Worldly cares and ‘the lure [deceit] of wealth’, like the other distractions, prevent hearing and produce no fruitfulness (Matthew 13:22, 23). Seeking the kingdom of heaven’s mysteries produces a bountiful harvest (cf. Matthew 6:19–34).

Matthew noted that Jesus was fulfilling prophecies by not telling the crowds anything without using parables; prophecies such as a psalm of Asaph, where, as one of David’s chief musicians, Asaph urged God’s people to listen carefully to the parables he was singing and saying:

I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done (Psalm 78:1–4, cf. 32–39).

Those who hear God’s word are constrained to teach it, but Israel’s history records many times when this living word of life was hidden by stubbornness (e.g. Psalm 36:1–4, cf. 14:1ff; Mark 7:14–25; Matthew 15:10–20).

Looking

Mentions of creation are embedded in the parables in the synoptic Gospels and the signs in John’s Gospel. Understanding beauty, majesty and upheavals in creation is linked with understanding parables and signs.

God had something in mind when he made creation. God's goal from the first chapter of Genesis onwards was that humanity would be God's family in God's creation. God knew redemption would be needed and would come by suffering – creation in some divine mystery follows redemption as well as the historical sequence outlined in the Hebrew and Christian biblical literature.

Jesus urged his listeners to consider lilies flowering and wheat grains growing. The parable of the sower suggests various views of creation, just as with Jesus' sign at the wedding at Cana. The mystery of God relates to God's creation. It was as if Jesus was saying: 'understand creation and you'll understand me; understand me and you'll understand creation'.

The seven signs in John come after Jesus noticed Nathanael and declared that Nathanael was without deceit (John 1:47). These signs all enlarge on the theme of glory outlined in John 1:14–18. It was this glory of God's saving grace and creational generosity that Jesus highlighted after feeding the five thousand (John 6:26–58). The crowds were 'looking for Jesus'. When they found him, Jesus said to them that *they were looking for him* 'not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves'.

Jesus would have been looking at them! What would it have meant to look Jesus in the eyes and have him look back and say these things? His signs were all parables – and his parables were all signs. Parables are more than earthly stories with heavenly meanings, they are heavenly ones with earthly meanings. Signs may not only be earthly and physical evidence of heavenly and spiritual graces but have heavenly and spiritual significances resulting from earthly and physical graces.

The creation was built *by* God's breath and word *for* God's breath and word: something happens when God breathes and speaks. History is fruit of God's Spirit and God's word: evil self-destructs according to God's Spirit and God's word and creation is sustained and flourishes by God's Spirit and God's word; creation would vanish without God's Spirit and God's word.

Revealing the mystery – 3

Hearing and seeing

A group of Greek people, who were among those who went up to Jerusalem to worship at what was to be Jesus' last festival, wanted 'to see Jesus'. On hearing about them, Jesus replied that

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:20–26).

Jesus shared that while his soul was troubled about his coming suffering, he wanted his Father's name glorified (John 12:27ff).

This passage contrasts light, belief, seeing, understanding, repentance, healing and glory with darkness, unbelief, blindness, misunderstanding, stubbornness, fear and pride.

The deceit of sin and the mystery of God are profiled. Events can be interpreted either way – otherwise God could be proved, and the Spirit's breath predicted (cf. John 3:1ff; Luke 7:18ff). Looking at the lilies of field can clarify where our hearts are (cf. Matthew 6:28; Luke 12:27).

This theme continues in the upper room discourse where Jesus' disciples were not hearing. Thomas said he did not know the way and Philip added that he wanted to see the Father (John 14:1ff). Jesus was not God with a mask. God is very earthly: he became a human being, yet they still did not recognise him (cf. John 1:10–14). This discourse ends with his disciples seeing clearly and believing Jesus came from God (John 16:25–33).

Death wins and loses

Every living thing dies, some more violently than others. Jesus faced death in Gethsemane. Every lily in every field, like every grain of wheat, seems to ultimately indicate that death reigns and that everything is subject to death.

God's response is to reign over death in and by the death of his Son, and to become Lord over everything not only as creator but as redeemer. The death of Jesus exposes the irrational and unrelenting deceit of sinful human hearts to the transcendent majestic mystery of creation's God coming and being impaled on a tree of death and changing it into the tree of life.

Do we, like some of those present, see him calling Elijah or do we see him bearing the shame, horror and deceit of sin as he unjustly suffers its only true fate and is cut off from his own creation? Do we see Jesus going to the place of desolation and bearing the cruel vengeance of maligning judgement?

Living Love

Nicodemus saw. He was with Joseph of Arimathea when Jesus' body was removed from his cross. Jesus' death unmasked human evil. He bore it in three hours, acting with dignity and love (John 3:1ff, 7:50, 19:39).

The mystery of the reign of God was revealed: 'to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away' (Matthew 13:12; cf. Isaiah 52:13ff).

One thief understood when Jesus prayed. Mary recognised Jesus on the first resurrection Sunday when he said her name. The two travellers to Emmaus recognised him when he broke bread. Thomas wanted to see his wounds. Paul was hostile until Jesus asked him by name about Paul's persecution of him.

The deceit of sin and the mystery of God is comprehended by the gospel message of Christ crucified. It is only there that we see by the Holy Spirit who searches divine and human depths regarding 'what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16; cf. Luke 22:39–46; Matthew 27:46; Galatians 3:10–14; 1 Peter 2:24).

The mystery of God is Jesus Christ, and the mystery of God in Christ is the hope of glory. Jesus was firstborn over creation, firstborn from the dead, and is now reconciling the world to himself as firstborn over the *new and renewed* creation and head of the church (Colossians 1:15–2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21; cf. Romans 8:18ff; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 1:3–12).

The significance and seriousness of human pride is ultimately overcome by the sacrificial sovereignty of divine humility in Jesus' humanity (Philippians 2:1–18).

Agents of the mystery – 1

God's creational and redemptive message

Jesus enacted the truth: something was going on in God's creation. Jesus was saying something about God's creation and about people on God's earth. He was saying something about his Father and what his saw his Father doing in this world for humanity and creation. God's actions are earthy, and God's Son is human.

John's Gospel and John's first letter both emphasise Jesus' humanity. They refer to seeing, hearing and touching him, to him being with them and among them, and to them experiencing community with him. What God was doing was according to this mystery of divine presence in the humanity of Jesus. The Spirit and word of God always do something and are always building a new creation regardless of what we see, hear, touch, think or feel. The Spirit and word of God do something creational and redemptive. They do not fail to accomplish God's divine creational and redemptive purposes and plans (John 1:1ff; 1 John 1:1ff; cf. Isaiah 55:10, 11).

Paul wrote of the Holy Spirit of the living God giving life and freedom, and of 'seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror' and 'being transformed into the same image [of God] from one degree of glory to another'. Sincerity and an 'open statement of the truth' were central to Paul's proclamation by which those blinded by 'the god of this world' might see the 'light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' (2 Corinthians 2:14–4:4; cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12 ,13).

Paul emphasised that his proclamation mirrored God's *creational* word by which light shone *out of* darkness and God's *redemptive* and *restorative* word by which light similarly shines *out of* darkness from within human hearts 'to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthian 4:6).

God's reconciling and renewing ministries

God's word and Paul's proclamation about our 'ministry of reconciliation' concern people being new creations in a renewed, re-created creation. The message we share is part of God's recreative work, a work involving pottery containers storing valuable treasures 'so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us'.

It includes Paul and all God's people 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies'. Paul's belief was that by 'always being given up to death for Jesus' sake', Jesus' life would be evident in his and our humanity and would therefore generate life in those with whom he and we share (2 Corinthians 4:7–12).

Living Love

There is no revival on a silver plate: the universe is redeemed through suffering – with suffering as *evidence* of and not a *reason* for this regeneration. While our outer bodies decay, our inner bodies are renewed and urged on by Christ's love

because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15).

We reach this new reality through the cruciform, Christ-centred *heart and mind* of Jesus – and not as the result of a time-space beginning or end. The recreative word is effective because God made Jesus, who was without sin, to be sin for our sakes 'so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Agents of the mystery – 2

Wisdom, revelation and proclamation – 1

Paul began his first letter to the Corinthians emphasising that God can change all human history through the ‘message of the cross’. Paul contrasted worldly wisdom with the foolishness of his proclamation, declaring that Christ was, by his death, ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1 Corinthians 1:18ff).

Deceptive sign-seeking religion and wisdom-coveting philosophies deny God as the origin of life in Christ Jesus, who became God’s wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption for God’s people (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Paul explained that God’s mystery involved him knowing nothing while with them apart from ‘Jesus Christ, and him crucified’. This knowledge was not detached data but came from being weak, fearful and apprehensive. As with the first creation narratives, this proclamation came with powerful acts of the Holy Spirit so that their trust in God would not rely on human-derived wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:1–6; cf. Proverbs 1:20ff, 3:13ff, 4:5ff, 8:1–9:6; John 1:1ff; 1 John 1:1ff).

Paul concluded this section linking ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ with God’s revelation ‘to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God’, and with ‘the mind of the Lord’ revealed to us who ‘have the mind of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 2:6–16).

While death, then, to coin a term, *de-creationalises* us, Christ is Lord over death and *re-creationalises* us, and we are *given* a recreating and reconciling message to share – we *are* part of the message that God is declaring in Christ’s recreational and reconciling good news (2 Corinthians 5:16–21).

How deep, abundant and beyond searching or scrutiny are God’s wisdom and knowledge, ‘For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever’ (Romans 11:33–36).

Wisdom, revelation and proclamation – 2

The letter to the Colossians (and Laodiceans) describes Paul being commissioned to be the church’s servant to reveal the fullness of the word of God, ‘the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations’ that had now been revealed to God’s people. This revelation was intended to give God’s community the wisdom that would enable them to reach maturity:

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:25–28).

Paul and Timothy emphasised that these believers could please God knowing that this hope was ‘laid up’ for them in heaven according to ‘the word of the truth, the gospel’ that had come to them. They could know God’s will ‘in all spiritual wisdom and understanding’ and ‘lead lives worthy of the Lord’, confident that God the Father has enabled them ‘to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light’. They had been rescued ‘from the power of darkness and transferred’ to live according to the sovereignty of God’s ‘beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’ (Colossians 1:3–14).

In between these bookends, Paul and Timothy further establish their profile of Jesus, outlining the creational and redemptive aspects of Jesus’ sovereignty. Christ images the unseen God by being the precedence, source, sustenance and coherence of all creation. He sources and resources the church as the human person who was resurrected first to have priority in everything:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15–20).

All creation is involved in God’s redemptive journey and God’s redemptive activity includes all creation. The wisdom of God, as Paul and Timothy understood it, closely identifies their theology of creation with their theology of redemption – and their redemptive theology with their theology of creation. They elevate the ‘very good’ declaration in the Genesis creation narratives to insist that although creation is under the bondage of evil, it will not disintegrate because Jesus reconciles humanity and renews creation (cf. Romans 8:1–39).

It is this understanding of reconciliation and renewal which is the substance of the word of God Paul proclaimed about the previously hidden mystery that was now revealed to God’s people. This revelation brings the ‘hope of glory’ to all nations because reconciliation and renewal result from Christ now being in God’s family. Christ’s glorious presence leads to everyone being able to understand the wisdom of God’s mystery and to reach maturity in Christ (Colossians 1:29).

Paul’s sufferings are inextricably linked with this outcome – an outcome that is for the church, for God’s reconciled community living in and looking for the renewal of this creation by Jesus Christ as they live in him.

Paul and Timothy conclude this introduction by returning to their earlier mention of the Colossians’ ‘love in the Spirit’. They do not want them to be deceived by ‘plausible arguments’ but to be

encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is,

Living Love

Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:1–5).

Mystery is mentioned three times in these passages: God's mystery was hidden and is now revealed in the word of God being proclaimed to all nations. The glory and hope of this mystery are because of Christ's indwelling presence and the maturity and wisdom that result. This mystery therefore means knowing and treasuring Christ's wisdom for their lives and for this world.

These treasures were to impact their community life, heal their divisions and enrich their worship. They were to be reconciled to each other and be clothed 'with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience [and] love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony'. Ruled by Christ's peace and indwelt by Christ's word meant they would learn and guide each other concerning every aspect of God's creational and redemptive wisdom (Colossians 3:12–17).

Agents of the mystery – 3

Wisdom, revelation and proclamation – 3

The letter to the Ephesians makes early reference to the mystery of the will of ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ being made known with

all wisdom and insight ... according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:8–10).

The letter ends with requests that its recipients pray in the Spirit for Paul to be able to share this gospel mystery with boldness as an ‘ambassador in chains’ (Ephesians 6:18–20).

Emphasis is made towards the centre of the letter of the way the mystery of Christ was revealed to Paul by a revelation of grace. This previously unknown mystery, now revealed by the Holy Spirit, was that the nations have now become ‘fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel’ (Ephesians 3:1–6).

According to God’s eternal purpose, now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who gives us ‘access to God in boldness and confidence through faith’, Paul was commissioned to take the good news of Christ’s limitless treasures to the nations and reveal ‘the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things’ to them. God’s goal, according to Paul, was that the church would be God’s means of displaying the diverse treasury of divine wisdom ‘to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places’ (Ephesians 3:7–12).

As explained earlier in this letter, God’s love has broken down divisive barriers and established peace where hostility had prevailed. God’s intention was to ‘*create* in himself one new humanity in place of the two’ and give this new humanity ‘access in one Spirit to the Father’. This reconciliation established (and establishes) God’s household as a community which, in Christ Jesus as Lord, is united and grows together into a holy temple – a dwelling place in whom we are being ‘built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God’ (Ephesians 2:11–22, italics added).

God’s holy, spiritual temple where God dwells may sound other-worldly, but, while it impacts the ‘heavenly places’, it is this-world focused and part of God’s plan to renew *this* creation – *this* earth, *this* world in which we ‘live and move and have out being’ as God’s family (Ephesians 3:12; Acts 17:28).

Paul’s ministry centred on revealing

the boundless riches of Christ [and] the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:8–10).

Living Love

God was sharing these riches and this wisdom in different ways with a view to the Ephesians coming ‘to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ where the truth that is in Jesus was spoken in love according to their new humanity ‘*created* according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness’ (Ephesians 4:11–5:14, italics added).

God has spoken through Christ Jesus and breathed his holy Spirit on us as terrestrial creatures and recreated us in Christ Jesus by

his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.

We are caught up in the administration of this mystery with God’s word to proclaim by God’s Spirit (Ephesians 1:3–14).

God’s word and God’s Spirit are no less powerful now than on the first day of creation or when Jesus was conceived, born, matured, ministered and then was crucified, buried, resurrected and ascended – it is just that we may not readily see what God is doing. God takes us to the cross and grave of Christ where Christ is Lord of the dead, and where we’ve been crucified and recreated as new creations in him in the mystery of God’s love – love that is beyond our understanding and comprehension but not our experiences and destinies.

Agents of the mystery – a summary

The mystery of God in Christ in us, ‘the hope of glory’, is God’s plan for this and the coming age (Colossians 1:27; Ephesians 1:21). God’s plan and this message are more than words; they image the cross in us, they are light in darkness – as with the initial creation, so with the new creation. God’s plan emphasises

- the centrality of the cross (Acts 3:17, 18, 2:23, 24; 1 Corinthians 1, 2).
- God’s purposes for all humanity (Romans 16:25, 11:25; Ephesians 1:9, 10, 3:2–6, cf. Ephesians 2:11–22).
- the primacy of God’s love (1 Corinthians 8:1, 13:2 cf. Ephesians 4:14, 15, 29ff, 5:32).
- the differences between worldly wisdom and God’s foolishness, and God’s wisdom and human folly (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16).
- our calling to proclaim the mystery of Christ to all humanity and witness to all creation (Colossians 4:3–4; Ephesians 6:19; 1 Corinthians 4:1; 2 Corinthians 4:1–18, 5:13–21; cf. Acts 13:4–12).

God’s mystery is Christ (Colossians 2:1–10). Christ, creation and gospel are closely linked (Colossians 1:15–29, 4:3) and we are ‘hidden with Christ in God’ (Colossians 3:1–4). The ‘mystery of Christ’ is both the mystery made known to Paul by revelation and the administration of God’s grace given to Christ for us (Ephesians 3:2–4). We are:

- chosen before creation to receive an inheritance as God’s family in Christ Jesus by redemption and the Holy Spirit’s guarantee.
- to know the mystery of God’s will and ‘good pleasure’ revealed in Jesus Christ as being God’s ‘plan for the fullness of time’, to gather everything together in Jesus.
- to know that God has done all this through the cross by grace, breaking down all barriers (Ephesians 1:3–14, 2:1–21).

Living and speaking the gospel is God’s method of administrating the mystery, of flooding and filling all with his love that ‘surpasses knowledge’. This is God’s accomplishment, the ‘showing of the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in kindness to us in Christ Jesus’ and administrated through the church, Christ’s body (Ephesians 1:9, 10, 2:1–10, 3:7–21). The work of the Spirit and the reality of God’s promises are central to this mystery (Ephesians 1:13ff, 2:17ff, 3:5ff cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1ff; 2 Corinthians 4:1ff, 5:13–21).

We have seen then that 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 speak of mystery and wisdom, 2 Corinthians 4 and 5 of creation and mystery, Colossians 1 and 2 of Christ as the mystery and Ephesians 1 and 3 of God’s plan and God’s mystery.

Re-creation and revelation – 1

Faith, hope and love

Paul's love-poem written to the Corinthian church begins by linking creation and love. Love is essential to substantial terrestrial or celestial communications. Prophetic powers and insights about mysteries and knowledge, faith to restructure events, and sacrificial generosity lack validity without love. The word that God speaks in and by Christ through and by the Spirit of God is the word of God's triune love.

Everything of substance comes from and flows out of God's triune love. God's love establishes and builds God's new creation, just as it created this creation. Belief, trust and faith, along with expectation, anticipation and confidence, suggest eternal realities as well as human dispositions in our transient experiences in this day-night life-death world (1 Corinthians 13:1ff).

Human creative acts of love have no hands but God's hands, no ears but God's ears, no feet but God's feet and no voices but God's voice. God is not limited to any person or community, or even to humanity itself since every part of creation and all creation together declares God's glory. God's delight in enabling human hands, ears, feet and voices is significant given God's proclamation of his glory throughout creation (cf. Psalms 8, 19, 29, 100 etc.). Our awareness of God's purposes and plans awaits a more complete, intimate and personal revelation:

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now *faith*, *hope*, and *love* abide, these three; and the greatest of these is *love* (1 Corinthians 13:12, 13, italics added).

As the letter to the Colossians outlined, the mystery of God's grace relates to God's intentions for creation and humanity, realised in Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Paul and Timothy thanked

God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and of the *love* that you have for all the saints, because of the *hope* laid up for you in heaven.

'Christ in you' is 'the *hope* of glory', and the basis on which they were urged to 'Above all, clothe yourselves with [God's] *love*, which binds everything together in perfect harmony' (Colossians 1:3–5, 27, 3:14, italics added).

The early part of the Ephesians letter records Paul having 'heard of your *faith* in the Lord Jesus and your *love* toward all the saints' and giving thanks and praying for them that 'you may know what is the *hope* to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints' (Ephesians 1:15–18, italics added).

The first half of the letter concludes with Paul kneeling ‘before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name’ and praying that they would be strengthened through God’s Spirit, and that ‘Christ may dwell in your hearts through *faith*, as you are being rooted and grounded in *love*’ (Ephesians 3:14ff, italics added).

Paul commenced the second section of this letter wanting them to: ‘bearing with one another in *love*’ since ‘There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one *hope* of your calling, one Lord, one *faith*, one baptism ...’ (Ephesians 4:1–6, italics added).

Worship and restoration

Living a resurrection life in the light of Christ involves understanding God’s will, being filled with the Holy Spirit and always giving thanks to God the Father. Reverencing Christ upends notions of power and domination, replacing them with mutual sacrificial subjection patterned on the great and profound mystery of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:14ff).

The armour of God includes a single weapon: ‘the sword of Spirit, which is the word of God’. When God speaks, God speaks by God’s Spirit, and something happens (Ephesians 6:10ff; cf. Jeremiah 1:4ff; Isaiah 55:10ff). God’s word and God’s Spirit are both creative and re-creative.

This Pauline profile is mirrored in various ways in the descriptions of worship and restoration that are in the book of Revelation. The Apocalypse of John commences and concludes with descriptions of worship and includes scenes describing God, the Lamb and celestial worship, along with that of those who have survived terrible conflicts having ‘washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’ (Revelation 7:14).

The context of John’s Apocalypse is that God loves us and has ‘freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever’ (Revelation 1:5, 6). These services and this worship are realised on the new earth that comes from heaven – a renewed creation where there is no longer any need for a locational temple since ‘its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’ (Revelation 21:22ff).

The writer emphasised the testimony of Jesus and the spirit of prophecy, reminding readers of the mystery of God revealed by God to John (Revelation 1:1, 2). After John, imprisoned because of God’s word and Jesus’ testimony to that word, saw a vision of Christ, he was told to write what he had seen including the mystery of the seven stars in Christ’s hand (Revelation 1:9–20; cf. 10:7).

This ‘testimony of Jesus’ relates to the ‘spirit of prophecy’ and God’s commandments and word (Revelation 1:2, 1:9, 12:17, 19:10, 20:4, cf. 6:9, 11:7, 12:11, 22:16). It so confronts the evil powers that those who have and share Jesus’

Living Love

testimony greatly suffer because they do ‘not cling to life even in the face of death’ – they are saints whose names are ‘written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered’ (Revelation 12:11, 13:8, 15:2, 17:6).

This vile and virulent demonic hostility is its sure doom. They

will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Revelation 17:14).

Evil is ultimately exposed as a sham – a pugilistic, punitive, parasitic predator proudly profiling a counterpart and counterfeit mystery (Revelation 17:1–8). Everything that seems so significant and substantial – so astonishing and amazing – is shown to be idolatrous and adulterous, to involve worshipping creation and despising its creator.

The Johannine Apocalypse provides little or no detail about any final battles, or about what happens to the false mystery apart from its rapid collapse during one hour of one day (Revelation 18:8, 10, 17, 19; cf. Matthew 7:24–27).

‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great’: The fall of the fall where humanity proudly and defiantly elevated itself is because there was no actual elevation, only deprivation and decline (Revelation 18:2). The fall of the fall is the unveiling of the glory of the truth. It is the revelation of God’s mystery – of God’s authority and sovereignty being shown to be just, true and faithful in all history, and that God’s justice, truth and faithfulness *are non-violent responses and do not annihilate in irrational and angry judgement*, but recreate, restore, refresh, replenish and redeem freely in love.

Evil, according to Paul, is finally destroyed by a puff of breath from the Lord Jesus ending evil’s ‘powerful delusion’ (2 Thessalonians 2:5–12). The Lord Jesus defeats evil by the same means that creation was made (Genesis 1:1, 2, 2:7; Psalm 33:6; Ezekiel 37:1–6; John 3:7–10; 20:19–22)

Re-creation and revelation – 2

Transformed communities – 1

The ‘mystery of God’ concerns the intentions of God in and through Christ by the Holy Spirit for creation and for human society and community. God is concerned about more than individual salvation; God is working towards a reconciled humanity and a renewed creation. All memories and molecules are transformed by the mystery of God in Christ, and everything covered over and concealed by the deceitfulness of evil is exposed to ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Paul urged the Philippian church to be like Jesus and so have the same ways of thinking, loving and living in complete harmony, free from selfishness and arrogance. Later in his letter, Paul wrote of their citizenship being in heaven, from where the Lord Jesus Christ would come as their Saviour and liberate and transform them from these bodies of humiliation that they might be

conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself (Philippians 2:1ff, 3:20, 21).

This *now but not yet* permeates all the letters attributed to Paul. The mystery of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit readies us for the new creation when death is ‘swallowed up in victory’. Christ’s resurrection, for Paul, was ‘the first fruits’, heralding everyone’s resurrection in Christ – as surely as everyone dies in Adam. The last enemy to be destroyed, according to Paul, is death, ‘so that God may be all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:20–28).

This transformation is sudden and means we will image ‘the man from heaven’ instead of ‘the man from dust’. This mystery changes us from being perishable to being imperishable and from being mortal to being immortal and fulfils the saying that ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’ (1 Corinthians 15:49–54).

This future reality impacts on our present existence:

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Transformed dust and breath inhabits a new creation where we are mutually reconciled by being reconciled to God and will image Jesus Christ who is the image of God (Colossians 1:15ff, 3:10; Ephesians 4:24; cf. Hebrews 1:1ff).

Transformed communities – 2

John’s apocalyptic account of turning to see the voice speaking to him, seeing ‘one like the Son of Man’ and falling ‘at his feet as though dead’ shared his record of this Son of Man placing

Living Love

his right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; 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 1:9–19).

The one who revealed ‘the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand’ has conquered death and who, according to John’s Apocalypse, conquers everything (Revelation 1:20, cf. 19:1–22:21).

The first letter of John, like the book of Revelation, places significance on ‘him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood’ (Revelation 1:6; cf. 1 John 1:1–2:2, 3:1–3, 4:7ff).

Peter’s second letter concludes by affirming that ‘we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’ in harmony with God’s promise. While we wait for this to happen, we are to endeavour to live peaceful and pure lives, to identify the Lord’s patience as salvation, to increase in living in grace, and to learn more ‘of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ to whom be glory now and to eternity (2 Peter 3:13, 18)

Transformed creation

This mystery is God’s plan, hidden in God who created all things, but revealed by God to creation from within creation – through Christ and his church. This mystery relates to God’s purpose to unify all things and bring God’s family to the praise of the glory of God’s grace – guaranteed by God’s Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:1–3:21; Colossians 2:1–3:17; Galatians 2:19–4:7, 5:13ff).

From the beginning of the book of Genesis to the end of the book of Revelation, the mystery of God is about what God is doing in history – about sanctuary and temple and sovereignty and presence – about fullness and riches and abundance – about the celestial realities being realised in the terrestrial landscapes and in the diversities of human communities that share together in harmony and peace and worship and serve the living triune God.

These themes conclude Paul’s first half of his letter to the Romans. Paul assured them that they were free from condemnation because God had ‘condemned sin’ by sending God’s ‘own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh’. They were now under the regime of ‘the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ and able to ‘live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit’.

They were indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit with a view to resurrection life – of Jesus’ and so of theirs! Their identities were no longer defined by bondage, fear and death but by adoption, inheritance and glory (Romans 8:1–17).

Present suffering remained during this life but was best understood as the ‘groaning of labour pains’ as the creation is being set ‘free from its bondage to decay’ and awaiting ‘the freedom of the glory of the children of God’. It is in this

Living Love

tension that Paul declared that God's love is victorious over everything in all creation and that this love unites us with God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:18–39).

Paul commenced his final section of his letter to the Romans urging them to, 'as an act of intelligent worship' and with their 'eyes wide open to the mercies of God',

give [God] your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world [including the church] around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity (Romans 12:1–2, J.B. Phillips).⁸

Being released from evil's deceit and knowing that the mystery of God is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Colossians 1:27) can be helpfully summarised by some final words in the last part of Isaiah where the LORD says that while everything in heaven and on earth is his, God's focus is on those who are 'humble and contrite in spirit' and who tremble at his word (Isaiah 66:1, 2).

This aligns with the One whom Paul declared was exalted because of his sacrificial humility. There is therefore encouragement in Christ, comfort in God's love and sharing, compassion, sympathy and joy in the Spirit.

Therefore, claimed Paul, God

highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:1–11).

⁸ *New Testament in Modern English, The*, trans. J. B. Phillips (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960).

Pathways of peace

Introduction

Peace is soundness, well-being and completeness, as well as serenity and tranquillity. When the Scriptures link peace with grace and righteousness they present peace as more than the absence of conflict and anger. Peace includes safety, prosperity, welfare, harmony and wholeness. It permeates the biblical doctrines of salvation, redemption, reconciliation and renewal.

Peace is a right relationship with God. When we reject this relationship, we experience God's disapproval in our empty experiences of life. Our alienation at the personal and social level, along with its consequences, provides ample evidence of the dislocation that comes from not being at peace with God.

Unless God acts to deal not only with the outward expressions of our conflicts, but also with the fundamental sources of our strife, we will never know true peace. It is this necessary healing of our consciences that God accomplishes through the cross of Christ. We are freed to love God and our neighbours with all our humanity. Our experience of God's healing power enables us to be at peace with each other, and especially with God's people, including when working through complex difficulties or adjusting to unresolved issues.

This peace is prophetic in the sense that it indicates the certainty that universal peace will be fully known in the new creation. As well as foretelling that day, our experience of peace is a powerful declaration and vital ministry to our troubled world. It is firsthand evidence that the Prince of peace is the Lord of lords, and that God is the God of peace.

In reflecting on biblical views about living in peace with God and other people, the Scriptures describe peace bringing healing and restoration in tragic situations. Peace is known as people celebrate and delight in thankfulness while living fragile and transient lives. Peace is experienced as a gift of God's presence as we participate in humanity's exploration of meaning and purpose. All these aspects of peace unite as we, being creatures in our cultural settings, share history and destiny with diverse communities and nations, and with creation in its anticipation for God's promised *telos* and *eschaton*.

Covenant and peace

From Genesis to exile

The second Genesis creation account and the passages that follow describe the harmony and wholeness of the initial creation being broken. Significant consequences included enmity, suffering and exile. Cain became a restless wanderer who sought security in his offspring and settlement. He is early testimony to the proverb 'A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but passion makes the bones rot' (Proverbs 14:30; cf. Genesis 4:13–17).

Melchizedek brought bread and wine to a victorious warrior when he met Abram. Melchizedek blessed Abram and 'God Most High, maker of heaven and earth' as king of peace and in return received a tithe of Abram's assets. God's covenants with Abram/Abraham were made in this context (Genesis 14:18–20; cf. Hebrews 7:2, 5:9, 10).

Moses taught peace as a covenantal gift. The people would prosper as they lived in the context of God's covenant with them. Otherwise they would experience famine, affliction and military defeat. The land would then 'enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbath years' (Leviticus 26:1–46 esp. 26:34; Numbers 6:22–27, 25:10–13; Deuteronomy 27, 28, 30:15ff).

The ancient view of military conquest and victory was harsh and brutal and was often understood as divinely mandated. In battle, the Israelites were to offer peace before declaring war. The peace that Joshua brought to the land was not permanent (Deuteronomy 20:10–12; Joshua 11:23; Judges 1:1ff).

David was denied his desire to build the temple because of his military involvement. It was to his son Solomon, as a 'man of peace' under whom Israel would receive 'peace and quiet' 'on every side', that this honour was given. This peace was not permanent, and the land became desolate until it 'had made up for its sabbaths' after the exile of its residents to Babylon (1 Chronicles 22:9; 1 Kings 4:24; 2 Chronicles 36:21).

In captivity, they were to pray for the 'peace of Jerusalem'; for the security and prosperity of those who loved Jerusalem. They were also to seek the welfare of Babylon and pray for Babylon because their peace and prosperity was linked with that of their captors. Jeremiah made it clear that healing, forgiveness, redemption and restoration would only come because of God's covenant love (Psalm 122:6–9; Jeremiah 29:1–31:40; cf. Lamentations 3:1–42).

Along with this focus on mercy and grace, references to peace offerings or to the 'sacrifice of the offering of well being' encouraged a spirit of thanksgiving as an expression of appreciation and gratitude for God's goodness and provision, rather

than being directly related to making atonement for personal sins (Leviticus 7:11ff, 3:1ff). Offerings were effective because they came from God's gift to God's people and indicated that God provides the atonement that produces true peace (e.g. Ezekiel 45:13–17).

Wisdom's message and other writings

Israel's worship and legal system recognised the uniqueness of every evening and morning and was built around the seasonal cycle of sowing, growing, harvesting and resting. This sense of transition and transience was a context for offering sacrifices covering guilt and expressing thanksgiving. Life's frailty and fragility with its immediacy to, and dependency on, creational provision highlighted the importance of forgiving and thankful spirits. They hoped for a peaceful life, for flourishing and fruitful families and communities, and for peace with their neighbours.

Job faced sickness and family loss, with Eliphaz insisting on a mechanical worldview: 'Agree with God, and be at peace; in this way good will come to you' (Job 22:21). Issues of intergenerational inheritance are themes in Proverbs 1 to 9 and include counsel about peaceful paths. Wisdom and understanding extend and enrich life and are preferable to wealth:

Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy (Proverbs 3:13–18).

We are told that even when strife comes, there is a 'time for peace' as God 'has made everything suitable for its time' (Ecclesiastes 3:8, 11). The psalmists were aware of life's transience and expressed delight and lament depending on the seasons they were experiencing. Psalm 85 speaks of the LORD having been 'favourable to [his] land' and having forgiven and pardoned his people. The psalmist longed for this experience again, confident that the LORD would not remain angry and would reveal his saving, steadfast love by reviving his people so that they might rejoice in him:

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land (Psalm 85:8, 9).

I will listen to what God the LORD will say; he promises peace to his people, his saints – but let them not return to folly (Psalm 85:8 NIV).

For Israel, peace was more than a cultic, God given ritual. It was grounded in their view of land, community and family. It expressed their creational, relational and spiritual identity and ethos, and brought hope and joy with longings for social and political faithfulness, justice and righteousness.

The prophetic voice

The prophets wrote boldly concerning this ‘covenant of life and well-being [peace]’ (Malachi 2:5, cf. ESV). The book of Isaiah records God’s everlasting kindness and compassion with God saying that

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

Ezekiel wrote of false shepherds and rebellious sheep and prophesied of another David who would be their shepherd and with whom God would make a covenant of peace. Likewise, Haggai prophesied the rebuilding of the temple and spoke of the time when the ‘treasure of all nations’ would come with God filling his house with greater glory than Solomon saw. This, according to Haggai, was to be where God would grant peace and prosperity (Ezekiel 34:25, 37:26; Haggai 2:1–9).

The great prophecies of peace in Isaiah include the LORD

- providing peace for ‘those of steadfast mind’ who trust him.
- ordaining peace for his people, with them acknowledging God’s complete initiative and total involvement in everything they did.
- creating light and peace and bringing darkness and distress to those who strive against their creator as pottery against a potter.
- lamenting that the disobedience and wickedness of God’s people meant they were without peace, while peace ‘would have been like a river’ if they had kept God’s commandments.
- rescuing the righteous and upright from calamity and giving them peace and rest.
- seeing the evil ways of God’s people but healing them anyway by leading them and repaying them with comfort and delight.
- providing peace and healing to those far away or nearby while wicked people are like a restless, tossing, muddy, murky sea that is never calm or at peace (Isaiah 26:3, 12, 45:7–10, 48:18, 22, 57:1, 2, 21; cf. Luke 19:37ff).

Peace issues from God’s covenant with his people. There is iniquity, violence, ruin, death and ‘empty pleas’ outside of this intimate bonding:

The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace (Isaiah 59:4, 8; cf. Romans 3:17).

It is in this desolation that the LORD intercedes and provides resources for poor people, deliverance for those who were broken hearted, and release for prisoners

and captives. This theme is central to the finale of prophecies in Isaiah with the wonderful revelation of God as father, creator and redeemer, the assuring presence of his Holy Spirit, and the victory of God's deliverer who 'will come to Zion'. The 'new heavens and the new earth' will be established where true and permanent peace will prevail (Isaiah 59:20, 61:1ff, 63:16, 66:22).

Jeremiah believed that it was to the nation's peril that its leaders 'treated the wound of [God's] people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there [was] no peace' (Jeremiah 6:14). They did not listen to what the LORD said about practising deceit and being greedy for gain. They did not read the signs:

Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the LORD (Jeremiah 8:7).

The prophets knew real grief and pain when declaring judgement. Jeremiah, for example, cried out,

Why have you struck us down so that there is no healing for us? We look for peace, but find no good; for a time of healing, but there is terror instead (Jeremiah 14:19; cf. 12:5).

The writer of Lamentations despairingly cried out for God's unfailing love and righteousness; for God's peace:

He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, 'Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the LORD' (Lamentations 3:16–18).

Other prophets, like restless Jonah, experienced the anguish of their own prophecies (Jonah 4:9; cf. Ezekiel 13:10–16; Micah 3:1–8).

This peace is powerful. It is not passive and inert. Its impact is permanent. It affects the whole creation. Every nation becomes involved in peace. Justice and righteousness flow out in 'quietness and confidence forever' (Isaiah 32:17; cf. Psalm 147:1–20; Isaiah 32, 55, 66:10–16; Micah 4:1–5). No wonder Daniel was spoken to as he was (Daniel 10:19)!

In what way would the Redeemer arrive in Zion (Isaiah 59:20)? Early passages in Isaiah refer to a son, Immanuel, who would establish a kingdom of justice and righteousness. This son is named 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace', with his reign bringing an ever-increasing abundance of peace (Isaiah 7:14, 9:2–7).

Later, we learn of an anointed servant who establishes justice throughout the whole earth by faithfulness and without aggression (Isaiah 42:1–9). This theme is enlarged in the account of the sufferings of this 'highly exalted' servant (Isaiah

52:13 NIV) whose bearing of transgressions, iniquities and correction brought peace and healing to those with whom he suffered (Isaiah 53:5–9).

The servant's sufferings were to be the fountainhead of the peace with which God would flood his whole creation; first to Israel and then through Israel to the ends of the earth. No wonder the feet of those who bring this good news of peace are 'beautiful upon the mountains' (Isaiah 52:7)! No wonder the prophet wrote about them going 'out in joy' and being 'led forth in peace' with creation breaking into song and celebrations (Isaiah 55:12, cf. 49:6–13; Nahum 1:15; Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15)!

Later prophecies in Isaiah develop this servant theme by indicating, as mentioned, that Israel's covenant God was Father-Redeemer, that God's Spirit would anoint God's people and that these initiatives would lead to a renewed creation (Isaiah 61:1ff, 63:16).

Anticipating peace was not limited to Isaiah. Zechariah wrote of a king coming to Zion on a donkey! This king would remove chariots, war-horses and weapons, and would 'speak peace to the nations'. His universal rule would relate to God's covenant and bring liberty to 'prisoners of hope' (Zechariah 9:9–12). Micah declared that Israel would be abandoned until out of its most insignificant tribe a ruler would emerge 'whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days':

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace (Micah 5:1–5a, cf. 3:5–12; Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:31; John 10:1–18, 17:1–5; Hebrews 1:3, 13:20, 21).

This shepherd-ruler was central to what Micah wrote about 'the mountain of the house of the LORD' with many nations coming to learn the LORD'S ways, 'walk in his paths' and accept his verdicts about their disputes:

... and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid.

For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever (Micah 4:1–5; cf. Isaiah 2:2–5, 55:8–11, 66:12)!

Christ Jesus: peacemaker

His life and ministry

At the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke of God acting to ‘remember his holy covenant’ (Luke 1:72). Zechariah saw his son’s birth as evidence that God would rescue his people from their enemies and ‘guide our feet into the way of peace’ (Luke 1:79). The angels at Jesus’ birth declared peace to those on whom God’s favour rests. When Jesus was brought by his parents to the temple, Simeon affirmed the Lord’s promise by asking to be dismissed in peace (Luke 2:14, 29–32).

The theme of peace was evident at Jesus’ baptism. The Holy Spirit descended ‘in bodily form like a dove’, indicating peace, and the voice from heaven alluded to the spirit-anointed servant in whom God delights because of his peaceful regime of justice (as mentioned in Isaiah 42). Messiah’s ministry would fulfil prophetic promises concerning peace (Luke 3:21–22).

Jesus blessed ‘the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’ in one of his beatitudes. The Son of God had come as peacemaker, and his sayings indicate that anyone who acts to reconcile people would be like him, and not simply the other way around. Jesus was declaring that he was the one of whom the prophets had spoken (Matthew 5:9). There is much in his Sermon on the Mount that describes a peacemaker’s lifestyle.

Reading the Gospel accounts enlarges these themes. When the disciples, some of whom were experienced fishermen, feared they would drown, they woke their resting Master: ‘He woke up’, Mark recorded, ‘and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!”’ Mark wrote that ‘the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm’ (Mark 4:39, 40)!

On the opposite side of the lake Jesus met a violent and screaming demon-possessed man who lived among graves. It seems that the nearby community was quiet enough until Jesus liberated the man at his feet. When the locals saw this man ‘clothed and in his right mind’, the tables were turned! *They* were afraid; the *healed man* was at peace (Mark 5:15)!

Back on the other side of the lake, Jesus, under pressure from the crowd and wanting to go to Jarius’ house, gave peace to a woman who feared the consequences of having ‘touched’ him (Mark 5:30–34). Similarly, the woman who anointed his feet at Simon’s house was sent away at peace (Luke 7:50).

When the disciples went on their preaching travels they were only to stay where their initial greeting of peace was received. Their ministry was to be in the context of peace, otherwise they were to leave at the earliest opportunity (Matthew 10:13; Luke 10:6).

His death and resurrection

Yet Jesus also spoke of division, not peace. He talked of bringing a sword and of kindling a fire (Matthew 10:34; Luke 12:49–52). The incident with the Gadarene demoniac had illustrated what would happen when true peace came. Did Jesus mean that when true peace came it would cause division and judgement? Did he know that, as Prince of peace, he was the suffering servant, and that when under political and religious judgement on the cross, this peace would begin to flow afresh to the ends of the earth? Did he dwell on those prophecies concerning peace knowing that the ‘wound of [God’s] people’ was so serious that only by his death on the cross could it be fully healed (Jeremiah 6:14)? If this is valid, then is it any wonder that he was distressed as he longed for this ‘baptism’ to be completed (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50).

The increasing intensity of the conflict of which he spoke was evident when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowd called out and praised God with words from Psalm 118 and declared, ‘Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!’ The Prince of peace wept: ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes’ (Matthew 21:1–11; Luke 19:37–44).

What did Jesus mean? His cleansing of the temple helps explain these profound words. He had gone to the temple soon after arriving at Jerusalem on a donkey and having overturned the tables, declared ‘It is written, “My house will be a house of prayer”; but you have made it a “den of robbers”’ (Luke 19:45–48; Matthew 21:12,13; Mark 11:15–18; cf. John 2:13–22).

An examination of the passages Jesus quoted indicates that

- God’s house was to be a house of prayer for those from all nations who ‘will hold fast to my covenant [of peace]’ (Isaiah 56:4–8).
- Those who abused God’s house were saying, ‘We are safe’. God had replied: ‘only to go on doing all these abominations?’ He indicated that what happened at Shiloh would happen in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:1–16). Jeremiah had warned about declaring ‘Peace’ where there was none.

John recorded a similar occasion (or the same one) and wrote that Jesus’ disciples related this event to a psalm: ‘It is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me’. This psalm details much that describes Jesus’ death, as do Jesus’ words about destroying and rebuilding the temple (John 2:12–22; Psalm 69:9).

Jesus, it seems, was mindful of how poor a grasp his listeners had of their own predicament, and of what God was doing to help them. Peter later declared that while people and their leaders had ‘acted in ignorance’, God had used their ignorance to fulfill what the prophets had said about his Messiah’s suffering.

Peter went on to say that Christ would ‘remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets’ (Acts 3:17–21; cf. 2:23; 1 Corinthians 2:5–9).

As Jesus prepared his disciples for his impending death, he had a primary concern that they be at peace in the middle of all that he would suffer. The discourse in John’s Gospel includes a warm affirming command that they should not let their ‘hearts be troubled’ (John 14:1). Jesus developed this theme when speaking of the coming of the Holy Spirit:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid (John 14:27).

Jesus concluded his discourse by saying that

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world (John 16:33)!

The peace Jesus established by his death was different to the false peace Jeremiah and the other prophets warned about. Jesus’ peace came in terms of the solemn and yet majestic words of Isaiah 52:13–53:12. The battle he fought required no military might: he even healed the ear of the high priest’s servant that Peter had cut off (John 18:8–11, 33–36).

When Jesus declared ‘Peace be with you’ to his disciples on his resurrection day, ‘They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost’. He reassured them by urging them to confirm it was him by noticing his hands and feet, ‘for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have’ (Luke 24:36–39).

The resurrection narrative in John’s Gospel also emphasises peace. Just as in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ greeting was ‘Peace be with you’ and was followed by showing them his hands and side – Luke mentioned hands and feet. John’s Gospel describes his disciples rejoicing rather than being ‘startled and terrified’. Jesus then reaffirmed his peace greeting and commissioned them:

‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’.

John’s Gospel records Jesus meeting his disciples a week later in the same house with ‘Peace be with you’. Thomas was present on that occasion and Jesus urged him not to doubt but to believe. Thomas’ affirmation made his response to seeing Jesus clear (John 20:19–26).

Living Love

While are not told if any of the women who had accompanied Jesus and had visited his tomb to find him raised from the dead were present at these times, we may conclude that his earlier words to the women of Jerusalem about them not recognising ‘the things that make for peace’ were no longer relevant in the same way for them. His encounters with women on resurrection morning certainly speak of peace and comfort.

The drama and substance of these resurrection appearances summarises the prophets’ declarations. Jesus’ peace was not a lightly accomplished peace. He dressed ‘the wound’ of God’s people with care and love (Jeremiah 6:14; cf. 8:22). Jesus then sent them as messengers of peace in the joy of their new-found peace and in the confident assurance that God was sovereign. They went believing that his peace would reach to the ends of the earth and to the depths of troubled human consciences.

The peace they received came to them in and through the same Holy Spirit who descended as a dove at Jesus’ baptism and led him in peace throughout his ministry. *The Holy Spirit brought them the peace of the risen Messiah whose peace had conquered all hostility at the cross.* Messiah is the Prince of peace who came from his Father to reconcile us to God as God’s peace-gift.

Proclaimers of peace

The good news of peace

Peter, at Cornelius' house, declared God's impartiality to them while affirming God's message of peace by God's messenger of peace, 'Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all'. Anyone, according to Peter, who fears God and 'does what is right is acceptable' to God.

Peter explained that the 'judge of the living and the dead' forgives sins just as the prophets testified. This forgiveness was consistent with the way Jesus, anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, did what was good by healing people suffering devilish oppression, and was

put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear (Acts 10:34–43).

Paul wrote that those who reject the truth and pursue evil will be given over to their wrath and anger, and so to trouble and distress. By contrast, those who find motivation for repentance in God's kindness, tolerance and patience, discover that there is 'glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good', regardless of their ethnicity or original religion because 'God shows no partiality' (Romans 2:1–11; cf. Revelation 6:4).

Peace comes by being justified by faith. Jesus gives us 'access by faith into this [justifying] grace', and God affirms this by pouring 'out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit'. Paul taught that we 'have been justified by his blood' and 'reconciled to God through the death of his Son'. This reconciliation was God's initiative. It resulted from God's refusal to tolerate evil and God's defeat of its efforts to make God appear to be our enemy. Having set us free from our bondage to sin and death by the removal of condemnation, the Holy 'Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' now sets our minds on what God desires: life and peace (Romans 5:1–11, 8:1–6).

The Ephesian Christians heard how their salvation came because of God's abundant love for them in Christ Jesus and through the uncalculatable treasury of God's grace. God's love and grace saved them from the 'desires of flesh and senses' which caused them to be 'children of wrath'. Non-Jewish believers were 'without Christ', alienated from the people of God and unfamiliar with their 'covenants of promise'. Paul described them as without hope or God until they were 'brought near by the blood of Christ' (Ephesians 2:1–13).

Christ Jesus dissolved and destroyed the basis for enmity between races and religions and towards God by demolishing the hostility and divisions between them and creating a new humanity through the peaceful sufferings of Jesus in being crucified. God's actions 'abolished the law with its commandments and

ordinances' as a culture of entitlement and manipulation and established peace and reconciliation as the basis for this new humanity:

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:14–18)

Jesus is our peace. He is not only the maker and preacher of peace, but our experience of peace is always in and through him, by the Holy Spirit and from the Father. There is no substance to his preaching and no permanence to the peace he made unless his peace brings us this access to God as Father in one Holy Spirit, and unless we cease to be outcasts and become 'citizens with the saints and ... members of the household of God' (Ephesians 2:18–22).

The deepest desires of the prophets hardly seem to compare with Paul's message to the Colossians that God, through his Son in whom God's fullness delighted to dwell, will reconcile everything terrestrial and celestial to himself – and that God does this in the face of human alienation and enmity.

Paul's proclamation was that this reconciliation comes about because of the peace God made 'through the blood' of Jesus' cross:

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him (Colossians 1:19–22; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:16–21).

God's final goal is a 'new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home'. While we wait 'for these things, [we are to] strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish' (2 Peter 3:13, 14). This new creation will be filled with peace, and this present one is in anguish until that time comes (1 Thessalonians 5:3; Romans 8:18–25; Revelation 7:14–21, 21:1–22:21).

The reign of peace

Paul exhorted the Colossians to 'let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful' (Colossians 3:15). This peace is to flow out to all humanity. It is sure evidence that the reign of God will not only come to fullness but that it is present reality. Christ's peace is evidence that we are no longer in the realm of darkness but in the reign of the Prince of peace, where sinful passions of anger, bitterness, factions, idolatry and selfish ambition are crucified, and where the Holy Spirit produces fruit, including love, joy and peace (Colossians 3:15; Romans 12:18, 14:17–19; Galatians 5:22–24; 1 Thessalonians 5:13; 2 Timothy 2:22; James 3:17,18; 1 Corinthians 7:15).

None of us like hardship. We know that under pressure we can respond with anger and bitterness. Nonetheless, however painful our difficulties and regardless of how

Living Love

unwelcome we find discipline, these hardships may produce the evidence of ‘the peaceful fruit of righteousness’ that indicates we belong to God’s family.

More than that, the healing that accompanies this harvest may help encourage and strengthen us to the point that our future goals in life are clarified and we

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:7–14).

God is at work to fulfil all that the prophets have spoken. God’s peace is given to God’s people. It is God’s peace that binds us together and maintains the unity of the Spirit. It is God’s peace that maintains harmony and order in the life and worship of God’s people (Ephesians 4:3; cf. 1 Corinthians 14:33; Acts 15:33). And it is God’s peace ‘which surpasses all understanding, [and which guards] your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 4:4–9).

We battle the ‘flaming arrows of the evil one’ with the ‘gospel of peace’. Our weapons are not worldly; we do not ‘wage war according to human standards’. The gospel of peace is so powerful that evil cannot overcome it (Ephesians 6:10–20; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5).

Greetings and benedictions

Paul's letters contain similar greetings: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; etc. cf. 1 Peter 1:2; 2 Peter 1:2; 2 John 3; Jude 2; Revelation 1:4). Reading the context of the greetings in the New Testament letters shows something of the understanding that those authors had of the many facets of grace and peace.

The benedictions concerning peace can help us better appreciate Paul's understanding of peace and receive great encouragement. Paul prayed that the Thessalonians would know the peace and presence of the 'God of peace' and the 'Lord of peace' continually and in every situation. Paul prayed that this divine peace would totally sanctify them and keep their spirits, souls and bodies 'sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 3:16).

Paul's prayer for the Roman Christians was that the 'God of hope' would fill them 'with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit', that the 'God of peace' would quickly defeat Satan and that they would know the Lord's grace (Romans 15:13, 16:20).

The writer of Hebrews included a helpful and assuring benediction praying that the 'God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep' would 'by the blood of the eternal covenant' make them flourish in doing good as they aligned themselves with God's will – and as God worked with and among them to achieve what brings joy to God (Hebrews 13:20–21; cf. Galatians 6:16; Ephesians 6:23; 1 Peter 5:14; 3 John 14; 2 Corinthians 13:11).

Living in God's love and peace

Introduction

Careful readers of this letter to the Ephesian Church may notice the language used about God. They are not presented with a tri-theistic being whose three persons are independent of each other as three gods, albeit working together. Nor are they told of a singular deity who emerges in one or more modes depending on the time and place under discussion. Whatever this meant in the development of trinitarian thought, the practical reality of living as God's people is expressed richly in terms of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Exploring this letter with this theme in mind is worthwhile, and prevents a limited view where focus is primarily on Christ, or on the Spirit, or even on the Father. The thoughts in both sections of the epistle can be understood more clearly by considering the various ways about which God is spoken, and the worship encouraged throughout the letter can be wider, deeper and higher using these insights.

Writing anything brief about the letter to the Ephesians is like a snapshot photograph of a natural wonder. It is a small effort to treasure a magnificent memory of an incredible experience. The Ephesian church is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation. It is no stranger to readers of the New Testament and yet warrants careful consideration. Likewise, this letter can be treated simplistically as theology for three chapters and advice for three more chapters. Yet, what could be more practical than to live in a divinely abundant world of wonder, love and grace which destroys divisions based on ethnicity, gender, sectarianism and other social and economic categories? What could be more theological than to be in awe that God-in-Christ is not limiting God's-self by the suffering and death by crucifixion of Jesus, but engaging in the most lavish undertaking ever attempted or possible?

My hope is that this brief collection of thoughts might encourage some to explore commentaries on this letter and delight further in its richness. Whether readers find my notes helpful or frustrating, may the mutual subjection proclaimed throughout this epistle brings praise to the glorious grace of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who unites us by his Spirit in love as his family.

An overview

The Father of glory – 1

Greetings from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:1, 2) precede an outline of the Father's abundance being 'lavished on us' in and through Christ. God redeems his family and brings everything 'in heaven and ... on earth' to completion and fullness in Christ 'according to his good pleasure' (Ephesians 1:3–10).

The Father of glory – 2

God does 'all things according to his counsel and will'. God achieves these things in Christ and guarantees them 'with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit', bringing thankfulness, praise and adoration for God's marvellous redemption (Ephesians 1:11–14).

Paul prays that the Father of glory will reveal himself to them so that they will know the abundance of this inheritance and God's power to provide it (Ephesians 1:15–23).

The blood of Christ

This redemption occurs in the face of deep defiance, yet by God's grace in Christ Jesus, we are rescued and remade to see the mercy, kindness and love of God, now and in the ages to come (Ephesians 2:1–10).

This divinely initiated reconciliation is not solely personal, but, by the blood of Christ, is for every people group including Jews and Gentiles. Peace comes through the cross of Jesus where a new humanity was formed in which the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is shared (Ephesians 2:11–22).

The fullness of God

The mystery of Christ is the Father's declaration in creation, in history, to the celestial and terrestrial powers that all God's promises are fulfilled in this new humanity – the church (Ephesians 3:1–13).

An affirmation that the fullness of God will fill God's church with all God's dimensionless abundance follows this revelation. This fullness is the Father's glory, it is God's action and presence through the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:14–21).

The unity of the Spirit

We share in the unity and diversity of the fullness of these triune relationships, which we know because of the humble, gentle, patient and abiding love and peace that is God's presence in his family. This unity of the Holy Spirit results in the

body of Christ Jesus coming together to maturity, as we live the truth in love (Ephesians 4:1–16).

The fragrance of Christ

Social and familial expressions of living in love are outlined in terms of mutual submission rather than dominance. These renewed and refreshed relationships flow from the fragrance of Jesus Christ's reconciling death, a death which reveals God the Father's love. We are urged to live in this light and to grow into the fullness of the Spirit, giving thanks to the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:17–5:20).

The evidence of this imitation of God's relationships is not found in empty mimicry but in authentic relationships. It occurs in the truth and life of mutual inter-personal subjection 'out of reverence to Christ', and hence to the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Correlative, but not identically equivalent relationships, include Christ and the Church and marriage partners, God the Father and God the Son and families, God and humanity and social and vocational communities (represented by masters and slaves) (Ephesians 5:21–6:9).

The full armour of God is our only defence against evil celestial powers. It brings us victory in the Holy Spirit by the word of God (Ephesians 6:10–20).

Peace, love, faith and grace come to those living in the undying love of the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 6:21–24).

Conclusion

God's plan is for unity not uniformity, for diversity not division. Unity and harmony bring aggregation, congregation and integration (Ephesians 4:16):

The church is the LORD's and the fullness thereof and they that dwell therein (cf. Psalm 24:1 KJV).

Terminology

Paul mentions Jesus around twenty times, Jesus, together with Lord and Christ, nearly ten times, and Christ, with or without Lord or Jesus about fifty times. This emphasis on Christ might be misleadingly seen as aligned with a celestial-spiritual-heavenly vs material-physical-earthly worldview – a contrast owing more to Greek philosophies than Hebrew-Jewish thinking. Worldly sin and failure are different from earthly and physical realities – ones which Paul sees renewed and restored in and by Christ. Hebrew-Jewish messianic narratives were interpreted by New Testament authors including Paul in terms of the reign of God, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins – all understood as the action of God the heavenly Father working in Messiah-Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

The Father of glory – 1

Ephesians 1:3–10

Greetings

Paul, by the will of God, greets the faithful saints at Ephesus with grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:1, 2).

The Father's blessings in Christ – 1

The book begins with the affirmation that Jesus Christ brings us all heavenly blessings or that we are blessed in the heavenly realms with all God's blessings or both! This is God the Father's action, for which he is blessed and praised (Ephesians 1:3).

The Father's blessing of us flows from his choice of us in Christ from before creation. It was his way of making us holy and blameless in his presence. The expression 'in love' applies to the clauses before and after: The Father chose us in love *and* our destiny is set by his love to be in his love (Ephesians 1:4).

God's love, as Father, is God's destining of us to be – by adoption – family together through Christ Jesus. This is the delight of his will. There are at least three perspectives that emerge (Ephesians 1:5):

- these divine actions have present, past and future aspects.
- each initiative is of the Father in and through God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Ephesians 4:13).
- God's family are the chosen recipients of God's initiatives.

It is the Father's pleasure and delight to precipitate a fountain of exaltation in us for God's grace (Ephesians 1:6, cf. 1:12, 14). This glorious grace is

- given freely by God as giver, without restraint on account of either the giver or the recipients, or creation, or sin and death (cf. Romans 8:31ff).
- everything that is given is 'in the Beloved', in Jesus Christ and so God the Father identifies us with his Son, Jesus Christ.

The focus of the Father's love *of* Jesus Christ is evident in God redeeming humanity, in forgiving our sins. This redemption indicates the measureless extent to which God lavishes grace on us. This outpouring of grace was and is according to the divine perception: 'With all wisdom and insight' applies to the clauses before and after (Ephesians 1:7, 8)!

The revelation of God's purpose and pleasure is personal, enveloped in 'the mystery of [the Father's] will' (Ephesians 1:9). They are hidden from humanity not only because of sin but by nature of God's own being, and they relate to the

whole creation, commencing from ‘before the foundation of the world’ and reaching their destiny by making us

holy and blameless before him in love … according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:4–6).

The fullness of time

It is the Father’s delight and intention to reveal something of this mystery to us in Christ Jesus. Christ’s life, death and resurrection declare the essence of God the Father’s plan for ‘the fullness of time’ (Ephesians 1:10). This plan is God’s intention to gather everything together in Christ. God’s plan for God’s creation and humanity speaks of an action that has in view an administration that is appropriate for God’s intended fullness and completion. It tells of a stewardship that has in mind a flourishing destination and accomplishment.

The ‘fullness of time’ is the goal of creation, of humanity, of history. It is our own personal destiny in the context of our being in corporate humanity. This goal is not only a harvesting, it is an integration, a congregation, and is much more than an aggregation of separate individual entities. It is a bringing together, a reunifying, of what was originally in harmony, but which has been fragmented and fractured by trespasses and sins.

This gathering together into one community is into one person, Jesus Christ. It is achieved by ‘redemption through his blood’ (Ephesians 1:7). It is the forgiving action of God; a *fore*-giving, a giving back of lost life and hope with a view to fullness and abundance.

Only that which is under Christ’s headship is therefore suitable for ‘the fullness of time’; only that – whether celestial or terrestrial – which is in Christ Jesus reaches authentic completion. God’s administration is the expression of Christ’s headship through the church as Christ’s body, God’s family and the Spirit’s community. This life is the theme in Ephesians 4:7–16, where grace is administered to the household of God for the ‘work of ministry’.

The Father of glory – 2

Ephesians 1:11–23

Review

The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father's 'Beloved', has

- blessed God's people in Christ in heavenly places with all his blessings. These blessings are the fullness of the Father's relationship with his Son, from eternity and in history, given to humanity through Christ Jesus.
- elected God's people to be pure and holy in Christ, sharing in the action of God the Father and Jesus Christ.
- destined us to be God's family, adopted in love.
- shown us in this intimate, familial context that the divine mystery is the Father's plan to unify all creation in Christ, so that when history is complete, everything will be in harmonious unity in Christ Jesus.

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

The Father's blessings in Christ – 2

God's people are chosen in Christ to be heirs – to obtain an inheritance and be made a heritage. This is the predetermined divine destiny decreed for us (Ephesians 1:11; cf. Psalm 2:8). The Father's abundant and free giving relates not only to the revealing of his grace, but to the certainty of God achieving God's goal in and by God's grace.

God's people receive an inheritance, not from, by or for themselves, but in order that they be God's heritage so that in the 'fullness of time' that God achieves God's plan to reveal God's-self in creation's redeemed family. God's people in this plan are heirs of the Father, in Jesus Christ.

These blessings are then outlined in terms of the 'we' and the 'you' ethnic groups in the Ephesian church (Ephesians 1:12–14). The Jewish believers – the 'we' – were to be and live for the praise of God's glory. They were to exalt God as Father in and through 'our Lord Jesus Christ' (Ephesians 1:3). This was a rich, intimate affirmation of Jewish identity in the Christian community. Both the 'you' – believers from other nations – and the 'we' had

- heard the word of truth about the Father's plan for God's family – the saving gospel of God's grace in Christ that would redeem humanity.

- believed in Christ who was the focus and goal of the Father's redeeming grace (cf. Ephesians 1:3–5, 10, 11).
- been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, guaranteeing the inheritance of both 'we' and 'you' groups until God's family are all redeemed.
- become one community rather than two divided groups and were all the richer for their unity in Christ Jesus as God's family.

Being 'marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit' means everything that has been said about God the Father and God's Son, Jesus Christ, applies to the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). The Holy Spirit shares in the Father's action in Christ. The Holy Spirit participates in blessings, in election, in adoption, in revelation and in consummation. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of grace and is present in the proclaiming and hearing of the gospel, bringing faith to the faithful. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of promise, always working with God the Father and Jesus Christ in their plan for fullness and completion.

The presence of the Spirit to and in us is the Father's indication and means of ensuring our inheritance as God's people. Inheritance links back to the earlier mention of 'every spiritual blessing' (Ephesians 1:3). Spiritual blessings can be thought of as the Spirit's blessings, the blessings of receiving the God's gift of the Holy Spirit in and by Christ, as well the actual blessings themselves.

The body of Christ, the Father's fullness

Paul is thankful in knowing their love flows from their faith in Christ and that their faith grows as their love flows (Ephesians 1:15, 16). His prayer is that they know the Father of glory, the God of the Lord Jesus Christ, in their spirits by the Holy Spirit, and hence know

- the hope to which they are called.
- God's inheritance among the saints.
- the immeasurably great power of God for and in us that enabled this hope, calling and inheritance (Ephesians 1:17–19).

Just as the Father's plan is accomplished by Christ's blood, so God's power is known in Christ's resurrection and ascension. To be at the Father's 'right hand' is for the Father to 'put all things under his feet'. 'Far above' means Christ's 'rule and authority and power and dominion' and 'name' are of God, and not of any celestial or terrestrial power in any age past, present or future (Ephesians 1:20–23; cf. Psalm 110:1).

Christ's headship 'over all things' is 'for the church', and the church is 'his body', and 'his body' is the Father's fullness, 'the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:22–23). This fullness embraces every divine initiative already outlined (cf. Ephesians 1:1–21).

The blood of Christ

Ephesians 2:1–22

Review

The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has, in Christ's death and resurrection, blessed us with every blessing, elected us to be pure and holy in God's presence, destined us in love to be God's family, disclosed that the divine mystery is uniting everything in Christ, made us heirs who receive an inheritance and sealed us in all this as God's people by the Spirit. All these revelations of God's grace are to fill us with God's own fullness (Ephesians 1:1–23).

Cosmic rebellion and divine mercy

Prior to the Ephesian Christians receiving these spiritual blessings, they were living death, following worldly behaviours and dominated by the 'prince of the power of the air' – of created air and not divine breath or spirit. This spiritual disobedience was by implication in complete contrast to Christ's obedience (Ephesians 2:1, 2).

As for these Ephesian believers, so for 'us'. The parallels between the two include: the flesh and the world, desire and power, wrath and disobedience, and a false father and the evil spiritual prince (Ephesians 1:3, cf. 12, 13).

God's revelations and blessings are unknown in these two environments and Paul's prayer is unintelligible. Disobedience and fleshly passions are in the context of the spiritual blessings and glorious grace just outlined and not in a silent vacuum. Human wrath is against God's *lifestyle* and God's wrath is against this *deathstyle*. Human anger is contrary to creation and destructive of human relationships while divine wrath is God's outpouring of blessings and grace in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is God's action in opposing and rejecting evil and sin (Ephesians 2:3).

God's wrath is known by rejecting divine love (Ephesians 2:4–6). God's great love (Ephesians 1:4), God's lavish grace ((Ephesians 1:7) and the great power (Ephesians 1:19) are all one *life-giving* divine initiative. 'But God ...' says it all (Ephesians 2:4, italics added)! Mercy relates to the misery of a defiant *deathstyle* and grace to its lethal guilt. Christ's love in his death unites him with us in our dying, thus enlivening us to God in his resurrection. This is God's glorious grace (Ephesians 1:6–8, 20).

The 'ages to come' can refer to both time and space – ultimately to eternity and the whole creation – and so to the goal of our hope and the fulfillment of God's plan (Ephesians 2:7, cf. 1:10, 14, 21). God's kindness is the central highlight of God's good pleasure in being merciful and gracious (cf. Ephesians 1:5, 9). It is this kindness that shapes the character and substance of God's 'wrath' in not endorsing or acting in any way like humanity's angry defiance.

God's grace and faith's responses are God's gifts (Ephesians 2:8–10). Boasting is therefore excluded, only praising the glory of God's grace (Ephesians 1:6) and the grace of God's glory makes any sense (Ephesians 1:12, 14). Works derive from God and not from or for oneself: 'We are what he has made us', we are God's creations, recreated in Christ for the good works God 'prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (Ephesians 2:10, cf. 1:3ff, 4:24; Isaiah 26:12).

Access through Christ, in one Spirit to the Father

Non-Jewish nations were without Israel's Messiah-Jesus and lacked the commonwealth, covenants of promise and hope that God's presence provided (Ephesians 2:11, 12, cf. 1:17, 18, 2:1–3). Christ's blood was necessary for God to save the Jews and bring the Gentiles to share in their salvation (Ephesians 2:13–16). This salvation was effective since God worked 'in [Christ's] flesh' to destroy hostile divisions between Jews and other nations. Both are made alive 'in Christ Jesus' with both having died in his death.

We are only saved in Christ Jesus: God does not save us separately from him. His flesh took the full fury of our disobedience and our anger, consuming them in and by his serenity and peace. Jesus' poverty in dying was his abundant peace, a peace more than adequate to destroy the vast deluge of human hate and hostility. The old order of legalism and lawlessness was bankrupt and unable to renew or recreate. Only in Christ Jesus' crucifixion and death was a new, serene and reconciled humanity created and only in his resurrection and ascension does he conquer devious and deviant humanity (Ephesians 2:13–18, cf. 1:4, 7, 10, 20, 2:10).

Jesus' proclamation of peace was declared to those near and far through his cross (Ephesians 2:17, 18; cf. Isaiah. 52:7, 57:14–21). All the blessings and grace outlined at the start of this letter are through Christ (Ephesians 1:3–12, 20–22, 2:5–10) and everyone has access to everything that is given in one Spirit – in the Spirit of oneness, harmony and unity (Ephesians 2:18, cf. 4:3). The Holy Spirit is present, uniting us with Christ in Christ's cross and raising us up to the Father in him. Our access to God is entrance into the community and communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We work with them as they work out their plan for creation (Ephesians 2:10).

God's goal is realised in Christ (Ephesians 2:19–22). 'You' are with 'us' in one body, filled to fullness with God the Father, Son and Spirit (cf. Ephesians 1:22, 23, 2:12). The whole community of believers are citizens and saints in the commonwealth of Jesus Christ. They are all members of God's house with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone and form a holy temple in the Lord which is built together as God's dwelling place in the Holy Spirit.

The fullness of God

Ephesians 3:1–21

Review

Our Lord Jesus Christ has ‘broken down … the hostility between us … [in order] that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace’ by his death and resurrection. This is the administration of ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ which, in the Holy Spirit, re-creates us from sin and death for good works as God’s household, God’s temple, where we receive God’s fullness by God’s grace and mercy. All this abundance flows out of ‘the great love with which [God] has loved us even when we were dead through sin’ (Ephesians 1:1–2:22).

The mystery of Christ

‘The above few words’ were not abstract ideas; they were Paul’s own witness to his apostolic calling to preach grace to the nations. This grace was ‘the mystery of Christ’ which God revealed to him (Ephesians 3:1–4).

This ‘mystery of Christ’ was unknown until the Holy Spirit revealed it to the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:5, 6, cf. 1:17, 2:20, 4:11). Although the Old Testament indicated that the nations would be blessed through the Jews, the ‘new humanity’ that Christ created was not yet known (Ephesians 2:15). The nations which were ‘without Christ’ were now in Christ through the gospel (Ephesians 2:12). They are now:

- co-heirs with Israel (Ephesians 1:11, 14, 18, 2:19, 20).
- co-members of the same body (Ephesians 1:4, 22, 23, 2:6, 15, 16, 21, 22).
- co-sharers of the promise (Ephesians 1:5, 10, 13, 18, 2:12).

Paul’s commissioning and conversion were one powerful ‘gift of God’s grace’ (Ephesians 3:7, cf. 1:19ff, 3:1,2). The persecutor was now proclaiming, bringing the nations the unfathomable, boundless and unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8, 9, cf. 1:6, 8, 18, 23, 2:4, 7). Paul’s preaching was declaring the plan of God’s mystery in Jesus Christ, a mystery hidden throughout the ages in God (cf. Ephesians 1:9, 10, 22, 2:2, 7, 10, 3:3).

Two key aspects underline this proclamation. Firstly, revelation of the mystery required Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection, as is seen in the frequent references to him throughout these chapters. Secondly, the reference to creation links God’s plan to recreate us in Christ with God’s intention from before creation began (Ephesians 1:4, 2:10, 15).

God’s wisdom and insight in showing this plan to us has celestial as well as national implications. They are seen in God’s hidden mystery which the church declares to

the heavenly authorities (cf. Ephesians 3:10, cf. 1:8–10, 20–23, 2:1–3, 19–22). The rich variety of this wisdom, evident in the church, flows from God's unsearchable and limitless grace in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:8).

This is God's 'eternal purpose' that was outlined at the start of this letter, and which brings Jews and Gentiles peace and reconciliation and gives them bold and confident access 'in one Spirit to the Father' (Ephesians 3:11, 12, cf. 1:4–10, 2:17, 18). It comes through suffering and just as Christ's sufferings bring glorious abundance, so Paul's sufferings are their glory (Ephesians 3:13).

Before the Father

From the first statement blessing 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' for blessing faithful saints with every 'spiritual blessing', access in one Spirit through Jesus Christ to the Father is a consistent theme in this letter. Spiritual blessings might be envisaged as the Spirit's blessings, the blessings of (being filled with) the Holy Spirit or the blessings that the Holy Spirit brings (Ephesians 3:14, 15, cf. 5:18–20). They certainly include God's 'glorious grace' which God 'freely bestowed' and 'lavished on us with all wisdom and insight' (Ephesians 1:3–8, 2:4–8, 10, 18).

This access reconciles all families to the Father from whom they are named, releasing us from the hostility of false familyhood derived from domination and disobedience into the harmonious peace, love and mutual submission shared in and by the triune God (Ephesians 2:1–3, cf. 5:21).

Out of the riches of God's fatherhood, by Christ's resurrection power and 'according to the riches of [the Father's] glory', the Holy Spirit comes to strengthen each person's 'inner being'. This empowering by the Holy Spirit grounds us in God's love, with Christ indwelling us by faith (Ephesians 3:16, 17, cf. 1:19, 20). The context for strengthening is suffering (Ephesians 3:1, 13, 4:1). This strengthening is – from its beginning onwards – the action of the love of God the Father, the indwelling Christ and the promised Holy Spirit.

The dimensionless love of Christ 'surpasses knowledge', is known together 'with all the saints' and enables God's family to 'be filled with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:18, 19, cf. 1:3, 10, 17–19, 2:4, 7, etc.). Abundance, riches, fullness and surpassing are words that prepare us for Paul's benediction (Ephesians 3:20, 21). His conclusion bookends his initial affirmation:

- God's power – through God's Holy Spirit – is at work within us (cf. Ephesians 1:19, 20, 3:18).
- God's goal – to 'gather up all things ... in heaven and ... on earth' in Jesus Christ – is abundantly accomplished (cf. Ephesians 1:4, 9, 10, 14, 18, 21, 2:10, 22, 3:10, 11).

Living Love

- The Father's glory is in Christ Jesus and in the church being 'filled with all the fullness of God' – the church being Christ's 'body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' – (cf. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14, 17, 18, 23).
- This glory is for all ages and generations, it is 'forever and ever' as 'a plan for the fullness of time', 'not only in this age but also in the age to come' (cf. Ephesians 1:21, 2:7, 3:10).

The unity of the Spirit

Ephesians 4:1–16

Review

The mystery of God has been revealed in and by Christ. The church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, now declares to all creation the excellencies of God's plan to recreate God's family in Christ by grace through faith as a lavishly abundant divine gift. This new – renewed – humanity is God's glory, God's dwelling place, now and in future ages. God's people are God's heritage, redeemed and rescued by the reconciling blood of Jesus Christ. They are filled with – and fulfilled by – 'all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 1:1–3:21).

Filling everything

While Paul referred to himself as an apostle, he made it clear that he was an imprisoned and unworthy one. The 'I therefore' at the start of this second section parallels the apostolic declaration at the letter's beginning. This profile of Paul as an imprisoned and unworthy apostle emphasises the wonderful revelations he has documented *and* his heart for the welfare of the Ephesian church. He consequently exhorts them to live worthy of the calling – the *churching* – with which they were called – *churched* – as God's *ecclesia*: (Ephesians 4:1; cf. 3:8; Acts 20:17–38).

Living this life is one with the nature and character of Jesus Christ:

In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35).

Paul's letters to the Galatians and Philippians further outlined his thoughts about humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity and peace. All three letters identify these qualities with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:2, 3; cf. Galatians 5:16–18, 22–26; Philippians 2:1–11). It is in this context that Paul's proto-trinitarian declaration emphasises triune and ecclesiastical community:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called [churched] to the one hope of your calling [churching], one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:3–6).

The 'unity of the Spirit' and the 'bond of peace' were secured at the cross, and it is for God's family to 'maintain' this unity (Ephesians 4:3, cf. 2:13–21).

This sevenfold unity is in

- one body: that of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3–14, 20–23, 2:15–16).
- one Spirit: God's promised Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:14, 17, 2:18, 3:5, 16).

- one calling and one hope of this calling: to fullness and abundance (Ephesians 1:4–11, 17–22, 2:4–7, 3:2–4, 8–13, 18–21).
- one Lord: one Lord of creation, church and history (Ephesians 1:9, 10, 20–22, 2:20–22, 3:11).
- one faith: faith in God's grace as God's gift (Ephesians 1:1, 17, 18, 2:8, 9, 3:13, 17).
- one baptism: a baptism into Christ's cross and coronation (1:7, 8, 13, 2:4–6, 16).
- one God and Father: God and Father above all, through all and in all; of all families and communities (Ephesians 1:3ff, 17, 23, 2:9, 10, 18, 3:14ff).

It is *this* unity that Paul already detailed, especially as it related to Jew-Gentile and humanity-God hostility (Ephesians 2:11–22).

The 'But' helps contrast the unity and the 'each of us' diversity (Ephesians 4:7). The grace each person receives expresses the unity, and like the unity, it is a gift of grace. The 'measure' of God's giving is boundless (Ephesians 1:8, 2:4–10, 3:16–18) and *in the Holy Spirit* (Ephesians 1:14, 2:18 cf. John 3:34). It is *Christ who administers* the giving (Ephesians 1:10) and *Christ who is given* (Ephesians 3:17, cf. 3:2). And it is the *abundant riches of the Father's glory* that strengthens and empowers us *through his Spirit*, and by which *Christ dwells* in our hearts through faith and grounds us in God's triune love (Ephesians 3:16, 17).

This giving and receiving occurs because of Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. This giving is amply adequate to fill everything (Ephesians 4:8–10, cf. 1:10, 23, 3:19, 4:6, 7). Christ's reign is operational 'through his blood' (Ephesians 1:7, 2:13–18). He gave *everything*, taking into himself *all* our hostility and enmity, and destroyed *all* of that, so that being raised – filled – with him, we would find *all our fullness* in him and *all* God's fullness in us.⁹

Equipping the saints

As with Psalm 68:11, Christ's gifts were people, with proclaimers (apostles, prophets and evangelists) listed before pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:7, 11, cf. 2:17).¹⁰ They were all gifted with an understanding of the mystery of the Father's will 'set forth in Christ', namely God's plan and purpose for Christ's body, the church (Ephesians 4:12, 1:9, 10, 3:3–10). Christ *is* these nominated gifts par excellence. They – and we all – are called into Christ's ministry: He is the apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor and teacher!

⁹ Paul altered receiving to giving in Psalm 68:18, emphasising God's victory: e.g. Psalm 68:1–6, 11.

¹⁰ The text is 'some pastors and teachers', not 'some pastors and some teachers'. I take it that some mainly teach by pastoring and others are more likely to pastor by teaching.

While ‘some’ are given as these gifts, all ‘the saints’ are involved in ‘the work of ministry’ which builds ‘the body of Christ’ (Ephesians 4:12, cf. 2:21, 22 as the goal of 2:10).

Paul’s emphasis was that ‘all of us’ – everyone together – ‘come to’ – arrive at and not make – the unity of the body of Christ already outlined and the knowledge of the Son of God (Ephesians 4:1–6, 13: Jesus Christ was not named Son of God until this statement, cf. 1:2–6 where we read of ‘adoption as [the Father’s] children through Christ’, implying Christ’s sonship).

Thoughts of ‘maturity’ connect with fullness and inheritance (cf. Ephesians 1:9, 18, 3:16–19), while ‘the measure of the full stature of Christ’ relates to Christ’s abundant self-giving. The ‘But’ contrasts abundance and maturity with deficit and immaturity, while the earlier ‘But’ compares unity and diversity (Ephesians 4:14–16, cf. 4:7, 11ff, 1:10, 20–22).

The circular flow of giving and receiving, serving and honouring, is completed. Fullness and giving come from God through Christ by the Holy Spirit to Christ’s body and then return to God through Christ by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:7, 11, 12). This circular movement is and reveals the Father’s glory (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14) and the mystery of Christ (Ephesians 1:9, 3:4–10). It is our inheritance (Ephesians 1:11, 14, 18) and involves and enables our access to the Father (Ephesians 2:18, 3:12). It is our life in the Holy Spirit, our growing ‘in every way into’ Christ; our being ‘filled with all the fullness of God’ (Ephesians 4:15, 2:18, 3:16, 17). To ‘speak the truth in love’ is to share the reality of the Father’s blessings in Christ with each other (Ephesians 1:3–14). This vocational life is ‘what [God] has made us’ for, and which God planned from ‘before the foundation of world’ (Ephesians 1:4, 2:10). Christ’s headship in this context primarily relates to what he gives as the source of God’s blessings to his body, the church.

The new humanity formed from hostile nations through the cross of Christ is seen as fully functional. It is ‘joined and knit together’ by the Spirit of oneness; it is ‘equipped’ according to Christ’s diverse sharing of himself; it is ‘working properly’ towards the fullness and fulfillment of the ages – God’s creational and redemptive goals – and it involves each member of Christ’s body strengthening and enriching each other in love. This is the ‘holy temple in the Lord’, ‘the dwelling place of God’ – Father, Son and Spirit – in full abundance (Ephesians 4:16, 2:21, 22).

The fragrance of Christ

Ephesians 4:17–6:24

Review

The transition to the second section of Ephesian letter is in the ‘I therefore’ declaration at the commencement of the fourth chapter. This transition can be understood as part of a central section beginning with a prayer based on the first part of the book and ending with an emphasis on what must be done in response to God’s initiatives (Ephesians 3:14–4:16). The remaining part of the book then flows from ‘Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord ...’ (Ephesians 4:17a).

Being ‘rooted and grounded’ in ‘the love of Christ’, being ‘filled with all the fullness of God’ and ‘joined and knit together’ in the ‘unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace’, God’s ‘new humanity’ – now reconciled to one another across religious and racial divides ‘through the cross’ – is harmoniously and fruitfully at work – even in sufferings – declaring ‘to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms’ the rich variety of the ‘wisdom of God’ as ‘his plan for the fullness of time’! This proclamation is seen in and results in the Father’s gathering ‘up of all things in [Christ]’ (Ephesians 1:1–4:16).

Imitators of God

Learning Christ and the truth which is in Jesus renews the spirit of our minds and re-creates us in holiness and righteousness according to the image and likeness of God. This new life completely contrasts the futile, alienating darkness of abandoning oneself to unrestrained impurity (Ephesians 4:17–24, cf. 2:1ff, 11ff).

Imitating God means living in God’s love ‘as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’. It means not grieving ‘the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption’, and being kind, tender-hearted and forgiving ‘as God in Christ has forgiven you’. This section continues to highlight proto-trinitarian perspectives where God, frequently referred to as Father, is ‘in Christ’ and where the Holy Spirit is ‘of God’ (Ephesians 4:25–5:2).

Our lives are to reflect Christ’s life and especially mirror his death. Our focus would otherwise be on ourselves and not on our neighbours. Imitating God means being truthful and peaceful. It includes working honestly and sharing generously with those in need.

Additional qualities relevant to inheriting ‘the kingdom of Christ and of God’ are listed, completing a profile of the last five commandments. Relational immorality, angry abuse, theft, falsehood and greed do not align with the triune abundant grace and mercy revealed by God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:3–7; cf. Exodus 20:13–17).

Profiling goodness and light reminds readers of the creation narratives and the resurrection recreation by which we are to live and flourish ‘as children of light’ by being awake and rising from the dead so that ‘Christ will shine’ on us. Being wise emphasises the Wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible where exhortations about wisdom are frequently linked with fearing God (Ephesians 5:8–16; cf. Proverbs 1–9).

God’s family is to be sober and filled with the Holy Spirit, to know the will and wisdom of the Lord Jesus, and by corporately worshiping Christ, joyfully thank ‘God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’. This is our testimony to knowing God’s ‘plan for the fullness of times’, and the basis for living wisely and fruitfully, of our being ‘pleasing to the Lord’. Nothing less is recommended in the context of the surrounding darkness and death (Ephesians 5:17–20, cf. 1:10, 2:10, 5:10).

Trinitarian life

To reverence Christ is to reverence his subjection to his Father and to be ‘subject to one another’, as emphasised throughout this letter and especially in this second section. Everything that follows about marriage, family and work environments is set in the context of this summary statement and its preceding context (Ephesians 5:21, cf. 1:15, 2:14ff, 4:1–5:20).

Christ has ‘loved the church and [given] himself up for her … so that she may be holy and without blemish’. This ‘mystery of his will’ – namely the church – is bonded to the one who sacrificially loves her. The church’s radiance and sanctity result from Christ’s nourishment and tender care – the church is full of splendour and glory because Christ is its Saviour (Ephesians 5:22–33).

The church is the result of everything being gathered together in Christ. The church is the goal of the Father who ‘accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will’ (Ephesians 1:11). The church is God’s dwelling place in the Spirit. Here is their goal in creation, their victory over evil heavenly rulers and ‘children of wrath’ (Ephesians 2:3).

‘In the same way’ upends the cultural norms of male dominance in first century society into ones where husbands ‘live in love’ and sacrificially give their wives honour, dignity, nourishment and tenderness (Ephesians 5:22–33, cf. 5:1, 2).

Having referenced the last five commandments, the ‘first commandment with a promise’ is highlighted. Men are again to alter the cultural power narratives by not provoking their children when bringing ‘them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord’ – namely all that has been outlined in this second section, based on the revelation profile in the first part! The prosperity promised to those who honour their parents reflects the inheritance we receive because of our adoption through Jesus Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit. This inheritance is Christ’s gift

from his inheritance from God and is in harmony with God's plan for creation (Ephesians 6:1–4, cf. 1:9–19, 5:5).

The realignment of power also related to slaves and their masters. The context for masters treating their slaves as they want slaves to treat them links with the headline injunction about mutual subjection and the earlier command to imitate God by sacrificial love because masters 'have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality'. Just as Jesus did 'the will of God from the heart', rendering 'service with enthusiasm' to the Father in the Holy Spirit, so are we to do when under the authority of others (Ephesians 6:5–9).

There is no pretence of easiness in any of these admonitions. The full armour of God is our only defence against evil celestial powers and oppressive earthly regimes. God's armour is not only defensive, it brings victory in the Spirit by the word of God, and it equips us to achieve the goal of the mystery of God. Such strength is essential and requires the resurrection power of Christ.

Emphasis is again triune as it is placed on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the strength of the Lord and the armour of God. This second section concludes as it began with reference to Paul's imprisonment; this time in the context of always praying 'in the Spirit', being alert and 'persevering in supplication for all the saints' – all with Paul's hope that he can 'make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel' (Ephesians 6:10–20).

Benediction

The undying love of the Lord Jesus Christ has been the theme of the whole epistle and the basis of Paul's confidence in God's plan for God's creation and God's family. Jesus Christ is the reference for our identity and destiny, and the Holy Spirit is our assurance that we are secure in God's beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. In the middle of crisis and imprisonment, of despair and hope, Paul prayed that the entire community knew grace, peace 'and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (Ephesians 6:21–24).

Extra notes: Other mentions of the Ephesian church

The other direct New Testament mentions of the Ephesian church are Acts 18:18–20:38, 1 Corinthians 15:30–34, 16:5–9, 1 Timothy 1:3–7, 2 Timothy 1:15–18, 4:12 and Revelation 1:11, 2:1–7.

A symphony of light, life and love

Heard, seen and touched

1 John 1:1–2:2

The word of life

The word of life, which John said he had heard, seen and touched, was the ‘eternal life that was with the Father’. This eternal life was revealed by God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and was central to the message John received that ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all’ (1 John 1:1–5).

The message John proclaimed was that the holy glory of God as Father and Son had appeared and acted in intimate human history to bring people into God’s eternal divine fellowship and to fill God’s family with joy and light.

According to John, God’s goal was that the incarnation of Jesus Christ would shine light into and out of sinful darkness and so prevent this darkness from deadening relationships anywhere in God’s universe. Achieving such purity in a sinful world required the blood of Jesus. The shedding of Jesus’ sinless blood secured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from unrighteousness.

The word of life was that the holiness and love of God had provided an atoning sacrifice for humanity’s sins through the cross of Jesus Christ. It was this word that proclaimed that God’s divine radiance had appeared in the humanity of Jesus to reveal the depths of the fellowship of God the Father and his Son and their co-advocacy for humanity against the powers of darkness and the tragedy of human evil.

Walking in the light

Walking in the light of Christ rather than in the darkness of sin was understood as essential to sharing and participating in the life of God and to communion and community within God’s family.

Walking in the light meant walking ‘as [Jesus] himself is in the light’ and brought cleansing and purification from sins by God’s faithfulness and restorative justice (1 John 1:7). It meant acknowledging and confessing sins rather than being deceitful by denying them, and so

- having community with each another. This community meant sharing with each other in the context of having been welcomed by God the Father and Jesus Christ. It was no more or less than a participation in their divine life.
- knowing the purification accomplished by ‘the blood of Jesus’ (1 John 1:7). It is the God who is light whose light purifies. God’s holiness was renewing and restorative, not depriving or destructive. God’s holiness was revealed and effected by God’s Son. God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ meant God’s renewal and restoration of creation would be by God’s self-revelation in Jesus’ humanity.

These verses contain three contrasts. Firstly, the blood of Christ was vitally necessary and completely adequate for relating to God and God's family. It was dishonest to claim these relationships while 'walking in darkness'. Secondly, it was deceitful to expect forgiveness and cleansing while denying the truth by insisting on currently being blameless. And thirdly, insisting on a faultless past declared God to be a liar and meant being without God's word.

Advocates together

The initial relational perspective on Jesus' humanity – his incarnation – is followed by an outline of his messianic relationship with his heavenly Father as God's anointed Son – a focus which explicitly mentions the Spirit in the middle of the letter. This revelation of eternal life aimed to bring new life to communities in the context of Jesus' relationship with his Father. Experiencing this eternal life is linked with God being light, presumably encapsulating the emphasis on incarnation and divine relationships. Walking in the light, having mutual sharing with other believers and the indwelling of God's word are closely connected, with forgiveness and cleansing being known because of the shed 'blood of Jesus his Son' (1 John 1:7) – highlighting atonement as another theme.

This progression from Jesus' incarnation to his relationship with God as his Father, to the nature of God's atoning action in Jesus as God's messianic Son is then developed as a co-advocacy of the Father and Jesus Christ. John highlights his message by his phrases: 'My little children, I am writing these things to you' before assuring them of God's initiative should they fail any of the previous 'If we say ...' crises:

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

By using his chosen word for 'atoning sacrifice', John was eliminating any suggestion that they needed to ameliorate God in any way. God's mercies more than provided all necessary cleansing and forgiveness. John then indicated that Jesus was not saving them from the Father, but that God as Father and Son shone healing and restorative light into and out of the darkness of human and spiritual evil (cf. Revelation 12:10, 5:1–14; John 1:29–34). John thirdly emphasised that Jesus' atoning sacrifice was not limited to individuals or to those within an inner circle but was for 'the whole world' (1 John 2:1, 2).¹¹

¹¹ See Extra notes: On atoning sacrifice.

Walking, loving and living

1 John 2:3–27

Walking as Jesus did

John emphasised that he was writing to declare Jesus Christ's righteousness was in being *both* the atoning sacrifice for the world's sins *and* the one who washes away all unrighteousness. John used extra terms to further outline his thinking. He maintained similar polarising contrasts, but now referred to his 'little children' knowing, obeying, abiding and walking in the context of Jesus' commandments, truth and love (1 John 2:1, 3–6).

The climax of John's declaration is that abiding in Jesus means walking as Jesus walked. This emphasis positively restates and re-emphasises his earlier comment that fellowship with God correlates with walking in the light rather than in darkness (John 1:5, 6). The link with perfection is not about a celestial, idealised life but a practical reality where God's love accomplishes its purpose. Perfection is not some permanent spiritual state but a living reality in which one walks, and in which one fails and for which the co-advocacy of the Father and his Son are needed: 'if we say we have no sin ... if we confess our sins ... if we say that we have not sinned ... if anyone does sin' (1 John 1:8–2:1).

Walking, then, is a way of life in which God's loving goal is realised in human acts of righteousness, truth and light; acts occurring in the middle of terrible darkness and relentless evil. Walking as Jesus walked means facing crises like those Jesus faced and needing the strengthening love of God that Jesus knew.

We saw earlier that Jesus walked in the light and that we are to do the same. The same point is now made in terms of love and truth with the implication that God's love was fully complete and mature in Jesus and that it achieved everything God intended to accomplish (cf. 1 John 2:5). The essence of these two references to walking is that to live in the light is to love and abide in the truth, and that to love and dwell in the truth is to live in the light.

This understanding is highlighted again in the next section where we read of a new commandment 'that is true in [Jesus] and in you' (1 John 2:8, cf. the truth of the new commandment 'is seen in [Jesus] and you' (NIV)). This truth is God's love and God's love is the authenticity of this life (cf. 1 John 1:1ff).

Living in light and love

The new commandment was the original one. It is the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection that they had already heard, and which John had personally encountered. John was reminding them to live as Jesus did. The radiance of God's light was the revelation of God's love, and it was already shining in the darkness

and helping them not stumble or be disoriented. Living in God's love similarly meant living in God's light (1 John 2:7–11).

The light was 'already shining', and 'the blood of Jesus' and his co-advocacy 'with the Father' were evidence of God's love (1 John 1:7, 2:8). Loving others in God's family meant living in God's light and living in God's light meant loving those in God's family.

There was no conflict between love and light or between knowing, obeying and abiding. Loving God and loving other people revealed the truth of God by shining God's light even where there was antagonism, anger and hate. There was nothing in the truth of God in Christ that was offensive. Hiding the truth in the interests of love was neither honest nor loving, neither was it loving to attempt to impose it in unwelcome ways.

Just as the themes of light and darkness developed earlier statements, so the calibration that follows further personalised John's message to his beloved, 'little children' (1 John 2:1, 7). His letter began by writing declarations, and this language is repeated in this passage (1 John 1:1–5, 2:1, 7, 8, 12–14).

John affirmed that Jesus had forgiven their sins. He affirmed that parents – presumably including those who had believed the longest – knew the truth about the 'life that was with the Father and was revealed' in Jesus Christ, and that those in the prime of life had overcome 'the evil one' – about whom more detail was to follow – by being strengthened by the indwelling 'word of God' (1 John 2:12–14).

Jesus' death and resurrection were significant in each of these scenarios. They led to *revelations* about forgiveness, overcoming evil and knowing God. They were *effective* as the co-advocacy of Jesus 'with the Father' brought security and confidence in times of struggle and persecution, and they were *crucial* in enabling this revelation to be effective (1 John 2:1–3).

Anointing, confessing and abiding

John contrasted loving the world with loving the Father and Jesus. John was not wanting them to turn to Jesus so that earthly things would fade in the light and love of God. Jesus had lived among them; he was *earthy* but never *worldly* (cf. John 1:1–4, 10–14)! Worldly things, including lust and pride, pass away, while those who do God's will *on earth as in heaven* 'live forever' (1 John 2:17; cf. the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:10 and the angels' message in Luke 2:14).

While their earthly life conflicted with the worldliness of those opposed to Messiah Jesus, John's beloved community was 'anointed by the Holy One' and personally knew the truth 'about all things' concerning Jesus and the Father, and the eternal life God promised them and in which they lived:

Living Love

No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life (1 John 2:23–25).

John had already written that their fellowship was with the Father and His Messiah-Son but was now seeking to assure them that this participation would transcend their sufferings and difficulties. John also wanted them to know that God's self-revelation was not a meta-physical, mystical, other-worldly phenomenon. It was about this life, was intensely relational and revealed God as God is and was and will continue to be, and what God was and is doing and will go on doing. God, John declared, is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God's own being is perfectly holy and overflowing with love. There was, is and will be nothing abstract, mechanical, detached or clinical about who God is and what God does. Joy was the goal of the revelation of God as light and love:

We are writing these things so that our joy [and presumably theirs and God's] may be complete (1 John 1:4).

From death to life

1 John 2:28–3:17

Unashamed and confident

The text of this letter may be read in clusters identified by words and phrases such as ‘We declare’, ‘My little children’, ‘Beloved, I am writing’, ‘Children’ and ‘And now, little children’ (1 John 1:1, 2:1, 7, 18, 28). ‘I write these things’ and similar phrases are also used for emphasis (e.g. 1 John 2:12–14, 26).¹²

John’s mention of Jesus being revealed is in the context of it being ‘the last hour’ during which many will oppose Jesus as God’s anointed Messiah-Son (1 John 2:18; cf. Revelation 1:1, 22:7, 12, 20). John was concerned for the welfare of his readers and not about any divine schedule.

He wanted them to know that abiding in Jesus would give them confidence whenever Jesus did come. Abiding in Jesus was possible because ‘his anointing teaches you about all things’ (1 John 2:26). John’s linking of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the truth of God’s word reminded his readers of the first Genesis creation narrative, the beginnings of John’s Gospel and this letter.

Their anointing meant Jesus Christ – God’s Messiah-Son – was in them and that they confessed God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, walked in God’s light, loved God’s people, obeyed God’s word and belonged to God’s family. They knew forgiveness and cleansing by ‘the blood of Jesus’, God’s righteous Son, co-advocate and atoning sacrifice (1 John 1:7, 2:1–9, 19, 23).

Their confidence meant they would be unashamed when Jesus came again – but not arrogant because of God’s forgiving and cleansing love and light (cf. 1 John 4:18). Their good and appropriate actions were because they knew that Jesus’ atoning sacrifice indicated his righteousness (1 John 2:1, 2, 29).

This mention of righteousness looks back to John’s introductory phrase: ‘And now, little children’ (1 John 2:28). God had shone light out from the depths of human sin and spiritual evil to the whole creation by Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, God’s propitiatory gift to dissolve and destroy human anger. Jesus speaking to his Father on their behalf was Jesus speaking to the One who sent him, was always with him and who had anointed him as Messiah-Son by the Holy Spirit.

Being ‘born of him’ led them to righteous living, to obeying God’s word and knowing the truth, to walking in God’s light, to living in God’s love and to abiding in Jesus. Being born again in this way meant Jesus’ righteousness, light, truth and

¹² Also see: ‘Beloved’ (1 John 3:2, 3:21, 4:1, 7, 11), ‘write’ (1 John 5:21) and ‘Little children’ (1 John 3:18, 4:4).

love would flow to them as God's family, recreating them according to the nature of the first creation (cf. Genesis 1:1ff; Psalm 33:6; John 3:1ff).

The Father's love

Although God as Father has been a constant theme in this letter, the revelation of Jesus as 'the word of life' who shines God's light into human experiences of darkness has been central. Love, similarly, emerges as a topic in terms of being aligned with the truth and light revealed in Jesus by loving God's family rather than being caught up in worldly passions (1 John 1:1, 2:5ff, 15–17).

Every mention of God 'the Father' is significant: eternal life and fellowship were 'with the Father' whose co-advocacy with 'Jesus Christ the righteous' acts against the world's sins. The Father's love was unlike worldly desires, with those who acknowledge Jesus as the Father's Son also knowing God as Father (1 John 1:2, 3, 2:1, 14–16, 22–24).

The Father's love-initiative is now emphasised. Everything seen in Jesus and experienced in knowing him is not only because God is light but because of the Father's love-gift. John's declaration of delight was that *the goal of the Father's love was calling them his children*; and his love was effective: 'and that is what we are'! God's love as Father had acted to name them and make them his family.

John's joy was also in seeing that *the Father's effective calling was so that he could love them as his family*: 'and that is what we are' (1 John 3:1)!

This ground-breaking divine love realigned them. To be truly known by other people meant they would also come to know the Father's love. And to know the Father's love was to be aware that although God's purposes were not yet fully revealed, God's plan involved being like Jesus 'for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2). This anticipation, known in the joy of being God's family, motivated the cleansing, forgiving purity of which John had already written.

Purification would come to God's family by them confessing God's faithful righteousness in forgiving them, by their living in fellowship with God the Father and Jesus as God's Messiah-Son, by harmoniously loving the family of God, by obeying God's revealed living word, and by abiding in Jesus.

Freedom from sin

John's bold declarations about sin as lawlessness and as alignment with the devil describe a bleak and barren contrast to the Father's transforming love. They profile a revulsion to sin and a rejection of accommodating sin within an ongoing way of living in the context of God's purposes in revealing Jesus as God's Messiah-Son. Jesus, John declared, had come to destroy the devil's destructive and defiant works by rebirthing humanity into a life of being anointed to abide in Jesus and live together in harmony as God's family.

Living Love

Doing ‘what is right’ meant loving each other, and, so by implication, being like Abel whose actions (in sacrifices and life in general) were good and righteous. Freedom from sin, devilishness and worldliness meant freedom to live in sacrificial righteousness and love as children. Freedom from sin and murderous hate meant living together as the Father’s family in the Father’s light, righteousness and love as revealed in Jesus.

Seeing the Father’s love meant seeing everything Jesus did and was in terms of the Father’s love. It included seeing God’s family together and personally as gifts reborn by the Father’s love. Eternal life meant passing ‘from death to life because we love one another’ – a very earthy, practical other-person centred love. A love that is more than euphemistic and generalised words; a love that identifies and responds to actual needs:

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. ... We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help (1 John 3:14–17)?

Knowing love

1 John 3:18–4:6

Truth, action and reassurance

John's motif for knowing love was based on Jesus' sacrificial death:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16).

Their life as God's family grew from knowing God's forgiving and cleansing love in Jesus' atoning sacrifice (cf. 1 John 1:7–2:2).

John had emphasised that knowing God involved loving other people by walking as Jesus walked, and that living this way meant God's purposes in loving humanity would be fully accomplished. Any other pathway ultimately led to darkness, blindness, hate and death (1 John 2:3–11).

They had learned of the truth about eternal life and so of abiding in God from the commencement of their lives as God's people; from when they were reborn into God's family. Their way of life and truth was the way of true love – of the love of God the Father and God's Messiah-Son, Jesus – and heralded the destiny awaiting them (1 John 2:12–3:3).

Writing that love was not found in words and speech but in truth and actions (namely, in truth and actions that flowed from and accompanied words and speech) was therefore summarising and reinforcing what was already written (1 John 3:18). John built on his theme by indicating that living this life of practical *action-based* love brought *confirmation* of God's *truth* and *reassurance* amid the inevitable accusations that came against them as God's family.

This intensely practical message gave them a way forward when their 'hearts' were unsettled and when they felt condemned. John's recommended response to these crises was to engage in practical, truth-based, sensibly considered acts of reconciling love, and that such love would, by implication, bring them peace, joy, hope, comfort and rest. Being reassured would result in greater confidence about living in God's presence and would lead to more wisdom concerning what pleases God and what it is best to ask God to do (1 John 3:18–22).

Believing and receiving

John's second theme in this brief section reinforced his basic gospel message concerning faith in God as Father and God's Messiah-Son, Jesus, and regarding mutual love in God's family. He also highlighted two aspects of the mutual nature of his understanding of abiding. Abiding firstly resulted from faithful responses to the message about the truth of God's word that they had heard – a response that was expected to lead to practical actions of love. Abiding was also described as a mutual indwelling where they abided in Messiah Jesus and where he indwelt them.

Living Love

This mutual abiding – their living in God’s anointed Son and his living in them – had been earlier explored in terms of their being anointed. They had knowledge because they were anointed, and that knowledge concerned Jesus as God’s Messiah or Anointed One. Their anointing taught them to abide in God’s Son whose anointing was integrally connected to the fellowship of the Father and Jesus in Jesus’ sacrificial atonement and to their fellowship with the Father and his Messiah-Son Jesus (1 John 2:20, 22, 27, also 1:3, 2:1–2).

Their mutual love flowed from this mutual abiding and came from faith in who God was and what God had done in Messiah Jesus. Rather than exploring notions of anointing in terms of Jesus’ messianic identity and his relationship with the Father, John explicitly named the Holy Spirit as God’s gift by which they personally knew and experienced this mutual indwelling. *The gift of the Holy Spirit is described here as Messiah’s gift to them and so was to be understood as the Father acting with, through and by his Messiah-Son.*

It is therefore reasonable to think that they linked the Holy Spirit’s presence with and in them with the immediately previous thoughts about being free from condemnation and reassured and confident in God’s presence and about asking for God’s assistance in their daily lives. This connection therefore links the Holy Spirit’s anointing with the sacrifice-based co-advocacy of the Father and the Son (1 John 2:1, 2).

Believing in ‘the name of [the Father’s] Son Jesus Christ [Messiah, Anointed One]’ meant having faith and trust in everything mentioned about the Father, God’s Son, Messiah Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Confessing and conquering

Having named Messiah Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit to them, John highlighted two themes. He firstly wanted them to discern God’s Messiah-sent Holy Spirit from those spirits opposed to Jesus who were already present. He secondly wanted to assure them that they had conquered these ‘anti-Christ’ spirits because they (unlike these spirits) were ‘from God’ and indwelt by Jesus (1 John 4:4).

Identifying God’s Holy Spirit with Jesus’ messianic humanity, and so with his relationship with the Father and his sacrifice of atonement, provides a significant summary of John’s letter to this point and sets the context for his next declarations about God being love.

John’s mention of the Holy Spirit confessing the truth links with his thoughts about the gospel, the word of God and truth; themes that are evident in the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation (cf. John 14–17; Revelation 19:10).

Just as spirits were to be discerned as to whether they were ‘from God’, so God’s family were to know they had conquered them because of the indwelling presence of Messiah Jesus and the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:4). Those who were from God had

been ‘born of God’ (1 John 2:29, 3:9, also 4:7, 5:1–4, 18) and so knew ‘the spirit of truth and the spirit of error’ (1 John 4:6).

Being from God was the Father’s love-gift by which he identified them as his family and destined them to be like Jesus when they saw him as he now is because of his resurrection and ascension (1 John 3:1–3). The Holy Spirit and Jesus are intimately connected with this re-creational love-gift, as John has repeatedly emphasised. God’s family had not just conquered anything or anyone, they had conquered the antichrist spirits to whom worldly oriented people listen.

Knowing God was not simply intellectual assent or emotional identification, it involved listening to God speak through God’s people. It included recognising, correlating with, and relating to those – including their leaders – whose fellowship was ‘with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’ and so who were walking ‘in the light as [Jesus] himself is in the light’ and who have this ‘fellowship with one another’ because of the cleansing ‘blood of Jesus his Son’ (1 John 1:3, 6, 7). It was this community life that the Holy Spirit confesses as God’s gift in Messiah Jesus to God’s messianic family. The Spirit of truth affirmed the authenticity and integrity of Jesus’ messianic identity, divine relationships, sacrificial death, co-advocacy with the Father, anointing, indwelling, and promised coming. The Holy Spirit achieved these outcomes by intimate presence and relational unity with God the Father and Jesus, and with God’s community of faith.

Love is from God

1 John 4:7–4:16

Knowing God's love

This section begins by stating that they were to share God's love with each other because they were recipients of God's love. They were to think and act in the same way as God, who thought love not only meant sharing but birthing and calling them God's family. Understanding what it meant to be 'from God' and love each other was the result of knowing *this* God, 'for God is love' (1 John 4:1–7, cf. 3:1–3, 9, 5:1, 4, 18).

In stating that not loving excluded knowing God, John was not saying that not knowing God meant never loving – he was just inferring that such love came with a lack of knowledge of its divine source. Mutual love is mentioned three times in this short passage and is linked with knowing God, sharing God's love and being so indwelt by God that God's love reached its fullness in them by their loving other people (1 John 4:7, 11, 12).

Just as 'God is light' meant God's light shone into and out of darkness, so 'God is love' meant God's love reached those who lacked love, hated others and did not know God: 'In this is love, not that we loved ...' (1 John 1:5, 4:8–10). They were therefore to reach out to each other in love even when the other person's response was not particularly loving.

God's pure light and birthing love shone in, from and through Jesus' humanity. God's light and love revealed Jesus' relationship with his Father and the Holy Spirit's messianic anointing of him. God's light and love enabled forgiveness and cleansing by Jesus' bloody sacrifice of atonement. God's light and love were God's faithfulness and righteousness, and not arbitrary or abstract decrees.

This passage focuses on God sending 'his only Son into the world'. The humanity of Jesus was evidence of this divine initiative. Its dual purposes were to give life where there was death and atonement where there was sin. Jesus' life and death shone light on God's clear declaration to humanity; they defined authentic love by a vivid contrast: 'not that we loved God' (1 John 4:10, cf. 1:5, 6, 2:8–11).

Having earlier written about the Father's love, John here wrote of God's love – and so of the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father's love was evident in both sending his Son and in Jesus' atoning sacrifice. The love of Jesus was seen in his life-giving humanity, and the Holy Spirit's love was known by the Holy Spirit being God's anointing birthing-nurturing gift of life who confessed to them that Jesus was God's true and authentic Messiah.

An incarnation without an atonement would have been both inadequate and ineffective, while an atonement without an incarnation was inconceivable and

impossible. Christ's incarnation was more than divinity with a human face. It was more than humanity with divine resources. And more was achieved than a brief and passing divine visitation. Something happened to 'the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:2). Something was happening to darkness (1 John 2:8, 17). Something happened to ignorance and isolation (1 John 2:20, 27). Something was happening to shame and insecurity (1 John 2:28, 3:19–22). And something was happening to broken community and fractured family life (1 John 3:1ff).¹³

Living God's love

While this final 'Beloved' exhortation is more emphasis than explanation, its message highlighted God's presence in, with and among God's community (1 John 4:11, cf. 3:2, 21, 4:1). Just as God's light shone to bring life at creation and by Jesus' life and sacrificial death, so God's love flowed to renew and recreate them as a living, loving and flourishing community. John mentioned no love hierarchy: they were to 'love one another':

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:11, 12).

Love was to be mutual, self-giving, forgiving and renewing. It was the result of being cleansed and forgiven (1 John 1:7). It confirmed they had passed from death to life and was their responsive alignment with Jesus having 'laid down his life' for them (1 John 3:14–16). It expressed their faithfulness and was evidence of being 'born of God' and knowing God (1 John 3:23, 4:7).

God's light-shining love and God's love-radiating light were co-revelations of the unseen triune God who lived in them and whose purposes were being realised in, by and through them. The 'life which was with the Father was revealed', and they could be confident and unashamed knowing that their destiny of being like Jesus was beyond their expectations, and that the devil's destructive works would be destroyed (cf. 1 John 1:2, 2:28, 3:2, 8; John 1:18).

Their alignment with Jesus by being Holy Spirit-anointed into the Father's family would recreate them in the likeness of God where their community would image the Jesus-image of God (cf. Genesis 1:26ff). Their life together was not an abstract and detached analyse of eternal mysteries but one of practical love – of God's love for them, in them and through them. What they knew of God's eternal nature was known by God's action and was focused on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus (cf. 1 John 1:5–7, 2:1, 2, 3:7, 8, 16).

John's statement that 'if we love one another, God lives in us' did not make God's indwelling presence dependent on love but completes the flow of life-giving love

¹³ See Extra notes: On atoning sacrifice.

Living Love

outlined earlier: ‘let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God’: love from God flowing to and between each other and returning to God in joy as thanksgiving, having achieved God’s purposes (1 John 4:12b, 7, cf. 1:3).

John’s message was that love was life-giving, that they lived where they loved and that they loved where they lived. While John wrote to Christians, the implications for the broader community were clear (cf. John 13:35).

Confessing God’s love

This next section is structured to emphasise its themes:

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world.

God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them (1 John 4:13–16).

The unseen God lived in those with consistent love for each other, and God’s purposes were achieved through their mutual love as God’s people. They knew God’s indwelling or abiding because of God’s gift to them of God’s Holy Spirit. The bookends of the passage highlight God’s love-gift of the Holy Spirit and the mutual love-abiding of God with them and God’s people with God.

Inside these bookends is a reminder that the Father’s sending of his Son as the world’s Saviour revealed God’s love for the world. This divine disclosure was not only known by John; it was the substance of John’s testimony – and so would be the substance of the witnesses by the communities among whom those who received John’s letter lived. This confession forms the central focus of this profile of the Holy Spirit as God’s love-gift and Jesus as God’s love-sent Son.

John had already indicated that confessing Jesus as God’s Son had practical aspects as well as verbal ones (cf. 1 John 3:18). It involved the community in walking in the light as Jesus did, in not loving worldliness, in abandoning evil deeds and inner hate, in laying down one’s life for other people as Jesus had done for them, in sharing possessions with those in need, in being victorious over antichrist spirits, and in conquering the world (1 John 2:3ff, 2:15ff, 3:11–15, 17–20, 5:3,4).

God's testimony is in us

1 John 4:17–5:21

As Jesus is, so are we

Although perfection has been specifically mentioned in the context of obeying God's word and loving one another (1 John 2:5, 4:12), many other statements relating to perfection appear before these three mentions:

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 (1 John 4:17, 18, italics added).

The two mentions of 'atoning sacrifice' and other references to Jesus' death may be gentle reminders of Jesus' last words in John's Gospel that, knowing that everything was 'now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), "I am thirsty" and then after receiving some wine, he said, 'It is finished' before bowing his head and giving up his spirit (John 19:28–30).

Perfection relates to finishing, to reaching a goal or target and to completing what was intended. It is about accomplishment, closure and purpose. It relates to fruitfulness and abundance, to resurrection and renewal. John was saying that God's light was shining in the darkness and that God's love was achieving God's intended purposes (cf. John 1:1–9; 1 John 1:1–5).

Some aspects of love's perfection include:

- obeying God's word about forgiveness and cleansing by walking as Jesus walked and by knowing assurance about God's will (1 John 2:5, 6).
- knowing that darkness and worldly desires are transient, that God's light is shining, and that God's love is permanently life-giving (1 John 2:7–17).
- being promised an eternal life of abiding in God 'the Father and the Son' and of being 'anointed by the Holy One' with God now abiding in them (1 John 2:18–27).
- being confident but not arrogant and knowing freedom from blame and shame by being born of God and living in God's truth and righteousness (1 John 2:28–29).
- awaiting the revelation of what 'will be' when Messiah Jesus is revealed and seen 'as he is' and when 'God's children now' become fully like Jesus (1 John 3:1, 2).
- living in this hope by self-purifying 'just as he is pure' (1 John 3:3). This living means

Living Love

- freedom from being devil's children and knowing that his works are being destroyed (1 John 3:4–10).
- more ability to deal with worldly antagonisms (1 John 3:11–13).
- willingness to help others by sharing possessions (1 John 3:14–18).
- being reassured and free from condemnation and doing what pleases God (1 John 3:19–22).
- knowing the Holy Spirit's testimony about living in love, believing in Messiah Jesus and being aligned with God's indwelling (1 John 3:23, 24).
- discerning between antichrist spirits and God's messianic Holy Spirit, and between differentiating truth from error (1 John 4:1–6).

John emphasised boldness 'on the day of judgement' because God's atoning love-sacrifice eliminated fear-based penalties. These penalties are, according to John, not love-based or light-sourced, but arise from inner torment derived from evil antichrist accusations that focus on unconfessed failures (1 John 3:18). Love's fruitfulness and light's harvest are in being like Jesus 'in this world', and reference relationships with God (1 John 4:17, cf. 3:3).

Conquering worldliness

To reach 'perfection in love' is to love while abiding in and relying on God's love because God loves; and God loves because God is love. Love is perfected in us by God's perfect love. 'We love' has no object attached and therefore indicates a universal action: 'We love [God, creation and humanity] because God loved us' (1 John 4:18, 19). This affirmation summarises Jesus' teaching about the greatest commandment (cf. Matthew 22:34–40).

Hate is the opposite of love, and its mention is a reminder of earlier comments that to hate is to be blind, to dwell in darkness and death, and to lack eternal life (1 John 2:11, 3:14, 15, cf. 3:13). The community's relationships with God and each other were congruent since loving God meant loving each other while loving each other meant loving God.

By equating hate with lying, love is linked with truth (1 John 1:6–10, 2:4, 22, 23; cf. John 8:42–47). Truth and honesty are mentioned throughout the letter. Truth involved walking in the light as Jesus walked, while lying meant 'walking in darkness' and being dishonest about God (1 John 1:6–8, cf. 2:4–8, 21, 27). Love was truth in action and active truth was loving (1 John 3:18, 4:6). The last parts of the letter state that 'the Spirit is the truth [about Jesus Christ]', that God is true and that God's Son Jesus Christ 'is the true God and eternal life' (1 John 5:6, 20).

The declaration that 'We love because he first loved us' and that those who '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' also meant telling the truth:

We are truthful because God was truthful with us and those who do not tell the truth to or about others in God's family whom they do see cannot possibly be telling the truth about God whom they have not seen (cf. 1 John 4:19, 20).

This mutual love was both spontaneous response and necessary obedience. Believing Jesus was God's Messiah indicated they were 'born of God' and loved God's family. Loving God and obeying God's commandments included loving God's family (1 John 5:1, 2, cf. 2:3–5, 3:22–24).

The breath-taking and breath-giving result of this love-obedience nexus was world conquering and not a heavy and wearisome burden! Faith in Jesus as God's Son meant being born of God and belonging to a love-community. Knowing God's love together was 'the victory that conquers the world' – the perfect and mature goal of the Father's love in calling us into being God's family through the atoning sacrifice of God's Son and by the anointing of God's Holy One, God's Spirit (1 John 5:1–5, cf. 2:20, 27, 3:1ff).

Believing, knowing and understanding

John's mention of 'water and blood' may allude to Jesus' baptismal anointing and his death by crucifixion or to the blood and water that issued from his pierced dead body on the cross (1 John 5:6–8; cf. John 1:19–34, 19:31–37).

While human testimony may have general context or be specific relating to John the Baptist and John the Disciple and/or Elder, God's testimony 'to his Son' is linked with God's Holy Spirit who not only told them but was 'the truth' about God in them (1 John 5:6–9). Jesus' messianic anointing and their anointing as God's family was by God's Holy Spirit and revealed 'all things' to them that were relevant to God's plans and purposes in and by Jesus' incarnation and sacrificial atonement (1 John 2:27):

Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. ... And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life (1 John 5:10–12, 2:12–14, 3:23, 4:1, 16, 5:1, 5, 10, 20).

The quality and character of this life has been central to John's discussions about truth, light and love (cf. 1 John 1:1, 2, 2:10, 17, 25, 3:14–16, 4:9, 12). Being free from condemnation and having boldness to ask God for help and insight into doing what pleases God had been described as love expressed 'in truth and action' and are re-emphasised in John's final exhortations (1 John 5:14, 15, 3:18–24). Doing what pleases God involves discernment and seeks forgiveness and restoration. It acts to care for those who are 'born of God' – and so in God's family

Living Love

– by accessing the protection of Messiah Jesus who was also ‘born of God’ as God’s Son (1 John 5:16–20, cf. 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 7). This defence against evil had been outlined in terms of conquering the world and its antichrists. The peril and danger faced by these believers was because ‘the whole world lies under the power of the evil one’ (1 John 5:19, cf. 2:18–20, 3:8–10, 18–20, 4:1–6).

John’s message from beginning to end was that they need not be seduced by lies about Jesus’ messianic identity and mission, that they could ‘believe in the name of the Son of God’ so that they might know that they had ‘eternal life’, and that they were to keep themselves from idols since they were in God’s family (1 John 5:13, 21). John’s premise was that Jesus was God’s Holy Spirit anointed Messiah, the word of ‘eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us’, and that

we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God [Father, Son and Holy Spirit] and eternal life (1 John 1:1–4, 5:20, cf. 4:2, 13–16, 5:6–12).

Extra notes: On atoning sacrifice

The expression ‘atoning sacrifice’ (1 John 2:2, 4:10) is elsewhere translated as ‘propitiation’ (KJV, NKJV, ESV and NASB) and ‘expiation’ (RSV). There are few New Testament occurrences of this term. In Luke 18:13, praying for mercy in the temple can refer to the mercy seat in the temple’s holy of holies. Justification, redemption, righteousness, remission of sins, forbearance and grace are highlighted in Romans 3:25, while Hebrews 2:17 also has a temple setting and focuses on mercy, temptation, reconciliation, and destroying death with its fear and bondage.

These translations highlight that Jesus’ incarnation and messianic anointing were for a purpose, and that his death by crucifixion was somehow essential to God’s plan to restore and reconcile humanity. The expression ‘atoning sacrifice’ helpfully points to Hebrew and Jewish tabernacle-temple settings where God’s lovingkindness, mercy and grace intersected with human despair and distress to provide a future hope and expectation of peace and prosperity.

Expiation carries economic and forensic meanings and avoids ideas of needing to placate divine intemperate hostility. It nonetheless may suggest abstract and clinical forms of God’s justice to which humanity is accountable and can imply deist and moralist views of God and eternity.

Propitiation suggests humanity’s need to deflect God’s wrath against evil, raising questions as to the nature of God’s righteous opposition to sin. Seeing Jesus’ death as a propitiatory sacrifice and imagining him placating God as an angry Father, demanding retribution against wickedness and against wicked people, is contrary to each of the above contexts.

If, however, God’s wrath against sin and evil is God’s peaceful, holy and loving insistence that sin and evil have no currency in God’s kingdom, then God’s wrath can be considered in terms of the turmoil and torment humanity experiences by rejection God’s restorative initiatives of grace and mercy.

Jesus’ incarnation is God’s initiative to live among us and, by submitting to evil’s violating and violent judgements against humanity, to destroy the devil’s works and remove human guilt, fear, shame and self-blame. It is God’s initiative to shine light and love into and out of human darkness and hate.

Jesus’ incarnation heralds his atoning sacrifice, and his atoning sacrifice reveals his incarnational identity. His proclamation of God’s reign by God’s Holy Spirit by his actions, parables and teaching was a continual revelation that he, with the Holy Spirit and his Father, were advocating for humanity through his death and resurrection. The triune God was in symphonic harmony without any inner wrath action necessary or occurring.

Living Love

The divine anthems of joy evident in Jesus' life and his laments, sorrow and grief revealed his Father's initiatives of grace and mercy – grace and mercy misunderstood and rejected until light shone and love embraced by a rebirthing Holy Spirit-empowered miracle of new creation:

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God (John 1:10–13).

Messiah Jesus *is* the propitiation, expiation and sacrifice of atonement. He is not a propitiator of a hostile deity or the expiator of a celestial judge or accountant. He is not a mercy-seeker in a harsh and cruel heavenly religious setting. He is *God-among-us* gifting humanity new life, turning back darkness and shining light, and rejecting hate and revealing love – and doing so at the cost of his own life, so establishing a regime of life, light and love for now and into eternity where we will be like him because we will see him as he is.

The perverse perceptions of sacrifice, propitiation and expiation belong to the false unrealities of evil that so easily seduce humanity and so urgently need the word of testimony of those whose life-identities transcend creaturely death:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, ‘*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 comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.* But they have conquered 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’ (Revelation 12:10, 11, italics added).

Reflections

On being wise and knowing truth

Discerning wisdom

Biblical perspectives on wisdom and knowledge, God, humanity and the universe take on forms not always believed or accepted.¹⁴ We may easily fail to recognise or unwittingly force meanings upon passages and words that were not intended by the various original authors and ancient editors. We may need the continual transforming and remoulding that Paul speaks of in Romans 12 when exploring and translating their thoughts into current contexts.¹⁵

Job and wisdom

Job lost his possessions, servants and children, and then his own health failed. Much of the book of Job describes the thoughts of Job and three of his friends as they dialogued about his misfortune. The LORD answered Job after these discussions by saying, in effect:

You have taken upon yourself to know the reasons behind what happened to you and are demanding me to defend and explain to you what I have done. All this to satisfy yourself about my integrity and decency. Well, let's switch things around the other way. You claim to be wise, answer my questions! If you think you can understand such mysteries, answer these questions! You've questioned me about what I've done, I'll question you about your responses (cf. Job 38:1–3)!

These questions build to a climax:

And the LORD said to Job: 'Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.' Then Job answered the LORD: 'See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further' (Job 40:1–5).

Job's reply suggested that his understanding had altered. In much of what humanity calls wisdom, we may easily forget how little we know, and not only how much God knows, but in what ways God is in active control.

¹⁴ See the Appendix for several resources linked with my earlier reading around the included themes.

¹⁵ Cf. *New Testament in Modern English, The*, Romans 12:2: 'With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers [and sisters], as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world [including the church] around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity'.

God was not content to allow Job to consider himself insignificant. God wanted Job to present himself ‘with majesty and dignity’; to clothe himself with ‘glory and splendour’ and to pour out ‘the overflowings’ of his anger. God’s challenge to Job included a reciprocal challenge:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his (Job 40:1–14)?

God had made humanity in God’s image, and Job had more to learn. The remainder of Job 40 and all of Job 41 reveal more of the LORD’s questions to Job, and of Job learning more about the location of true wisdom and power. Job’s subsequent response was somewhat different (Job 42:1–6). He was ready to learn answers to different questions than he was previously asking:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:3).

Job’s first responses may have been remorseful, with repentance as his final ones. He may have moved from seeing divine sovereignty as power-derived retribution and prosperity to understanding it as relationally embedded in mystery, awe and wonder (Job 40:1ff, 42:1ff).

Job’s repentance may have been about the nature of his questioning and not regarding the essence of his question. If that is the case then Job is insisting to God that regardless of the way Job was coping and the inadequacy of his questions and responses, that his issue with God was still not answered. This insistence may be at the heart of what God vindicated. God had assured Job that God was God and was confirming to Job that Job’s concerns were valid!

Wisdom in Proverbs

The type of advice given in the introduction of Proverbs is not prescriptive but directive. Readers are not given rules about how to be spiritual and what to do in every situation but are to learn ways that enable and encourage living according to the LORD’s creative and restorative purposes.

A basis for wise living is stated in Proverbs 1:2–6 and comes before a summary of the rest of the book:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:7, cf. Proverbs 8:13, 9:10).

Themes that emerge from the first nine chapters include:

The source of wisdom

All wisdom comes from the LORD, the covenant God of the people of God (Proverbs 2:6, 3:19–20, 8:22–31).

The nature of wisdom

Authentic wisdom is pure, powerful, humble, loving, available, beautiful, precious and just. It is personal though transcendent and understandable though incomprehensible (Proverbs 8:12–20, cf. 9:10).

The call of wisdom

Genuine wisdom orients people away from shame, failure and neglect towards a flourishing and fruitful life (Proverbs 1:20–23, cf. 2:1–5, 3:3–8, 8:32–36).

The fruit of wisdom

Wisdom is Edenic and aligned with creation's essence, purposes and goals (Proverbs 3:13–18, cf. 4:20–25).

Ecclesiastes and living wisely

Ecclesiastes tackles problems related to living with wisdom and knowledge in an apparently futile and meaningless world. This analysis is neither the whining of an old cynic nor a piece of clever evangelism. It is good advice from an older teacher to anyone who believes that being wise only means being knowledgeable and expedient. The preacher identified his concerns as seeking wisdom by searching everything attempted by humanity in the 'unhappy business' with which we occupy ourselves (Ecclesiastes 1:13–18).

Our dilemma, according to the preacher, is that the more we study life, the more difficult it is to believe God knows what is occurring and is in appropriate control of what happens under God's sovereignty. The preacher said he could find no adequate answer to his questions regardless of where 'under the sun' he searched. He concluded that life is futile and meaningless unless understood in terms of God making everything appropriate for its time and season. His messages about wisdom are summarised by an emphasis on accepting our limitations and capabilities and remembering and honouring our creator (Ecclesiastes 3:1–11, cf. 2:24–26, 3:14, 5:18–20, 8:15–17, 9:9, 11:5, 9, 12:1–14).

Paul and God's renewing wisdom

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 take on a fuller meaning in this context, especially in terms of the Christian good news. He advised those who wanted to boast to 'boast in the Lord' (1 Corinthians 1:31; cf. Jeremiah 9:23, 24). He shared his insights 'not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God'. He had arrived in Corinth 'in weakness and in fear and in

much trembling', resolved 'to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Corinthians 2:1ff).

No wonder Paul prayed for the Colossians that they would be

filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:9ff).

Paul's focus on new creation in his second letter to the Corinthian Christians was that just as creatural light shone *out* of darkness at the good and pure dawn of creation so redemptive and restorative light shines *out* of evil and sinister darkness to establish a new creation *in* this fallen world with its failed humanity. This new creation is the action of Jesus and the Spirit according to God's plan and purposes (2 Corinthians 3:17–5:21 especially 4:6 and 5:17).

Paul's 2 Corinthians narrative built on what he had earlier written to them about resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1–58). He emphasised that he spoke true wisdom unlike those who dominate this age and that God had revealed by his all-searching Hoy Spirit what, for humanity, had previously been completely inconceivable and totally beyond imagination. This revelation was for those who love God and for whom the death of Jesus was the crucifixion of 'the Lord of glory' (1 Corinthians 2:8ff).

God is**Absent or present?**

Enlightenment art largely lacks the angelic creatures assisting mortal humanity that are present in earlier Middle Ages art. Ancient Greek culture expresses different views of the universe to other ancient cultures. We should not, then, be amazed to find that the Bible presents perspectives of the universe that may be partially or largely unfamiliar to us.

We may see the universe as closed, impenetrable and impermeable to any direct divine involvement and that it is, therefore, unaffected by anything exterior to it. Modern mysticism may see the universe as our main determining influence, rather than any external being. Western humanity, for scientific convenience, uses models built on closed systems, resulting in many benefits in understanding and utilising our space-time home environment. One danger in these approaches is when inductive generalising assumes that a given model leads to an adequate account of our human existence. The universe may then be understood as nothing but random cause and effect sequences. These approaches may interconnect with beliefs that communion with God and human freedom are best achieved by denying the physical aspects of life.

One Christian perspective is that God's generous provisions may be seen to be unexpected interruptions rather than ongoing participations. The ancient words of Psalms 8 and 23 can be readily lost or misread if we see the universe as even partially opaque to God's presence and care. We may think God has to invade God's universe to care for God's creatures and creation. For God to be ever visiting God's people may be ignored (cf. Matthew 28:20).

The way we understand God – often using anthropomorphisms – expresses our perspectives on either God as absent and 'out there', perhaps sometimes interrupting and invading space-time or 'down here', and present with us by being indistinct from creation. God, in this second sense may perhaps be understood as the ground of our being and something of a mystical common factor in and with humanity. Either way, natural theology, or something similar, may then result.

Creator and parent¹⁶

Genesis chapter one portrays God as other than creation. This creation narrative describes God as beyond space-time. Creation is God's handiwork and not God's being. God is referred to personally in Genesis 1, implying that God is more than eternal and uncreated; God is creator and parent. God is the fountain from which

¹⁶ Since God's image and likeness is male and female, the use of male language for God as Father and Son is best not understood as extrapolations of human masculinity or of patriarchal paradigms. The 'I am' name may be seen as elevating God above the prevailing patriarchal structures.

everything in creation derives. God's spirit-word establishes and enables a life-death cycle of flourishing and fruitfulness not tainted or tarnished by failure, futility or evil. The ultimate and complete expression of God's image is revealed when God creates humanity as God's male-female image and likeness (Genesis 1:26ff), confirming God's divine person as creator and parent, and preparing a rich living communion for humanity and with divinity – a communion in communities with families, vocations and recreations ('sabbath rests').

God is given names which imply God's otherness or transcendence and identify God personally many times throughout Scripture. God's covenant name relates to the Hebrew verb *to be* and informed Moses who was sending him from the burning bush to Pharaoh. God's self-declared name was 'I am that I am', and God told Moses to tell God's people that the 'I am has sent you' (Exodus 3:14ff). Moses was taught that his parents' God was not limited by space-time constraints and so was more than capable of handling Pharaoh.

Jesus used this theme when telling the Pharisees that 'Before Abraham was I am' (John 8:58). When rebuking the storm on Galilee, Jesus told his disciples to 'take courage, it is I, do not be afraid' (Mark 6:50). The 'it is I' is not unlike the 'I am' assurance given to Moses.

The book of the Revelation has references to God's essence, to God's essential being, to God's eternal *is-sence*. Like the Israelites, to whom Moses went in Egypt, the receivers of John's Revelation were under foreign domination. Both groups needed reassurance that God was greater than human tyrants. They were both told that while Pharaoh and Caesar had human existence, God's majesty and power is such that God was not limited to space-time. God's essence means that that God is, and that God is beyond, over, in and among everything, and that God is not any created *thing* (cf. Revelation 1:4, 8, 17, 4:8; 11:17; 16:5, 21:6, 22:13). God is Alpha and Omega, First and Last, Beginning and End. God is who God is, and who God was, and who God will be.

Person and community

God's essential being is majestic, faithful, wise, loving, gracious, truthful, just, holy, glorious, honourable and powerful (e.g. Revelation 4, 5, 15, 19; Micah 7:18; Hebrews 1:12–13; Isaiah 40:6–8; Exodus 34:5–7). If God is essentially creator and parent, is it surprising that God is also essentially Offspring as well (cf. Acts 17:28)? Is it unexpected that there is diversity within God's unity and not just solitariness and singleness? Is it unrealistic that God finds full unselfish other-person centred generosity and reciprocity within God's-self?

A reader of Genesis chapter one may notice how often the words 'and God said ... and it was' occur, and that humanity was created as male and female, as God's image and likeness. The first letter of John commences by developing from Genesis and by building on the early Gospel of John narrative about the Word of

Living Love

God. This Word, this Logos, was in unity with God (diversity) and identity with God (unity) (John 1:14, 18; 1 John 1:1ff; cf. Hebrews 1:1ff.).

Paul believed Messiah Jesus was the image of the invisible God, that all God's fullness dwelt in Jesus and that Jesus was and is the means and goal of creation (Colossians 1:15ff).

God's first creative act in Genesis was not parental nor is it stated as involving God speaking. God's initial action was a wind sweeping 'over the face of the deep' (Genesis 1:2). The second creation account includes a similar spirit-activity with God breathing the first 'breath of life' into human nostrils (Genesis 2:7). Jesus' first discussion with Nicodemus includes him expecting Nicodemus to understand his message about the Holy Spirit spiritually rebirthing people (John 3:8). Jesus' upper room conversation with his disciples includes a focus on the Spirit ministering to God's people (John 14:1ff). Paul built on this Spirit-theme when telling the Athenians that 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

God's immense and total activity in creation is a radical and comforting truth too easily displaced by non-biblical worldviews. God is neither remote to a closed universe nor invading and interrupting an independent self-existent cosmos, but always participating in it. The biblical witness is that the whole creation would immediately vanish should God do otherwise (cf. Psalms 33:6; 90:1ff, 104:29; Colossians 1:17).

God is continually active at every co-ordinate of space-time and with every creature in fresh, invigorating and magnificent ways by purposefully and progressively creating, sustaining, redeeming, renewing and restoring God's own universe, all with the goal of the revelation of God's family (Romans 8:19)! Our response can be with all of heaven's community, even given the immense sufferings humanity and all creatures experiences (Revelation 4:11; Romans 8:18ff; 2 Corinthians 4:7–5:10).

Bringing many to glory

When considering miracles in Scripture and beyond, we can be confident that God is not restricted in the material universe by God's fixed laws. We should not be surprised if these laws facilitate effects different from those we anticipate, especially as they operate under God's creative and parental action. Jesus always did his Father's will, confident that this would be witnessed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus being human was no trivial event and his actions were never superhuman or divine. Rather, Jesus showed us that to be human is to be filled with the triune God. It is, in this sense, *natural* to be filled with God.

We learn from Paul that it was consistent with God's being that Christ Jesus emptied himself into human form – so fully imaging and reflecting God without

being in any way inferior to God (as space-time images always are) and without exploiting his divine identity (Philippians 2:5–11). The incarnation would not and could not have occurred if humanity was anything less than God's image and likeness. Paul's point was that this Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the Messiah of God's people, was obedient to death on the cross as a human person, and that it was *because of this* – 'therefore' – that he was victorious and highly exalted as Lord of all humanity and every celestial power (cf. Romans 8; Hebrews 2).

This understanding of Jesus as Lord and Messiah is reinforced by Paul's exhortation that his readers were to be obedient 'with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Philippians 2:12, 13). Paul was saying that if God so worked through the obedience of Jesus, we should be obedient and allow the action of God to flow through us. Paul's argument requires that Jesus acted as a human person.

The writer of Hebrews, after quoting Psalm 8 concerning humanity's potential to rule over creation, indicated that it is only in Jesus that this reigning occurs (Hebrews 2:5–18). Everything was subjected to Jesus because he suffered death. While we do not presently see humanity ruling creation, we do by faith see Jesus as creation's authentic and non-exploitative sovereign. The author of Hebrews reminds us that we are Jesus' sisters and brothers, and that Jesus became like God's family in every way, even sharing our temptations.

Jesus reveals, makes known and explains the God whom humanity will not by fallen choice face (John 1:18). Jesus told Thomas and the other disciples that he was the way to the Father, the truth of the Father and the life of the Father (John 14:6ff). This points us to the greatest miracle of all – to Jesus' cross and Jesus crying out 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me' (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34; cf. Luke 23:44). Jesus' obedience and purity sustained him as he 'bore our sins in his body on the cross' (1 Peter 2:24; cf. Isaiah 53:10, 12).

The results of God's action in Jesus' death were seen by those women and then men who went that first Easter morning to the tomb where Jesus was placed. Could he who defeated death be dead? Would that not defy creation (cf. Luke 21:5)? Our salvation is because God choose not to defy either God's creation or God's own being and person.

We can rejoice with heaven and sing with countless others the new song of Revelation 5:9 and 10. There is no point trying to prove God's existence or rationalise and understand the dilemmas we recognise theologically and philosophically about God and evil apart from through eyes and hearts that worship the transcendent majesty of divine grace and mercy and flee the hideous, parasitic, counterfeit, irrational but seemingly brilliant parades of evil that seem so pervasive and persuasive. God is not to be proved, only known, and only known in love, truth and goodness (John 17:3, 23).

Being persons, together

Divine visitations

The Scriptures reveal vast ranges of amazement and wonder by godly people about the extent of God's involvement with humanity. Job, for example, cried out from his anguish about God's presence (Job 7:17–19), while David's response suggests a different set of experiences and emotions (Psalms 8, 144).

The psalmist of the twenty-third psalm wrote that he was unafraid of evil because of the Shepherd-LORD's presence. God is recorded making covenant promises with God's people about being with them as their God (cf. Genesis 17:1ff). This theme of God's presence continues throughout the Old and New Testaments (e.g. 1 Kings 18; Isaiah 2:8, 29:16, 40:18–20; John 17:3; Acts 17:22–31).

In what ways are we to understand humanity given that God displays so thoughtful, diligent and compassionate concern for everyone? In what ways are we to respond to a divine, personal creator and parent who visits humanity every day? It is one idea that God visited humanity for a little over three decades in Jesus of Nazareth, but it is another one that God, in Spirit and word, has always visited and does continually visit every person since the dawn of humanity's creation (cf. Genesis 1:2, 1:26–31, 2:7–9).

The author of Lamentations affirmed his belief in the unceasing 'steadfast love of the LORD' in the midst of being distressed and homeless, and of Jerusalem being destroyed. Echoing Job's lament but seemingly reversing Job's approach, the writer's hope was that the LORD's mercies would 'never come to an end', and that, because of the vastness of the LORD's faithfulness, they would be 'new every morning' (Lamentations 3:22–26). If these biblical testimonies are true, then the universe and world we live in could not be mediocre (cf. Genesis 1:31)!

Their testimony was that not even the horrors of the evil humanity commits could destroy God's faithfulness. They believed God was not so feeble a creator nor so weak a covenant parent that humanity could obliterate God's creation (cf. Luke 3:38). God has somehow created such that God's ultimate purposes succeed, even allowing for humanity's free will – free will that by creation images God's own eternal freedom either by affirmation or defiance. The psalmists declared God's freedom over idols and rebellious nations:

Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases (Psalm 115:3).

For I know that the LORD is great; our LORD is above all gods. Whatever the LORD pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps (Psalm 135:5, 6).

Full humanity, together

The first creation narrative may be read as implying that God is not a solitary unit as God's image-offspring creation is male and female. The second creation story portrays woman not as inferior to the man, but as his intimate partner and companion. Since woman is to man as man is to dust, she glories and delights him, and *he* helps her as his companion (so glorying and delighting her) as well as her helping him – otherwise she is not his full partner-companion-helper. Their harmonious mutuality and reciprocal dialogue is best understood in terms of all of humanity. The serpent unsurprisingly tempts this final creational glory, seeking to dismantle the mutual-honour regime that the LORD God created by discrediting the woman and destroying the couple's partnership.

The indivisible unity of each person is implicit in both creation narratives, as well as the mutual companionship of the man and the woman. The man and the woman are not categorised into roles, nor are they described as aggregates of body, mind, soul and spirit. Each person is a full being, able as one unique identity in corporate humanity to reflect God as creator and parent. The second narrative identifies each of them in some sense as more than themselves; they represent all humanity. God, not subject to our space-time limitations, sees all humanity together – past, present and future – and yet knows each person in their own unique space-time context:

No one is an island, complete in themselves.
Everyone is a piece of the continent, a part of the world. ...
Anyone's death diminishes me because I am involved in humanity;
And so never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for you.¹⁷

Paul believed that we see humanity fully together only in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:14–15; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22; Acts 17:26).

Fulfilling vocations, together

Paul wrote to the Ephesians that we are to live to the praise of God's glory (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14). He taught the Romans about being adopted as God's family 'in order that we may be glorified with [Christ]' (Romans 8:17). Matthew recorded Jesus teaching those with him about shining light (not darkness) on other people so that good works might glorify their heavenly Father – who, by implication, perennially shines love, mercy and goodness on all humanity (Matthew 5:16, cf. 5:43–48).

¹⁷ John Donne, 'Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions,' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devotions_upon_Emergent_Occasions (paraphrased).

Before declaring that ‘we live and move and have our being’ in God and that humanity is God’s ‘offspring’, Paul spoke of creation as God’s shrine or temple, and of God’s self-sufficiency and abundance in giving everyone ‘life and breath and all things’. Paul explained that

From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and [that God] allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – *though indeed [God] is not far from each one of us ... [and is known by] a man whom [God] has appointed, and of this [God] has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead* (Acts 17:24ff, italics added).

The building of human-derived shrines and temples, and the subsequent idolatry, is a rebellious refusal to honour and worship God expressed by exchanging God’s glory for idols (cf. Romans 1:18ff; 2 Thessalonians 2:4). The place or *locus* for glorifying God is ‘in whatever you do, in word or deed’ (Colossians 3:17). Paul insisted that we ‘are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in [us]’ and that ‘God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple’ (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17, cf. 6:19). In his later letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul linked them being the ‘temple of the living God’ with God’s presence with them and God’s parenting of them as God’s redeemed offspring.

Our presence in creation is intended to be a realm of praise and thanksgiving to God by being God’s image and likeness in helping bring creation to form and fulness. Humanity is brilliantly and wonderfully equipped for such a comprehensive task (Genesis 1:28, 2:8–17). However, it is only in Jesus as Spirit anointed Messiah that this is ultimately fulfilled (cf. Ephesians 4:10).

One psalmist wrote that ‘the works of the Lord’ are great and ‘studied by all who delight in them. Splendid and majestic is his work’ (Psalm 111: 2, 3), while elsewhere a psalmist shares his gratefulness: ‘for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are thy works, that I know very well’ (Psalm 139:14). The writer of Ecclesiastes, in seeing the vocations God has given humanity, wrote that God

has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into [human] minds, yet [humanity] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Our ability to see and know all of God and everything God does is too broad for us and calls for humility (cf. Genesis 11:6). We are to remember our creator, fear God and keep his commandments ‘for that is the whole duty of everyone’ (Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13)!

Each of us has a unique and significant role in this context – we all have our own vocation or calling as one of God’s innumerable people. We, transformed by God’s

Spirit as God's Spirit is poured out to redeem, refresh and renew us, are given blessings and gifts to re-equip us to become fully human, to be all that, in fallen humanity, we had refused to be (cf. Hebrews 2:2ff; 2 Corinthians 5:14ff) As these spiritual gifts transform us and others into the image and likeness of God's beloved Son, we do not become superhuman heroes or subhuman slaves, but fully mature daughters and sons of the living God (cf. 1 John 3:1–3; Ephesians 4:1–13; 1 Corinthians 12:1–14:40; Philippians 3:20, 21).

Paul's sequence of thought in writing to the Ephesians is that Jesus gave humanity gifts to 'fill all things'. These gifts were to equip God's people

for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:7–13).

We may, then, speak of the collective purpose of persons in the context of nations and civilisations, and of different aspects in each society, all as part of God's intentions for humanity, ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

Falling and standing

No study of biblical views of humanity can reasonably bypass the Genesis 3 narrative. If the 'fall' is ignored, the only reason for human cruelty and torture seems to be that we are naturally oriented that way. There can be no hope of a renewed humanity if humanity cannot be renewed! To argue the goodness of God from such a view of humanity is therefore contrary to all that is evident in history and continually now before us and in us.

This tension between God's goodness and human failure is resolved in the second Genesis account with humanity created good and knowing God – and then rejecting their created freedom and corrupting their own wholesome identities. All of creation consequently is subjected to futility with curses and enmity dissolving divine blessings and harmony. Only when humanity assumes its creational calling as outlined in Genesis 1:26ff and Psalm 8 will creation lose this futility and reach fulfillment. This goal ultimately and only happens through Messiah Jesus and will only be fully revealed in the renewed creation (Romans 8:18–25; 2 Corinthians 4:1–5:21; Hebrews 2; Revelation 19–22).

The 'fall' was no divine miscalculation. The Genesis 3 account describes God doing the same things after these two sinned as God did before they disobeyed God's instructions. When confronted by humanity's – and our own – shortcomings, it may be helpful to see that while we may come to view God differently, God does not change. The man and the woman attempted to hide from God in Eden because *they* were afraid: God confronted them as God still walked in the garden in the cool of the day. In attempting to be as God, humanity tries to make God into its fallen image and likeness. It is only possible to hide

Living Love

from God if God is a space-time existent like ourselves (cf. Genesis 3:15; Luke 3:23–38).

God's message to Cain that 'If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it', like God's advice that Habakkuk 'Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith', shows that God's ways are never ultimately broken; they are only ever illustrated (Genesis 4:7; Habakkuk 2:4).

Cain could not destroy God's acceptance of Abel or God's intention to birth a dynasty of faithful people. Seth replaced Abel, and 'people began to invoke the name of the LORD' when Seth's son was born (Genesis 3:25–26). God makes covenant with God's people, and redemptive history unfolds (Genesis 8:22, 9:1–17, 12:1–3, 17:1–10; Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 36:24–28; Mark 3:14; Luke 1:72, 22:20). Revelation 21:1–7 describes a humanity, who, in God's covenantal action in raising up a people for God's-self, are the fruits of the one prophesied in Genesis 3:15.

Discerning truth

Paradigms and frameworks

Just as humanity is a diverse unity, so human knowledge is a complex web of perspectives on a wide range of areas including faith and reason, secularism and religion, and creation and grace. The ways we resolve issues like these can be a source of or a stumbling block to personal growth. They can lead to a rich tapestry and treasure of understanding and learning or to a poor intellectual pluralism and compartmentalisation. Conceptual and practical confusion can result from being faced with a spectrum of answers ranging from a wholesale acceptance of secular thought to a naive biblical dogmatism. These kinds of views can lead to an increasing scepticism towards biblical revelation and an unwarranted fragmenting of knowledge and humanity.

Everyone views reality from some form of ideological conceptual framework. Biblical considerations suggest that the deceit of sin leads to a failure to see reality accurately and adequately. After their disobedience, the original two in Eden tried to hide, having concluded that God must be like them. Our faulty and feeble efforts, even at their best, easily tend to prune and modify what we receive according to what we already believe. Paul wisely urged the Roman believers not to be conformed to this world, even to the world of the Christian communities in which we participate, but to be continually transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2).

God's Holy Spirit is ever-present in giving humanity new beginnings – new births – so we can see more clearly. To refuse the Spirit's work – which we often may not even recognise – allows liberalism and legalism to replace liberation. Jesus, in offering freedom from being threatened by truth, offers freedom to know and explore the truth by dealing with the problem of human sin and guilt in his death on the cross, so reconciling us to God.

Humanity has developed different frameworks for reasoning. Each one has its own presuppositions upon which, using appropriate vocabularies, we develop logical arguments and consequential statements to provide a means for interpreting data into information, knowledge and wisdom from a range of perspectives. Each person is familiar with paradigms that assist in expressing the vocabularies of some of these different kinds of knowledge. These presuppositions are assumed rather than proved.

The Bible does not attempt to prove God exists nor does it attempt to rationalise a single interpretative narrative (cf. Hebrews 11:6). It commences with two different accounts of creation and provides four variant narratives of Jesus' life, death and resurrection! In both instances, there are considerations that readers can pursue to validate the thoughts being presented. 1 Corinthians 15 is one of the

many passages where we are told that our Christian faith depends finally and ultimately on events in space-time history (1 Corinthians 15:1ff; cf. John 1:1–18; Luke 1:1–3; 1 Peter 2:24).

There is a danger in confusing the different literary forms being used. The contrast between literal and literary readings can help distinguish between reading Genesis as modern science or contemporary history and reading it more closely to its original Hebrew and Jewish cultural settings.

Beginning with God

Where are we to begin? What areas of learning are important? These questions are not easily answered if we forget that ‘In the beginning God ...’ relates not only to creation but to redemption. Our starting point must always be with God being creator and restorer, ever giving into our human journeys even where it may be appropriate to limit our vocabulary to common concepts or procedures that are non-theological. We still need to ask ourselves simple questions like ‘what am I here for’ and ‘why am I here’ even if they do not explicitly arise in our learning areas.

Alternative not singular approaches

There is an inherent weakness in seeing reality from the eyes of only one form of knowledge (including theology). This tendency to reduce everything to what it appears to be from the perspective of one area of knowledge is not unique to the academic world! We are created to be open to new input, not closed.

Inductive, deductive not reductive perspectives

There is a readiness to see faith as nothing but the traditions of western Christendom and to see education as nothing but schooling. Part of the problem lies in the phrase *nothing but*.¹⁸

Inclusive not exclusive dispositions

In an ancient Greek legend, Procrustes would fit his victims to a pre-determined form. Our knowledge of God, humanity and creation is much the less for our false securities and truncated explanations.

A liberated mindset involves ...

Liberated approaches come with liberated people. Jesus pointedly compared sin with truth and found them opposed. He noticed that our problem is more often not that we cannot understand, but that we will not understand (cf. John 8:30–36).

¹⁸ Victor E. Frankl, *Will to Meaning, The* (New York, USA: Penguin Books, 1988), 23ff.

Alignment with Jesus

The Scriptural witness is that God can go on liberating us so we can begin learning to develop a mindset that frees us from the torment of sin, guilt, fear and death. Jesus taught that freedom comes from abiding in him and knowing his healing love and truth by the Holy Spirit. This freedom releases us to participate more fully in being active, caring and meaningful people.

Relationship with God

A liberated mindset grows in knowing God and in knowing that knowing God is a daily journey of mystery, wonder, grace and mercy. Knowing God helps us escape from reductionist doctrines and brings a peaceful awareness of God's presence in creation and other people (cf. Jeremiah 9:23; Hosea 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:12; and Philippians 3:7–10).

Wise living

A liberated mindset lives wisely, grows in discernment and learns to recalibrate past successes and failures into a rich celebration and humble confession of life's high and low points (cf. the Sermon on the Mount; Job; Psalms; Proverbs; Ecclesiastes; Micah 6:8; Philippians 4:8; etc.).

Responsible priorities

A liberated mindset acts with responsibility concerning what it knows about creation, communities and people (cf. Matthew 21:28–31; 25:1ff; and Jesus' parables). James, aware of Jesus' teachings and approach to life, pointed out rather directly that faith without works is dead and that anyone 'who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin' (James 4:17)!

Delight in God's word and world

A liberated mindset delights in God's ways and so is keen to study God's works, world and words. This study involves working together with other people to see one's works in various ways – through the eyes of different conceptual frameworks and paradigms as well as in our daily relationships. This delight is enhanced by studying God's word (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15; Psalms 19, 119).

Alertness to dangers

It is clear from Scripture that a liberated mindset recognises areas under attack from anti-Christian thinking. The prophets pointed to apostasy, idolatry and adultery in their contemporary societies (cf. Acts 17:22–31). As Paul reminded the Corinthians, it was God's Spirit and not their own intelligence that would enable them to have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:26ff).

Openness to insights

A liberated mindset seeks liberation not legalism or liberalism as its norm for living. Reductionism is foreign to it and seeks to never operate from a closed personal system. It is liberal and generous but always discerning and diligent.

Acceptance of correction

A liberated mindset is wise enough to admit and learn from failures, vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Wise people fear God, love righteousness and accept correction. Wise people are not primarily aiming to be informed and knowledgeable, but to use their insights with understanding, discernment, compassion and love (cf. Proverbs 3:5–12).

Appendix

These notes reflect some early insights gained from understanding a little of Solzhenitsyn's *suffering-God*,¹⁹ Jacques Ellul's *people's-God*,²⁰ C. S. Lewis' *here-God*²¹ and Francis Schaeffer's *there-God*.²² Other perspectives came from reading Colin Brown and Viktor Frankl,²³ while Leon Morris,²⁴ J. I. Packer,²⁵ John Stott,²⁶ Martin Lloyd Jones²⁷ and F. F. Bruce²⁸ also helped my theological thinking.

My later books, especially *Learning to Love Wisdom* and *Living in Love and Freedom*, contain bibliographies listing more recent reading.

¹⁹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *From under the Rubble* (Great Britain: Fontana Paperbacks, 1976).

²⁰ Jaques Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972); *Meaning of the City, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997); *Judgment of Jonah, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, c1971).

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Narnia Chronicles, The* (Great Britain: Puffin Books, 1974). Cf. *Mere Christianity* (London and Glasgow, UK: Fontana Books, 1971); *Fern-Seed and Elephants* (Glasgow, UK: Fount Paperbacks, 1981); *Great Divorce, The* (Glasgow, UK: Fount Paperbacks, 1983).

²² Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970); *God Who Is There, The* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973)

²³ Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), Frankl, *Will to Meaning, The*.

²⁴ Leon Morris, *Spirit of the Living God* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960); *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1965); *Lord from Heaven, The* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974).

²⁵ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973); *Knowing God* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973).

²⁶ John R. W. Stott, *Men Made New (Romans 5-8)* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969); *Basic Christianity* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971)

²⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970); *From Fear to Faith (Habakkuk)* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970)

²⁸ F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents, The* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960); *Spreading Flame, The* (Exeter, Devon, UK: Paternoster Press, 1976); *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Exeter, Devon, UK: Paternoster Press, 1980)

Other reflections

The creation and evolution debate

Much past opposition to the theory of evolution did not primarily come from scientists. Recent years have seen 'creationist' scientists debate the scientific bases of evolutionary theory along with the theological and philosophical ones. Their impact on science education in the United States has on occasions and in some places gained benefits like 'equal time' with evolution in science textbooks. My intention is not to discuss each side scientifically but rather to look at some of the assumptions I have seen adopted by proponents on both sides.

Darwin produced his 'Origin of the Species' in 1859 and based his work on notions like the survival of the fittest and the adaptation of the species. He believed that if species fail to adjust to their ever-changing environments, then extinction occurs. Only species able to develop immunity and strength against predators and other alien factors could expect to survive. Different species therefore 'evolve' over long periods of time.

It was no surprise that the established church rejected his views. Da Vinci, Galileo and a host of other scientists had previously incurred the wrath of the church when they had suggested alternatives to traditional thought.

Part of the church's problem arose from its continual interaction with contemporary thought. Platonist and Aristotelian thinking had profoundly influenced Roman Catholic thinking at various stages of its history. Aquinas, in writing his theology in the thirteenth century, was greatly influenced by Aristotle. Aquinas produced a system of thought based on chosen concepts which were lenses through which the rest of the world was viewed. Various arguments, based on these concepts, were developed to provide information on a variety of subjects. The resulting traditions built up around Aquinas' very significant work were vulnerable to results gained by more experimental and/or empirical research.

We have therefore Darwin's understandings based on his research competing with views like those formed around Aquinas' theology. Biblically extracted ideas, built into human cultures and traditions, can readily become theories which may not be supported by adequate scientific research.

We attempt to understand our environment using conceptual frameworks. We have learnt thought structures through which we view reality. The book of Ecclesiastes says God

has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Our limitations determine not what we can discuss so much as the extent to which we can know things. We are not to stop thinking, but to be aware of our creational limitations – our creatureliness.

We may think our conceptual frameworks are sufficient lenses through which to gain knowledge and determine patterns for living. We may at times act as though we want to be as God, not merely like God. We may easily ignore the reality that God's ways are not our ways, that God uses intellectually naive people to teach true wisdom, and that we can be easily blinded by our philosophies and conceptual frameworks.

We can readily assume the sufficiency of our world view and only consider closed settings. We may then easily reduce reality to what it appears to be from our vantage point and simply ignore conflicting evidence. Our comments can imply that something is 'nothing but' something else, or we say, 'all that this is, is ...'. We can then too quickly specialise our thinking and generalise our conclusions. Our problem may surface in the statement 'nothing but', reducing reality by many dimensions. Science can become scientism, evolution evolutionism, creation creationism, bible research biblicism, and so on.

Viktor Frankl provided an illustration.²⁹ A sphere and a cylinder produce the same shadow when light is shone from one direction but different results when shadowed another way. Knowledge is something like that. We reduce reality using languages which help us understand it and do this from different vantage points. Those who examine a shadow of an unseen object from one position may draw different conclusions about what they see from those who examine a shadow from another perspective. Two different theories emerge. Some may say that the two objects are similar (as both can give circular shadows) while others may conclude that they are totally different objects (one can give a circle, and the other a rectangle). Intellectual arguments sometimes result from looking at different projections in order to understand reality.

It is easy to see the way this dilemma applies to evolution and creation science theories. Arguments about the way the universe began are not fully measurable. No creature observed the first action. Only a God outside of space-time could 'observe' creation. Our task is to interpret what we do know to form postulates about the way things began. We must ascertain what our assumptions are and what language we will use in this process. Will our research and reflections be scientific, theological or sociological? Our perspectives will partly determine our conclusions, and we can expect to get apparently conflicting answers by adopting different perspectives. I suggest that humility should help us accept diverse conclusions without distress and loss of Christian or scientific faith.

²⁹ Frankl, *Will to Meaning, The*, 22ff. Two alike cylinders can similarly provide different shadows.

Living Love

We may ask which language takes precedence: science or Scripture. It is not surprising that Christian fundamentalism has produced creationism nor is it surprising that humanism encourages evolutionism. It seems to me that we all adopt a disposition towards reality that is deeper than any language, namely our disposition towards God. God's self-revelation gives us foundations which can liberate us to see, if we will, reality more clearly: 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (John 8:32). Theological truth about God, humanity and creation is understood primarily by comprehending revelation, by God's Spirit giving insights to our intellectual study, by recognising the folly and foolishness of the cross of Jesus Christ.

My plea is that the 'isms' be left off, and that we read Genesis as best we can through the eyes of the original authors and their cultural settings, and so see its theological significance and bypass sifting it for conclusions based on scientific thought developed in completely different settings. We can also discuss evolutionary trends and creational considerations while always being careful not to reduce God to merely belonging to one 'ism' or another. Let us not ignore God's goal for creation: God wants to show great family love to created humanity in its creational home and has demonstrated this plan in the humanity of Jesus, his cross and resurrection, and Christ's Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We, with all creation, agonise for the new earth and the new heavens where this divine tabernacling flourishes forever.

Rituals and renewal

Jesus practised rituals. It was his habit to worship regularly at the synagogue and to attend feasts at Jerusalem (e.g. Luke 4:16; John 7:10). He introduced his new covenant love feast at a Passover meal (1 Corinthians 11:24).

Ceremony was important throughout Israel's history, especially from Moses' era and the introduction and development of the practices outlined in the Pentateuch. Scripture indicates that their rituals were often livelier and more varied than many Western written and unwritten liturgies. Many psalms exhort us to sing, make joyful noises, kneel, clap, shout, wait in silence, dance and make loud musical noises (e.g. Psalms 47, 62, 63, 95, 100, 149, 150). I expect Jesus approached Synagogues and the Temple with this kind of spirit. We read of him being joyful, weeping, laughing, angry and tired, and so his worship would have been filled with warmth, mindfulness, intention and emotion.

To suggest Jesus' attitude to worship was common may be simplistic. If the exhortations from the psalms are not indicative enough, the prophets certainly emphasise their concerns about improper approaches to worship. Isaiah indicated that feasts without inward renewal were worthless, while Malachi described the way God saw most of the religious activity of his day. Jesus' verdict was even more dramatic:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ... blind guides ... blind fools! ... For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:16–27).

It is interesting and important to notice Jesus' lack of criticism of their institutions and rituals. His comments were about people hiding behind organisational and activist masks. This may not imply his approval of their forms and structures, but rather as him dealing with what he saw as essential issues, and then allowing the fruits of his feedback to affect these other areas.

Criticisms of those performing rituals inappropriately may be tied up with calls for renewal. These longings may simply be people wanting to know God more fully. Old Testament prophets insisted that relationships mattered more than performance. Adam and Eve's death from sinning was explained in terms of its impact on their own relationships, their environment and their God.

Ezekiel used the theme of knowing 'the LORD' over 60 times. Jeremiah wrote of God giving 'them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD' (Jeremiah 24:7). These exhortations to know God also applied to nations other than Israel, as well as to individuals in any particular nation.

Living Love

Disobedience to, and rejection of God leads to basic forms of false knowing. Idolatry and spiritual harlotry were seen as redirecting one's affections from God to some other person or object. On this basis, there were several expressions of false knowing. There was the difference between actual knowing and knowing about, and between relationships and information. One may be the best student of the Bible and not know its divine author (cf. John 14:9). Godliness as practicing religious morality can become false knowing.

We are warned not to be content to live as good citizens. Jesus' reply to the rich young ruler was that he could behave in a godly manner without any meaningful love relationship with God. Activism has magnificent potential for those wanting to know God. Peter was perhaps sometimes like this. He was at times busy with practical suggestions unaware of Jesus' real plans. The story of Mary and Martha amplifies this point.

True knowing is fundamental. God's strongest desire is for us to relate to God as God really is, and to do this as the family God has made us to be. We are to know about *and* to know personally. We are to know of God's plans for moral goodness as an overflow of true relationships with God and other people. We are to be active in God's kingdom *because* we are in communion with God and relate to the community in which we live.

It is easier to perform liturgies than it is to live out their content. Instead of being helped by them to relate to God and other people, we can simply go through the motions and leave it there. We may perform mental as well as physical liturgical exercises and indulge ourselves in conceptualising and rationalising any topic mentioned with little or no view of practical real day to day action. We can turn aids to worship into escapes from worship and then into barriers to relating meaningfully to our creator, to God's creation and those around us.

Is it any wonder that the prophets exhort us to lay aside false dependencies on our rituals and to focus on knowing God? Jonathan Edwards wrote of a particular place being 'never so full of love, never so full of joy, and yet never so full of distress as it was then'. He concluded that

by the mixture of counterfeit religion with truth not discerned or distinguished, that the devil has had his greatest advantage against the cause and kingdom of Christ ... [and] that he has prevailed against all revivings of religion that have ever been ... By this, he hurt the cause of Christianity ... much more than by all the persecutions.³⁰

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections, The* (Guildford and London, UK: Banner of Truth, 1961), 10, 17.

Living Love

The magnitude of spiritual activity in revivals is beyond the boundaries of institutions and their rituals. Reciting the Apostles Creed can be safe and talking too much about the Holy Spirit making that doctrine personally alive can be unwelcome. Edwards' advice is pertinent: we need to 'use our utmost endeavours clearly to discern ... wherein true religion does consist'.³¹ He stressed the importance of true love and abundant joy based on the understanding of God's grace and the deliberate commitment of the will.³²

One lesson that can be learnt from John the Baptist is that boldness may not always be better than timidity. The stories of Nicodemus suggest that cautious care may at times be better than spontaneous activity. Jesus' prayer reminds us that eternal life is knowing 'the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom [Jesus' heavenly Father has] sent' (John 17:3). Hosea invited God's people to come together and return to the LORD

for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

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

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² Part I 'Concerning the Nature of the Affections, and their Importance in Religion' begins with 1 Peter 1:8: *ibid.*, 21.

Living Love

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

Learning to Love Wisdom

In Triune Community

Meditations on Hope and Peace

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal: Volumes 1 and 2

Living Love

Travelling Together

Towards Eternity

Redefining

On Earth as in Heaven

Joys and Sorrows

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I am especially thankful for the insights into life, love and hope that Bev, my wife, and our family have shared with me. Their patience, kindness and generosity have led me to a deeper awareness of God and his mercy and grace.

³³ This version updates the one published after a tertiary student camp: Don Priest, *God Is Not up for Re-Election* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications Inc., 1984).

³⁴ I called my paper *Peace*, but it was circulated as *Peace of God and Man, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications Inc., 1986) The song, *Christ our living head*, was a response to this study: *New Creation Hymn Book*, (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, <https://www.newcreationlibrary.org.au>, 2010), 94.

³⁵ Don Priest, 'Creation Vs Evolution Debate, The,' *Forum 69: A Magazine for Lutheran Graduates* Volume 8, no. 3 and 4 (September/November 1976): 9–11. 'Rituals and Renewal,' *Forum 69: A Magazine for Lutheran Graduates* Volume 9, no. 6 (March 1978): 12–15.

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