

False Dimensions

*Collection of 19 essays
2015-2020*

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(Essay #1)

4 Thoughts on Joseph

Introduction & Background:

The last few days I've found myself thinking about Joseph. His amazing story is found in Genesis 37-44. I will not summarize his story here, but maybe you should take a few minutes and read it afresh. In this brief essay I share 4 reflections about Joseph and his story, under different headings. I hope you enjoy!

#1: Pharaoh's Dream: Now this thought is not really about Joseph, but about God and the nature of his revelation. *I was wondering how Pharaoh knew that Joseph's interpretation of his dream was the right one.* It would seem that many wise men of Pharaoh's kingdom had tried to help him with his dream, but he was not convinced and all of their lives were now in danger (Gen 41:8). But for some reason, although Joseph's interpretation pointed to future events (so they were not verifiable, really, for at least 7 – 8 years), Pharaoh immediately knew his interpretation was the right one, and rewarded Joseph on the spot in royal fashion.

This makes me reflect on the nature of God's revelation to us. How do we recognize the true revelation about God, Christ and his Spirit when we see it? We are told in Psalm 36:9 that *'in his light we see light.'* We are also told that the *'spirit testifies to our spirit...'* (Rm 8:16). Paul tells us that it is the God of physical light that made his spiritual light illuminate our hearts so that we see Jesus. (2 Cor 4:6) For this reason, even if the devil dresses up as an angel of light, we will know the real angel from the false angel; not because they look different, but because we know his voice, and see with a light not our own. (2 Cor 11:14; Jn 10:27; Mt 6:23) Pharaoh knew that Joseph's interpretation was the right one because *'deep called to deep.'* (Psalm 42:7)

#2: Wisdom License: After 2 years in jail, Joseph is called before the most powerful king on earth. This is his one shot to change his destiny forever. We know he had wanted this, and even anticipated it, because he asked the 'cup bearer' – after interpreting his dream in jail – to tell Pharaoh about him. (Gen 40:14) So Joseph felt that the spirit of God in him was fit for a king, so to speak, was a personal and national game-changer.

Now Pharaoh was thought to be a god. He was a religion in himself. But Pharaoh needed Joseph, and Joseph served another God. This encounter – much like many encounters in my own life – was not so much about a man meeting man, but a god meeting God. When Pharaoh said to Joseph, *'I have heard it said of you... that you can interpret dreams'* (Gen 41:15), there was any number of responses that Joseph might have drawn on – prudent, kind, deferential, thankful, etc. But he had waited a long time for this moment of destiny, and had come to great clarity about the nature, heart and spirit in this destiny. Joseph's first words to Pharaoh are courageous, dangerous, testifying: *'I cannot do it... but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.'* (Gen 41:16) This is so loaded! Pharaoh is a god, but this is obviously not the God Joseph is speaking about, deferring to, or acknowledging in this his gifting and wisdom. Joseph is acknowledging a different God, a higher God, and making clear to Pharaoh that this is not only Joseph's source, but Pharaoh's only hope in this predicament. Pharaoh heard loud and clear, because this is what Pharaoh says after Joseph does interpret the dream: *'Can we find anyone like this man? One in whom is the spirit of God?'* (Gen 41:38)

Now a spin-off advantage in acknowledging God in your gifting, rather than taking credit, is that you will be less threatening to people. We are envious people. When we take credit for gifts

and abilities that God has given us, we will encounter men's envy and not their trust. Joseph acknowledged God before Pharaoh, and this glorified God – but it also protected Joseph, made him 'easier to take.' In acknowledging God, Joseph deferentially kept his own station as a man beneath that of Pharaoh. We are told in Philippians 2:3 to '*consider others better than ourselves*', and this is easier done when we acknowledge God for everything 'good' that we can do.

OK, back to the point in the title of this section, 'Wisdom License'. Because Joseph had something (wisdom) that Pharaoh desperately needed, Joseph had earned the right, so to speak, to testify to his God. Pharaoh needed Joseph, and Joseph used this opportunity to speak the name of God to Pharaoh. Joseph's wisdom was license to testify.

Do you use your resources to 'buy' opportunities to speak about God? Jesus said to use worldly wealth to gain friends. (Lk 16:9) This is a shrewd and holy admonition. It is not a shallow one, or without deep and eternal purpose. If you own a business, you have every right to provide a room, space and time for a bible study. If you give to the poor, you have every right to share in that moment that Jesus loves and cares about that person. (Lk 4:18) If you provide for your family, you have every right to call a family Bible reading time every evening... Do you use your resources for license to testify to Jesus, the same way Joseph used his wisdom as license to testify about God?

#3: Joseph's Job: Life is real, as my late grandma used to say. Eternity is in the heart of mankind (Eccl 3:11), and this includes heaven and hell. When Jesus did miracles, there would be revival and belief, but it was often accompanied by a swell of opposition, and hate. (Jn 11:45-53) Joseph, a slave boy and prisoner, had trumped the wise men of Egypt, and indeed the gods of Egypt. This was an extraordinary moment for all to behold, and the king lavished on Joseph prizes and power that no doubt had been coveted by many in the courts. Interestingly, Joseph, was now given a massive job to do – to steward and multiply the wealth of Egypt for the next 14 years.

This is interesting on a number of levels. First, quite simply, Joseph had a lot of work to do, and targets to reach! He did not just become a rich ruler with power to network and provide for family; he became a CFO and carried the full weight of responsibility to not only generate wealth, but show that his dream interpretation was real. So he got to work – very busy, real and high-staked work.

Secondly, Joseph would have had haters, as noted above. He would have been surrounded by racism, opposition and the killer of killers: envy. (Pr 27:4) We know this because his own people that he provided for, did slide back into slavery of the Egyptians, as soon as the Egyptians had opportunity to do so. The Israelites were considered lesser, and targeted. So like David in the courts of Saul, or Jesus amongst men, so was Joseph amongst the Egyptians. And this point is a segue to the next consideration.

#4: Sons to Slaves: As noted above, how is it that Joseph, second in power, could not have been known to a successor Pharaoh, and his people made slaves? (Ex 1:8) It is noteworthy that Joseph, when introducing his father, Jacob, to Pharaoh, had been asked by Pharaoh what it was his people did. Joseph made clear to Pharaoh that they were only shepherds – the lowest job in society – and it may be that this lowly position was reassuring to Pharaoh in allowing them to settle in the land. (Gen 47:3) As long as they were not perceived as a threat in either business or numbers, nor evidenced ambition of power or wealth, they were safe and welcome.

However, the true disposition of the Egyptians towards them came out when the Israelites became more numerous and prosperous. Now the authorities sought to subdue them, abuse them, take advantage of them. Fear and greed are such powerful drivers! (Ex 1:8-11)

So an extraordinary thing happens: the Israelites went from being privileged and provided for by the second-most powerful man in Egypt, and a relative, to becoming slaves in this same society. From 'sons' to slaves. From 'heirs' to foreigners, so to speak. This has happened over and over throughout history, both in scripture and politically. I think of David and Solomon having these experiences of falling from privilege, and even Eli the priest and so many other individuals and nations. However, it is usually associated with a falling away from faith in the true God, the worship of other gods, or rebellion against God morally. But I do not see a reference in this story of the Israelites becoming slaves as related to their worship of God.

Jesus and his reach to us is exactly the opposite of this story: we go from lost to found (Luke 19:10), from foreigners to citizens (Phil 3:20), from slaves to sons (Gal 4:7).

Conclusion: Joseph's life was extraordinary, but never 'safe'. I think of Daniel, also, an esteemed adviser of the king, thrown to the lions late in his career. And Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego also, at a turn, find themselves from riches to furnace. Jesus was honored by all, but never safe. (Jn 2:24) We are admonished by Jesus himself to pray in God's kingdom to our earth here and now. (Mt 6:9-13) This is exciting, and promising, life-affirming and encouraging. We must, however, always *'hold fast to our faith'*, and keep our eyes on the truth and spirit of God's love being better than life. (1 Tim 6:12; Ps 63:3) We must celebrate always, not even the casting out of demons but that our names are written in the book of life. (Lk 10:20) We absolutely must invest in, and celebrate, the walls of God's Kingdom that we see built here, rather than the walls of churches, homes or careers that are built here.

'...your life is now hidden with Christ in God.' (Colossians 3:3)

(Essay #2)

The Best Translation of the Bible, Ever!

This is not really an essay, but a blog post from 2016, which I wanted to deposit here in the 'essay' category. Why? Well, because for most of my Christian life I have struggled a little with pride issues that surround this topic. I have often thought I need to learn this or that original language, or I can never really defend my love of Scripture, my views or opinions about Scripture, my views of God and understanding of God's 'names'... Only yesterday, the ripe old age of 41 and about 25 years into my walk with Jesus, the key Scripture of Acts 2 came to me... So I cut this blog post, but thought I would add it here also for the scholar...

Blog Post, 4/16, from my blog called 'On Life': www.1peter1three.weebly.com/

I grew up in church. I often heard preachers tell us what this or that word in the Bible *actually* meant in the Greek, or Hebrew, or Aramaic, or Latin... From a young age I remember thinking, 'Gosh! If that's what the Greek says, why didn't they put that into the English in the first place?'

As life has gone on, of course I've come to realize the nuances of language. Preachers are not nullifying this or that English rendition, necessarily, but rather casting light on more depth in a word or phrase or context... This is just good literature analysis, dipping in and out of etymology, exegesis, hermeneutics, etc. All good!

However, there can be a 'pride' thing in knowing - or not knowing - original languages. And I just want to make 3 brief points here:

1. Jesus is the 'Living Word': We are told in John that the 'Word was God' and became 'flesh'. (John 1:1,14) This 'living word' - Christ - also said of his own 'speaking', that his words were 'spirit and life.' (John 6:63) So the ultimate purpose of all 'written word' (whatever the language) is to know the 'living word', the one off the page that is spirit, life, and defies any written code.
2. One can know the Scriptures and not know God: Jesus said to the teachers of the law (who knew the Scriptures in their original languages) that they did indeed know the Scriptures, but they did not know God. (John 5:39-40, 46)
3. God himself translated the 'word of God' into many languages!: On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles in the form of 'tongues of fire', and they began to speak the word of God in different languages – different to the original languages of Scripture: '... how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' (Acts 2:8-11)

The very best translation of the Bible is the one where the written word lifts off the page and becomes 'spirit and life' in your spirit and life. The very best translation takes you away from 'knowing' written words, to knowing the 'Living Word'. The best translation translates your pride into humility, where you count all things loss - including knowledge and languages - compared to the 'surpassing greatness' of actually *knowing* Jesus. The best translation of the Bible is the one that you read and come to love God more, and your neighbor more. (Mt 22:36-40)

(Essay #3)

Living Hope (=Live.In.Hope) #Mark5:36

'Hope' is a curious thing. I have always wondered at it. Where is the 'space', the reality of 'living hope', or living in hope? The obvious block to my mind and spirit is the linear in this life, the passing of time and the facts of things lost or gone. It is easy to 'hope' for tomorrow, because it has not yet come and gone. In fact, regarding 'tomorrow', one does not know if one is actually 'hoping' in any spiritual sense, or just hoping in the sense of wanting and waiting to see... But how does one 'hope' for that which is already lost? Is there such a hope? In the spiritual sense we just referred to, is there any other kind of 'hope'?

When I read Scriptures I see stories of people who hoped for what was dead and gone, and it came back to life. I read of people who saw realities - things true here and now - that no one else could see or fathom or experience. There are moments where the facts said one thing (and people said it also), but God defined it differently - like someone being 'dead', but Jesus saying it was, in fact, 'sleep'. There was a moment right here, for example, if we could stop the clock, where a man would be looking on a dead loved one, but Jesus was challenging him to see, say, believe, that this was not death, but sleep. (Mt 9:24)

The prophet Ezekiel was led by the Spirit to the Valley of Dry Bones. (Ezekiel 37) This valley was full of dried bones of people long dead and gone. Then the Lord called Ezekiel to prophesy to these bones, and call them to life. The bones rattled together, and before Ezekiel's eyes sinews and ligaments and skin came over the bodies, and breath into their lungs. This act of creating before the eyes of a man, reminds me of the act and process of Jesus actually creating eyes in the eye sockets of a man. (Mk 8:22-26) When Jesus died, also, we read an account of tombs breaking open and people who had died coming back to life and moving back into the community. (Mt 27:51-53) When I think of 'hope', of Spirit-led and Spirit-filled 'living hope', I think and wonder about the truth and reality of these people, i.e. that person who saw their lost loved one placed in the Valley of Dry Bones, who wept and resisted and said, 'No! No! This person lives, he lives!' I think of the child of the buried man in Jerusalem - who later was to come alive - who at the funeral would not cry, and would say to people quietly, under their breath, that their father was not dead, that he was alive, that he would still see him and spend time with him. I think of the mother of the blind man - that Jesus was later in life to heal - who, when he was born without eyes, refused to 'see' it this way. She loved him and insisted that her child did have eyes, that he did see, that he was perfect.

It is easy to look back and see who had 'hope'. But what interests and challenges me is not who had hope, but what reality of truth the hopeful were living in when the rest of us simply grieved and lamented. Their 'living hope' was, in fact, a different reality, a different universe, and it was the truer one. Their hope for things lost was truer than our acceptance of things lost. Their reality of things alive, was a truer reality than ours of things dead. This is what intrigues, challenges, and now speaks to my soul.

Job spoke a truth about himself, but only came true for the rest of us thousands of years later. But Job's words and vision - impossible and unconsummated in his lifetime - were never truer, higher and more eternal. In many respects, they preceded him, and flowed to and through him, and continue to flow from the heart and throne of God, to and through all of existence, purpose and purity. His timeline was impossible ('after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my skin I will...'); his vision blasphemous ('I will see God [the unseeable] with my own eyes'). And yet what does an earthly profession sound like when it captures and expresses the Eternal? What does a 'living hope' experience feel like in the bounds of the limited, broken and mortal?

'I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. I will see him with my own eyes. I and not another. How my heart yearns within me.' (Job 19:25-27)

So here's my 'free fall' on this issue, my 'soaring' - and I define it this way because it is more like a boundless space of the Spirit, than a 'point'. Jesus often called us to walk in faith and in hope, on paths that were not of this world or timeline. He unveiled to us through miracles paths that were 'other', like walking on water. (Mt 14:22-33) Through encounters Jesus revealed to us timelines that were 'other', like transfigurations and out-of-body realities. (Mt 17:3; Rev 1:13-18; 2 Cor 12) God revealed spiritual 'armies' that were present and strong, surrounding physical armies that were threatening and unseeing. (2 Kings 6:17)

I know the love and will of God is pure, life-giving, holy and beautiful. I know that anything outside of this reality is not his will. (1 Jn 3:8; 2 Pe 3:9; Mt 18:14; 1 Tim 2:4; Ps 45:7; Heb 1:9; Jn 10:10; 1 Jn 1:5; Mk 3:22-30) I believe that to 'live in hope', or to have and live in the reality and truth of Christ's 'Living Hope', is to believe that even when a man dies, he lives; when a man is born without eyes, he has eyes; when a child is hurt, he should not have been hurt, and will one day never have been hurt. (Jn 11:25-26; Ez 36:26; Rev 21:5; 2 Cor 5:21) God's will and ways are never thwarted. Things happen that should not, and are not allowed by God, not his will. But 'living hope' in Jesus Christ says that God's defeat of the grave is going to race back through time and un-do all hurt and sin that has been done. God does not just move forward and patch up, cover up, and leave things to be forgotten. No! God, through the suffering of Christ, makes all things 'new' - does not just repair all things. (Rev 21:5) This is impossible for us to know and fathom. Impossible. We only have a one-way timeline, and that is forward. This is why - perhaps the best reason why - we take hold of 'hope'. Not just any hope, but a 'Living Hope'. (Rm 5:1) We take hold of Christ's power over Time, and his '*blood that speaks a better word*' than blood spilt through sin (Heb 12:24), and we hope in Christ to race back through time and change everything, make everything perfect again, and delete the history of sin not just from our minds, but from history. Who can fathom or understand such a reality at work, such a truth in force? Not me. So I live in hope.

'Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?... 'Don't be afraid' Jesus said. 'Just believe.' (Mark 5:35-36)

For more on connecting with the source of eternal life, Jesus Christ, please visit the 'First Steps' page at: <https://1peter1three.weebly.com/first-steps.html>

(Essay #4)

What Is True Repentance?

True repentance of our sin, is not primarily about turning away from our sin. It is about turning *towards* Jesus Christ.

After all, if you turn away from your sin and look to move towards 'goodness', well, where is this 'goodness' you are moving towards?

Jesus Christ came to earth – God in the flesh (John 1:14) – as the *'light of the world'*. Jesus said about himself, about this light: ***'Anyone who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'*** (John 8:12)

Turning towards the light of Jesus is precisely *how* we turn away from the darkness in our lives. Turning towards Jesus Christ is true repentance. Coming to Jesus Christ in truth, is to move away in truth from your sin.

So if you asked *'how'* to repent of your sin, what *'action'* to take, the only real first step you can take is this: to put your *faith* in Jesus. The first practical step of repentance is not focused on the sin, but on your connection with, your relationship with the Lord.

Check out this exchange with Jesus:

The people asked Jesus, ***'What must we do to do the works God requires?'*** Jesus answered, ***'The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent.'*** (John 6:28-29)

The 'work' is 'belief'. The 'action' is 'faith'.

Here is another, powerful scripture:

'The will of my Father is that everyone who looks to the Son, and believes in him, will have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.' (John 6:40)

The will of God, is faith in Jesus.

We cannot let the word and truth of *'repentance'* be primarily about the actual sin in our lives. Otherwise, when we think of 'repentance', we will focus on the sin, and not on the Savior. We will try so hard to get this sin out of our lives by *'good works'* and *'deep thoughts'* and feelings of regret. We will use rules (the Law) to try to clean up our lives, when the law has no power to clean up anything! *The purpose of all rules (the Law) is to lead us to Jesus Christ – so he can cleanse us by his Spirit.* His Spirit does the cleansing, not the Law. Here are 2 key verses on this:

'A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.'
(Galatians 2:16)

'So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.' (Gal 3:24-25)

Jesus the Way

Remember, also, that Jesus is a 'path', not a status. He is the 'way'. (John 14:6) When we come to Jesus in truth, we actually come with a desire to walk in light, and to move out of darkness. We cannot do this ourselves, and that is why we come to the *'true light'*, Jesus Christ. (John 1:9) But when we come to Christ, we go 'through' a door. (John 10:9) Jesus told us that by passing through the door that is Himself, we enter into a new space, a new sphere, and *'we go in and go out and find pasture.'* To come to Jesus is not to come to a stagnant pool of water, but to a flowing river. (John 7:37-38) It is to become part of a blowing wind. (John 3:8) Jesus constantly challenged people to change direction and 'follow' him. (Mark 10:21-31) Jesus is about moving in a new Spirit.

The same way coming to Christ, and being in Christ, is 'Spirit' (John 6:63), so, too, is the truth about 'getting away' from our sin. Everything about sin is not really 'status', but spirit. We are told in scripture that *'the law is spiritual.'* (Romans 7:14) And we are also told that the breaking of the law – or sinning in this or that area – is, in fact, to break the *whole* law! (James 2:10) *How can it be that my 'white lie' renders me guilty of all sin, or the breaking of all the commandments? Why and how is this?* Well, the law is spiritual, and breaking the law is more about our spirits being 'broken', than this or that rule being broken. When we recognize that our very spirits are broken, and therefore 'sin', we need a Holy Spirit to pour over us and cleanse us from deep within. This spirit-cleansing completely by-passes all the power of the law and sin, and sets us free, sets us soaring!

'When the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!' (John 8:36)

The Pharisees were caught up on the idea of rule-breaking and rule-fixing, so to speak. This is legalism, the focusing on laws themselves, not the 'spirit of the law', and therefore the Spirit of truth. (John 4:24) John the Baptist shattered this paradigm for them, by saying, ***'Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.'*** (Matthew 3:8) John pointed out that when it comes to repentance, one must *'keep with it'*. If the law is spiritual, than repentance – i.e. moving in the pure purpose and spirit of the law - also must be of the spirit, a moving and blowing and changing of the invisible soul of a man. *How can this happen?* How can we blow in the spirit towards goodness? Only in believing in Jesus Christ, and allowing his Spirit to blow through us (John 3:8), his blood to pour over us. (Heb 12:24)

Freedom

There is much about 'repentance' in the teachings of Jesus and the whole New Testament. Jesus himself called people to believe and repent. (Mark 1:15) *The turning towards Christ (faith) is a turning away from sin. It is the same turn! We need help with this – and that is OK!* In the same way Jesus calls us to believe, but we need him to help us with belief (see Mark 9:24 & Luke 17:5), Jesus calls us to repent of sin, and we need his help to do this also. He never expected us to believe in our own capacity, nor to repent in our own strength – but he does call us to pursue this!

So when we have come to Christ, received his love and tender forgiveness, we must heed his gentle word, ***'Go and sin no more.'*** (John 8:11 & John 5:14) What if we do sin again? Well, we acknowledge it, and we come to Christ for more of his forgiveness and embrace! (1 John 1:9) Remember, Jesus is the 'way'. He is a path. So if you sin, think of yourself falling down on a path, a journey. *You need only to get back up and keep walking.* This path is hard and *'narrow'*. (Luke 13:24) There will be difficulties and you will stumble and fall. (John 16:33) But in the same way Jesus told us to forgive each other 70 x 7 times, he, too, is of this Spirit, and

willing to forgive us 70 x 7 times.¹ *He is a path of forgiveness, not a status. His way is a flowing river, not a stagnant pond.* Repentance is to simply come to Christ afresh, be embraced again, and keep walking on the path of Light that is your true and beautiful destiny, from here to heaven...

My friends, I conclude with this: *It honors Jesus that you receive his forgiveness and grace. It vindicates the cross and his blood.* (Eph 3:10; Rev 5:9) It makes his sacrifice for you, and your name engraved on his hands (Isaiah 49:16), worth it. He takes no delight in you being punished or even dying for sin. (Ezekiel 18:23) He takes no delight in you being burdened with 'regret'. He delights in his own blood covering you, and your path of 'belief and repentance' leading you out into pastures of freedom and grace.

I end with this most powerful Scripture, which is a great yard-stick by which to measure whether you are feeling pure conviction of the Holy Spirit to come back to Jesus in repentance, or simply being assailed with guilt and accusation by the enemy. What is the *spirit* of the 'conviction' you feel? Is it a gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit towards a new path, a new way, true repentance? If so, the spirit of this path, this 'repentance', will leave no regret!

'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.' (2 Corinthians 7:10)

¹ Matthew 18:22

(Essay #5)

Mark 1 – Five Points

#1: (Mark 1:1-5) Repentance was ‘preparation’ for the coming of Jesus.

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus, and the way he did it was calling people to repent of their sins, and mark this ‘turnaround’ by being publicly baptized. It had been prophesied that this ‘messenger’ would come (Mal 3:1), and Jesus himself said that John the Baptist was the ‘Elijah’ to come again. (cf Mt 11:14, fulfilling the last prophecy of the Old Testament, Mal 4:5-6)

Note: Repentance prepared the road for Christ, and was also part of Christ’s own message. (Mark 1:15) Repentance still prepares the way for Jesus, and is still called for by Jesus. (Acts 3:19)

#2: (Mark 1:7-8) Repentance is the beginning, not the end, of the message of Jesus!

John the Baptist clearly states in these verses that what is coming after him, is more ‘powerful’. Repentance is good, deep, necessary, but it is ‘done’ and marked by water baptism. It ‘prepares the way’. For what? Well, for the more ‘powerful’, as John says. (vs.7) Jesus comes with more power, and is the ‘point’ of all repentance. *Repentance prepares, Jesus ‘finishes’.* (cf John 19:30/Ps 22:31) And the ‘mark’ of coming to and being with Jesus is not done with water, but with the Holy Spirit. (vs.8)

Note: Repentance is something we need as a ‘way of life’ (see Matthew 3:8), but our focus, the point of repentance, is to be with Christ. Don’t linger and languish in a worldly sorrow. When you repent, walk free, and ‘be’ the new and redeemed you that Christ paid for. (Rev 5:9; Is 49:16) The repentance that Christ gives, ‘leaves no regret’ (2 Cor 7:10)

#3: (Mark 1:11) God quotes the Bible!

Jesus often quoted the Bible (see Matthew 4:1-11, and Luke 20:17-18, and many more occasions!) But here, God quotes himself! See Mark 1:11 and Isaiah 42:1.

Note: We need to read the Bible regularly – daily. We need to read it methodically (maybe 1 chapter a day), so as to learn the history of God’s character through his acts, his teaching, his people. If God and Christ quote the Scriptures, surely we need to know – and quote and/or reference – the Scriptures!

#4: (Mark 1:15) Jesus is the ‘good news’.

‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’ (Mark 1:15)

If you look carefully at this Scripture – and bearing in mind how Christ so often shielded his own truth (Mark 1:25, Pr 25:2, Mt 16:20, Mt 13:44, Is 6:9) – it is important to note the detail. ***‘The time has come...’*** This is an ‘arrival’ point. Jesus is saying the time is here, I am here, God is here! (Is 7:14, Mt 1:23) So when Jesus goes on to say that the Kingdom of God has ‘come near’, I believe we are to press in here and see that the Kingdom of God had actually come – i.e. *‘the time has come’.* (see Matthew 20:18) Jesus goes on to say, ***‘Repent and believe the good news!’*** (vs.15b) Repentance was preparation, as we have seen, not the actual ‘time come’. So here Jesus is pairing, coupling the ‘repentance’ – i.e. the preparation – with the prize, the presence and revelation of *‘God with us.’* The good news is not the repentance, but that sins can now be forgiven here on earth. (see Luke 5:24) This forgiveness

of sins is the 'harder' thing to do, according to Jesus. (Luke 5:24) Why? Because it cannot happen without his own shedding of blood. (Heb 9:22) You can repent without the shedding of blood, but your repentance has no forgiveness, no 'arrival' or redemption, without the shedding of blood. The good news is the forgiveness of sins, and 'God with us.' (Mt 1:23; Jn 17:3) The good news is Jesus Christ himself – the King of kings not only in heaven, but here on earth (increasingly – Mt 6:9-13), and now in your heart! (Col 1:27)

Note: The 'pressing in' to really 'see' Jesus, is a principle we are called to, and rewarded for doing. If you have some time, look up and consider these Scriptures: Jeremiah 29:13, Isaiah 6:9, 2 Chronicles 15:15, Genesis 32:22-32 (note vs.26), Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 14:1-9, Matthew 20:29-34, John 20:11-18, Hebrews 11:6.

#5: (Mark 1:17) Coming to Christ is the message of the Kingdom of God.

I believe the 'good news' being Jesus is reinforced right here in verse 17 after that critical verse 15 above. Jesus calls Andrew to follow him, and says that in doing so, he will catch others. To follow Christ, is to enter into the good news. To come to Christ, is to be forgiven, and saved forever. To come to Christ is to access the good news of God, and to find a new purpose. What purpose? Well, to 'catch other men' for Christ. The good news is coming to Christ, and the call of Christ is to bring others to him. Here, as noted above, the King of kings, comes to 'King' the earth, and also 'reign' in your heart. Jesus, King of heaven, King of the earth, and King of your heart. This is the Kingdom of God!

Note: Every aspect of life comes from Christ. (Acts 17:25, Ps 24:1, Ps 50:10, Ez 18:4, Gen 1:27, Jn 10:34, Ps 82:6, Mt 5:45) However, the 'kingdom' here is one of darkness. It is a defeated kingdom of darkness (Jn 16:11), but it is here. For this reason, to bring the name of Jesus and the power of Jesus with faith to any corner of this dark world, and in any word, deed or deposit that the Spirit fills, is to bring the 'Kingdom of God' – i.e. the presence and aroma of Christ – to and through the kingdom of darkness. So 'conversions' to Christ are not the only aspect of bringing the Kingdom of God to earth. Every ray of light you bring in Jesus' name is beautiful, powerful, eternal! However, we can so quickly substitute the King for his kingdom, lose the man in the midst of his power and blessings. This is to lose our 'first love', and it is to lose the whole point of the kingdom itself: the King! (Rev 2:1-5; Jn 5:39-40)

Bless you as you crown Jesus King of your heart, follow him, and 'catch' others! (Mark 1:17)

(Essay #6)

SOME

'...I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.' (1 Cor 9:22)

I have often been caught in confusion – in debate with others, or in my own thinking – by the 'All-Or-Nothing' notion about God.

If God answers prayer for help, why did he not answer *that* prayer? If God protects me now, why did he not protect me *then*? If God loves everyone the same, why does he save some and not others?² etc.

This is deep stuff! This is tough stuff! This is – and will always be - beyond our understanding. This question - the 'all-or-nothing' notion - has to do with the 'ways' of God. His ways are 'not our ways', and they are as high above us, as the heavens are above the earth. (Is 55:8-9) Here is the problem, however: when God (or people) don't act in a way that we feel they should, or that we understand, we tend to judge their 'character'. So what we really struggle with when we question God's ways, is whether we can trust God's character. And this is natural, normal, and even endorsed in Scripture. People who knew pain – and maybe you know terrible pain! – cried out to God saying, 'Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? Why do you stand far off?' (Ps 10:1-2) Jesus himself felt and spoke of the ever-present God, the wholly reliable Father, as having 'forsaken' him. (Mt 27:46; Ps 22:1)

So if God's ways are higher, deeper, other, what can we say here? I want to defer to you, 2 brief reflections that are helping me grow at this time:

1. God reveals himself, and I believe:

I know God most truthfully, most fully, by his revelation. He has told us who he is, and demonstrated who he is – and I believe Him. I don't know God most truthfully based on my 'experiences' of God. Yes, I have experienced God in many ways, as have you. I have experienced much of the Holy Spirit, and these experiences are true, and reveal God to me. But I don't base my *deepest* understanding and trust of God, on my experiences. Why? Because my experiences of God, are mixed in with so much of my own, broken self, and my dark, dark world environment. I just can't see and know God in a perfect way, while I am still imperfect, and my world is soaked in darkness and brokenness. So I know him on his terms. I believe his report about himself, and strive to submit my experiences and understanding to his true identity. *The best way to really see and believe God's goodness, his compassion, his walking with us, is to gaze on Christ.* Jesus is 'God with us', and his touch, his presence, his story here on earth, speaks the clearest, most tangible message of God's identity to our very souls. Gaze on Jesus! Meditate on his words!³

God cares about your pain and suffering! God bottles your tears (Ps 56:8), and weeps to reach you, to bless you. (Lk 19:42) *I can't reconcile this loving God, with the pain you have experienced.* I, too, weep with you. (Rm 12:15) I hate that you have suffered hurt. I often cry to God about this broken world, the vulnerable, and evil that seems to reach

² 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; Matthew 18:14; John 3:16

³ John 1:14; Matthew 8:3; John 6:63; Isaiah 7:14/Matthew 1:23

and harm every innocent child and person. I hate it! And I know that my hate of evil actually honors God! (Ps 45:7; Ps 94:16). So I simply appeal to you, my brother, my sister, to bring this pain and disappointment – even with God – to Jesus himself. If you can bring your suffering to Jesus, and *‘fellowship with Christ in his sufferings’*, this I do know: You will be honored even as Christ is honored.⁴ You will be lifted up, made new, and rewarded by God himself, as if you were Christ himself. Yes, this I know! Your healing will be *‘truer’* than your suffering, and your renewal and restoration will be more enduring than your loss. Your past pain will disappear into non-existence, as you *‘fellowship with Christ in his suffering.’* (Phil 3:10)

‘He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.’ (Psalm 37:6)

2. SOME:

If we can trust God for his character – that he is good, trust-worthy, loving – then we truly have arrived. If, even in the face of our personal experiences and suffering, we manage to *‘not take offense on account of Christ’* (Mt 11:6), we have triumphed! On a personal note, I am never more humbled than by the testimony and life of the believer, who has known suffering and yet calls God *‘good’*, and worships Jesus. This always brings me to tears, because I feel I am looking on the face of truth itself. I feel that I am seeing the very reflection of Jesus, and *‘experiencing’* heaven’s breeze and light. I feel humbled in the presence of such people. I feel honored to *‘experience’* them. I feel challenged in my own weak faith, poor vision, limited understanding. Jesus himself, when being crucified, said, *‘Forgive them, Lord...’* (Luke 23:34) *When I meet a ‘forgiver’ in this life, I meet someone who sees Jesus more clearly than I do.*⁵

Having believed God for his character, we can still find ourselves *not* understanding his *‘ways’*. *Why this prayer, and not that one? Why this healing, and not that healing?*⁶ We believe God is good, that He hears and answers prayer. We have asked in his name and believed, but we don’t see God act.⁷

One thing I have noticed in scripture is the recurring word – and reality – of *‘some’*. *‘Some’* healed, *‘some’* saved, *‘some’* coming from the East and the West, *‘some’* disciples called to follow Jesus, and others who asked but were not allowed.⁸ Actually, when we start to *‘see’* this, we see it *everywhere* in the Bible, and everywhere in life!

I see that this principle or reality of ‘some’, is how God works. I simply see that it is a *‘true’* dynamic of the workings of life, and the workings of God. I don’t understand it. I wish it were not like this. But I am seeing that the reality of *‘some’* is just a real dynamic. It is not an *‘equation’*. It is not an algorithm. It is rooted in relationship with God, and comes forth in and through the purposes of God. Does this weaken my faith? No! On the contrary. *Now that I see that God can and does and will respond to ‘some’ things – and that I don’t have to doubt his character if he does not answer as I’d wish – I am free to really call on his name for action!* I have nothing to lose! I can trust him – He is loving, good, listening, with me – so whether he answers my plea or not, I do not lose my

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ezekiel 36:26; Revelation 2:17; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Isaiah 1:18; Revelation 21:5

⁵ Philippians 2:3

⁶ John 5:1-8 (There were *‘many’* sick, and at this time only *‘one’* healed)

⁷ John 16:24; Mark 11:22,24

⁸ Isaiah 49:12; 1 Corinthians 9:22; John 5:1-8; Mark 5:18-20

confidence or relationship with God. So if there is no risk to my belief and understanding of his character, why would I not go to him, even 'pester' him like the widow to the judge? He tells us to do this! (Luke 18:1-8)

So call on God, today! Call on him again! Don't grow weary in this! He hears, he loves, he responds, and he acts on faith-filled, persistent asking. Draw nearer. Press in. He rewards those who step over their own thresholds of understanding and judgment, and meet him on *his* terms, *his* revelation, *his* ability to act!⁹

'Have faith in God!' (Mark 11:22)

⁹ Philippians 4:6-7; Luke 18:1-8; Galatians 6:9; Isaiah 38:5; Hebrews 11:6; James 4:8; Matthew 15:21-28; John 20:11-18; Genesis 32:22-32; Matthew 20:29-34.

(Essay #7)

Loving God, Using Talent!

Loving God, using talent - I've often got this mixed up. I've loved talent, and used God. *Tried* to use God. It never worked out. In fact, it was terrible! Here are two areas where I've gone wrong, and one way to get this right:

Wrong Area #1 – Morally: When I was young, particularly in my teens, I stepped carelessly into the 'ways of the world'. I knew the truth of God, believed in Jesus, but did not really count the cost of following Jesus. When temptations blew my way, I let them blow me away... I said what I wanted, thought what I wanted, and did what I wanted... Suffice to say, when Jesus really met me, and called me home at the age of 16, there were quite a lot of scars already on my mind and soul and relationships. Jesus forgives all, and walks us on a new and eternal path, ever-brighter. (Pr 4:18) However, Jesus is a great Redeemer. He will take sorrows past, and use them to forge our growth, to draw us closer to him and others, to teach us repentance. Our past may be forgiven, but it is not immediately 'deleted' from history. I was left with many insecurities to work through, areas of my soul that might have otherwise been formed in strength and spirit.

'Godly sorrow leaves no regret...' (2 Cor 7:10), and I can honestly say that God has eradicated in me a worldly sense of 'regret', i.e. any sense of despair, or that the past has condemned or doomed the present or the future. Jesus truly overtakes all past sin, and his path of redemption and forgiveness and new life is *'ever-brighter'*. (Pr 4:18) It is incredible how Jesus redeems, and makes new! (2 Cor 5:17) However, I can say that to *'love the world'*, and try to use God as a back-up or guarantor of immoral choices, is foolish. If you 'mock' God in this (and he will not be mocked – Gal 6:7), you will reap a long road of return to wholeness. Not worth it. Love God, and use the world; do not love the world, and try to use God!

Wrong Area #2 – Business: I started a small 'coffee roasting' business on a poor spiritual footing. I was pressed from the outside - 4 small kids, marriage strain, tight finances, church divisions. But where things really broke down was on the inside. I let go of my hold, my commitment to Christ, my heart. (Pr 4:23) Temptations were strong on all sides, and anger and self-pity were back in the driving seat. I was still going to church, and moving and grooving in my Christian circles, but I was no longer *'fighting the good fight of the faith.'* (1 Tim 6:12) I was coasting, and drifting... In this 'place', I decided to start a small 'coffee roasting' business. I needed – I deserved – something of my own. Something creative. Something inspiring. It would be good for me, encourage me, and thereby 'bless' everyone around me. It was for the family, after all, we could prosper through it... Justifications abound! I was 'talented', a solid networker. I wrote up a business plan and applied for a loan, and \$30,000 was mine to use! I spent the money, bought a roaster, started cooking beans from my shed, selling locally and online...

Long, long story, short: Despite a 'good' product, market opportunities all around, there was no 'wind' behind my business. The only 'strength' that the Lord allowed, was my own. So I pushed, and pushed, and pedaled and sweat, and the business moved forward by inches. When the Lord closes a door, no man can open it. (Rev 3:7) And another verse that has been branded on my soul forever, and I often tell people is the sum total of what I learnt through business: ***'Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it...'*** (Psalm 127:1)

Here's the interesting part of how the Lord 'released' me from this business. When I had truly repented, and worked through years of dealing with this decision and investment (and debt), the Lord allowed me to 'cut my losses', sell the equipment, and shut things down. And when I say the Lord 'allowed' me this, I truly mean it. I had tried to sell it earlier on in the process, but just could not. The Lord, I believe, had more 'repentance' to work in and through me using this monster I had built... So when the time of 'release' came, I was able to sell. But, here's what happened. The sale – for the agreed price, which was a blessing – turned bitter at the very end point. After money had been exchanged, items packaged and shipped, the buyer, I feel, had some kind of 'regret', or story unfolding on his end. He started badgering me, threatening me, harassing me on text and email for this or that item that didn't come through, and he wanted this or that amount of dollars, etc. It was 'dark'. It felt heavy and shook my peace. It had 'fear' in it. The Lord prompted me to cut off communication, and turn my heart and eyes to the Lord only. So here I am, finally cut free, having been blessed by God, but with a type of bitter taste in my mouth. It was a rough ending, an ugly finish. I believe the Lord let it be this way for a reason. You may remember when Jacob had wrestled with God, and 'overcome', but God left Jacob with a 'limp' as a sign and record of this encounter. He did not leave him giddy and glowing, but limping and pondering. This is how God left me, as I walked free after 10 years of putting 'talent' before 'loving God'.

The Right Way: Love Jesus More Than Your Talents!

How do you 'love' something more than you naturally love it? The fact is, maybe you are not that moved right now in your love for Jesus, your love of God. And you may be wondering, how can it even be possible to love Jesus more than, for example, the blessings he gives, the life he has created... How can you honestly be expected to focus on Christ, and 'love' Christ, more than your creativity, your work, your car, your popularity?

Firstly, let me say, you are not a 'fool' in feeling like this, or even – if you dare – asking these questions. Honestly, even if people are not 'saying' these things, or 'admitting' them, most of us are living this value system every day, every hour, every decision. We are putting 'life' before the Author of Life. We are putting money – in its every form – before love of God, and love of people. So if you struggle today with this notion and challenge of loving God, you are not alone!

Here's what I do submit to you, however. Take some time alone to really ponder this truth. Make a cup of coffee, and get alone somewhere quiet, and sit and listen. This is the truth to ponder...

There is much more life in the Spirit - the unseen - than there is life in the physical world, the 'seen'. There is much more beauty you can see in the Spirit, than you can see with your eyes. There are many more people and 'audiences' in the heavenly realms (right now, looking down on you!), than there are on earth. (Eph 3:10; Heb 12:1; 2 Kings 6:17) There is much more meaning and adventure going on in building God's Kingdom, than there ever will be in building your career. There is much more 'happening' right now in the Spirit Realm, in the Kingdom of Jesus, than there is happening in any concert, party or historical event here on earth. If you have a 'fear of missing out' (FOMO), and you are not walking in the Spirit, you are truly missing out on where it's happening. I don't say this to distress you, I say it because it is the reality of God's world, his Spirit, his love, his Jesus. In light of this truth – the truth of Jesus Christ and his love and life – you need to ponder, and indeed conquer (i.e. seek until you find), this treasure, this *'love that is better than life.'* (Psalm 63:3)

How? How can you find this treasure? How can you truly 'get over yourself' and find God? Here's what I defer to you: Cry out to God today! Call on the name of Jesus in prayer, and say, *'Lord, I fear I am missing out! I fear I am not seeing you as the treasure that you truly are? I need to see you, Lord! I need my eyes opened to the truth of your worth! And with Jacob I say, 'I'm not letting go until you bless me!'* (Gen 32:26)

Getting Practical: True love gets practical! (Jn 8:31-32) My friend, restructure your life! I don't think you need to shelve your talent – or your business or hobby - but you do need to take it off the trophy shelf, and make your pursuit of God your number one! Set time aside every day to 'seek' God, to spend time with Jesus. When David 'saw' God, he would gaze on him; when he was not clearly seeing God, he was 'seeking' him! (Ps 27:4)

What I suggest is that you read the Bible and pray. Don't, for now, read devotionals or Christian books. Just read your Bible. It was written by 'unschooled' men (Acts 4:13), and it is accessible to everyone who wants to know God better. I read one chapter a day, about 5 days a week. I don't cross-reference, and I don't re-read chapters. I keep going. After I have read my chapter, I sit with my friend, Jesus (Jn 15:15), and pray to him, and listen to him. (Jn 10:27) I enjoy the 'NIV' version, or the 'ESV'. Every now and again you will hit a verse that rocks your spirit, and you will need to memorize it. Write it on an index card and get it on the fridge. Stop and read it, and recite it when you pass, including the chapter and verse... Maybe record these memory verses as a 'voice memo' on your phone, so you can listen to them when you are in the car or have some time.

God bless you in seeking, reaching out for, and finding Jesus! (Acts 17:27; 2 Chron 15:15; Jer 29:13)

(Essay #8)

Kingdom Construction

‘...each one’s work will be shown for what it is...’ (1 Cor 3:13)

Anybody at any time can begin to invest in their eternal inheritance. No one has an advantage over anyone else. Every single soul – sinner or saint - through Jesus Christ, can become a king or queen, and have a castle on a hill. How? It is very simple: *Repent of your sin, put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and live each day to build the Kingdom of God!* Let me back up a little, and expound on this...

To live is to build. Every aspect of life is densely material, practical, toilsome - from breakfast to business. This is how God created life. This is what we are born into, and have to survive. Jesus came – God in the flesh, the *‘living Word’*¹⁰ – to walk our walk. He never condemned people in their toil, in their labor. He never demeaned people in their struggle to survive, in their efforts to pay bills and taxes. Jesus came not to condemn us for being weary in our toil, but *because we were weary in our toil.*

Jesus had *‘compassion’* on us, and viewed us as *‘helpless and harassed.’* (Mt 9:36) Jesus moved into people’s spaces of stress and even of sin, to reassure them that he came to relieve stress, not cause more. Jesus invited himself to Zaccheus’ house – a ‘chief’ tax collector and oppressor of his own people – and sat and ate with him. (Lk 19:1-9) Such grace and kindness opened Zaccheus’ heart to repentance and life-change.¹¹ Jesus called out to the ‘weary’, and invited them to a place of rest. (Mt 11:28-30) Life is hard, and God does not chastise you for having to work hard!

Here’s the challenge, however: There are two spheres we live in, when we live in Jesus. We live in this world – and have to survive here – and we also live in the heavenly realms. Yes, according to God, our lives are *‘hidden with Christ in God.’* (Col 3:3), and we are *‘seated with Christ in the heavenly realms.’* (Eph 2:6) Paul tells us we are only passing through here, but ‘citizens’ of heaven. (Phil 3:20) Paul tells us we are to live here like the world is only a transient stage – because it is only a transient stage! (1 Cor 7:29-31) But Paul – like Christ – also calls us to ‘live here’ – i.e. to enjoy life, receive good things with thanksgiving, to love and care for things. (1 Tim 4:4-5; James 1:17; Mt 11:19a; Lk 16:10-12)

This is challenging! As humans, we find it hard to live in two spaces, two spheres, at the same time. We are tempted to either invest everything into this world – our homes, cars, pleasure, life insurance, investments, etc. – and very little into God’s world – faith, tithing, giving, forgiving, moral living in secret. (Mt 6:4,6,18) Or, sometimes, we find it hard to believe and ‘live for God’, and yet continue to invest, enjoy and care for the things and people of this life. I want to share two brief reflections on this:

1. *Live by the Spirit:* There is only one way to live in the ‘world’ and in the ‘heavenly realms’ at the same time – *by the Spirit of God.* Not by philosophy, intelligence, or even Bible-knowledge.¹² Jesus walked by the Spirit in his ministry, and this is how he knew when to work and when to rest, when to fast and when to feast.¹³ *You can only live by*

¹⁰ John 1:1-5,14

¹¹ Romans 2:4

¹² John 5:39-40; Matthew 4:1-11

¹³ Matthew 4:1-11; John 5:19; Isaiah 26:3; Gal 5:25; John 3:8; John 5:39-40; Matthew 22:29; Gal 5:1

the Spirit if you know the Scriptures (the 'written word' – Mt 22:29), *know Jesus Christ personally* (the 'living word' – Jn 1:14), *and are full of faith.* (Heb 11:6) You will not 'drift' into Spirit living; it must be intentional. (1 Tim 1:18-19; 6:12) You will drift into guilt and legalism very easily – because these are directly related to our pride, and the attacks of the enemy. So be a 'freedom fighter'! Jesus paid a high price for your freedom, and calls you to 'hold' to it! (Gal 5:1) Enjoy this life intentionally! (1 Tim 4:4-5; James 1:17) And yet keep your eyes full of the light of heaven, of the *'joy set before you.'* (Heb 12:1-2; Mt 6:22-23) This is not 'dual' living, it is the only 'true' living. It is God's 'real' for us!

2. *Kingdom Construction:* The only 'true' you, is the one bound up in Jesus Christ. He made you for himself, and apart from him you are not your 'true self'. (Acts 17:15-27; 1 Cor 6:19-20; Rev 2:17; Jn 1:47) We are told that the mystery of God is '*Christ in you.*' (Col 1:27) For this reason Paul prays for us, that we would free-fall into this '*love of God*', this reality of who we are. (Eph 3:14-21) The more we soak in this true identity, this love of Christ, the more 'real' we are – and the more 'real' we are *together*. And '*together*' is the key here: the more 'real' in Jesus I am, and the more 'real' in Jesus you are, the more we can experience true togetherness, true relationship. Jesus is truth, and the more we are in him, the more 'true' we are in ourselves, and in our togetherness. So why is this second point – and essay – called *Kingdom Construction*? Well, when I am true in Christ, and you are true in Christ, and we are building the 'Kingdom of God' together – we are truly building something that has eternal value, and will last forever. We are literally – not spiritually or metaphorically – we are literally building heaven, brick by brick. We are building heaven here on earth ('... *your kingdom come...*' Mt 6:9-13), and we are building 'bricks-to-be': '*... each one's work will be shown for what it is...*' (1 Cor 3:13) The Kingdom of God is that which is governed by Jesus Christ here on earth, in spirit, in practicality, for now, for later, for years ago (forgiveness, for example), for years ahead... Everything done in the name of Jesus Christ by faith-filled people, is truly an eternal-life experience, and an eternal Kingdom Construction!

True you in Christ. True togetherness in Christ. True Kingdom Construction in Christ!

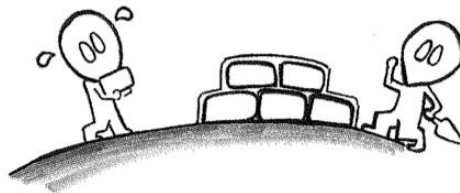


Illustration by Daniel Walker

(Essay #9)

Good God?

Believing that God is good, and that he hears and answers prayer, is the most challenging issue for me as a Christian.

Brought up as a 'missionary kid', I saw many peoples and places around the globe at a young age. We lived on land and sea. By the age of nine I had been to and through 49 countries. I have memories of sailing away from poverty-stricken places. Kids in rags waving from shore as our ship pulled slowly out of harbor. The sun and skies glistened off the water, and departures were both exciting and melancholic, as is the ocean.

One memory I have is my dad preaching in the open air, on some big, wide promenade somewhere in Brazil. A young kid skipped by in a mickey-mouse costume, promoting some business or product, maybe 10 years old. He stopped to talk. He pulled off the big mickey-mouse head, and had a sad, sweaty face. I remember him talking to my dad, eyes cast down, nodding and listening. After a minute or two he slipped the big, smiling mickey head back on and skipped away, waving his arms.

In my 20s my wife and I were in Mexico City, a year 'off books' prior to completing our degrees. Times were really hard for us in Mexico (pre-cell phones, pre-credit cards), but at least we knew we would be back on a plane and out of there at some point. The last few weeks we were there, we weren't getting paid at our job, because the small language school was going into bankruptcy. We were renting the top floor of a family home, a single mom of four; dad had left a few years earlier and started another family. This home was on its way into foreclosure, and the mom would cook and cater from home to make some money. Grafting a living in Mexico City is beyond hard. Anyway, I say all this to share only one powerful, sorrowful moment: the picture of the mom, crying, and the kids, waving us goodbye and wishing us well as we headed to the airport after a year, never to see them again. We were down to our last 20 dollars, and had lost about 10 pounds in weight, and I was so deeply relieved to be leaving the hardship. But I had no answers for their hardship. I just knew I was so glad to be leaving.

In Dostoevsky's *'Brothers Karamazov'* (1880) a conversation is tabled about evil, and one character cautions that any such conversation can only be had in the context of an actual experience or instance of evil. In other words, it is easy to theorize about evil, but evil is less easily – and more truthfully – considered in the context of real occurrences. This is because its feeling, its spirit, is part of its reality. And real occurrences calibrate, inform, a truthful understanding of evil. You can talk about evil all day long, but what do you say and think about Alahna, an 8 year-old girl stripped, beaten and abused by a group of men? And what would your views be if Alahna was actually your sister, your mother, your daughter?

Evil is. Wicked men are. Good people are harmed by bad things. How, then, can I call on a good God, and believe that he hears, that he will protect? Where was he for Alahna? Where is he for the persecuted church? How can he hear me in the USA for my needs, for my wants, and not hear his people, his loved ones in Syria? Jesus, how can that child lose his head, and I not lose my peace and confidence in trusting you?

This is the point where all *'wisdom of the wise'* is rendered futile. There is no thinking that crosses this line. None. We must lift our eyes to the God of heaven, and watch, listen, for the path of life, the path of truth. The depths of darkness are too deep for us, as are the heights of

heaven and the ways of God (Rm 11:33-36; Is 55:9). We can't find God through our own wisdom (1 Cor 1:20), and we cannot find peace in God through our own wisdom. Jesus said that his words were *'spirit and life'* (Jn 6:63), not equations of reason. As God, the 'Word', came off the page to life (Jn 1:14), so the truth of God's peace and ways is 'off the page', high and away from words and reason, so to speak. God himself cannot be found in the Scriptures alone (Jn 5:39-40), and without the *'power of God'*, knowledge of the Scriptures is not enough. (Mt 22:29) The only way to navigate the deep, healing, peaceful truths of God in this dark and sinful world, is to know God on God's terms, and let his spirit blow where it blows, and blow us with it. (Jn 3:8) Perfect peace is not in understanding, but in a mind *'stayed on the Lord'*. (Is 26:3) We do not have answers for how God is good in light of suffering. But we do have a story and person of God that gives us a path for peace and trust in this life of suffering.

I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. This, however, is a starting point for this issue of trusting his goodness, his presence, and really seeing deep into his being. Peter believed Jesus, and walked on water with Jesus in his line of vision; but when in arm's reach of Christ, he lost sight, he doubted. The reality and threat of the dark waves crossed his vision and his heart. The waves were real, the destruction real, but at that moment he had a particular place on the waters, a particular reach and reality with Christ, a particular light in his eyes, and he was called to keep this in his vision, keep his step. When Jesus caught him in his fall, he asked, *'Why did you doubt?'* (Mt 14:22-33) There were plenty of reasons to doubt, generally, but Christ's question was not to anyone else at that moment. It was to Peter in that exact place, that moment, his reality.

Jesus is personal to you and to me. My 'real' in very deep and eternal respects, is different to your 'real'. Jesus to me, even when we are together, is different, personal, than Jesus to you at that same place and moment. Again, to Peter, Jesus would not let him see his future in light of anyone else's future; Peter queried his own destiny in light of John's, and Jesus said, *'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.'* (John 21:22) Our togetherness in Christ is not 'sameness', not even in the same moment. This fragmentation of spirit and life, is integral to actually coming together in truth, counter-intuitively, and in walking in freedom and peace, even in a blinding storm.

Jesus had a different 'gospel', so to speak, for each person. To the rich young ruler, his very soul pivoted on a moment's decision regarding the god of wealth in his life. There may have been a man as wealthy standing in this same conversation, but in a very different relationship and reality to his wealth, and in a different relationship and reality to Christ, and so a different world, as it were, beneath his feet. This may sound far-fetched, but I would submit to you that it is only far-fetched in theory, not practice. What is it that allows your soul to be joyous standing beside (in church) someone grieving, and for you to love them, even weep with them, but to leave and not lose your joy, nor cancel your celebration for later that afternoon? Something in their 'real', with Christ and others, does and should mix and join our lives, but does not eclipse or invalidate God's truth and provisions and moments in another's life. Same time, same place, same God, same family, but different and very real and equally true things at work, and different light and life of God in the eyes of each other, even as these eyes meet. How else can one encourage another? Something from the one, comes forth and imparts new and 'other' reality into the other. If there is no real-time difference, there can be nothing one has to give another in their grief.

This is why we must not give up meeting together (Heb 10:25), and this is why it is hard to meet together – because there will be people who need what we have, and we must give as the spirit leads. He became poor, so that we might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

This is not a treatise on individualism in Christ. On the contrary, this is simply an effort to see the true nature of how Christ can give me peace when others suffer. And the answer lies in a deep mystery of how God works in and through people, in and through time. It might look and 'be' the same to us, but it is not that simple in *real* reality. Jesus said that before Abraham was, 'I am'. (John 8:58; Ex 3:14) This throw back was not just a statement about Jesus being God, but also a statement of Jesus being always in the present, in some respects. Where and 'when' was Elijah and Moses when they appeared with Jesus in the transfiguration (Mt 17:3), or when Samuel was summoned from the dead and appeared to Saul? (1 Sam 28) Where and when were the souls in hell that Jesus preached to or what and 'when' is the impact of 'baptisms for the dead'? (1 Pe 3:19; 1 Cor 15:29)

We may have straight time lines, of sorts, for all biblical and theological happenings, but I respectfully submit that we cash into 'mystery' when it comes to our understanding and even explanations for why at this 'time' we are not on missions carrying out the great commission. For that, we have deep time, place, space, and Holy Spirit theologies. For the former, we seem to have pat answers. Uncommonly, I am not admonishing us on the latter, or questioning our plethora of mysteries regarding God and the present. I am saying we need to get less 'pat-answer' on the former, and go even deeper on the latter, in the present. As did Paul in the heart of his theologizing: *'Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out...'* (Rm 11:33-36) Why? Well, very simply, so we can know God better, and walk in deeper peace, spirit and freedom in this disparate world, as Christ did. We need to cut loose into the 'spirit and life' that are the words and reality of Christ (Jn 6:63), so that we not only have confidence in the presence of God (Heb 4:16), but also in the presence of the poor – knowing, like Jesus, that our only real footing in reaching the lost, and knowing peace in a storm, is because of God's 'anointing'. (Luke 4:18; Is 61:1)

I leave you with this, which comforted me this morning as I grappled with this issue. Jesus came into our present, and told us to be at peace. Over and over again. He did not explain evil, but wept with Martha, and moved towards the pain in faith, gospel and power. (Jn 11:35) We are called to weep with those who weep (Rms 12:15), and move the gospel of peace forward. Jesus' real words to the issue of evil, was to submit himself to it, ask that we go free (Jn 18:8), and then bring power against it. As Christians we are called to know, believe, live and bring the gospel against darkness. This is the aroma pleasing to God (2 Cor 2:15), and the power to save.

(Essay #10)

Feeling Pressure to be Rad' for Jesus?

Introduction & Background:

Being 'radical' for Christ is not the same as being Spirit-led. When the wind went out 'before' the Lord and 'tore the mountains and shattered the rocks', the 'Lord was not in the wind.' (1 Kings 19:11-13). The Lord was, at that time, not in the noise, or even the 'power', but in the whisper. We cannot confuse 'power' and 'noise' with true leading of the Spirit. Four hundred of Ahab's 'prophets' said one thing, and only Micaiah really heard from the Lord and spoke what was true. (2 Chron 18) Jesus himself told us there would be false prophets performing miracles in his name. (Mt 7:21-23)

As a 'missionary kid' and son of an open-air evangelist, from a very young age I have grappled with the issue of being '*radical for Jesus*'. I have seen and felt the 'highs' of true, Spirit-led courage in standing with Jesus. I have also had seasons of deep lows where fear and guilt had replaced my joy and my freedom in sharing Jesus.

In this brief essay I lay out what I believe is truly 'radical' when it comes to sharing Jesus with others, and where we can access God's freedom and peace in this challenging area. It has everything to do with the true message of the gospel, the nature of God himself, and a process of knowing and walking with Jesus...

There is only one 'true' hiding place in this life. It is in Jesus Christ. He is God's '*door*' to salvation. (John 10:9) He is God's '*Peace on earth*', and God's '*goodwill to men*.' (Lk 2:14) This peace, however, is accessed through not only Christ's death and resurrection, but through our own death and resurrection. It is accessed through a tomb.¹⁴ This 'crucifixion' aspect of our faith and walk with Jesus is a 'live wire', an 'exposed nerve'; we feel it daily. Paul says, '*We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our mortal body.*' (2 Cor 4:10) Why is such peace only accessed through crucifixion? Why does it have to be this hard? To stand with Christ – we all so quickly learn – is to stand against the natural forces of this world. There is hostility here. There is danger here. God, have mercy! It is exhausting to take up our cross '*daily*'. (Lk 9:23) Why '*daily*', Lord?

This is the '*narrow path that leads to life*'. (Mt 7:14) Truly, it is. We must not let this out of our sight. Just look at the life of Jesus. Two key things here to always hold in our vision: First, the life of Jesus was tiring, hard, powerful, joyful and sacrificial. The road for Christ was tough, and it is tough for you and me. Secondly, Jesus always spoke and imparted peace, no matter how desperate or dangerous a situation. He spoke life and affirmation, even in the face of despair. I think of John sending to Jesus (Mt 11), and asking, effectively, for rescue, as his own life was on the line. Jesus did not spare John from death, but did send word to him that his life had not been in vain, his ministry not forgotten, his own life and legacy honorable before God and man forevermore. We must focus on the 'peace' that Jesus offers us. '*He is kept in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on the Lord.*' (Is 26:3)

So we have, in Jesus, a '*narrow road*' - just like that of Jesus. And we also have in Jesus a heavenly '*peace*' - just like that of Jesus. We have in Jesus, the life of Jesus. Life with Christ is a living relationship, a real one. It is raw, in constant growth and tension, but it also promises – with 'pursuit' – a '*peace that passes understanding*', a '*love that surpasses knowledge*.' (Jer 29:13; Phil 4:6-7; Eph 3:19)

¹⁴ Gal 2:20; Mark 8:34-38

If we truly walk with Jesus, we cannot make the narrow road a broad road. We can't do it, not possible. We can, if we choose, step off the narrow road, but we cannot broaden the road. Unfortunately, however, there is something we can – and often do - 'miss' on this road. We often miss out on the 'peace' that can only be found on this road! We miss out on God's 'rest'. How is this? Oh, so many ways! In fact, we will miss his peace and rest if we are not intentional about always knowing, finding, holding and valuing his peace and rest. It will slip past us like a breeze. Why like a breeze? Because his peace and rest – like his words and his presence – are 'spirit'. (John 6:63; John 4:24; 2 Cor 3:17-18) The narrow road of Jesus is pretty tangible, with its knocks and struggles. But the peace and rest that are on offer to us on this road, are spirit, and accessed through faith. We can't change the road, but we can miss out on its treasure of peace!

Why are we so tempted to step off the narrow road, or to redefine the narrow road? We are tempted to step off the narrow road for two reasons, one personal, one public: First, we want to do whatever we want to do, even if just 'in secret'! To walk with Jesus throws open our lives to his light even when we are alone on our phones, on our computers, or in the corridors of our minds. To walk with Jesus is to have him ever-present, and this is a dying to self. But it is our 'secret' life that concerns Christ. (Mt 6:4,6,18) It is here in our 'secret' life that we experience the very best of Christ – a friend when we are alone, peace when we fear, and forgiveness where we feel guilt. To deny Christ in our 'secret' life, is to deny Christ where we need him most.

Secondly, we want to turn off, or 'redefine' the narrow road because of the cost of 'testifying' to Christ. To share Jesus with others can be hard, and we fear doing it. In my experience, it is always far more rewarding and welcomed than it is rejected, but we always associate 'witnessing' about Jesus with our worst experiences, our worst nightmares. Let me drill into what I mean by 'redefining' the narrow road, and this will be the segue to my real heart on this matter...

I think the challenge to 'share' Jesus with others is scary. I think it has scared the church in the West to the point of us adopting a whole new view on sharing the gospel. Here is our new view – here is our *'redefined'* narrow path: *We don't actually need to share Jesus, we just need to be good people.* This is why we are hearing things like, *'Preach the gospel, and if necessary use words.'* What is really being 'preached' with this quote, is, *'It is not really necessary to share the message of repentance and faith in Jesus... just live a Christian life.'* Why would we be tempted to adopt this view? Well, it is very simple. There is no offense in living the Christian life, or in 'being' a Christian. There was no offense when Jesus did the miracle of multiplying the bread, but there was massive offense the next day when he refused to do it again, and called the people to believe that he was the *'bread that came down from heaven'*. (John 6)

There is no mystery as to why we would adopt this view of not really needing to witness to Christ. To share the name of Jesus is a very particular aspect of being a Christian, and where the waters are always uncharted. It is scary! But the gospel message is not the same as living a Christian life. They are very different aspects of our Christian life. The gospel – a call to repent of our sin and put our faith in Jesus Christ – is very much a 'message', and not a lifestyle or good deed. Paul puts it this way:

'How will they hear unless someone preaches to them?... Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.' (Romans 10:14,17)

There is a much better offer to you by Jesus Christ when it comes to this area of ‘witnessing’, than to ‘redefine’ the path, to say it is not necessary. Here is the way to face into this tough area, to access freedom and peace, and to stay on the ‘real’ narrow path!

Firstly, consider how it is that Jesus shared his own message, his own ‘gospel’. He did it in ‘step’ with the Spirit, only according to the leading of the Father. (John 5:19) Jesus only did what he saw and heard the Father do. Jesus did not work off a set of statistics, or even according to a set method of evangelism. He was always in step with the Father. In fact, when he was overwhelmed with the number and state of the ‘lost’, he admonished his disciples, his workers, to first lift their eyes in prayer to the Father – he did not put the pressure and the workload primarily on their shoulders. (Mt 9:36-38) Jesus moved in this area in a sense of ‘partnership’ with the Father. He said to the Pharisees that the Father was bringing him people, and Jesus would not turn away these people. (John 6:37) So first and foremost, I encourage you really sit and consider the dynamic of Jesus in this area of spreading his truth: **‘in step with the Spirit’** (Gal 5:25/Isaiah 26:3), according to the very specific **‘lead of the Father’** (John 5:19), and in **‘partnership with the Father’**. (John 6:37) This is Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, all Spirit! This is much less ‘mind’ and ‘technique’, and much more Spirit!

I hope this mode of Jesus – Spirit-filled, Spirit-led – breaks some light into your sense of pressure in this area. Now let’s allow some more light in here...

The gospel of Jesus Christ – that of repentance and faith – is a message of freedom, not condemnation. It is actually ‘good news’. The message – this repentance and faith – is not so that we get ‘clean’ before God, but so that God will dwell in us, now and forevermore. Yes, this message is one of purifying the person who feels stained for life; it is a message of power to heal the broken heart, and give a person a *‘new spirit and a new heart.’*¹⁵ This gospel message is not a rebuke; it is a lifeline for the eternally ‘rebuked’. Jesus did not come to condemn. He came because we are already condemned! (John 3:16-18)

So if this message is essentially ‘good news’, a message of ‘love’, why do I feel such pressure and fear in sharing it? How can I overcome this fear and pressure?

OK, well, you feel pressure and fear because good news or not, love or not, you have seen that this message is not of this world. You have seen that this message is of a Spirit that the world rejects.¹⁶ Jesus himself, the epitome of love and ‘good news’ and power and meekness – was crucified by the same people he loved and reached. So you fear, my brother and sister, because you see clearly. Here’s our first step, however, in recalibrating our spirits and minds on this issue, despite the ‘fear’, despite the hostility we know exists out there. And in addressing the first steps of recalibrating our responses, we will see the Spirit slowly start to push our fear away, out further and further from our mission call...

First Step: Believe God’s report about the gospel message. How? Say in faith, *‘Whether or not the world ‘feels’ the love, or hears this news as ‘good news’, I am going to believe that it is, and share it as such – as the Spirit leads!’* Ponder this statement of faith! Remember that without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6), and through these words and truths of faith we do demolish strongholds, loose and bind spiritual forces. (2 Cor 10:3-5; Mt 16:19) In the name of Jesus, and by the blood of Jesus, we overcome the dragon, and we see Jesus open people’s eyes to his truth.¹⁷ We as believers must believe, whether those around us believe or

¹⁵ Ezekiel 36:26

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 2:16

¹⁷ Revelation 12:10-11

not! This will calibrate our walk, our words, our authority. So this first step is essentially to believe God's word about Christ, about his gospel, over the report of the world, over the response of the world.

Second Step: Know Christ! This might seem like a funny *second* point. But the truth is, we can lose our 'first love'. We can truly have once known, received, delighted... and then grow weary and cold. Jesus takes this loss of love seriously. To the church in Ephesus he warns them that if they do not return to this 'love relationship', he will remove the 'lampstand' of their church.¹⁸ Where there is no 'love', there is no life. The whole gospel message is the love of God poured in and through people. No love, no life. No love, no gospel message. Jesus told us that the greatest commandment was to love God, and love others. (Mt 22:36-40) How can we really be in the flow of God's love for others, if his love is not pouring through us? God is love! (1 Jn 4:8) '*God with us*' is the very name of Jesus! (Isaiah 7:14; Mt 1:23) Jesus inside us, is the very purpose and '*mystery*' of God! (Col 1:27) Without love even charity is meaningless, prophecy is empty, spiritual gifts without power! (1 Cor 13) Higher than hope, is love! Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6), and yet higher than faith, is love! (1 Cor 13:13) The second step, my brother and sister, is to go back to your first love! Sit with the Lord. Receive his love. *Be loved by Jesus!* This is the very well-spring of the gospel! You may need to really stay in this place for a season. God may be calling you to a season of rest, of quiet waters and green pastures. (Psalm 23) If you are not centered in the flow of God's love and his Spirit, your gospel message to others will lack God's Spirit and his love.

Below is step three, the final step. I hope at this point you are feeling less pressure to be radical, and more leaning towards God's love, his Spirit.

Step 3: Pursue Christ! So what is it to be radical for Jesus Christ? Being radical for Jesus is not about doing anything for Jesus. It is about wanting to know Jesus more – and then going where he goes! In my life, this has meant primarily 'repentance' (Mt 3:8), and secondarily more readiness and action in sharing my faith. This is where Christ has walked in my journey with him, day by day. As I walk with Jesus, he walks alongside people who are hurting, and has equipped and called me to share with these people, and in doing so I find myself closer to Jesus. In 'sharing' Jesus, I know more of Jesus, and am being obedient in my gifting and call. This is my path, which is not the same as yours!¹⁹ To know Jesus more – the goal of all 'Christian living' – where is Jesus calling you to this day? Maybe, primarily, to repentance? Is the Lord calling you away from pornography, for example? Is he calling you away from immoral thoughts? Is he calling to you, telling you that he sits quietly with you at this time, away from others with the Bible and a cup of tea? *Where is Jesus in your life right now? Are you there with him?* God has bound up this '*life that is truly life*', in Christ himself.²⁰

To be radical for Jesus is to be true to him in your secret life. This is where God draws near to you. This is where you find your footing for action, and God's blessing on your 'doing'. Let God love you. Be still and know that he is God. (Ps 46:10) Let Christ in. That is the only '*radical*' place you need to protect. The rest – the 'action', the 'witness' – will grow from this place.

'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.' (Revelation 3:20)

¹⁸ Revelation 2:1-5

¹⁹ John 21:20-22

²⁰ 1 Timothy 6:19

(Essay #11)

False Dimensions

'Blessed are your eyes, because they see.' (Matthew 13:16)

The source of evil is when mankind wants to *'be like God, knowing good and evil.'* (Genesis 3:5)

Let's look at this just a little closer. God had 'good and evil' in his grasp, in his 'sights'. In a sense, God had them in their 'cage', on the outside of mankind's reality. We did not have to worry about 'good and evil'; we were living in a sheltered garden of complete bliss, perfection, peace, abundance. It was paradise. There was a 'dimension' of 'good and evil' that was off our grid. God had contained it, and kept us from it.

As a parent – or a loving sibling or friend – we often try to shelter our loved ones from 'awareness' of evil. We don't just try to protect them from the evil itself, but we try to protect their hearts and minds from even being aware of it. As a parent I'll often shut off the news when the kids come into the room. Or I will avoid certain details about what has gone on in history, or indeed down the road. This is not denial. This is love. They don't need to carry the burden. There is more truth in their unawareness, than in being aware. There is more strength.

Jesus said, ***'Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.'*** (John 18:37) It is as if standing with Jesus, and allowing his Spirit to permeate one's mind, one's perception, will affect not just what we see, but *how* we see. Jesus also said, ***'Be careful how you listen.'*** (Luke 8:18) And again, Jesus admonished us about the eyes – that their 'seeing' would affect not just light in the eyes, but light in the whole body. (Matthew 6:22-23)

The 'reality' of Christ – of God in the flesh (John 1:14) – was so 'earthy'. Even the ways of God the Father through Christ were so lifelike, so to speak. God would send dreams to this or that person to 'warn' them about danger. But then I would think, *'If such power of God exists, why does he not just obliterate or block the danger?'* Then at other times God would obliterate or block the danger, no vision sent or needed. Jesus would multiply food for thousands, but at other times be 'thirsty', tired, hungry. No explanations given to the inquiring mind, no equations of 'how' God works. His *'dimension'* of truth and reality – like his 'name' – stands alone and stands higher than reason, and is life itself. (Exodus 3:14)

When people tried to isolate the ways of God into 'explainable' and 'questionable' rationale, Jesus would introduce the Spirit of God into the answer:

'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures together with the power of God.' (Matthew 22:29)

'The wind blows wherever it pleases... So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' (John 3:8)

It is sobering to remember – and very freeing, and even exhilarating – that our 'Fall' into sin, was reaching for 'knowledge', specifically of 'good and evil'. This was a dimension outside the garden wall, and outside our ability to process, to hold. But we reached for it. We stepped into a dimension that only God could hold, calibrate, contain. And since then we ask, 'Why?'

We look at God's 'real', his life, and we constantly doubt him because it doesn't make sense to us anymore. God's ways either look too high for us, or too low for us. But we have a spirit of broken knowledge coursing through our minds, leaving us almost dead in spirit, unable to see truth. So we question and question and question... Jesus said:

'To what should I compare this generation? They are like children calling out, 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' (Matthew 11:16-17)

To this day we question God's Scriptures (*Does God really need to reveal and record 'holy' writ?*). We question the 'blood' of Christ (*Does the 'blood' of Christ actually have power?*). We question the 'name' of Christ (*Is Jesus really the only way, the only name?*). We question the morals of God (*Surely those Scriptures and morals were only for a time, one teachers views...*) We question God's 'ways' (*That could only be your mind, your thoughts? God's Spirit doesn't actually 'speak' to the individual...*)

We rebelled against God and ripped open our minds, our souls, to 'good and evil'. And with this, death flooded our bodies, and our minds. ***'With the increase of knowledge, is the increase of sorrow.'*** (Ecclesiastes 1:18)

Jesus admonished us, therefore, that we needed to become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3) We are warned that it is not through our wisdom that we find truth, or God. (1 Corinthians 1:20-21) I think of horses 'blinkered' in order to stay their course, even win a race. Their vision needs to be limited, not increased. Our eyes were not opened in the Fall, they were closed.

Jesus said, ***'I am the light of the world. He who follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'*** (John 8:12)

The revelation (not the equation) of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ, is the source of all truth. Jesus said he was the 'truth'. (John 14:6) He said everyone on the side of truth walks with him, in his light. (John 18:37) He said we needed to be like children – not scholars – to enter into this holy dimension.

(Essay #12)

'Now I know you love me.' (*Bringing Your Life Into God*)

'Now I know you love me.' (Gen 22:12)

After God had tested Abraham, he said, *'Now I know you love me.'* (Read the story of this 'test' in Genesis chapter 22:1-12) God had put Abraham to the test by asking him to sacrifice his one and only son to God. This son had been a gift from God, and there was a promise of 'lineage' through this son, and now God was asking Abraham to sacrifice him, kill him.

This was 'dark'. In fact, this practice of sacrificing children to the gods, was considered evil by God. We know this because when God gave the Law to the people he explicitly told them not to do this. (Lev 18:21) So the 'spirit' of this 'test' on Abraham, seemed to be contrary to the very nature and spirit of the God who had given him this son, this 'life'. This was a dark test, and no one in Abraham's life would have been able to comprehend it, nor endorse it as a 'holy' command from the 'holy' God. So Abraham did not consult anyone on it. Not his wife, not his 'mentors', not his 'small group', not his pastor. He knew the voice of God in a deep and 'set apart' way, and he stayed in step with it.

We see this with Paul, also. In Jerusalem Paul tells the believing Jews that he was set apart to hear God's voice and 'know his will' (Acts 22:14-15), and he goes on to say that this same God called him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. At this point the people (the 'believers', the 'church'), nearly kill Paul. Even the apostle Peter was finding Paul's 'call' from God to the Gentiles as challenging to his own views and practices, and this is why Paul rebuked him 'publicly', and never regretted doing so. (Gal 2:11,14 - Is this consistent with Jesus' admonishment to first address grievances in private?²¹ Is this consistent with 'honoring' leaders? It would seem so!)

So God puts Abraham to the test in such a dark way it would be understood by any human confidant as evil. This test on Abraham would have turned anyone of us into a 'Job's Comforter' at best. Honestly, had he shared with me what 'God' was calling him to do - kill his son on the holy altar of God - I would have called this pure evil, blasphemous, and rebuked it, rebuked him, with every fiber in my being. And honestly, in 'essence' it was evil. It was as evil in 'essence' as our sacrificing of Jesus on the cross. And was this not the very foreshadowing of that? So it was evil. And this is why God stopped it. He stopped Abraham from this evil act. Unlike God, however, we did not hold back on sacrificing Christ.

So Abraham walks through the very heartbeat of God's redemption story, up to the very edge, only inches away from having blood on his hands. He accompanied God through his sorrow here, 'stayed with him a while'²², where we failed to 'stay with' Christ in his sorrow in the garden of Gethsemane. Here in the dark space of Abraham's soul, his son bound up and as good as gone, God speaks: ***'Now I know you love me.'*** (Gen 22:12)

No one could have understood or endorsed this 'test', and no one thereafter could have understood or endorsed it retrospectively. No one could have understood, not even Abraham, that this was the very foreshadow of the Savior's crucifixion and resurrection, a pure Messianic prophecy in word and deed. No one. Sarah probably lived in a measure of uncertainty, even

²¹ Mt 18:15

²² Mt 26:38

fear, that Abraham might 'hear God' again, or 'voices', and go after their son again, or someone else. Isaac might have had a measure of that same fear in him.

But let's consider briefly what happened to Abraham in this, and how his reality changed forever. Abraham died and came to life in that moment. He died to temporal, mortal life, and rose to eternal life. He never moved on from that moment, from that 'eternal space'. At this moment of dying with Christ, and rising with Christ, Abraham was '*hidden with Christ in God.*' (Col 3:3) As are you. Are you? Have you died like Abraham died, and been saved like he was saved? Completely? Is this life dead to you? Paul says of his life in Christ here on earth:

'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the son of God..' (Gal 2:20) Time no longer 'ticks', so to speak, because we're not in time. We're '*citizens of heaven*' (Phil 3:20), primarily in the 'eternal', and only passing through this temporal reality. This temporal reality is not the 'Real' one. It's not. This is why Jesus could speak in the present tense when he spoke of '*being before Abraham*': ***'Before Abraham was, I am.'*** (John 8:58) In this statement Jesus was standing in the place and person of God, quoting the 'Great I AM' verse of Exodus 3:14. The Jews knew it, so tried to kill him.

Jesus - outside of time - stood and spoke with Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. (Mt 17:1-3) How could he do this, and how could Peter and John - mortal like you and I - be there, too? Peter saw Moses? John saw Elijah? I wonder what they looked like. They were the only mortals who could ever know this. How could they be present with Moses and Elijah thousands of years later, alive and kicking? Because they were with Christ. Their lives - like yours and mine - are even now ***'seated with Christ in the heavenly realms.'*** (Eph 2:6)

I subtitled this essay, '*Bringing Your Life Into God.*' This is not the same as 'bringing God into your life.' When we draw near to Christ and walk with him, we will bring our lives into his eternal Spirit, his eternal reality, and every aspect of our lives will be imbued with his purposes, places, harvest, meanings, redemption power, and the gates of hell will not prevail in any space there. If, on the other hand, we bring God into our lives, well, he may or may not influence those wee pockets we put him in. Do you want light in your pocket, or do you want your whole being (and house and neighbors and career and colleagues) under the full and eternal cover of God's light?

'Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.' (Mt 5:15)

So how do you bring your life into God? Fully. Completely. Where time stops and thereafter everything is part of '*God's kingdom come, his will done on earth...*' (Mt 6:9-13) Is the portal to such 'being' always a test like Abraham's. I hope not. Some of us will be tested, however, through a Valley. The key? Stay in step with Jesus, with his Spirit, and he will take you through it, and turn the Valley on its head and make it a mountain of eternal reality. So I'm not sure about the testing, the Abraham 'portal' in our lives, but I am sure about this 'door' to God's eternal space, to being '*hidden in God*', and submerging your world - and 'reality' around you - into the Eternal:

'Jesus said, 'I am the door, and anyone who comes through me will be saved, and he will come in and go out and find pasture.' (John 10:9)

I pray Jesus spares you testing, the way he spared his own disciples. (See Jn 18:8) Jesus did not come to 'test' us in this 'present evil age', but to save us from it:

'Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from this present evil age.' (Gal 1:4)

But one way or the other, my brother, my sister, what is Eternal Life worth? What is the very eternal winds of God's Spirit - blowing through our 'reality' each and every day - what is it worth? Smile. Look to Christ today. Whisper to him. Tell him you're in! Tell him you want it all. You don't want his light in your pocket - or God in your life - you want your life to freefall through the 'door' of Jesus Christ, and come fully into God.

'... and he will come in and go out and find pasture.' (John 10:9)

(Essay #13)

Grace

God never allowed you to be hurt. God never permitted it. God never agreed to it. God hates what was done to you. Jesus weeps even as you weep. God will judge and punish the people that did this to you.

God stepped down from heaven and comes to you now. Jesus is his name. Jesus comes to you now, to heal you. He comes to take your hand and walk you into healing, purity, beauty, power, newness, confidence, quietness, perfection, peace. Jesus comes to take your suffering and sorrow away. He comes to destroy every shred of hurt and darkness that touched you, and to put in you a new heart and a new spirit. Jesus comes to you now to make you completely new - the old you (hurt you) gone, and a new you standing, now and forevermore.

You might ask Christ, *'Where were you when I needed you?'* You might cry, *'If you can save and heal me now, why did you not protect me then?'* Jesus looks into your eyes as you cry, and he cries, too. His eyes well up with tears and he listens. He loves. He understands. He does not answer you with words, but with his own self. He does not judge you. He looks into your eyes and loves you. When you wipe your eyes, his head still hangs, his tears still drop to the floor. Jesus never gets over it. He never moves on. He never explains it away. He *'hates wickedness'*, and has no darkness in him. Nothing he has ever done - in your life or in anyone's life - has hurt in it. He has always been with you, when man was against you and failed you. Jesus knows your pain and your story, because he was the only one who did not turn his face away. When men failed you and abandoned you, they abandoned him, too. When men hurt you and betrayed you, they hurt and betrayed him, too. When they abused you, they abused him, too. When those you had loved were not there for you in danger, they fled from Christ also. When we left you to be crucified, we left Jesus to be crucified, also.

It was not Jesus who failed you. When we crucified Christ, we crucified you with him. He is the only one that actually was with you, that stayed with you, that suffered and died with you. The rest of us fled, turned, denied. It is we who cannot be trusted. It is mankind that abandoned you.

Jesus will meet you here and now and walk you out of the tomb. He died with you, but rose again to life, and will walk you out of the tomb. This is where Christ meets you - here, in the grave where man left you. Here - today and now - Jesus asks you to trust him. Jesus asks you to believe that he has not failed you, and that he can walk with you into a new life, a new 'self', a new creation. Jesus knocks on the door of your heart to come in. Jesus offers you his hand to walk out through his door of eternal life. (John 10:9)

For more on 'First Steps' with Jesus, please visit: www.1peter1three.weebly.com

'I will put in you a new heart, and a new spirit.' (Ezekiel 36:26)

'Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil.' (1 John 3:8)

'In Christ is no darkness at all.' (1 John 1:5)

'Jesus hates wickedness.' (Heb 1:9; Ps 45:7)

'Everyone in Christ is a new creation.' (2 Cor 5:17)

'Everyone in Christ - their old 'self' is crucified with Christ and gone!' (Gal 2:20)

'A tree is recognized by its fruit...A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.' (Matthew 12:33,35)

'Jesus said, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to prisoners, to give sight to the blind and to set the oppressed free.' (Luke 4:18)

'A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out!' (Matthew 12:20/Isaiah 42:3)

No work of Christ has a shred of evil in it! (Mark 3:22-30)

Other scriptures to look up and allow to soak into your soul, to define the heart of Jesus and the Jesus you know: Matthew 18:6-9; Matthew 21:12-13; Acts 23:3 (and see verse 11); Luke 13:31-32; John 19:10-11; Matthew 12:22-32; Romans 12:15; John 11:35; Luke 19:42; Eph 3:14-21; Isaiah 32:17; Isaiah 1:18; Matthew 25:40; Rev 21:1-5; Rev 22:1-5.

'God says, 'You call me unjust? Is it not you, mankind, that is unjust?' (Ezekiel 18:25)

(Essay #14)

'Yes!'

Change your reality. Change everyone's reality!

Can you change this dark world's reality? I'm not just talking about changing your own heart, and your own world; I'm talking about actually changing the world – reality itself - around you, that you so desperately ache to see changed.

My friend, the reason we hide behind our work and our walls, is because the world outside grieves our hearts. The cold. The hunger. The abuse. The danger. We grieve 'sin'. This honors God. In fact, through the prophet Ezekiel, God called him to 'mark' those who grieved evil, and the Lord would spare them. The others he would kill.²³ God hates what is evil (Psalm 45:7, attributed to Jesus in Hebrews 1:9), and he wants us to hate it, too. He does not want us to hide from it, but to cut into it and change it! Can you? Yes, you can!

Through Jesus the 'Kingdom of God' can cut into the 'Kingdom of Earth'. Jesus called us to pray for this (**'...your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'** Mt 6:9-13). Jesus called us work for this. (Mt 7:24-27) Though we live here on earth, the **'Prince of this world stands defeated'** (Jn 16:11), and there is an 'open heaven' above us, and beneath us, to reclaim this land for God, and to permeate all things with God's Spirit.

'Behold, I am making all things new.' (Rev 21:5)

'...creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.' (Rm 8:19-21)

'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast... worked all through the dough.' (Mt 13:33)

'... 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, '... on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' (Mt 16:16-19)

My friends, as Christians, as believers in and followers of Jesus Christ, we are at war. Truly. We have taken hold of *'God's power for salvation'* (Rm 1:16), and we are ministering this power to and through this earth.²⁴ This is primarily a spiritual battle, with physical and material symptoms or outcomes. Take, even, 'prosperity' as an example. True prosperity - i.e. material prosperity that flows as a blessing from God and not a distraction or trap of the evil one - is a spiritual 'space' over a people or land or project or path. A 'thing' in itself - like a big building, or a flow of money - is never enough to say whether a space, place or person is prospered by God. The devil has material wealth at his disposal, and even tried to tempt Jesus with it.²⁵

We are at war - and it is a war of 'spirit', soul and the 'eternal'. As we advance the Kingship of Jesus to and through the hearts of eternal beings, and over the 'land' beneath our feet

²³ Ezekiel 9:1-6

²⁴ 2 Cor 5:5; Eph 6:12

²⁵ Mt 4:9; 2 Chron 7:14 ('... heal your land...')

(houses, fields, schools, businesses, communities, etc.), we are changing everything. And I do mean 'everything'! Let's take an example:

Let's say I work in a place that is quite hostile to God. I can feel it. There are 'strongholds' here - like a 'pro-homosexual' leaning, putting people and policies in place that support/promote homosexuality. And 'gossip' is prevalent. You feel, also, that as a Christian there is a general 'resistance' to your spirit, like any input you offer regarding work or social activity. You feel a cold shoulder.

OK, so we've set the scene. It is a spirit-scene. Yes, the group of people in this place are the key to the spiritual climate and 'strongholds', but this is because they are spiritual beings. It is where they are at with God that determines the 'spirit of the air' in your workplace. It is not their personalities, per se, nor the facts and figures regarding this or that. 'Real' reality is spirit. Look at these scriptures, and then we'll keep analyzing this situation, and where true victory is available to us and others:

'The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you— they are Spirit and life.' (John 6:63)

'Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.' (Eph 6:12)

'Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.' (2 Cor 10:3-5)

'He has set eternity in the hearts of mankind.' (Eccl 3:11)

The 'reality' in a place is the 'space between people', so to speak. Think about it. If you and I stand 3 feet away from each other, facing each other, our 'reality' is in reference to each other's 'place'. You're there, I'm here, and the 'world' we find ourselves in is a synergy or mixture of your 'situation' and mine, your world and mine. Our reality is a space (or culture, etc.) made up of your world and my world coming together.

This is absolutely true of the 'spirit' of a place - or home or office. One person is in that place declaring in their heart and mind (their 'eternal' heart and mind - Eccl 3:11) that money is God, that gossip is king, that immorality is a feast to be hailed, celebrated. Then there's you. You also are in that same place declaring in your heart and mind... what, exactly? Now here we meet with the very core, the very heart of the matter, of how you will change both your reality, and the reality of this whole world. *Who is your heart truly bowing down to?*

If your heart is 'unsure', maybe has a 'belief' in Jesus, but is not truly surrendered to his Lordship, his ownership of Life, his values and rules and morals and Spirit of mercy, then your heart may be 'lukewarm'. One foot in, one foot out. Jesus warns a church in Revelation chapter 3 about this. He says, ***'Be either hot or cold. If you are lukewarm I will spit you out of my mouth.'*** (Rev 3:16) If others around you are truly committed to the god of this world, and you are only weakly committed to the God of Truth, to Jesus Christ, this will determine the 'spirit of the air', and the climate in your place of work. The *'Kingdom of God'* is where Christ is crowned King - in the hearts of people.

So to change the 'weather' of a place - which changes the reality of that place - Jesus needs to be crowned King in the spiritual realm of that place. How? With a statue somewhere? A church? No! In your heart. Yes, your heart. You. Right where you are. Eternity in your heart. Made in the image of God. And raising up a cry from your heart that says, **'Jesus is Lord of my heart!'** A cry that says, **'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!'** (Jn 24:15) In this sense, my brother, my sister, a light breaks into darkness right where you are, and over/through where you are. This is a spiritual light, in the spirit realm. The whole place changes imperceptibly. Not something you observe with your eyes, as Jesus said, because the **'Kingdom of God is within you.'** (Lk 17:21) The testimony of your heart stakes a claim in the spiritual landscape right there. There is a power released that changes, 'heals', the land.

'If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.' (2 Chron 7:14)

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

My friends, **'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it'** (Ps 24:1), and **'all souls are his.'** (Ez 18:4) Jesus is concerned not with what goes in the mouth, but what comes out of the heart. (Mt 12:34) The words of Christ are 'spirit'. (Jn 6:63) His worshippers must be of 'spirit'. (Jn 4:24) We are 'eternal beings' (Eccl 3:11) and the most 'real' reality in which we live, move and 'purpose', is spiritual. The 'belief' deep within your heart about who Jesus is, who God is to you, is the 'truest' thing in your life, and your truest impact on Reality around you.

Do you believe in Jesus? Do you really? Is he Lord of your life? Is he real in your heart, mind, actions and workplace? Do you share him with others? Do you pray for others in your work? Do you invite them to church, as the Spirit leads? Do you believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, that all people are called to hear of him, believe in him, and be forgiven and saved in order to have life after death?

'God commands everyone, everywhere to repent.' (Acts 17:30)

'How will they hear unless someone preaches to them?... Faith comes from hearing the Word, and hearing through the Word of Christ.' (Romans 10:15,17)

'There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' (Acts 4:12)

OK, so we come back to our example of you or me in an office setting, hostile to your faith. Here's how you - just you - change the whole 'world'. You sit quietly. You listen to the Lord. You feel and 'know' the difference between a 'lip-service' belief or faith (see Isaiah 29:13), and a real, deep-water faith. (see Psalm 42:7) You hear the whisper of the Lord, calling you to sincere 'friendship' (see Jn 15:15), to sincere 'zeal' (see Luke 12:4-5, 8-9). You feel the Spirit of the Lord Jesus come near you, over you. And you say, 'Yes.'

'Agree with God and be at peace.' (Job 22:21)

You sit quietly. You let the Lord love you. You loosen your hold a little on life, and feel some pressure lift. The pressure to be 'relevant', to be 'normal', to be 'cool'. You feel the pressure valve loosen, and the pressure steam out. You sit quietly.

Your spirit moves towards Jesus - which truly is not where he was 'to you' before. You're being lifted away in spirit. You're in a different place. Your spirit has borne away and stationed in a different place in this multidimensional space and reality that is existence.

'You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.' (Col 3:3)

'God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.' (Eph 2:6)

'Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.' (Psalm 91:1-2)

'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' (Gal 2:20)

So your friends come back from lunch, and everything has changed. You're dead and gone. The 'you' that is there, is in a different 'place' to them, and the space between you, the boundaries of your reality, has changed. There's a new God in the mix, in this land, and there's a new person - a *'new creation'* (2 Cor 5:17) - in the person of you. Everything has changed. But your friends don't yet see it. But it's true. They don't see this landscape, but they are in it. They are standing on 'holy' ground without knowing it - as was Moses.²⁶ By the sincere 'act' of faith in the depths of your soul, you have changed the very world of those around you, and history itself. And now for the 'fallout'...

The 'fallout', my brothers and sisters, is the actual 'workings' of this new reality, this new 'authority' in the 'spirit of the air'. The fallout is the breaking in of the 'kingdom of God' into the 'kingdom of the world' - in your workplace. You're a soldier now, on mission. Stealth, but sincere. You are *'hidden with Christ in God'*, even when you are in the cafeteria chatting and eating. You are constructing the 'Kingdom of God', even when you are building a project in work.

'Jesus said, 'Pray to the Lord of harvest to send out workers...' (Mt 9:38)

'Your work will be shown for what it is... the fire will test the quality of each person's work...' (1 Cor 3:13)

Now your friends, as usual, invite you to go out for a drink after work. But you feel a little 'distance' is needed at this point, to start to 'curb' the habit of coarse joking, lustful and foolish talk that goes on there. So you cordially decline, saying you need to hustle home to the family today. You've avoided folly, in the name of Jesus. This was no accident. This was a 'kingdom' action, and eternal construction work is being done, 'gold' bricks being laid, stealth fighting tactics in play.

'Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.' (Psalm 1:1-2)

²⁶ Ex 3:5

'Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.' (Col 3:17)

You are now on mission in everything you do, advancing the Kingdom of God. You are doing things and saying things and thinking things, because of Jesus and for his glory.

For this reason, finding yourself in a new, true and eternal Reality, you truly need both the 'Word of God' and the 'power of God' in your daily life.

'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.' (Matthew 22:29)

So we want to know both the Scriptures and the power of God. How? Very simply, by committing 5-10 minutes each day to read the Scriptures, and sit in the presence and Spirit of God. Scriptures and Power. Soak in them.

I personally read one chapter of the Bible each day, and ponder it, pray quietly. Monday - Friday. This is my 'staple' discipline. As the Lord leads and grows me, I find myself praying often, listening to worship music often, and thumbing through the Bible at different times as the Lord brings a Scripture or thought to my mind. But my staple diet is Mon-Fri, 10 minutes, one chapter and prayer. Often in my car on audio. With my coffee and my commute, I listen to my chapter, and then just cruise and talk to the Lord, listen to the Lord in the quiet.

So I change the world around me through a 'Yes' deep within me, between me and God. 'Yes' to Jesus Christ in the depths of my soul. And I change the world around me through faith-action, as the Spirit leads. I say 'Yes' to this event, 'No' to that invite, and on and on. Jesus will lead you. 'Yes' to my daily 'quiet time' with the Lord. 'No' to those images and even those thoughts.²⁷ 'Yes' to more worship music. 'No' to more 'babble' and unnecessary 'news' and debate:

'Guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith.' (1 Tim 6:20-21)

'I made a covenant with my eyes that I would not look lustfully at women.' (Job 31:1)

'Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater— has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.' (Eph 5:4-5)

One more 'Yes!' that I want to submit to you. This is perhaps the most critical, powerful 'Yes' that will blow through your soul. And in the same way the words of Christ are 'spirit and life' (Jn 6:63), this 'Yes' is spirit, and comes from revelation and faith - not reason, not logic, but revelation and faith.

One man could look on as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and feel only 'envy', see only 'threat', and go away and plot his death. Another man could look on - seeing the same event, the same Christ - and see the Messiah, the Savior, and worship. How can two people see the

²⁷ Isaiah 55:6-7

same God, the same power of God, and one bows and the other plots a crucifixion? Why do both not see the same thing, go the same way? Is not the same reality at work? (see John 11)

Jesus asked Peter to tell him what the crowds were saying about him, specifically 'who' the crowds were saying that Jesus was. Then Jesus asked Peter for his personal view: **'But what about you... Who do you say I am?'** (Mt 16:15) Peter professed - as you and I profess - that Jesus was the Savior, the Son of God. Here Jesus says something so very key to our 'seeing', and to our life and 'path' in Christ thereafter: **'Blessed are you... for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'** (vs.17)

You and I see Christ for who he is - by 'revelation' from God himself. We see Christ, and believe him to be God, by the power of God. We didn't suddenly understand it, like we understand a mathematical proof - otherwise you would be able to simply 'prove' it to someone else. It's not 'just obvious', in the sense of 'just making sense' - or everyone would see it, and you would easily make it 'seen' to anyone you wanted. You see Christ by the very power and 'revelation' of God.

'In your light we see light.' (Psalm 36:9)

'For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.' (2 Cor 4:6)

Above two verses speak to the nature of God's revelation about himself, to our hearts. This should keep us humble, and in prayer for others. Look also, at this key verse:

'...the world through its wisdom did not know God...' (1 Corinthians 1:21)

So if not through our wisdom, through our 'smarts', how is it we know God, and know God's truth and guidance in our lives? It is by the revelation of his Spirit. We see Christ by his own light. We feel the weight, truth and conviction of the Scriptures, by the revelation of his Spirit to our spirits. We feel true conviction of our sin by his Spirit. (Jn 16:8) We know true (and not false) compunction and repentance - **'that leaves no regret'** - by his Spirit. (2 Cor 7:10)

We feel and 'know' forgiveness of God, not by 'reason', not by our own 'justification', but by a different kind of 'Reason', and different kind of 'Justification'. Impossible to understand. Impossible to actually exist. Impossible! So, how?

'Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.' (Mt 19:26)

'Come now, let us reason together,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.' (Isaiah 1:18)

You have said 'Yes' to the impossible, irrational, unjustifiable forgiveness and redemption of Christ. You have lifted your eyes to Christ, who by his blood and very self has opened a door in the Spirit realm for your sin, your past, to not count against you. You have said 'Yes' to Jesus who makes you a new creation, **'the old is gone, the new has come.'** (2 Cor 5:17) Impossible! Unjustifiable. For this reason the devil still stands before the throne of God and 'accuses' us. (Rev 12:10) But we have said 'Yes' to this Spirit truth, and it has swept over and become more true than the condemnation from the facts of our lives. Spirit over facts.

So here's the final 'Yes' that needs to blow through your soul all the days of your life. If Jesus says that something 'is', it is. He is Truth. (Jn 14:6) If everything in your life, heart and mind say one thing, but Jesus whispers another to your soul - like, **'Peace'**, or *'It's OK, you can let this go and move on...'* - then regardless of the 'facts', of your 'faults', of your own sense of how to disentangle a matter, this freeing word of Christ, this 'Reason' of God, this open door, is the true one. Rest. Be saved. Receive his love. This nature of God's revelation is the same one that saves you. Say 'Yes!'

'If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.' (1 John 3:20)

'The Lord said, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' (Acts 10:15)

'Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one.' (Romans 8:33-34)

'Agree with God, and be at peace.' (Job 22:21)

(Essay #15)

My Healed Land: A Reflection

'Pray like this... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'
(Matthew 6:9-13)

Since I was a child, I've always felt the soul-pain of leaving others behind. I grew up a 'missionary kid' (MK), and was always on the move. And the nature of our 'business', our 'product', was the gospel message of Jesus Christ. I lived on land and sea – 2 ships for 4 years. I passed to and through over 40 countries by the age of 9, and then settled in a foreign land. So I was always on the move, on mission, and always leaving people behind.²⁸

I remember so vividly as the ship would pull out of harbors of Asian ports, and South American ports, and I would see homeless children under the docks, waving us off with a smile. Did we just come and go, and leave them in their poverty? Are we actually giving them anything, or just passing through, and leaving people behind? What is this gospel message?

I remember as my father and others would preach on the streets of Brazil, Philippines, and everywhere in between, and the homeless, the destitute, the abused and abusers would listen, would respond, would accept, would reject. And we would pack up and go back to the ship, and sail off... What had we given them?

I now live in the prosperous West. You probably do, too, if you're reading this. So having just read my opening paragraph above, you might have felt a surge of agreement: 'Yes! What is this preaching, and no more? What is this 'talk' about God, but with no actual humanitarian action?!

Maybe you have felt the sting of culture accusing the church of this kind of thing. High and mighty talk about God, about Jesus, but no compassion, no change or action in people's lives...

These are real thoughts, feelings, experiences. The truth is, Jesus himself warned about the 'yeast' of the Pharisees (seminarians, teachers, preachers...), which he defined as 'hypocrisy'. (Lk 12:1) In Jesus' day, before his day, after his day, there was, is and will be hypocrisy: teaching truth, but not living it. Empty words. But actually, the problem with hypocrisy, is that the words really aren't 'empty', they are loaded with deception, and that is why they leave a wake of hurt and more deception. They are words with an encasement of truth, but with a spirit of untruth. It can be as dark – according to Jesus – as people actually prophesying and doing miracles in his name, but not actually 'knowing Christ'. (Matthew 7:15,20-23) Perhaps more painful to the individual is the hypocrisy of naming Christ in a life, in a home, but living a lie – abusing, drinking, drugging, assaulting. And yet going to church, and dragging us along to sing songs on a Sunday...

So first, let's validate our pain. Let's allow ourselves the anger from hurt we've experienced from hypocrisy. It's real. It was, is and will be. But let me jump straight to something key on this very issue: Jesus hates this! Jesus will judge this! Jesus warned with almost violent language against this! Here are the scriptures on these points that jump to my mind, but honestly, this is the very character and heart of God and Christ from Genesis to Revelation. The Scriptures are packed out with God's hate for the false and the counterfeit.

²⁸ For more of my personal story, please visit www.1peter1three.weebly.com

Jesus hates sin:

- **'...about the Son he says... You [Jesus] have loved righteousness and hated wickedness...'** (Heb 1:9, quoting and claiming Ps 45:7)

- When Jesus was accused of collaborating with, or drawing power from a sinful spirit, this is when he spoke of the 'sin that would never be forgiven'; this unforgivable sin is saying of Christ that he has 'an unclean spirit'. (see Mark 3:22- 30 – specifically vs.30) So if it is sin we are talking about, never think or say that it is somehow God's will!

Jesus will judge:

- Jesus is the judge of the 'living and the dead.' (2 Tim 4:1)

- Jesus refers explicitly to when he will 'sit on his throne' and judge the nations. (see Mt 25:31)

- Jesus refers to differential sins and guilt. (Jn 19:11, and see 1 Cor 6:18)

- Jesus said, **'I have much to say in judgment of you.'** (John 8:26)

- Jesus said, **'He who disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God.'** (Luke 12:9)

- Jesus said, **'Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned...'** (Mt 18:6)

This is just to make the point that it is the devil that is a deceiver, a counterfeiter (see 2 Cor 11:14). He is the liar. (Jn 8:44) And if everything about hypocrisy hurts your heart, and grieves your soul, you stand on the side of truth, and Jesus said: **'Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.'** (Jn 18:37) You stand with Jesus here. God actually wants people to grieve sin. (see Ez 9:4) When Jesus encountered loss, he gave no explanation, but wept. (Jn 11:35) When asked about whether sin was the cause of an ailment, he dismissed the question about sin, and addressed the hurt, brought healing. And we are told, like Jesus, to not explain suffering with sovereignty theologies, but to **'weep with those who weep'** (Rm 12:15), and to get on with the healing message and Spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Jn 12:35; Rm 10:14-15,17; 1 Cor 9:16)

So as a Christian, what do you leave people that truly changes their life? I mean, you might give them some money today, but it's gone tomorrow. Do you go back and give them more? You might dig a well today, but since when was leaving a 'well' with a village a sealed deal that you and your church have done your part for them? Have you packed up and moved to that village, to live and work there, serving them the rest of your life? So what 'practical' things do you do for the world, as your testimony to Jesus Christ that is 'enough'? Every one of us walks away from children 'under the harbor', every day!

I'm not here trying to invalidate 'good' that you do in Jesus' name. And nor am I invalidating your hurt and issues with 'hypocrisy', which we've looked at honestly above. But I am also shooting an arrow into a strand of arrogance that is alive and kicking in all of us, a self-righteousness, that thinks what we do is enough – but what others do is never enough. We think just preaching about Jesus is not enough, not the true message, but that our donation of money (and often not sharing the gospel message about Jesus) is enough. And we walk away

feeling quite good about ourselves. In the same way the hypocrisy needs to be called out, so, too, does this arrogance and error. It stems from pride, and from a deep lack of discipline in the Word and in the Spirit of Jesus. As Jesus' said to the group of questioners, **'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures, or the power of God.'** (Mt 22:29)

So where is the 'sweet spot'? Where is the 'way'? What is it that God requires of us? What, actually, is the gospel message that we are called to believe, called to live, and called to share with 'all nations'? Here is where the healing begins...

My friends, as humbling as it may sound, inasmuch as the world around us has sneered and jeered, the 'power of God' – which is real, and flows, and changes hearts and lands – is in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel is a very simple, very powerful message of God to each and every human: To repent of our sin (to actually turn away from it in our lives), and to put our sincere belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, one with the Father.

'Anyone who hears my word, and believes him who sent me, has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has passed over from death to life.' (John 5:24)

'I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation...' (Romans 1:16)

'I claimed to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and in great fear...' (1 Cor 2:2-3)

'What must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.' (Acts 16:30-31)

Jesus said, **'If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins.'** (John 8:24)²⁹

Even when Jesus did miracles (and he did not do miracles for everyone who wanted them, who even needed them)³⁰, he made his 'point' the saving of the soul. In Luke 5 Jesus heals a paralytic but look at what he says to this man:

'So that you know that I have power to forgive sins, take up your mat...' (Luke 5:24)

And look at what Jesus says to the disciples after they have just been experiencing 'power' of Jesus in casting out demons:

'Do not rejoice that the demons submit to you, but that your names are written in heaven.' (Luke 10:20)

As we discussed earlier, signs and wonders are not why Jesus came, nor do they indicate where Jesus is being most glorified. (Mt 7:15,20-23) Jesus came to be *'God with us'* (Is 7:14/Mt 1:23), and regardless of people's prosperous or poor lives here on earth, regardless of healings and prophecy³¹, sunshine or rain³², the gospel message is that through repentance

²⁹ A few more key verses on the message of repentance and faith: Mk 1:15; Rm 10:9; Rm 10:14- 15,17; Jn 5:14; Jn 8:11; Lk 13:5; Mt 21:31-32

³⁰ John 5:1-6; Mt 16:1-4

³¹ Mt 7:15-23

³² Mt 5:45

and faith in Jesus, people can 'know' God, and be saved now and forevermore.³³ This is why Jesus came. This is the message he preached. This is the message – and the power – that Jesus wants shared across the globe. This is the gospel.

So to my own insecurity as a child and young man, of the 'foolishness' of the message that was preached³⁴, well, Christ is the prize and the power, and his gospel message is the highest value gift you can leave with any person in any situation. Jesus is the 'treasure' buried in a field, worth all that anyone owns. (Mt 13:44) Jesus – his Name, and power to forgive and save for all eternity – is what God has smiled on and will honor as it goes forth in faith, is claimed in faith, is worshipped.³⁵

The reason I was – and still can be – ashamed of the message of Jesus, is not because He is not enough, but because I don't know his worth. 'His love is better than life.' (Psalm 63:3) But for me, generally, my life is better than his love. And therefore if I cannot frame his message, his truth, into some benefit for me in my own life terms, well, I'm ashamed of what he has to offer. If I cannot frame Christ into the 'value system' of the world around me, well, I'm ashamed to share him, as I feel like I'm sharing something of little worth, of little entertainment.

Jesus is God's highest prize. He is the tangible, visible, merciful and sacrificed message of God for the salvation of the very soul of a man. His blood 'speaks a better word than the blood of murder' (Heb 12:24), can right wrongs, re-write history, and set captives free for a second chance.³⁶ He defeats the tomb, and he defeats the very spirit of death in life around us.³⁷ Jesus is 'God with us', and brings healing in his 'rays'.³⁸ If this is of little value to me, or to others, that is my – and their – problem. This is the gospel. This is the message. And the only thing to be ashamed of in its light, is my own lack of appreciation, understanding and experience.

'There is no other name under heaven given unto men by which we must be saved.'
(Acts 4:12)

'Anyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will acknowledge him before the angels of God.' (Luke 12:9)

'Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, therefore, go to him outside the camp and bear the shame he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.' (Heb 13:12-14)

Now, Jesus is not a word on a page. He is the Word that '*became flesh*' – he came off the page! (Jn 1:14)

'The kingdom of heaven is not one of mere words, but of power.' (1 Cor 4:20)

This 'power' starts in the soul, and literally saves a person for all eternity. Jesus said this was 'good news for the poor.' (Luke 4:18) Why? Well, to be 'saved' by Jesus Christ means that if

³³ Mt 7:21-23 & 2 Tim 2:19

³⁴ 1 Cor 1:20-21

³⁵ Phil 2:10; Col 3:17; Acts 4:12; Jn 9:38; Mt 14:33

³⁶ Is 1:18; 2 Cor 5:21; Luke 4:18/Is 61:1

³⁷ 2 Tim 1:10; 1 Cor 15:55/Is 25:8

³⁸ Mt 1:23/Is 7:14; Mal 4:2

you are 'last' here, you will be 'first' there! (Mk 10:31) Your destiny of poverty has been put to death, and a kingdom of everlasting wealth, health, joy and beauty is just up ahead. And even here and now, bubbling up and over from 'within', this eternal life and heavenly inheritance breaks into your earthly life. It starts in the soul – this is the will of God – and spills out and over onto your earth, your land.

'Whoever believes in me... streams of living water will flow from within you.' (Jn 7:37-38)

When we crown Christ as king of our lives, agreeing with God the Father, a new kingdom comes upon us. A new King is set in place over our lives, our skies, our hearts, minds, businesses, marriages, spirits, investments, crops, weather, etc. We are now under new authority, and the very infrastructure of our existence is subsumed into our eternal kingdom. This is a new 'power' that flows to and through us here and now, and a new 'purpose' that comes into the very lives we live here on earth.

Purpose? Yes! Look at what Jesus instructed us to pray, and to live: ***'Father in heaven... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'*** (Mt 6:9-13) In Christ we are new creations (2 Cor 5:17), new citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20), we are hidden in the heavens with Christ (Col 3:3), and we have a new, eternal purpose in our lives here and now. It is this: to build the kingdom of God.

How do we build the kingdom of God here on earth? Well, the kingdom of God is not one you see with your earthly eyes³⁹, but it is real, and its structure (the very bricks you lay here in faith) 'will be shown for what it is.' (1 Cor 3:13) We build the kingdom of God, by bringing this King into our lives and identity here on earth. We believe that Jesus is the King of the world, and by his Spirit we bring his 'story', his gospel message, to and through our world here. In doing this, we are advancing his kingdom into the earth. (***'...your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'***) The spear tip of the kingdom of God, is the King himself – Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God comes to earth only in the way that God himself came to earth – Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, ***'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'*** After saying this, he then commissioned us to action: ***'Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.'*** (Mt 28:18-20) Disciples not of ourselves, not of our churches, nor of our Christian cultural or political systems and preferences; but disciples of Christ. People who see and follow Christ, regardless of the political or cultural system in which they find themselves. People follow Christ, and then from 'within' waters flow, and this impacts and transforms relationships and lands around them. In the wake of following Jesus, culture and land molds.

'If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.' (2 Chron 7:14)

So Jesus has broken into my world. He has become real to me, and his ***'love is better than life.'*** (Ps 63:3) I have come to realize that his gospel message does and will offend my prideful soul, and it is 'not of this world'. (Jn 18:36/14:27) No, the gospel of Jesus Christ – which is God himself with me, with you, with us – does not fit into the systems or values of this broken and hurting world; rather, it fits this hurting world into its own Person of healing, forgiveness, purpose, power and eternal life.

³⁹ Luke 17:21

I have come to believe that the gospel is the ‘power of God for salvation’ – and it is ‘Spirit’, and it stays with any people that it is brought to in faith.⁴⁰ It is, in fact, the only thing that stays with them. God stays with them. And He begins by healing the heart, and then spills over – day by day, year by year – to heal bodies, marriages, crops, systems of law and order, politicians... Like the mustard seed, like the yeast, Jesus will grow in and through a people, where faith takes hold of his ‘story’.⁴¹

‘Peter said, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you... for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that... on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it.’ (Mt 16:16-18)

Now, my friends, if we are clear on the message of the gospel – repentance of sin, and faith in Jesus Christ – then we are equipped to bring a full assault on darkness in this broken world. We can go anywhere, led by the Holy Spirit⁴², and bring a declaration of the one, true, pure King of the world – Jesus Christ – and offer people, through the gospel, an opportunity to ‘know him’, and have their names written in heaven. And then also, in his name and by his kingship, we can pierce darkness and liberate captives – spiritually, and practically. We can demolish strongholds, and fearlessly take back the land for the one, true King. I leave you with these verses of vision, purpose, power – to heal the land:

Jesus said, ‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ (Mt 16:19)

‘For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.’ (2 Cor 10:3-5)

‘For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.’ (2 Tim 1:7)

‘Can plunder be taken from warriors, or captives be rescued from the fierce? This is what the Lord says: ‘Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.’ (Is 49:24-25)

⁴⁰ Is 55:11; Rm 1:16; Jn 6:63; Jn 16:7

⁴¹ Mt 13:31-33

⁴² Jn 5:19; Jn 16:13

(Essay #16)

Suffering and a Good God

'This is how you should pray... deliver us from evil.' (Mt 6:9-13)

I received a question this morning from a sister in the Lord regarding suffering and our good God. Below is my answer, and an attempt to share my heart on this issue. Honestly, when I read over what I've written below, it still does not capture my truest feelings, which really are just a broken heart, and my hope that the Lord will help me, help you, and carry us through to victory. If you have suffered, and question God, please know you are honored in the eyes of the Lord, have a special place in his heart, and will come to understand, feel and know the resurrection power of Christ in a way that few will know. You will receive back your dead, your stolen goods and spirit; and your inheritance, in Jesus' name, will, one day, eclipse your sacrifice, will reverse your experience. You are strong, pure, true and mighty in faith. Your inheritance will be astounding. We thank you and honor you, as we do Christ. (Romans 8:18; Isaiah 1:18; Romans 4:17; 2 Cor 5:21)

Hi Joanne, This question about suffering and God's goodness, is, to me personally, the deepest issue in our Christian faith, and our belief about God.

I cannot find answers for it. I believe that God does not want me to find answers for it. I think it is above the capacity for man to 'speak to'. Jesus, to my knowledge, never gave reasons for why this or that person suffered; Jesus, instead, focused on bringing healing and comfort, and warning us to avoid doing evil. In fact, when Jesus came face-to-face with suffering, he 'felt compassion', and admonished the disciples to pray to God for 'workers'. (Mt 9:36-38) Again, when Jesus stepped into people's suffering, he 'wept' with them (Jn 11:35), or moved strongly to comfort and heal. We are told to 'weep with those who weep' (Rm 12:15), but unfortunately, often because of our own fears and insecurities, we try to 'explain' things to people when they are grieving, rather than just move close to listen, shed a tear, comfort.

People are allowed to get angry with God. God himself allows this, and even gives us the words to express it! (Psalm 10:1-2, and many other scriptures) In fact, when Job was suffering so terribly, God never had a problem with Job for his anger and wrestling with God, but God did have an issue with his 'false counselors'. These counselors or comforters were well-intentioned, trying to defend God's honor, but they were wrong! (Job 42:7) God does not need us to defend his honor. He needs us to draw near to the hurting and to be his hands and feet of comfort and empathy.

I think the scriptures that speak to suffering 'for our good' are deep and amazing, and are for individuals, with faith and fortitude, to apply to 'themselves', as God helps them to do so.⁴³ But I don't think people outside the suffering (like Job's friends), should use them to admonish people in pain. I don't think Jesus would do this. I think Jesus would weep with them, and draw near to be with them, serve them and sit with them.

Anything bad or evil, I never ascribe to God. We are told that there is no darkness in God, and that we should not even ascribe temptation to him. (James 1:13; 1 John 1:5; 1 Tim 6:16) Jesus taught us to pray that we would be delivered from evil. (Mt 6:9-13) God honors those who 'hate' evil. (Ps 45:7) So if and when something 'bad' happens to someone, this is of the enemy, and should never be ascribed to the Lord, not even in the name of 'sovereignty'. So how, then,

⁴³ James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-19

do we understand God's 'control'? How, then, can we have 'confidence' in God's protection? Well, this is where I have to really humble myself, be satisfied to not have the answers, and yet I ask God for faith to stay with Christ and to not be 'offended on account of him' (Mt 11:6). I wrestle with Jesus, and ask him for healing, for peace that passes understanding. I ask God to spare me from evil (like we are instructed to ask in the Lord's prayer, Mt 6:9-13). One thing I do know from scripture, Joanne, is that many who are last here on earth (Mk 10:31), will be 'first' in heaven. And those who have 'suffered with Christ' will gain a powerful resurrection! (Heb 11:35-38; Phil 3:10-11)

So, Joanne, I, like you, wrestle with this issue. I think I will always wrestle with it, because we should never grow comfortable with our understanding of the issues of evil, of God's goodness, God's judgment, or people's suffering. We are called to bring the 'good news' that Jesus Christ heals the heart, heals the soul, and is in the process of making all things new. (Rev 21:5)

We will bring this message forward in faith, even if we must bring it with tears, with a broken heart, and with very limited understanding.

I hope this is of some help, Joanne, to encourage you to continue believing that God is good, Jesus is present, Jesus protects, heals and forgives and will judge all sinfulness. We must also always believe, and minister with humility, that the healing power, the redemption power of Jesus, is stronger than the grave. (1 Cor 15:54; Is 25:8; 2 Tim 1:10) I will never and can never be arrogant in this message, nor can I ever claim to understand it. I must never be a 'false comforter' where I try to defend God's honor. I must walk as Christ did, and minister Jesus as he ministered himself to people.

Oh, Lord, help us! In Jesus' name we pray!

(Essay #17)

Poverty, Wealth and Jesus Christ

'Does having lots of stuff make you rich?' Bob Marley, 1945 – 1981

Introduction

I might give a donation, or tithe 100 bucks, but then teeter and resist a one-dollar gift to a poor man on the side of the road. I will question the merits of sponsoring a child in need of food totaling 50 bucks a year, and then without thinking cruise through the fast food joint and feed the family an unnecessary meal. The rubber hits the road in our faith when it comes to money. Jesus spoke a lot about money, more because of what it means than what it is. This is the truth about all things in life. Stuff is everywhere - material, physical, sensational - but because of our sin all this 'stuff' is no longer 'one with' God. We need to navigate this life in Jesus with our cross on our backs, ready to die and then die again until we come clean to and through the gates of glory. (Genesis 3:5-6; Jude 25; Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5; Mark 8:34-38)

Money is a currency for self, good and bad. We use it to feed the body, to finance good things, to finance bad things, to free people, to enslave people, to seek safety, to enjoy safety, to indulge, to express sacrifice to God (tithe), to express sacrifice to idols, etc. So our relationship to money is going to be about as 'live' a wire as our relationship to life and God.

Are you deep with God? Your relationship with money will be healthier. Are you weak in your faith? Your relationship to money will be more dangerous and interwoven in you than you may know or feel. If you try to get too comfortable in your theories and dealings with money, then money actually has too much of a hold on you. If you try to ignore money and act as if it does not matter or warrant your attention, then money actually has too much of a hold on you. You cannot 'box' money or relegate it to insignificance, nor can you elevate it to more significance. It is what it is, and you will be to it, and it to you, in direct and significant correlation to your love of God – the first and most important commandment (Matthew 22:36-40).

One of the best ways to 'do' money is the same as 'doing' life, and that is 'on the side' of your relationship with God. It matters, but should not be, never be, what is in the center of the picture, that thing in clearest focus. It should be in the picture, because God made life that way, but it should not ever be what you strain to have clearest in focus.

The only true rest you can and should be striving for is the 'rest' that God gives, and to know this day, this hour and in your relationships that He is in and through you (Hebrews 4:11; Psalm 27:4; Hosea 10:12). If you feel and hear the 'living waters' flowing through you, your money matters will be clear enough. (John 7:37-38)

Poverty, Wealth and Jesus Christ

I grew up on the mission field, what they call a 'missionary kid' or 'MK'. My dad is a street preacher, has been since his 20s when he committed his life to Jesus. He and my mom, US citizens, struck out on the mission field from the day they got married – India, Lebanon, and on and on. They were with 'Operation Mobilization' (OM), and still are. I personally, after being born in the US, was brought up for a few years in Iran (till evacuated by the US government in 1979), then through Turkey, Belgium, and 2 ships for 4 years (all over Asia and South America). We trundled into Ireland in 1984, in a big, Ford transit van, 6 kids from 1 to 14 years old. I was 9 years old, and had been to 49 countries.

From the youngest of ages I have been exposed to not only life's natural disparities of wealth and health in a given community, but almost to the full spectrum of extremes across the world. When getting evacuated out of Iran due to the revolution in 1979, I remember hanging my 'Pooky' bear on the olive tree for the shepherd boy who worked in the field across from our apartment blocks. I was 3 years old, going on 4. Also in Iran I remember being told to duck and hide in the car because we were out past curfew and being stopped by police. Two of my other clear memories from that age and era were sitting in a bucket seat of a paratrooper plane with my rub-a-dub-dub-three-men-in-a-tub toy, jetting out of Iran bound for Turkey, back of plane open... and also standing at the foot of the first ship we moved onto, 'Logos', in the Philippines, thinking if I went up the gangway the ship was bound to tip over and fall, just going on the sharp edge the ship seemed to be balanced on in the dark waters of the night.

While on the ship we would dock in countries and fan out places preaching and teaching and sharing and caring. I remember the ship pulling away to the cheers and smiling waves of homeless children living under the docks. In 1980 our ship came across a stranded boat of 93 refugees fleeing Vietnam, destined now to die. We stalled the ship and pulled them all aboard, letting their vessel drift away empty, but no lives lost.

Every couple of years as a family we would make a trip back to the US, to touch base with churches, friends and family. My parents were financially supported by people donating to the Christian mission they were working with (OM). So it was important to get home and report on life and outreach work every couple years. My parents did send out a monthly letter to interested people, but there were no phone calls or emails or any other form of 'real time' update. In fact, when I was 18 years old and my now-wife and I went on a one-year mission commitment to Spain (1992-93), we did not have email or phone call opportunities even at that point. I spoke on the phone only one time to my parents that whole year, other than that it was hand-written letters. So go back to the 60s and 70s and communications were almost non-existent, so these trips back to the US were critical in letting people know you were still alive and kicking out there...

When back visiting the US, I remember so enjoying the smell and look of 'cookie monster' on a frosted cookie in the dazzling Target. Life was trademarked and registered. Amazing. Roads were smooth and teeth existed (whatever about white or straight). Shoes were everywhere and tragedy was defined and responded to urgently if I was lacking a second donut. Just blissful! We would visit people's homes from supporting churches, including millionaires with man-made waterfall pools in their back yard, and cinemas in their basements. Then pack up and back out to the warm, blue skies of Brazil, for example, with homeless kids swarming around having the deepest and darkest conversations about God before skipping back out to the dark streets of the unknown. I would watch them go. And it is now I see how ponderous those images and souls pressed in on mine. And I thank God for it. Because whether one sees it or not, it is truth and happening, and there are questions we need to ask and answer about God, life, wealth, poverty and the gospel, that find footing in this truth. Let me share with you some of what God has been teaching me in this area.

There will come a day when not only creation is perfect, but your capacity to enjoy it is perfect. It says in Ecclesiastes that blessed is the man who is able to enjoy the fruit of his labor (Ecclesiastes 3:13). To have or be in perfection, can be hell itself, if not capacitated to enjoy perfection. Remember, heaven and hell coexist. At least in our minds they do, whatever about in their real times, spheres and dimensions in our future, God's 'time'. But drawing a parallel from our times here and now, we can and do find moments – even just moments – when we can enjoy life, light and sensation, and even forgetfulness; and at those same moments, still lodged somewhere in our psyche, is the belief that somewhere at that same moment heinous

crimes are being perpetuated against mankind. How can we ever enjoy anything, therefore, when we know in our knower that hell is assailing another at that same moment? God in his mercy is giving us the capacity – to you and your evil neighbor – to enjoy a ‘measure’ of joy that is real (Matthew 5:45). Heaven is not only what is created around you, but what is in you. The outward and the inward have to line up spiritually. This is why many a rich man surrounded by earthly perfection, uses all his wealth, health and beautified resources to overdose in despair. Heaven is from God, is an eternal and not primarily a circumstantial thing. Eden lined up both the spiritual and the physical, and heaven will do that again. In heaven, light will exist, but not separate to Him like the sun. God will be the light – the creator and created, as it were, one and the same. (Revelation 22:5)

You may have noticed that life is material, physical. It is important to note that when God made creation, creation itself was not God, but was one with God. So God would walk with mankind in and through His creation, but when God was not walking with them, they were not incomplete or spiritually empty. Creation mankind was in, and mankind itself, was ‘from Him and through Him and to Him’ (Romans 11:36; and see Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3; John 1:3).

Since the Fall (Genesis 3), the presence of God in creation was separated in a way that was not meant to be. Creation became something separate to God, and in a new relationship to God. This is the only possible way that now creation – created things - can become idols and objects of worship – trees, sun and sky. Creation is now seen as separate to God because although it derives from Him, is sustained by Him, God’s spirit now stands beside but not laced through a pure creation. God loves it, but is not in it. Not like He once was and will be again. To admire, or ‘worship’ creation when in the garden of Eden would have been completely synonymous with worshipping God, because the worshipper and the worshipped would have all been in the same, pure spirit of God’s expression and creation. But now that darkness is laced through the core of the created, to admire (past a point) and worship creation, is to bypass the creator and bow down to equal measures of the ‘image of God’ in all things (Genesis 1:27), and the death and decay that has made its rightful stamp on things because of our rebellion. We cannot worship the created because we are worshipping a darkness and measure of death that is not God, is an idol, another God, another spirit, a serpent. My descriptions here are necessarily pivoting and spinning on poetic license – how else can one speak to such things? I hope you afford me the same latitude God affords the Psalmist, and you afford a good movie. Roll with me here, and let’s try to access and touch truer truth than the literal can ever render (John 5:39-40).

Christians struggle with the issue of wealth and poverty. It is a live nerve, and we all would love to coat it; it is a kill-joy and we would all love to inoculate it, or eradicate its lurking, ‘guilting’ presence and potential to ambush. This issue is not just a struggle for Christians, it is part of the spiritual battle that wars on every man, woman and child on this dark sphere and era of the eternal. Jesus spoke so much about money, and not in order to equip us for ‘financial peace’ but spiritual peace. Same reason Jesus spoke about all things ‘real’ and tangible to us here. Not money, but the ‘love of money’, is a root of many kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10) – because of what it means to your heart, not what it is, or how much it is, in your hand or bank account. The ash heap of a single dollar is very similar to that of a million dollars, and when the wind blows even those ash heaps dissipate and are no more. What is money? It is the very essence of all that is the ‘temporal’, is for here and will be left here. So like all things temporal, we need to ‘subject them to be obedient to Christ’ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5) – thoughts as well as cash.

Can a Christian drive a BMW? Do you remember that inane, and immature question circulating the first world, and distracting us from the gospel like so many other bumper stickers today?

(Matthew 22:29). Yes, a Christian can, if Christ says so. If you are looking for an equation to justify or condemn said Christian, you are on that legalistic and prideful spectrum that has no superior end. It floats weightless in the dead expanses of vanity. Melchizedek was rich beyond measure, but Abraham, led by God Himself, tithed to this man (Hebrews 7:1-2; Genesis 14:18-20). Jesus wanted the rich, young ruler to give away all his money, because it came between him and following Christ (or the first commandment of having no other God, Mark 10:17-22). This is seen because despite Jesus' love for him (vs 21), and the man's desire for eternal life (vs 17), he would not and could not give up his money for God. He went away sad and we hear no more about him. Joseph of Arimathea was a bold disciple and a rich man (Matthew 27:57). The centurion who 'wowed' Jesus with his faith was a rich man and Jesus added health to his wealth after commending him publicly (Luke 7:1-10). If you are obsessed about the ills and favors of money, in your life or that of another, you are deafened to the real voice of God and deceived by your own pride. You can be the richest and godliest man on earth, and the poorest and most money-hungry man on earth.

What's your treasure? What, honestly, is your reward? When you lie down at night, what is your prize for life lived, and even suffered? Can you, with the Psalmist, say, '... earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail (and my health insurance, and 401k), but God is the strength of my heart (my true health and future security), and my portion forever' (Psalm 73:25-26)? With the prophet can you say, '... though the crops fail... yet I will be happy in God my savior...' (Habakkuk 3:17-18)? Is the Kingdom of God to you as Jesus' described its value, a treasure in a field that is worth all we own? (Matthew 13:44) If the relationship of God to man is defined in such intense, all-consuming measure, by Jesus' own life and words, and the examples of our forefathers (Exodus 33:18), to not be in this place in our souls and our lives is to be missing out. If you are not there, are you 'seeking'? (Psalm 27:4; Hosea 10:12)

My struggle regarding resources is more on the end of having, not wanting. This is not more virtuous than any other struggle on this issue, just a different starting point to challenge and grow me in my walk with God. One reason for my particular struggle of having resources, that I have discovered deep down in myself, is to do with how I would 'secure' them for myself if/when I have them. Now this is after a long stretch of experiences, perceptions, and different financial situations (living on people's donations as a child, living as an earner/employee as an adult). This insight to my self and my own struggle is a subtle 'truth' and I'm going to expound on it here.

If one does not have resources, and is given them to live on (such as my type of childhood), one adapts to this modus operandi. You might experience certain difficulties from this lot in life – uncertainties, lack of predictability and limited material options – but you also do not carry the responsibility, really, to manage money nor give it away. Giving is a tough, spiritual discipline in itself, and no one is exempt from God's call to have a generous spirit and disposition. However, if, primarily, you are a 'beneficiary' financially, due to life's circumstances, one of God's blessings in that place, is that there is a lot less pressure on you in the spiritual challenges of giving money away. There may be much else that you are called to give, but money you do not have to give. What you do not have, as it were, you are not going to give account for. This is simplistic, for purposes of explanation and contrast.

Another one of God's blessings to the 'poor', as a spiritual gift to them for their suffering want, is that they are preferred, or specially equipped for more 'faith': '... Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith...?' (James 2:5) Jesus is serious about this principle of faith, and in order to protect its worth and work in our lives, God will not always be moving our lives towards more resources or material wealth. Your faith is more important to

God than your material wellbeing. He really wants us to be free from the love of money (Hebrews 13:5). He speaks to a church in persecution and says, 'I know your poverty... yet you are rich!' (Revelation 2:9) Jesus had the power to heal everyone, but did not. He had the power to multiply food all the time, but he did not (and see why: John 6:26). He is interested in His power being both a blessing – like the sun and rain on everyone (Matthew 5:45) – and a resource and demonstration to mold the truest of treasure in our soul, to endure for ever: to prize His presence, rich or poor, crucifixion or resurrection, over anything here and now, including relationships and wealth. Is this where you are at? (Philippians 3:10; Matthew 10:37-39)

Now, having said that Jesus could have done anything He wanted but did not (as I just said above) is not entirely true. It is deeper than that. There is, in fact, a principle here (regarding Jesus having resources and yet living in peace among the poor), that is key to our own peace in having and stewarding resources. So if you are like me, maybe more comfortable with the parameters of not having, then this principle is really important to understand, in order to break into that space and truth of freedom of 'having', yet being free and at peace in a broken and disparate world. This is a 2- pronged principle. (John 4:24; 2 Corinthians 3:17)

First – or first prong – is that Jesus practiced what He preached. The true treasure of God is His presence, even in tribulation, demonstrated by His own preference to endure crucifixion and be in step with the Spirit – or in the will of God – rather than be spared but out of step with the Spirit or not fully in line with the will of God (John 5:19; Galatians 5:25). Jesus said, 'I have food that you know nothing about...' (John 4:32,34), and also demonstrated in His mind-bending, brink-of-death fasting, that if it was bread and the voice of the Devil, He would prefer death and the 'word of God' (Matthew 4:1-11). Such powerful liberation from the essence of this life's core structure and value system. Food was not the issue. For this reason Jesus 'ate and drank' and blessed with food (Matthew 11:19; Mark 6:30-44). This issue was, and always will be, until the 'renewal of all things' (Revelation 21:5), an issue of the heart. Jesus is after the heart and the spirit (John 6:63), and He will not give us a buy-out option.

We all seek safety from this tough walk with Jesus. We want to buy out or even buy in with suffering, and He will not allow us this stagnant relationship with God. He told Nicodemus, 'the wind blows where it wants... so it is with everyone born of the spirit.' (John 3:8) He told the young man, 'Foxes have holes, birds or the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.' (Luke 9:58). Jesus will not guarantee you a place to stay, or a nomadic life, money or adventure. He requires that 'daily' we take up our cross and desire to be with Him, wherever He is, left, right or center. He is our safe place, and His name is our fortress (Proverbs 18:10). Jesus is 'the bread of life' (John 6:35), 'living water' (John 7:37-38), and is, in fact, not only the treasure in life, but Life itself (John 14:6; 17:3). It is a mysterious and deep spiritual reality and torrent, but it is the truth. Jesus said this news was 'good' for the poor (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1). What do you believe people really, really need? Do you know the gospel and treasure it such that you sell – not buy – to protect it? (Matthew 13:44)

Second prong is this. Jesus had a 'guide', and offers to guide us. My child once asked me, 'If you were asked by a poor person today to give him your car, would you?' (you might here be thinking on Matthew 5:39-41). I said, 'Well, no. Because I don't believe the Spirit of the Lord would be calling me to do that.' There are scriptures one might use against me in this, but if it is not the word of the Spirit, it is simply a misuse of scripture. This is very important to see, believe and take hold of. The devil himself quoted scripture to Jesus – scripture that is about Jesus (Psalm 91) – with the intent to get him to commit suicide and/or worship Satan himself (Matthew 4:1-11). The written Word is for us to truly know the Living Word. Never let scripture become something used against truth - and it will be on all sides. You need to know God's

Spirit well, not just chapter and verse. Know both scripture, and the 'power of God', Jesus tells us, in order to not be 'in error' (Matthew 22:29; John 5:39-40). So Jesus stayed in step with the spirit, saying He did nothing outside of the will of the Father, outside of what He 'saw the Father doing.' This is why one day Christ might heal one person, but not others. (John 5:1-15)

This mysterious union of Christ with the Father is real, and our union with Christ is real. If you try to do 'life in the Spirit' by simply knowing scripture and other nuggets of wisdom, you will forever be sitting on the runway. Ready for take-off, maybe, but not in the air and flying. No verse can tell you in itself if it is 'time' for that verse to be applied to a situation (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Proverbs 25:11). Keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25). How will you know the voice of your guide, so as to know when it is time to give and time to withhold? Jesus said His sheep know His voice (John 10:27). You will know His voice better the more you walk with Him. How? Obedience to Him (John 14:15), love of God and of Christ (Matthew 22:36-40; Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Love of and diligence in His word (Psalm 119:111), tenacious hold of Him (I Timothy 6:12), fellowshiping with the saints (Hebrews 10:25), love of others (Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:18), sharing your faith (Philemon 1:6), etc. You will know His voice better, the better you know Him.

The key, the question, the answer, pivots on this: Where is God in your moments, your path, your story, your vision, right now? Where is God in their story right now? Our passion and prize is God. He is the plot and the sub-plot. If in Him and through Him you are in a season of blessing – like Job at the end of his trials – than honor Him by receiving and sanctifying with thanksgiving all that He has given you (I Timothy 4:5). Praise God. Enjoy. Why? Because this is what God – not you – is doing in your life. If He calls it clean, who are you to call it unclean? (Acts 10:15) Have the faith and the humility to enjoy (I Timothy 6:17). Be free.

If you are in the first chapters of Job in your own life, then see this and own this. Look to God, to see God, and to yearn for His salvation and work in your life. Look to God for His prospering and healing. Do not look to mankind, as what is of man, man can affect and influence, but what is not of man, he will be powerless to influence. And if you burden mankind as if he could change your circumstances, you might take him down with you (Jonah 1:12). See what is of man, and what is of God, and be pleased – trial or prosperity – to want what is from Him more than what is from man.

This is how we walk amongst the rich when we are poor, and celebrate with them, rejoicing with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15). This love and passion for God is also how we walk among the poor when we are rich, and weep with them, if, indeed, there is a gospel of God at work even in their grief and midst. The gospel is the 'good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1-2), and this does not always include your soup kitchen addendum. My experience in working with the hurting and ministering Jesus in their pain, is that it is not them that struggle with the notion of God being good and relevant in their distress. It is, rather, we the rich who struggle with this concept. The poor seem to see, touch and taste the 'good news' that is the true gospel, whether we bear provision or not with this gift and ministering of faith. Do you truly know and love the gospel and Christ, such that you can give the gospel and nothing else with confidence to the poor? The reason we struggle to have confidence that the gospel and presence of Jesus is 'good news' and sufficient for the poor, is because the gospel and presence of Jesus is not good news and sufficient for us.

We need to discern what is faith and action (James 2:14-26) and what is fear and dismissive humanitarianism. Apart from Christ we can do nothing (Jn 15:5) – not even good works. Have the humility to seek and serve Jesus when with the poor, and to seek and serve Jesus when

with the rich. Wealth is nothing, God is everything. Your poverty is nothing, for you are rich! (Rev 2:9).

God our treasure, our eyes' most prized object. The cross our glory, His presence our passion. If we do as Jesus said, with all our strength and mind to love God daily (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 8:34-38), this will calibrate our relationship to money, and put it on a separate track to our real treasure. Man cannot serve both God and money. If you serve God, money will not even be on the spectrum or sphere of that value and system and reward. If you serve money, God cannot be on that value system or reward. Money cannot and should not feature in the deeper places of Christ in you (Colossians 1:27; Matthew 6:24).

Note from the Author: As set out in the introduction and through the body of this work, this is a theme that has worked, and is working me, hard! I think God wants us to know freedom in and through Jesus Christ, now and forevermore. And the route to this freedom – to His kingdom come, His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-13) – is the same every time: it is found in living by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7), in subjecting the 'real' to the 'spiritual' (2 Corinthians 10:3-5), in standing on air, as it were, or Spirit, rather than on rationale (Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:3; 12:24). It is a narrow path, challenging, spiritual, exhausting, but much like the road of the cross and its ultimate prize. (Matthew 7:14; Mark 8:34-38; John 6:63; 4:24; 2 Corinthians 3:17)

Christ's 'Actual' Blood?

I recently heard it said, that the 'blood of Christ' and all that it accomplished, is not actually his 'literal' blood, but rather to do with all that his death and resurrection 'meant'. I have 2 brief points to defer to the reader on this:

1. How God Sees:

To hold to the above metaphorical position, I think we're assessing and evaluating Christ's blood from a wrong perspective. We're seeing it through our 'mature' eyes, our 'adult' minds, our 'rational' and 'serious' understanding.

But the power of Christ's blood is because of what the blood means to God – not to man. To God every drop of Christ's blood is literal, historical, quantifiable, like the hairs on your head. (Lk 12:7) Every drop of Christ's blood broke God's heart and consummated his fury – for all eternity, backwards and forwards. Every drop – like your every tear (Ps 56:8) – is 'bottled' by God, indispensable, never forgotten, never dried in God's heart. Christ's blood is the power of God to forgive the repentant now, and the rage of God to forever destroy the unrepentant later.⁴⁴ The blood of Christ – his own, willful 'laying down' under the sin of man (Jn 10:18) – forced God to look away once, and compels God to never look away again, until all things come under the authority of Jesus. (Mt 27:46/Mt 28:18) It is for this reason Jesus told us to ask the Father 'in my name...' (Jn 16:24)

There is so much 'wrath' of God indicated in the New Testament about those who reject the words and the person of Jesus. This judgment is never hateful in spirit towards people, but comes from the love that God has for Jesus, and because people reject Jesus. And so we must consider what the blood of Jesus means to God, not what it means to us. (see footnote 1 below)

2. How We See:

Jesus said, '**Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**' (Mt 18:3) Jesus also told us that our eyes are the 'lamp of the body', and when they are good, the whole body is full of light. (Mt 6:22-23) Jesus came to open the eyes of the blind. (Lk 4:18) Many who saw Jesus with their own, wise, mature, adult and 'understanding' eyes, looked straight through him and missed God. (Jn 11:53; Lk 6:7; Jn 5:39-40)

Nothing about God – nor his ways – fit into and through our minds. (Rm 11:33-36; Is 55:8-9) We see him not through our wisdom, nor by the light of our reason. (1 Cor 1:19-21) It is 'in his light we see light.' (Ps 36:9) It is by the author of light that our eyes are illuminated to recognize Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

So like a child we see, we enter the kingdom, and we sing, say, believe and know that God is 3 in 1, that everything came from nothing, that the name of Jesus – regardless of the language – has power, and that the blood of Jesus – regardless of its physicality – has eternal reach. Because the bible tells us so - and so we have known in our own souls! (Rev 12:10-11; Jn 9:25; 1 Cor 4:20)

⁴⁴ Mt 12:47-50; Mk 9:7; 12:9; Lk 12:4-5,8-9; Mt 26:24; Jn 19:11; Acts 17:30-31, etc.

'Blessed is he who does not take offense on account of me.' (Mt 11:6)

(Essay #19)

This Side of Evil

(Full title: *The Jesus I Serve Is This Side of Evil*)

Introduction

Jesus stands on only one side of evil. He does not somehow, and in some vague 'sovereignty' way, allow evil to happen. This is the Revelation we have in the Word, and in the life and words of Christ. And we must not 'go beyond what is written.' (1 Cor 4:6)

This 'revelation' of God is beyond our reason, our 'wisdom'. But it is the true revelation of who God is. To stand with Christ here, will feel limiting to your 'intelligence', and humbling in your testimony. It will feel 'weak' to you, a bit foolish. But it is God's 'folly' and God's 'weakness'.

'The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.' (1 Cor 1:25)

This Side of Evil

'Will you speak wickedly on God's behalf? Will you speak deceitfully for him?' (Job 13:7)

This opening verse – Job 13:7 – is key. Job is asking this question – 'Will you speak wickedly on God's behalf?' – to his counselors, his comforters, who were 'defending' God. They were saying God is true, God is upright, he is just, and it is man who is wicked. They were actually saying true things about God. But Job's suffering had nothing to do with Job's sin, and actually had nothing to do with God's will – both of which his comforters were insinuating.

God delighted in Job's righteousness and prosperity. God delighted in Job's faith. God's will was all things 'life' and 'love'. I think we miss the key issue in Job – and it's not that God allows evil. He doesn't. Christ doesn't⁴⁵, and for this reason he will punish it.

The key, childlike (and therefore truthful⁴⁶) point of Job is this: The devil brings the evil, and God brings the rescue, the defense, the salvation. This is the 'truth' of Job. And the 'test' for us in the book and story of Job? Well, the test for us is the same as was the test for Job's comforters – and they failed it. Will we, like them, fail the test of 'Job'?

Job's comforters failed the test by ascribing the devil's work to God, and trying to 'justify' God in it. Job challenges them this way:

'Will you argue the case for God?' (Job 13:8)

Then Job expresses God's heart on their – and our - defenses of God regarding people's suffering:

'Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay.'
(vs.12)

In this word of the Lord to Ezekiel, there's a critical insight as to how God works:

⁴⁵ Mk 3:22-30; Mt 18:6; Mt 5:48; Jn 10:10; Gal 1:4; Mt 26:24; Mt 25:31-32; Mt 12:36; Jn 19:11; Ps 45:7/Heb 1:9

⁴⁶ Mt 18:3

'If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood.' (Ez 33:6)

How is it that a man can be punished – justly – for their sin, but another man held accountable – justly - for their punishment, their 'blood'? This is impossible to carve up into 'shares' or percentages. This is, in fact, impossible to comprehend, and it is foolish to try to 'defend', or 'argue the case for God.' (Job 13:8)

When it comes to God's 'ways' and 'judgments', Paul admonishes us in this way (quoting both Isaiah and Job):

'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

***How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!***

'Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?' (quoting Is 40:13)

'Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay them?' (quoting Job 41:11)

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

(Rm 11:33-36)

So when it comes to the 'watchman' and what we can know and can act on, well, it's this: people are in sin, and they need to be reached, to be warned. Our job is to watch, know and warn – this 'warning' is a complete message, and full of grace, in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus not only calls us to 'turn away' from sin (which was the 'baptism of John' to prepare for the gospel – Matthew 3:11), but it tells us where to then place our belief for salvation, what 'door' to pass through for eternal life and renewal! (Jn 10:9)

If we don't 'warn' – or preach the gospel - we will be implicated in people's loss and punishment. If we do, we won't. In some ways, we've been 'tied' to people's sin, in a 'warning' capacity. We can't just say their sin is their problem. God has somehow made their sin our problem. And did not Christ do this for us?

'He became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God.' (2 Cor 5:21)

'Christ became the curse for us...' (Gal 3:13)

Christ tied his life and destiny to our sin, so that his own mission would fail if he did not stand in the gap. (Ez 22:30)

Regarding the nature of God's punishment, God's justice, people's suffering and loss - this we don't know. We only know that if we don't warn and 'watch', we will be implicated in their punishment, if not the sin.

This is critical, my friends, the issue of what we can and do know regarding sin and suffering, and what we don't and can't know. We got to stay in our 'truth' lane. There will be paradoxes in our understanding, and therefore (hopefully!) in our communications and interactions with people. This is good! In some areas of God's revelation, to be true to it, we must be limited,

this far and no further, this clear and no clearer... We're called to weep with those who weep, not to tell them that God ordained the disaster, and has a plan in it. If that truly were the case, really there is no need to weep. Although God has the ultimate victory, and the 'prince of this world stands defeated' (Jn 16:11), the enemy is still rumbling through the rubble and injuring the allies and relief workers. The battle is won, but the war zone in which we live and minister is still dangerous, and enemy forces still prowl and seek to inflict damage. Jesus tells us to be on our guard regarding the enemy, and even to pray that we avoid some of his trouble. How can Jesus tell us to pray against certain trouble, if he wills it towards us? Surely his will is what he tells us to pray for, and that is to avoid the trouble! When he tells the disciples of a tribulation that will come, he says:

'Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.' (Mt 24:20)

Jesus tells us to 'flee' a town where there is persecution, as he himself did many times. (Mt 10:23; Jn 7:1) How is it that we are told to 'flee' if the persecution, the resistance, the reality of what we naturally encounter is always his will towards us? No! The whole message of the bible, and the whole story of Jesus through the Gospels is far 'simpler' than this, far more human, more childlike. There are good guys, and bad guys. The good guys ultimately win, and even make 'good' out of what was intended for evil, but along the way it is a real – and not fake – battle, and there are real losses on the battlefield. And the good guys are only on ONE side of the battle – the good side. The 'good guys' are not switching teams to orchestrate an ultimate 'purpose' and outcome. It's not like someone playing chess against themselves, where the biggest winner is also the biggest loser.

Yes, this kicks up questions of 'sovereignty', but no child grapples with that big word, and completely incomprehensible concept to our little minds – and ***'unless you become like a child you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.'*** (Mt 18:3) Our 'wisdom' has only ever come between us and God, when it comes to 'getting God' (1 Cor 1:20-21), and/or 'defending God.' (Job 13:8) And I don't see anywhere in scripture where God consoles people about evil by telling them ultimately he had his hand in it... In fact, when the people tried to explain the good works of Jesus in this way – that by some dark power he was able to overcome power – Jesus pulled out the most chilling words he spoke, regarding the 'unforgivable'. He said that the only way he plunders the dark, is by tying up the strong, evil man of the house. Otherwise, he so famously said, a house divided cannot stand. And Jesus went further to say, that to see him and his 'Spirit' in any way collaborating with darkness, was an unforgivable sin, a blasphemy. (Mk 3:22-30)

And yet we in the Christian church come out with this very statement all the time! When we hear of a dear brother or sister assailed by what is clearly darkness (not some natural woe of our mortality like a cold, but an attack of the devil through the hand of sinners, such as abuse, violence, wicked scheming, etc.), we often console them by saying: *'The Lord 'knew', he must have allowed this, and he has a plan for you.'*

Not the Lord of the bible, not Jesus Christ! Things happened that God knew about, but never 'allowed', and we need to get on the right side of evil, here. An incredible verse to ponder is when Jesus told the Pharisees that God, through Moses, gave them instructions on divorce, not because he 'allowed' it but because their hearts were so hard that some measure of damage control and order had to be stipulated. Not God's will, not his way, but a merciful 'provision' in the meantime while we await judgment for that very breaking of his will and command.

‘Jesus replied, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.’ (Mt 19:8)

Paul himself said the devil thwarted his path on occasions – not the Lord. (1 Thess 2:18) We’re told we wrestle with ‘dark powers’ – not holy powers of God. (Eph 6:12) We’re told that we will have trouble in this world, but to take heart because God has ultimately ‘overcome’, and can and will ‘renew all’, but not that he willed the trouble in the first place.⁴⁷ We’re in a ‘present evil age’ that Jesus came to rescue us from, according to Galatians 1:4.

Unfortunately, my friends, when we ate of the fruit of knowledge to know right from wrong, we were deceived. (Gen 3:5) We wanted to be like God, and so we stepped outside of our minds’ bounds, and we’ve been free-falling in folly since then. We try to come up with answers for everything, and try to understand God’s ways and thoughts - which are higher than the heavens, and completely ‘other’ to our natural ‘knowing’ systems. (Is 55:8-9) We achieve nothing but madness, because we tried to be God through this tree of knowledge.

God in his mercy has given us ‘revelation’. He has shown us his own character and interventions in our lives and world, and he has modeled for us his ways and words. But even his word is ‘spirit and life’, not an equation to pocket and build on. So when the devil tried to use God’s written word against him, quoting the Psalms to try to tempt Jesus (Mt 4:1-11), well, the ‘written’ word has no power if not activated with a living faith in Jesus; and so what he quoted was not God’s Word at all. It was, in fact, evil. So we must gaze on God, absorb his truth through the humbling combination of both ‘the scriptures and the power of God’. (Mt 22:29)

You can spend 20 years in Seminary and not come to Christ (see Jn 5:39-40), or you can catch one true word of Christ in the wind, and build a revival on it. Read the account of ‘Mimosa’, a young girl from India who caught only one word about God through Amy Carmichael, believed, and walked with Christ for 20 years before hearing about him.⁴⁸

Revelation:

God reveals. We take captive the follies of broken minds, and now make them subject to Christ for full truth. We don’t take Christ, his ways, and then ‘therefore’ and ‘deducing’ and ‘inducing’ - discover truth. We take our deducing, inducing and reducing... and subject them in a childlike way to Christ, for full truth. And here it is: He hates evil. (Ps 45:7/Heb 1:9) He won’t allow himself to be associated with it in any way! (Mk 3:22-30) He calls us to be childlike to really see him, understand him, know his ways! (Mt 18:3) He will judge all sin! (Mt 18:6; Mt 12:36; Mt 26:24) He calls us to ‘abhor evil’. (Romans 12:9) He stands this side of evil – always and in everything! And if your mind takes you to other philosophies on the topic, other questions, other explanations – you’re in error. You’re deceived. You stray from where Jesus is, and you lose power to fight the evil.

‘...Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments... See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.’ (Col 2:3-4,8)

⁴⁷ Mt 16:33; Rev 21:5; Mt 19:28

⁴⁸ ‘Mimosa’, Amy Carmichael, 1924

'Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith.' (1 Tim 6:20-21)

'For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.' (2 Cor 10:3-5)

This leaves lots of questions unanswered, even unanswerable. Lots of questions we should not be asking. We need to get back to knowing God, not trying to understand or 'defend' him - the error of Job's counsel. (Job 13:8) If we gaze on the revelation of God in his scriptures, on the revelation of Jesus and his gospel, we'll come to the 'surface' of truth, but be far deeper in it. We'll have testimonies, not explanations. We'll have less answers that fit into minds, but more truth to transform minds. We'll have courage, and not pride, conviction and not arrogance. We'll be refreshingly limited in the written word of scholars, and filled like children with the Living Word. Our 'false knowledge' will be replaced with faith, our words with power.⁴⁹

'We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.' (2 Cor 4:2)

A colleague recently asked me if due to her homosexuality she was condemned to hell. I told her that according to scripture, I could confirm that homosexuality was an outworking of 'sin' in our lives, and is not what God has for us.⁵⁰ I told her that I could also confirm from scripture that she is loved by Jesus, and he calls her to repentance and belief, and that he is a 'door' to forgiveness, salvation, renewal, eternal life. I told this lady that with full confidence I could point her to the path of Christ for *'life that is truly life'* (1 Tim 6:19), but I could not speak to her personal state of judgment before God, *'if this'* or *'if that'*... I just cannot, I'm not allowed! I'm allowed to 'warn' (as a 'watchman') but not judge.⁵¹

This, I believe, is very true to the revelation and call of God; and yet it seems limited or irrational. Someone might say – and often they do – 'if you're saying that I need to repent and believe in Jesus to be saved, then surely you're saying if I don't, I'm condemned!' No. I'm not saying that, and won't agree to that. It's the 'watchman' principle. I can and must warn of danger and point to God for safety, but I can't – and must not – speak to the nature or justice of the judgment that comes. I'm a 'door-keeper' (Ps 84:10), a 'watchman' (Ez 33:6), a 'herald'. (2 Tim 1:11) I'm not the Judge. Jesus himself warned us to not try to pull weeds up and out, lest we take out good wheat mistakenly. (Mt 13:24-30) He said to leave the 'reaping', the 'judging', to the King.

If someone feels ready to repent of sin, believe on Jesus, well, here they are at the station where I stand, a concrete place, and I can show them the 'door', Jesus Christ. (Jn 10:9) But if they want to talk theoretically about the nature of sin, God's justice, God's judgment towards them 'if...' – I cannot, must not, speak to that! But if I fail to warn them, point them to the 'door', I will be implicated in possible punishment and loss. (Ez 33:6) So I warn them, share with

⁴⁹ see Job 13:8, 1 Cor 2:2-3, 2 Cor 10:3-5, Jn 5:39-40, Jn 6:63, Jn 5:46, Mt 22:29, Col 2:3-4,8, 1 Tim 6:20, Heb 11:6, 1 Cor 4:20

⁵⁰ Rm 1:26-27; 1 Tim 1:8-11; 1 Cor 6:9,18-20; Lev 18:22; Gal 5:19

⁵¹ If you want to hear an 8-minute audio reflection on this specific encounter and conversation, please visit this link:

<https://sharingyourfaith.weebly.com/blog/as-a-homosexual-can-i-be-a-christian-audio>

them, the 'gospel of peace' (Eph 6:15), the gospel of 'repentance and belief' for salvation. (Mk 1:15; Jn 5:24)

Jesus:

Let's talk about Jesus. Jesus is the 'culmination' of the Law (Rm 10:4), and he embodied it and destroyed it:

'Christ set aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations...' (Eph 2:15)

We know that Christ does not invalidate 'rules' or even the commandments.⁵² The law led us to Christ, and leads us to him still.

'The law was our guardian, to lead us to Christ.' (Galatians 3:24)

Jesus 'set aside the law' in the same way signs are 'set aside' when you reach a destination. What those signs represent is still valid, necessary. The way they point are not just for 'steps', but for spirit. For this reason we are told: ***'The law is spiritual.'*** (Rm 7:14) The Law is not primarily 'legal', but spiritual. This is why legalism is a misuse of the Law and misses its spirit. If truly tuned into the spirit of the Law, we would be focused not on the law, but on Christ, on his grace:

'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, because Moses wrote of me.' (Jn 5:46)

'You search the scriptures [the Law] because in them you think you possess eternal life, but you refuse to come to me and have life.' (Jn 5:39-40)

Christ embodies, culminates, consummates the Law. Everything that the Law is and was, came to fulfillment in Christ. The 'Word of God' – the Law, written and spoken – 'became flesh': Jesus Christ.⁵³ In a sense, when Christ was born, the Law was filed. It had done its job. It had convicted us of our sin (Rm 7:7), pointed us towards light, and readied our hearts to see God.

As noted previously, this does not render the Law redundant in terms of its value to direct us practically. However, it does render the Law redundant with regards to 'righteousness'⁵⁴ and with regards to 'ranking' of God's revelation. Signs point us to a destination, but once we've arrived there, all signs – though significant – should never become more important than the actual destination. Jesus is the destination of the Law, and Jesus is the highest expression, revelation and authority of God to man.

Why am I drilling down on this, in this essay? Because when it comes to knowing God's heart on evil, and where he stands in relation to it, the highest authority that God has given us to 'see' and 'understand' this, is the life, teaching and modeling of Christ. Prophecies and texts from the Law are beneath, behind, the eclipsing light of Jesus himself. As we noted earlier, some laws were even given just as 'damage control' because our hearts were hard. (Mt 19:8) But the life of Jesus is the ***'fullness of the deity in bodily form'*** (Col 2:9), the perfect image of God⁵⁵, and the perfect expression of God's heart. So in relation to

⁵² Mt 5:18; 23:3

⁵³ Jn 1:1,14

⁵⁴ Gal 2:16; Rm 3:20

⁵⁵ Col 1:15; Heb 1:3

evil, our words, thoughts and actions need to align fully with that of Christ. In fact, we're admonished to even take captive thoughts and make them subject to Christ. We're called to base our 'reasoning' – not on the principles of this world, but on Christ. He is the 'living Word.' (Jn 1:14)

Let's look straight at it, therefore: When Christ encountered evil and brokenness, he never explained it away. He penetrated it with the gospel of repentance and faith.⁵⁶ He moved his Kingdom into and over the kingdom of darkness. He fought against it. He felt compassion. He told us to pray for more workers. (Mt 9:36-38) He worked. He prayed. He taught. He risked. (Lk 11:37-54) He kept moving. (Jn 4:40) His ways were messy. (Mk 8:22-26) His tactics were shrewd and intentional. (Mt 10:16,23) He often offended people. His own disciples (church members?) asked him to not offend people – and he declined! (Mt 15:11-14) He was disrespectful to and about the 'king'. (Luke 23:8-9) He was misunderstood by his own 'prophets'. (Mt 11:2-3) He was abandoned by his closest followers. (Mk 14:50)

When people tried to explain his power over evil by suggesting some kind of collaboration with it, he warned them that this thinking, this 'belief', would never be forgiven by God. (Mk 3:22-30) When people had pain, he wept. (Jn 11:33-35) He admonished us to 'walk while we have light', to make headway. (Jn 12:35) He told us to duck and dive from winds of darkness and persecution. (Mt 10:16,23) He wanted to see change, and longed to change hearts and the very landscape of regions, cities, nations. (Mt 23:37; Lk 19:42; 2 Chron 7:14)

He was a warrior, who came with a 'winnowing fork' in hand to separate evil from the good. (Mt 3:12) He warned of judgment. (Mt 26:24, 12:36, Mt 18:6, Mt 25:31-32) He threatened child abusers. (Mt 18:6) He wept in the face of loss. (Jn 11:35) He grieved injustice and the death of believers. (Mt 14:13)

This picture of God is the 'side' of evil that he stands on. Jesus is 'this side of evil' – and so should we be, in word, deed and thought. He brings light into the shadows, to dispel them. God modeled this for us through Jesus Christ. Now, let us go 'outside' the city – or the philosophies and 'expanses' of man's wisdom – and be exactly where Christ is on this issue. The world will call it 'small', theologians 'incomplete', philosophers 'irrational', the wise 'foolishness'. We call it the 'revelation' of God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. And my friends, the gospel is the only ***'power of God for salvation.'***

'Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.' (Heb 13:13)

'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...' (Romans 1:16)

Redeemer:

Jesus redeems. This is a deep and dark business. Redemption – *'making all things new'*⁵⁷ – is where holiness meets evil and defeats it. Redemption – *'turning things to good'* (Rm 8:28) – is a battle, a blood bath. Only One is left standing. This is a very important issue here, and this is why:

If Jesus does not fight and punish evil – even here and now - then we will.

⁵⁶ Jn 5:1-14; John 8:1-11; Luke 5:20-24

⁵⁷ Rev 21:5; Mt 19:28

The problem with mankind taking their own vengeance on evil, is that we tend to fight evil with a measure of evil. But if no other power is moving against evil, I would sooner bring the fight, even if I'm not pure in my fight or have some malice in my motive.

If Jesus has one foot in the enemy camp, or is in anyway party to the hurt that happened, I can't trust his 'help' now. If Jesus 'allowed' this girl to be hurt, or that young boy to be humiliated, then I won't go to that Jesus for help, for healing. No way! I'd sooner buy a baseball bat ('cause no license is needed for that) and go express my own justice on the aggressor. And no argument regarding my own failings and 'who am I to judge', would be strong enough to deter me.

I will only go to a God for help, if this God is 100% on the side of rescue, salvation, protection, and if he 'hates' evil and had no part in it.

'You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.' (Ps 45:7 – quoted again in Heb 1:9 about the character and person of Jesus Christ)

I will only go to a God for help if he has deeper and darker zeal against the abuser than I do – and has expressed it.

'The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. He will drive out your enemies before you, saying, 'Destroy them!'' (Deut 33:27)

Jesus said, ***'If anyone causes one of these little ones — those who believe in me — to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come [as in, 'will happen'], but woe to the person through whom they come!'*** (Mt 18:6-7)

I will only go to a Redeemer who reviles – even threatens – those who suggest he collaborated in the darkness.

'Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.' He said this because they were saying, ***'He has an impure spirit.'*** (Mk 3:29-30)

The Jesus of the Bible, the very 'culmination' of the law and all of God's 'Word' and 'wisdom' and 'power' and 'holiness' (Rm 10:4; 1 Cor 1:24,30), this Jesus never allows evil, hates it, said it's unforgivable to associate him with it. (Ps 45:7/Heb 1:9; Mk 3:22-30; Mt 18:3) This Jesus I can come to when harm has reached me.

This Jesus will be moved when I tell him what happened. He will well up with tears when he sees me cry. This Jesus will feel disrespected by the enemy taking advantage of one of his own. Jesus can and will handle this completely, if I put down my baseball bat, and trust myself, my people and my cause, to him. Christ entrusted himself to God in this way, and God comes through.

'When they hurled their insults at him, Jesus did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.' (1 Pe 2:23)

'What then will the owner... do? He will come and kill those tenants...' (Mk 12:9)

Jesus redeems by addressing and overcoming darkness. He makes 'right', by defeating the 'wrong':

'Christ Jesus... destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.' (2 Tim 1:10)

'The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet...' (Rm 16:20)

Jesus has set his seal on you, and you are his. (Eph 1:14; 1 Cor 6:19-20) If the enemy dares to defy Christ and his borders around you, his encampment around you, the enemy will pay and God will restore completely your heart, your soul, your mind, your inheritance, your land. (Mk 10:28-31; Rev 21:5; Ez 37:3,12; 2 Tim 2:11-12)

'I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten...' (Joel 2:25)

'I will heal your land.' (2 Chron 7:14)

'I will put in you a new heart and a new spirit.' (Ez 36:26)

'He will drive out your enemies before you, saying, 'Destroy them!' (Deut 33:27)

How dare the devil trespass the decree of God's favor and protection on you! Never believe that Jesus 'allowed' this. (Mk 3:22-30; Jm 1:13) Never 'reason' that God somehow purposed this. (Job 3:8) The only 'rationale' that God brings to pain is judgment and healing:

'Come now, let us reason together,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.' (Is 1:18)

'The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.' (Mt 26:24)

Jesus is your Redeemer. He makes 'wrongs', right. He fights for you. He stands only on the side of peace, protection and love. He will only be found in that camp. Jesus is this side of evil. And for this reason, you can trust him with your pain, your cause, your violation of justice. For this reason you can put down your arms – because he takes up his on your behalf.

Jesus is only here. He is not everywhere – both in darkness and light. No, he is only in the light:

'This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.' (1 John 1:5)

Don't let people tell you that Christ somehow was in, behind or a part of the 'purpose' of your pain. Jesus did not let people say this to his face (Mk 3:22-30), so don't let people – or the enemy – whisper this to your heart.

'Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.' (Gal 1:4)

'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.' (1 Jn 3:8)

Example from the life of Moses:

In Exodus 17 we get powerful insight to how God works, where he stands, what's going on spiritually in our battles here on earth.

The Israelites went to war against the Amalekites. This was a tough one, contrasting with a lot of the Israelites' previous battles, in which they just routed the enemy, zero contest. But this battle was different, a close one. Faith was at the very core of the outcome. Moses was told by God to raise his hands over the battle – an act of faith in God, a prophetic partnering with God. And here's what happened:

'As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.' (Ex 17:11)

Two things struck me about this battle and the events that surrounded it. First, after the battle God instructs Moses to reassure Joshua – because, I imagine, the 'loss' dynamic in this battle might have shaken Joshua's confidence in whether God was really with him. So God says to Moses:

'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.' (Ex 17:14)

Have you had some tough battles, close calls, points in a battle where there was 'loss'? Has it shaken your confidence in God fighting for you? My brother, my sister, you stand with Joshua here. Heed the word of the Lord to Moses in above scripture! (vs.17)

Secondly, look closely at the words of Moses at the close of this account:

'Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the Lord, the Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.' (Ex 17:16)

I always associated this story with the raised hands of Moses, not the raised hands of the Amalekites. I think spiritually the enemy had 'raised hands' against God, and God called Moses to partner with him in raising hands of faith against the enemy.

God was opposed to the defiant, raised hands of evil. And God called us to partner with him in raising hands of faith.

When we raise hands of prayer, we stand with God on his side, against evil, against the raised hand of the destroyer. This is the truest picture of our partnership with God in faith against evil. Our God is on this side of evil, calling us to faith, to raised hands. In this place we stand with God – on this side of evil.

'I want men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.' (1 Tim 2:8)

Jesus asked us to partner with him in prayer, also. In the battle – the battle God was in, Christ was in – he said, 'Stay here and keep watch with me.' (Mt 26:38)

Jesus asked us to stand with him in his battle facing darkness. This is where we find Christ: stressed by the darkness⁵⁸, opposing it, and calling us to oppose it with him.

So why, then, when we pray, do we feel we are trying to convince God to oppose darkness, and to support our cause? Truly the cause against sin and suffering is Christ's cause, and it is he who invites us to oppose it with him, to lift our hands against the battle.

'Who will rise up for me against the wicked?' (Ps 94:16)

Why do we console people in their assault that God 'knew' and somehow 'allowed' this sin? No! It is our Christ who has broken into our dark world to defeat evil, to stand against it. The gods that 'will' evil, are the gods that our God stands against.

It is a fight. And our God, Jesus Christ, is on this side of evil.

Will of God:

'The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.' (Mt 26:24)

These words of Jesus – and others like it⁵⁹ - run very deep. Here he is saying that it is the 'will' of God that he goes this road, but it is not the 'will' of God that he goes this road. The word 'will' has different meanings depending on what we're actually saying. It was never God's 'will' that Jesus suffer and die. It was never God's 'will' that anyone sinned and suffered and died. God hates sin and everything that comes from it, including suffering and death:

'The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong.' (Ps 5:5)

So when Jesus says that he will go as it is written about him, he is saying that he is going a road he was never meant to go, does not want to go (see Mt 26:36), but will go in order to save others. It is the will of God that people are saved.⁶⁰ And he will call some warriors to walk through darkness to save others. His will is only to save. His bravery and 'zeal' (Is 9:7) will move through darkness to accomplish life. His 'will' is only life.

It is God's will that sin and death are defeated. It was never God's will – 'desire' or 'granted permission' – that sin happen. And God does not need sin or darkness to accomplish what he needs to accomplish. There is nothing about darkness that God needs in order to accomplish his purposes. And he won't tolerate that notion in our minds and hearts – that he somehow colludes or collaborates with darkness in our lives. (see Mk 3:22-30)

And even where God 'disciplines' or punishes, he does not 'will' or 'allow' any darkness in the heart of the 'punisher'. This is deep, but so important to grasp. Life is hard, and God will discipline those he loves (Heb 12:6), but if any person or people group is utilized by God in the 'discipline' or 'punishment' of a nation, God expects purity in the hearts of people towards people. Same with parents towards children. Discipline of children, yes. Anger towards children, no. (Eph 6:4) Look at these incredible scriptures in Ezekiel towards the nations that God used to 'discipline' Israel:

⁵⁸ *'...being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.'* (Lk 22:44)

⁵⁹ Mt 18:6-7

⁶⁰ 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pe 3:9; Mt 18:14

‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘Because the Philistines acted in vengeance and took revenge with malice in their hearts, and with ancient hostility sought to destroy Judah, therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to stretch out my hand against the Philistines...’ (Ez 25:15-16)

The ‘war’, even the ‘revenge’ are not the offense. The state of the heart in the battle offended God. The heart is always the issue. I am not offended by a police officer doing his job, enforcing law. But a corrupt officer who is enjoying ‘enforcement’, and carrying out his duties with a salacious or mean spirit, this is offensive, this is evil – this is acting in vengeance, with malice in the heart. Same with our armed forces in other nations. Are we fighting for a cause during the day, but abusing citizens in the dark? God will punish most severely! Is this not completely consistent with all Scripture, and the words and Spirit of Christ?

‘Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ (Mt 9:12)

‘Which of these was a neighbor to the man...?’ The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’ (Lk 10:36-37)

‘What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them... the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.’ (Mt 15:11,18)

‘Do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.’ (Mt 10:26)

‘But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’ (1 Sam 16:7)

‘What is the most important command?... Jesus answered, ‘To love... God... to love people.’ (Mt 22:36-40)

It is all about the heart. And the heart of God is all about life, love and mercy. Anything other than God’s pure light, is of the devil – it derives from a power that opposed God, and runs a course to and through life. In Christ, this darkness, this evil, ‘stands defeated.’ (Jn 16:11) But we still live, move and choose our destinies here on the bloody battlefield. Here in mortal life – but a breath – we still live in the crossfire of God’s goodness and the Devil’s death. And like on a battlefield, brothers and sisters, there are 2 sides to the fight. And you can’t be on both. And nor is Christ. He is this side of evil.

It will offend your pride to limit yourself to Christ. Heed this line. It will offend your ‘intelligence’ to stand with Christ. This is the challenge to our souls. We ate of the tree of knowledge, and we now think we should have answers for all we do. We think we should have knowledge. We try to extend Christ like a canopy over everything in our minds, to ‘cover’ our craving to be all-knowing. We ate of the tree... we must have answers! Our pride nourishes on ‘knowing’. We must know all. We ate of the tree...

‘Blessed is he who does not take offense on account of me.’ (Mt 11:6)

People walked away from Christ. Even though he looked on them and loved them, people would walk from him because they could not reconcile what they wanted with where he stood.

(see Mk 10:17-31) We do the same with our theology, our answers. We tell people that Christ somehow had his presence and his hand in the hand of the abuser, because he 'knew' what was ultimately best in his purposes for you, and... and...

'Will you speak wickedly on God's behalf? Will you speak deceitfully for him?... Will you argue the case for God?' (Job 13:7-8)

Stop 'knowing' answers, and know God! Stop eating from the tree of knowledge, and start gazing on the life of Christ! This teaches us true 'knowledge' about how to see and respond to evil. When Jesus encountered questions about God's hand in people's suffering, he dismissed it as folly, and pointed to a higher vision. (see Lk 13:1-5 & Jn 9:1-3) When people tried to implicate him in darkness – even regarding the casting out of darkness – he threatened them with being unforgivable. (Mk 3:22-30) When people suffered loss, he never explained it away as part of God's purpose, but wept with them. (Jn 11:33,35,38) When Jesus lost his friend – the one in prison, when Jesus had come to set captives free – he grieved, and did not rationalize. (Mt 11:1-11; Lk 4:18; Mt 14:13) Paul tells us explicitly in Romans 12:15: 'Weep with those who weep.' But we prefer to talk, to speak wickedly on God's behalf.

My friends, death came through the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Let's stop seeking truth through this same fruit. Let's seek truth through the life, words and Spirit of Christ. He is truth! (Jn 14:6) And his words are 'spirit and life.' (Jn 6:63) Let's be bold and spirit-filled, and stand where he stands, and take no step outside of that revelation space. Let's go to where he is, despite how it may appear to the world around us. For we know that 'Christ is the power of God, and the wisdom of God.' (1 Cor 1:24) Not answers. Christ.

'Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.' (Heb 13:13)

Peace in the Battle:

Jesus 'lays a table before you in the presence of your enemies.' (Ps 23:5)

The enemies are still there, even in your 'presence'. How can you rest? How can you take your eyes off them? There is no reassurance here that they will not attack, not overthrow. And yet what is the Lord calling you to? He is calling you to sit, to take your eyes and mind off the enemy, and to feast.

'I will satisfy your desires in a scorched land.' (Is 58:11) The land is scorched. Times are hard, for you and others. How can you enjoy a moment, or even a season, of your desires being satisfied? And yet what is the Lord doing? What is the Lord calling you to? Truth is where God is. He is not honored by your take on reality, or your take on when it is time to eat, sleep, rest, enjoy. ***'It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns?'*** (Rm 8:33-34)

If you are given 1, 2 or 5 talents by the Master, it is 1, 2 or 5 talents that you are called to invest. 'What do you have that you have not been given?' (1 Cor 4:7; Lk 17:11-27) Don't quibble the 'justice' of your lot. Don't think that your own thoughts see and stand on what is truth and justice. 'In the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him.' (1 Cor 1:21)

Truth is spirit, and it is found where Jesus is. 'Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.' (Jn 18:37) Do you listen to the voice of Jesus every day? Do you heed his whisper to be at peace,

to put something down, or to leave someone with him?⁶¹ Do you receive the feast he lays for you, and leave the enemy to his care? Do you accept and walk into the 'sleep he gives to those he loves'? (Ps 127:2)

Jesus slept at night, despite much need around him, much injustice, and much love he had for many. He slept. The key to his peace in a storm, is that he listened to the voice of the Father. 'The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.' (Jn 5:19) Jesus didn't find his peace through reason, or justifying himself, or explaining away the enemy. He listened to the Father, and when the Father said, 'Rest', he rested.

This is also our key to peace. Not justifying that we have done enough for a day, or this or that person can take it from here, or that people's plight is ultimately the will of God. No. Despite people's plight around us – the presence of the enemy – God will call your heart, mind and body to a feast. And, **'His word is truth.'** (Jn 17:17)

Even this morning I have had to hear and heed the call of God to rest my mind, to 'feast'. I have had many people and projects on the go – deep, dark needs that I have been called to lift up in faith, stand beside and battle. But then the flesh gets mixed in with the spirit. And pride seeps into virtue. And I find myself spinning in thought, and worrying that this or that person might feel I've abandoned them in the fight, or there's more I could/should be doing for them... And I worry. I'm not feeling fully led by the Spirit, as I was when I stepped up to the battle. **'Having begun with the Spirit are you now so foolish as to try to attain your goal through human effort?'** (Gal 3:3)

I hear the word of the Lord to let go. So what if I am judged by others? Jesus is truth, and he calls me now to let go; to allow the Lord this morning to work, while I rest. (Ps 121:4) He calls me to let him be more, while I become less. (Jn 3:30) He smiles, and calls me to make that cup of coffee I desperately want, and let the boat of this battle float out into waters that are distant from me. He gently, beautifully, stations me elsewhere. I'm still here. I'm still 'true'. (Jn 1:47) But I'm in God, not in self. I can feast, wait, and rejoin when and where Jesus leads me. Wait. Rest. Thank you, Jesus.

Triune God

As Christians we believe in a 'Triune God' – the impossible identity and reality of 1-in-3 and 3-in-1. Why? Because this is what is 'written', revealed. It is indisputable. From Genesis to Revelation, multiple writers and multiple centuries, this 'identity' of God comes through.

For more on this key topic, and to begin to consider – and maybe memorize – key passages on this, please check out my booklet called, **'Who Is Jesus?'**⁶² I'm not going to provide all the scriptures on this topic here – the 'Deity of Christ', etc. – there are just too many! It's everywhere. It's the very identity of God, consistent, as I say above, through the whole bible.

Now, here's the key issue, broken down in 2 points, and then I'll relay its relevance to our topic in this essay:

1. The 'Triune' Identity of God makes no rational sense!

⁶¹ Jn 10:27; Ps 25:14; Amos 4:13; Ps 7:9b; Jer 29:13

⁶² Free in PDF format at www.1peter1three.weebly.com

Just soak in this for a minute. All of our theology, our human understanding, our seminary courses and message outlines – are based on our God, whose identity – 3-in-1, 1-in-3 – cannot be understood, grasped, explained, not even with a clover! It is a mystery to human understanding. This identity of God can and must be believed, because it is simply the ‘true’ and ‘indisputable’ revelation of God through the Scriptures, but it cannot be understood.

Because it cannot be understood by our human minds, some religions have changed this identity. Their strongest reason for doing so is not the Scriptures, but the fact that it makes no sense to our understanding. So they will reference ‘some’ Scriptures to point to the differentiation of the persons of God, but ignore – or explain away - all the other Scriptures that point to the Oneness of God, and God’s persons therein. What they do is relegate – i.e. make lesser – the bigger revelation, and submit it to lesser, or the more understandable revelation. They take that which requires more faith, so to speak, and submit it to that which takes less faith. This is the wrong order of things, coming from lack of faith and integrity with the Word, and so yields a wrong understanding of God.

‘I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.’ (Rm 10:2-3)

This point about submitting faith to reason – instead of reason to faith – brings us to the next key point:

2. *We have to read some Scriptures in light of other Scriptures!*

This is ‘correctly handling the word of truth.’ (2 Tim 2:15) This makes sense in life, in literature, in everything! If we get the ‘light’ wrong here – in other words if we read this Scripture in light of that one, and not the other way round – we get error. Here’s an example:

‘All those who do wrong God hates!’ (Psalm 5:5)⁶³

‘Jesus said, ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ (Lk 23:34)

We know that God is love. (1 Jn 4:8) We know he shows no favoritism, and wants all to be saved. (Acts 10:34; 2 Pe 3:9) So we read the first verse – Psalm 5:5 – in light of the second. We know that God does not ‘hate’ people who do wrong, in the sense that we ‘hate’, or the sense that we might even wish God hated. He does hate evil – more than we do. But we read Psalm 5:5 in light of the greater revelation of Luke 23:34. We will understand God’s hate of the ‘wrongdoer’ in light of God’s love for everyone. Because this is the greater – and consistent – revelation of God’s actual identity. We will not understand God’s ‘love’ for people, in light of the fact that he hates wrongdoers. This is the wrong order, and would lead us to a wrong understanding of who God is – primarily a Hater, second to that, some love...

When it comes to Christ and the side of evil that he stands on – we must read some Scriptures in light of others. Not because it supports this or that view, or makes a theology consistent, but because it is the truth about who God is. Where this revelation reaches beyond our ‘reason’, but flows in the Spirit and in the Word, ***‘we take captives our thoughts and make them subject to Christ.’*** (2 Cor 10:3-5) This is the ‘avenue’ we have had to take – to be true to the

⁶³ The issue of ‘literature genres’ is key, and I don’t reference it here. For a great, accessible read on bible book genres and how to read them, see Gordon D. Fee’s, *‘How To Read The Bible For All It’s Worth.’*

Word and the Revelation – with God’s Triune identity. And it is the same avenue God calls us to in understanding where he stands with regards to evil.

God owns the earth, and time, and *‘all souls’*. (Ez 18:4) We can’t hide from his Spirit. (Ps 139:7) ***‘He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.’*** (Col 1:17) He ***‘sustains all things by his Word.’*** (Heb 1:3) He is with us always! (Mt 28:20; Heb 13:5) He never fails us! And... he hates evil, never allows it, will punish it, warns against it, and came to rescue us from it. (Heb 1:9; Mt 18:6/Mk 3:22-30; Mt 26:24/Mt 12:36, Gal 1:4/1 Jn 3:8) And this latter revelation about who Christ is, and his stand against evil – only this side of it – is the highest truth, the deepest truth, about the character, Spirit and identity of God, and all other Scripture that relates to his ‘presence’ here or there, his ‘sovereignty’, must be read in light of this. Because this ‘latter revelation’ anchors in the pure, uncompromising truths about God being only Love, only Light, only Holy – ***‘in whom there is no darkness.’*** (1 Jn 1:5)

Greater than hope and even faith – and therefore so much greater that our reason and theologies about ‘sovereignty’ – is love. (1 Cor 13:13) The childlike minds we are called to have, and all things pure, innocent and loving, say Christ had nothing, absolutely nothing to do with this evil, and he grieves it more deeply than the victim, and will fight it more tenaciously than a brother.

We must interpret all other Scriptures about God in light of this childlike revelation of who he is, and where he is, when we encounter evil.

‘Unless you become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.’ (Mt 18:3)

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