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Jesus Christ – Hope for All Peoples

“He will cause justice to be victorious and his name will be the hope of all the world” -Matt.12:20

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Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.

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A Living Hope that Doesn't Disappoint

What can we confidently hope for in this Advent / Christmas season and in the coming New Year? Optimism fails us when our wishful desires, dreams and plans are not fulfilled. Fortunately our hope in Christ offers us a more solid foundation and confident expectation that we will obtain the gifts and graces we need to live well as pilgrims and citizens of a heavenly kingdom that awaits us at the end of our journey of faith. In the meantime hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit which has been given to us (Romans 5:5).

God places in our hearts a hope and a longing for something far greater and far more glorious than anything we could imagine or wish for in our small and fast moving world that speeds by and then fades away like a speck of dust lost in the vast cosmos somewhere between time and eternity.

Paul the Apostle tells us that God the Father “*chose each one of us in Christ before creation began*” (Ephesians 1:4). We were created for a life of glory with God in his everlasting kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy. We hope and long for the day when we and all creation will share fully in the glory which God intended from the very beginning.

Hope is a supernatural gift and strength that we must exercise

The hope which God gives is a supernatural gift and strength which enables us to grow in faith and love as we pursue God's will and plan for our lives. Peter the Apostle describes the nature of this supernatural hope:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1

Peter 1:3-5)

Hope is the trait of relying on God's help for those things which he has promised and so confidently expecting to obtain them, even in the face of difficulty or in the face of their being beyond our power. If our hope is rightly placed in God, and not in ourselves, then we will not be disappointed, even if everything around us should fail. Hope is the anchor that grounds us in God's heavenly kingdom.

There are numerous examples of godly men and women who persevered through hope, courage, and patience in the midst of severe trials, persecution, and hardships. Their faith expanded in the furnace of affliction, and their hope became strong like steel when struck with the hammer of testing, and their love overflowed with the fragrance of Christ's mercy and kindness under the weight of abuse and persecution. May we be encouraged by their example and not be afraid to suffer for the name of Christ and the gospel he calls us to proclaim through word and deed.

In this issue

This issue focuses on how we can grow in hope both individually and together as brothers and sisters united with the Lord Jesus in Christian Community.

[Daniel Keating](#) and [John Yocum](#) open the Scriptures for us in explaining how hope orients us to look with eyes of faith towards the fulfillment of Christ's promise to come again to raise us up with him to everlasting life and joy in his heavenly kingdom.

The testimony of [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#), [Edith Stein](#), and [Corrie Ten Boom](#) - who endured unimaginable suffering and trials under the persecution of the Nazi regime, give witness to the power of Christian hope in the face of difficulty and challenges to our faith.

[Eberhard Arnold](#), founder of Bruderhof, points to the renewal of Christian communities today as a living sign of the coming Kingdom. [Bob Tedesco](#), one of the founding leaders of the Sword of the Spirit, explains how the Holy Spirit is equipping Christians to live and serve together in [community as disciples on mission](#). [Paul Jordan](#), mission director for Kairos outreach to young people, shares the stories of several young people who are actively engaged in [mission work](#) locally and around the world. These are some of the sign's of God's action today to renew his people and to give all of us fresh hope that we, too, can make a real contribution to the spread of God's kingdom in our homes, neighborhoods, cities, and wherever the Lord sends us as his ambassadors.

Let us celebrate Advent and Christmas with the Lord Jesus Christ knowing that he will supply all of our needs and strengthen us for the coming year of grace and mission in his service.

Sincerely in Christ,
Don Schwager
editor

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The Promise of the Lord's Return

A Commentary on 2 Peter 3:8–16

by Dr. Daniel A. Keating

The following brief commentary from the Second Letter of Peter, Chapter 3 is lightly edited with permission of the author, Dr. Daniel Keating, from his book, *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude*, published by Baker Academic, 2011. While it was written from a Roman Catholic perspective, the material can be beneficial for Christians from other traditions as well. – ed.

The Day of the Lord Will Come (3:8–10)

2 Peter 3: 8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. ⁹ The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard “delay,” but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out.

OT references: Ps 90:4; Wis 11:23; Sir 18:7–9; Isa 34:4; Ezek 18:23; Hab 2:3
NT reference: Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39; John 3:17; Rom 2:4; 11:32; 1 Tim 2:4

vs. 8: Peter now answers the first objection posed by the scoffers, “Where is the promise of his coming?” To begin with, Peter argues, the Lord does not count time the way we do. A long delay for us is a short time in God’s eyes: But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. Peter is paraphrasing Ps 90:4 (“A thousand years in your eyes are merely a yesterday”) to show that a vast period of time by human calculation is but as one day—one moment—for the Lord. Time is simply not an issue for God. There is no real distinction between one day and a thousand years in his sight. The point, though, as the next verse indicates, is not the insignificance of time, but rather its true and essential significance. Time is filled with meaning and possibility because it is the context in which we are given the opportunity to turn to God.

vs. 9: Moving one step further, Peter offers the positive reason for this seeming “delay” in Christ’s coming: The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard “delay,” but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. The purpose of this “delay” is salvation: the Lord is showing great patience, postponing the day of judgment, because he desires that all should repent and that none should perish. We can hear an echo of John 3:17 here: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

What is the Lord’s disposition toward the human race? He is being “patient.” The verb is in the present active tense, indicating ongoing, active patience by the Lord. He is giving space for all to come to repentance. Along with 1 Tim 2:4, this is one of the strongest biblical assertions of God’s universal desire that all come to salvation. The Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires repentance (Ezek 18:23); his kindness is meant to lead to repentance (Rom 2:4), and he waits to have mercy on all (Rom 11:32).

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

God’s Patience for the Sake of Repentance

The experience of the apparent “delay” of God’s promises was also felt acutely in the Old Testament, as reflected in Hab 2:3 (LXX), “Though he should tarry, wait for him; for he will surely come, and will not delay.” The answer to this cry of impatience—“How long?” (Ps 13:1–2)—is that God is not delaying the fulfillment of his promise but is being patient, waiting for repentance. Sirach (18:7–9) speaks of this patience, and the book of Wisdom (11:23) highlights the motive of repentance: “But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook the sins of men that they may repent.” God’s patience for the sake of repentance is neatly summed up in Paul’s speech to the Athenians: “God has overlooked the times of ignorance, but now he demands that all people everywhere repent because he has established a day on which he will ‘judge the world with justice’ through a man he has appointed” (Acts 17:30–31).

vs. 10: Though God is patient, the day of Christ’s coming will occur suddenly and without further warning: But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The “day of the Lord” is an expression drawn from the Old Testament (Jer 46:10; Joel 2:1–11; Amos 5:18–20) that here refers specifically to the second and glorious coming of Christ. Peter says that this day will “come like a thief,” quoting Jesus himself (Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39). The image of the thief, found also in 1 Thess 5:2; Rev 3:3; 16:15, expresses the suddenness and

unexpectedness of Christ's return.

What will be the result of this coming for the world? Then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out. The biblical background is probably Isa 34:4 (LXX): "And all the powers of the heavens shall melt, and the sky shall be rolled up like a scroll: and all the stars shall fall like leaves from a vine." "Elements" may refer to the basic materials or building blocks of the world (see Wis 7:17), but more likely Peter is referring to "celestial bodies" like the stars.⁶ (See the sidebar below, "New Heavens and a New Earth.")

What does Peter mean by "the earth and everything done on it will be found out"? The precise wording of this phrase varies in the ancient manuscripts of 2 Peter.⁷ The version "will be found out" (NAB) is most likely the original one. In the final judgment all human works will be "disclosed" (NRSV) and "laid bare" (NIV).

LIVING TRADITION

Second Clement on Christ's Return

The Second Letter of Clement (usually ascribed to a Christian author writing in the middle of the second century) takes up and develops Peter's statement on the coming of the Lord: "But you know that the day of judgment is already coming as a blazing furnace, and some of the heavens will dissolve, and the whole earth will be like lead melting in a fire, and then everyone's works, the secret and the public, will be revealed" (16.3).

The conclusion is clear: the false teachers have it wrong. They are not reading the Scripture correctly. The Lord is not slow or delaying the fulfillment of his promise; he is simply giving space for all to repent and turn to him, which is his aim in the first place. But in the end, the Lord will come again, suddenly and decisively. With this coming the present heavens and earth will pass away, and all the works that human beings have done will be disclosed for what they really are.

Reflection and application (3:8–10)

We have much to gain from the full truth of what Peter says here about God's disposition toward us. On the one hand, some Christians today have so adopted the spirit of judgment that they have no room for the patience of God that seeks repentance. They are like Jonah who relished the imminent judgment about to fall on Nineveh and was actually disappointed when the people repented! On the other hand, there are many Christians who gladly welcome God as a patient Father who waits for the return of his children, but they have abandoned the idea of his just judgment. They presume on God's patience and consider that everyone has a basic right to salvation, no matter how they have lived or how they have responded to the †grace of God. Peter shows us how both truths must go together. The Lord God desires no one to perish, and he has gone to great exertion and cost to redeem us from our own sin. The time we are living in displays the lavish patience of God as he waits for his children to return. For this we ought to hope, to labor, and to pray. But Christ will come again and judge each one, and then our works will be shown for what they are. How urgently the Church needs to recover the fullness of Peter's words for the sake of the New Evangelization.

Call to Be Prepared (3:11–16)

2 Peter 3: 11 Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought [you] to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the elements melted by fire. 13 But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace. 15 And consider the patience of our Lord as salvation, as our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, also wrote to you, 16 speaking of these things as he does in all his letters. In them there are some things hard to understand that the ignorant and unstable distort to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures.

OT references: Sir 36:7; Isa 60:22b; 65:17; 66:22

NT references: Matt 5:6; 6:33; Mark 13:20; Acts 3:19–20; Rom 2:4; 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 16:14; 21:14

vs. 11-13: Peter now brings all this home to his readers: Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought [you] to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion (literally, “in holy and godly conduct”). In other words, since the present world will be dissolved and all our works will be fully subject to God’s scrutiny, it only makes sense to lead lives that follow the way marked out by Christ Jesus. “Conduct”⁸ is the same word that appears so prominently in 1 Peter (1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16). It refers to the practice of daily life according to the ways of the Lord.

In addition to this, Peter says that we are to live waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God. This “day” is a clear reference to Christ’s second coming (see Rev 16:14 for “the day of God”). The call to wait for this day is the standard New Testament exhortation.⁹ But the notion of “hastening” this day’s coming is unusual. What does Peter mean? He may mean that by our prayers and manner of life we can participate in God’s purpose to shorten the time and hasten the day of his return. The day of God will come when God so wills, and not according to our efforts or calculation, but our prayers and way of life may help prepare the way for the Lord’s return.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Hastening the Time of God's Action

The notion of the Lord “hastening” the time of his own action is found in Isa 60:22, “In its time I will hasten it” (RSV). The related idea of God “shortening the days” appears in Jesus’ announcement of the last days: “If the Lord had not shortened those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect whom he chose, he did shorten the days” (Mark 13:20). In Sir 36:7 the author prays that God might “hasten the day, [and] bring on the time.” The same idea of human response accelerating the return of the Lord is implicit in Peter’s speech in Jerusalem: “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the †Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus” (Acts 3:19–20 NRSV).

In sharp contrast to the heavens that will be dissolved in flames and the elements that will be melted by fire, Peter opens the shutters to the new world that we are eagerly waiting for: But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. We await the day when all sin and wickedness—when all that is contrary to God—will be judged and burned up, and only “righteousness” will remain.

Peter calls the Christian way of life “the way of righteousness” in 2:21; here we see the complete fulfillment of this, when God who is the source of all righteousness (1:1) will bring about a world in which only righteousness and godliness are found. Notably, God’s righteousness is what Jesus urges his followers to “hunger and thirst for” (Matt 5:6) and to seek above all else (Matt 6:33).

Where does the Lord promise new heavens and a new earth? The promise comes at the conclusion of Isaiah: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth” (65:17 NRSV). “As the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall endure before me, says the †LORD, so shall your race and your name endure” (66:22). The book of Revelation (21:1) uses the same language to describe our final destiny in Christ: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now” (NJB).

LIVING TRADITION

New Heavens and a New Earth

Early Church witnesses favor the view that Peter is speaking here about the transformation, rather than the complete destruction, of the present world order. Eusebius of Emesa (fourth century) writes: “The heavens will not be destroyed, but rather they will be changed into something better. In the same way our bodies are not destroyed in order to disappear altogether but in order to be renewed in an indestructible state.”^a According to Bede the Venerable, “[Peter] did not say other heavens and another earth, but the old and ancient one to be changed for the better.... As for the things, therefore, that will perish, grow old and be changed, it is definitely clear that once they have been consumed by the fire they resume a more pleasing appearance as soon as the fire goes out.”

Does Peter envisage the complete and utter destruction of this world and the creation of an entirely new world? Or should we interpret Peter as describing the intense purification of the present world, such that it becomes the dwelling place of God's righteousness? Peter does not say, but there is precedent that may make the second interpretation more likely. Just as Christ's own body was transformed but not destroyed in his resurrection to begin the new creation, so might the Lord transform the present world through a fire of purification, to bring about "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (see Rom 8:19–23).

vs. 14-16: Peter now renews the call to holiness: Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace. Since we are looking forward to the "new heavens and a new earth," we should eagerly seek to be "without spot" and "without blemish," in direct contrast to the false teachers who are called "spots" and "blemishes" in 2:13. Our destiny is to imitate Christ himself, the "spotless, unblemished lamb" (1 Pet 1:19; see also Eph 1:4; 5:27). Further, we should be eager to be found "at peace" with God, in right relationship with him. There is an echo here of Peter's opening prayer (1:2) where he asks that "peace" may be multiplied to his audience. By repeating the verb "be eager" Peter circles back to his exhortation in 1:10: "Be all the more eager to make your call and election firm." The call to eagerly seek an enduring holiness is at the heart and center of Peter's message in this letter.

Next we are called to **consider the patience of our Lord as salvation**. This is a shorthand expression for God showing patience by delaying the day of judgment (3:9). For those who take advantage of the time by repenting and living in a way pleasing to God, God's patience is the source of their salvation. Paul expresses a similar idea in Rom 2:4: "Or do you hold his priceless kindness, forbearance, and patience in low esteem, unaware that the kindness of God would lead you to repentance?"

Speaking of Paul, this is just what Peter now does! He refers to him as **our beloved brother Paul**, who **according to the wisdom given to him, also wrote to you, speaking of these things as he does in all his letters**. Peter ascribes wisdom to Paul, indicating that he regards Paul's teaching as both authoritative and inspired. What letters of Paul might our author be referring to? If we are in the geographical region of Asia Minor then the best candidates are Ephesians, Colossians, and Galatians. But Peter makes reference to "all his letters," indicating a larger collection. If Peter the apostle himself is the author then he must be writing at the end of his life when the majority of Paul's letters were written and circulating among the churches. While it is conceivable that this was already happening in the early 60s, the circulation of Paul's letters fits even better a period later in the first century following the death of both Peter and Paul.

Peter says that Paul wrote about "these things." Which "things" is he referring to? At the very least Paul wrote about the promise of Christ's coming, about the sure judgment to follow, about the new heavens and earth, and about the need to remain holy and blameless as we wait for the day of the Lord. Paul's letters are replete with all these topics.

Then Peter admits that in Paul's letters **there are some things hard to understand that the ignorant and unstable distort to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures**. Anyone who has read Romans, Galatians, and the Corinthian correspondence (in fact any of Paul's letters) would agree. They are dense writings, closely argued and easily misunderstood. Peter's caution against the "ignorant," or "uninstructed," and "unstable" people who distort Paul's letters points back to his sharp concern with the false teachers. It is likely that these teachers claimed to find in Paul's letters the basis for their own moral laxity. This was a problem that Paul himself had to correct in his lifetime (see, for example, Paul's rejection of moral laxity in Rom 3:8; 6:1; Gal 5:13).

Why is Peter dragging Paul into the discussion here? Presumably because Peter knows that Paul’s teaching has reached this same audience (he says that Paul wrote to them), and he is concerned that Paul’s letters not be distorted among them. The false teachers may well be claiming Paul as the authority for their teaching and lifestyle. Of course Paul does not support what they are teaching, but it is quite possible to believe that they were using selections from Paul to justify the freedom they were claiming, which is really just license to sin. Thus, Peter is not rejecting Paul’s teaching, but rather rejecting the distortions of Paul’s teaching that were circulating in the Christian community.

Finally, what are we to make of Peter’s reference to “the other scriptures” (literally, “writings”)? This is probably a general reference to the biblical writings from the Old Testament, but could include a reference to the Gospels as well. Many interpreters believe that Peter is identifying Paul’s letters as equal to “the other Scriptures.” If this is so, then 2 Peter was probably written later in the first century when Paul’s letters had been collected and had begun to be recognized as part of the inspired apostolic testimony to Christ. But it is also possible that Peter does not mean to put the two on equal footing and is simply saying that these false teachers not only distort Paul’s letters, but they distort the biblical writings as well.

Reflection and Application (3:11–16)

It is no accident that a number of churches read this text in the Sunday liturgy during the season of Advent. For many Christians, Advent is simply the season to scurry around and prepare for the Christmas holidays. Even those who attempt to observe Advent prayerfully view it simply as a preparation for Christmas, for the first coming of Christ in the flesh. But Advent is also the season for the Church to recall with intensity the second coming of Christ. If one looks at the structure of the readings and prayers of the liturgy, especially for the first and second Sundays of Advent, it becomes clear that the second coming, not the first, is in the foreground. This is why 2 Peter is such an apt letter for the Advent season. Peter calls us to embrace the promise of Christ’s second coming with vibrant faith. He tells us that we should use the time at hand as a season for repentance, since this is why God is being patient. He calls us to get walking on the right “way,” to pursue with eagerness a life of holiness and godliness. Have we taken on the qualities of the false teachers—arrogance, sexual immorality, worldly greed? Do we need to get back on the “way of righteousness” and so be found “at peace” with God? Are we “hastening the day of God” by the way that we live and pray? There is an urgency in 2 Peter that fits and energizes the season of Advent, a season when we are called to be on the watch for Christ’s second coming even as we joyfully prepare for the celebration of his first.

Notes

⁶ The ESV, for instance, translates “elements” as “heavenly bodies.”

⁷ For a full account of the textual variations, see Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 316–21.

⁸ Greek *anastrophe*.

⁹ See Acts 1:4; Rom 8:25; 1 Cor 1:7; 1 Thess 1:10; Jude 1:21.

^a Catena, ACCS, 159.

^b Commentary 151.

NJB New Jerusalem Bible

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

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When Heaven Explodes With Color

We await our blessed hope, the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13)

by John Yocum

The age to come

Advent is the season in which the Christian people focus on the return of the Messiah and the day he comes again in glory. This is the day when the “age to come” will finally be here and the saints will enter into heavenly life: “We await our blessed hope, the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

If we are honest, however, that hope at times seems less blessed than we might want to admit. I have a friend who, in her honesty, sometimes fears that she won't really enjoy heavenly life that much. The thought of an eternal time of worship doesn't always appeal to her.

Her misgiving feeds on the notion that the age to come will be like our experience of the 'spiritual' things we do in this life, only longer. But the age to come will mean not the elimination, but the re-creation of everything in this life. It will not be a narrower, but a broader, deeper and fuller experience of all the good in the world we now know, with none of the effects of sin. We ourselves will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:52).

The world as it is now is often at odds with God's intention, and even the good things God created to be enjoyed can entice us away from Him. When I'm deep in prayer, I usually close my eyes because the things around me are a distraction.

God's glorious presence magnified

In the age to come, what we see and hear won't distract us from God's glorious presence. Rather, they will magnify it.

Isaiah describes that day in one of the Sunday Advent readings:

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing....
They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.
(Isaiah 35:1-3)*

Everything blooms; everything explodes with life in Isaiah's vision. The dusty, hostile desert gives way to running streams and bubbling springs. Flowers spring up in the desert. Nature itself sings. Everywhere the world is alive with God's glory, and testifies to his majesty.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis depicts a cosmic bus ride from a dismal, grey hell to heaven exploding with color. When the passengers alight, what they find is a more colorful, more substantial earth. The light at first is nearly blinding. The blades of grass are like needles to their tender feet. The guide who conducts the travelers on a tour of the new creation explains that heaven is brighter, firmer, more solid, because it is more what is meant to be than what we know now. To fit in, the pilgrims in Lewis' tale need to become people they were meant to be. Those who choose to remain in the heavenly land must go through a period of adjustment, shucking off what is weak and deformed, in order to put on what is noble and strong. They become royal and dignified because they are meant not only to live in the new world, but to reign there (Revelations 22:5).

The adjustment Lewis imaginatively describes mirrors the training that is meant to be accomplished in this life, according to Paul. As he reflects on his own hardships, Paul says, "this slight, momentary affliction is preparing us to carry a weight of glory beyond all comparison (2Corinthians 4:17). "The Hebrew word for "glory' means "weightiness." Though 2 Corinthians is written in Greek, the rabbi Paul probably has that Hebrew metaphor in mind. This life – especially its difficulties, persecutions and temptations – is preparing us to carry a heavy load of solid, heavenly glory, the burden, you might say, of kings and queens.

A life of training for glory

Through his Holy Spirit, God is training our hearts, teaching us to turn aside from our sinful passions and our irreverent attitudes, to learn to live our lives by the truth, and to imitate God's own character (Titus 2:11-14). Like weight training, or physical therapy, the discipline can be painful at times, and we wonder if it's worth it.

That's why Paul says the life of training for glory is one in which 'we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal' (2 Corinthians 4:18). What Paul means by 'unseen' is not permanently invisible, but not yet visible. Deferred gratification is part of Christian hope.

But gratification there will be in abundance. And it won't be poorer, but richer than the pleasures of this life. At the end of the day, we'll need new bodies just to cope with it. We'll need new equipment to handle heaven's higher voltage (Romans 8:22-23). We find some things in life a struggle just because we get tired, or sick, or hungry. Even when our hearts are right, our bodies don't always cooperate. Our bodily weaknesses came together with the spiritual corruption of sin. Some day that will all be behind us.

In the meantime, we look to the things we don't yet see; to the day when what is mortal will be swallowed up in life; when the lame will leap with joy; when the dumb will shout aloud; when the deaf will hear the music of heaven; when the blind will open their eyes and see – along with all of us – the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

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“I stand at the door and knock” (Revelation 3:20)

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Sermon given on the First Sunday of Advent - December 2, 1928

Celebrating Advent means learning how to wait. Waiting is an art which our impatient age has forgotten. We want to pluck the fruit before it has had time to ripen. Greedy eyes are soon disappointed when what they saw as luscious fruit is sour to the taste. In disappointment and disgust they throw it away. The fruit, full of promise rots on the ground. It is rejected without thanks by disappointed hands.

Not all can wait

The blessedness of waiting is lost on those who cannot wait, and the fulfillment of promise is never theirs. They want quick answers to the deepest questions of life and miss the value of those times of anxious waiting, seeking with patient uncertainties until the answers come. They lose the moment when the answers are revealed in dazzling clarity.

Who has not felt the anxieties of waiting for the declaration of friendship or love? The greatest, the deepest,

the most tender experiences in all the world demand patient waiting. This waiting is not in emotional turmoil, but gently growing, like the emergence of spring, like God's laws, like the germinating of a seed.

Not all can wait – certainly not those who are satisfied, contented, and feel that they live in the best of all possible worlds! Those who learn to wait are uneasy about their way of life, but yet have seen a vision of greatness in the world of the future and are patiently expecting its fulfillment. The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come. For these, it is enough to wait in humble fear until the Holy One himself comes down to us, God in the child in the manger. God comes. The Lord Jesus comes. Christmas comes. Christians rejoice!

We must learn to wait aright

In a few weeks we shall hear that cry of triumph. But already we can hear in the distance the sound of the angels' song praising God and promising peace on earth. But, not so quick! It is still in the distance. It calls us to learn to wait and to wait aright.

When once again Christmas comes and we hear the familiar carols and sing the Christmas hymns, something happens to us, and a special kind of warmth slowly encircles us. The hardest heart is softened. We recall our own childhood. We feel again how we then felt, especially if we were separated from a mother. A kind of homesickness comes over us for past times, distant places, and yes, a blessed longing for a world without violence or hardness of heart.

But there is something more – a longing for the safe lodging of the everlasting Father. And that leads our thoughts to the curse of homelessness which hangs heavily over the world. In every land, the endless wandering without purpose or destination. Looking beyond our own comfort here, we see in many lands people dying of cold in wintry conditions. The plight of such people disturbs us within and amidst our enjoyment; a thousand eyes look at us and the evil haunts us. Poverty and distress throughout the world worries us, but it cannot be brushed away and there appears to be nothing we can do about it.

Two inescapable realities – sin and death

On this first Sunday of Advent, the two inescapable realities, which have been the subject of our thoughts over the last two Sundays, with which the Christian year ended, greet us now in this first Sunday of the new year. They weigh heavily upon our souls this day: sin and death. Who can bring help as we face these destructive realities? Who can deliver us from their dire effect? Only One! Our Lord delivers us from sin and death. Shall we not cry, as the first believers did, "Come Lord!" This is the ancient cry, "Maranatha," and quickly come!

Soon we shall acknowledge that our Lord Jesus Christ comes into our world, into our homelessness, into our sin, and into our death.

Lord, make me holy and pure

Lord Jesus, come yourself, and dwell with us, be human as we are, and overcome what overwhelms us. Come into the midst of my evil, come close to my unfaithfulness. Share my sin, which I hate and which I cannot leave. Be my brother, Thou Holy God. Be my brother in the kingdom of evil and suffering and death. Come with me in my death, come with me in my suffering, come with me as I struggle with evil. And make me holy and pure, despite my sin and death.

Every day, a quiet voice answers our cry, gently, persuasively, "I stand at the door and knock."
Should we tremble at these words, this voice? The Spirit that we have called for, the Spirit that saves the

world, is already here, at the door, knocking, patiently waiting for us to open the door. He has been there a long time and he has not gone away. His is a very quiet voice and few hear it.

Can you hear him – he knocks again

The cries of the marketplace and of those who sell shoddy goods are all too loud. But the knocking goes on and, despite the noise, we hear it at last. What shall we do? Who is it? Are we afraid or impatient? Perhaps we feel a little fear, lest someone undesirable is at the door, dangerous or with malignant intent. Should we open? In all this fuss, the royal visitor stands patiently, unrecognized, waiting. He knocks again, quite softly. Can you hear him?

And each of you may ask: Do you mean he is knocking at my door? Yes. First quiet those loud voices and listen carefully. Perhaps he knocks at the door of your heart. He wants to make your heart his own, to win your love. He would be a quiet guest within you. Jesus knocks – for you and for me. It takes only a willing ear to hear his knocking. Jesus comes, for sure, he comes again this year, and he comes to you.

When the first Christians talked of the second coming of the Lord Jesus, they thought of a great day of judgment. That seems far removed from our thoughts of Christmas, but what the early Christians thought must be taken seriously. Surely it is true still that when we hear the knock of Jesus on the door, it smites our conscience. We fear that we are not ready for him. Is our heart ready for his visit? Is it fit to be his dwelling? The dwelling place of God?

Perhaps, after all, Advent is a time for self-examination before we open the door. When we stop to consider, the contrast between those early Christians and us is extraordinary. They trembled at the thought of God coming, of the day of the Lord, when Jesus, “Judge eternal, throned in splendor,” would shatter the complacency of all the world.

Not forgetting the awesome nature and fearfulness of God coming near

But we take the thought of God coming among us so calmly. It is all the more remarkable when we remember that we so often associate the signs of God in the world with human suffering, the cross on Golgotha. Perhaps we have thought so much of God as love eternal and we feel the warm pleasures of Christmas when he comes gently like a child. We have been shielded from the awful nature of Christmas and no longer feel afraid at the coming near of God Almighty.

We have selected from the Christmas story only the pleasant bits, forgetting the awesome nature of an event in which the God of the universe, its Creator and Sustainer, draws near to this little planet, and now speaks to us. The coming of God is not only a message of joy, but also fearful news for anyone who has a conscience.

It is only by facing up to the fearfulness of the event that we can begin to understand the incomparable blessing. God comes into the midst of evil and death, to judge the evil in the world – and in us. And while he judges us, he loves us, he purifies us, he saves us, and he comes to us with gifts of grace and love. He makes us happy as only children know.

We are no longer alone – God is with us

He is, and always will be now, with us in our sin, in our suffering, and at our death. We are no longer alone. God is with us and we are no longer homeless. A piece of the eternal home is grafted into us. For that reason, we grown-ups can rejoice with all our heart around the Christmas tree – perhaps even more so than the children. We can see already the abundance of God’s gifts. Just remember all the good things he has given us

in the past year and, looking at this wondrous tree, feel secure in the promise of the wondrous home – the “safe lodging” – he has prepared for us.

Yes, Jesus comes both with law and grace. Listen again, “Behold I stand at the door and knock.” Open the door wide! How often have you thought that to see Jesus would be marvelous, that you would give everything you have to know that he was with you. Of course, you want more than to have him within you, you want him visible and in bodily form. But how can that be? Jesus knew that his followers would want to see him and have him by them in human form. But how can this be? He told a parable about this – the scene of the last judgment when he would divide the nations as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.

He said to those who were truly his flock of sheep, on his right hand:

Come you who are blessed by my Father... I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. When those on his right hand asked in surprise, “When? Where?” he answered, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25: 34–40).

Christ walks the earth as your neighbor

With that we face the shocking reality. Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He asks for help in the form of a beggar, a down-and-out, a man in ragged clothes, someone who is sick, even a criminal in need of our love. He meets you in every person you encounter in need. So long as there are people around, Christ walks the earth as your neighbor, as the one through whom God calls to you, demands of you, makes claims upon you. That is the great seriousness of the Advent message and its great blessing. Christ stands at the door. He lives in the form of people around us. Will you therefore leave the door safely locked for your protection, or will you open the door for him?

It may seem odd to us that we can see Jesus in so familiar a face. But that is what he said.

Whoever refuses to take seriously this clear Advent message cannot talk of the coming of Christ into his heart. Whoever has not learned from the coming of Christ that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, has not understood the meaning of his coming.

Through all the Advents of life – learn to wait

Christ knocks! It is not yet Christmas. And neither is it yet the great last Advent, the second coming of Christ. Through all the Advents of our life, we shall wait and look forward with longing for that day of the Lord, when God says, “I am making everything new!” (Rev 21:5). Advent is a time of waiting. Our whole life is a time of waiting; waiting for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Then all people will be as brothers and sisters, rejoicing in the words of the angels’ song: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).

Learn to wait! For he has promised to come: “Behold, I stand at the door.” But now we call to him: “Yes, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.”

Excerpt from *I Stand at the Door and Knock: Advent and Christmas Sermons* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited and translated from German into English by Edwin Robertson, copyright © 2005, published in the UK.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor and a founding member of the Confessing Church. He was the first of the German theologians to speak out clearly against the persecution of the Jews and the evils of the Nazi ideology. In spring of 1935 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was called by the Confessing Church in Germany to take charge of an "illegal," underground seminary at Finkenwalde, Germany (now Poland). He served as pastor, administrator, and teacher there until the seminary was closed down by Hitler's Gestapo in September, 1937.

In the seminary at Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer taught the importance of shared life together as disciples of Christ. He was convinced that the renewal of the church would depend upon recovering the biblical understanding of the communal practices of Christian obedience and shared life. This is where true formation of discipleship could best flourish and mature.

Bonhoeffer's teaching led to the formation of a community house for the seminarians to help them enter into and learn the practical disciplines of the Christian faith in community. In 1937 Bonhoeffer completed two books, *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. They were first published in German in 1939. Both books encompass Bonhoeffer's theological understanding

of what it means to live as a Christian community in the Body of Christ.

He was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo in April 1943. On April 8, 1945 he was hanged as a traitor in the Flossenburg concentration camp. As he left his cell on his way to execution he said to his companion, "This is the end – but for me, the beginning of life."

photo of Bonhoeffer in the courtyard of Tegel prison, summer 1944; source: Christian Kaiser Verlag

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Citizens of Heaven

by Corrie Ten Boom

[Paul the Apostle's Letter to the] Philippians 3:20–21 says, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

In being born again, we are born into the family of God, and there the Lord Jesus gives us eternal life. He makes us citizens of the kingdom of heaven. We already have that eternal life now, if we are children of God, whether we are aware of it or not.

A small foretaste of heaven

My father was very aware of it. If, for example, we had an unexpectedly happy evening through a blessed visit, a conversation, or beautiful music, he often said, “That was a very small foretaste of heaven, of the joy that we will experience there.” But he also saw everyday life in that glow of eternity. He said, “My name is on my watchmaker's shop, but God's name should actually be on it, because I am a watchmaker by the grace of God.”

I worked with my father for twenty-five years, and I saw that he was first a child of God, and then a businessman, and that he led a holy life in the workshop and the shop. Being citizens of a kingdom in heaven doesn't make us unworldly, because it says in Psalm 24:1, “The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”

But if I was just a citizen of the world, I would run the risk of becoming desperate; I can see that all around me. Atheism is marching across the entire world. The unclean is becoming more and more unclean. People say that there will be a nuclear war in the future. But that is the amazing thing. We know that the earth is the Lord's. You can't understand all this with your logical mind; it's the foolishness of God which can only be understood by faith.

Death does not rob us of our heavenly citizenship

I saw an awful part of a Nazi concentration camp, where bodies had been laid on the ground in a wash house. Those who wanted to wash themselves had to step over them. There I saw a little bit of the citizenship of the kingdom of heaven. It was the dead face of my sister, Betsie. There was a heavenly peace and joy to be seen.

As the Bible tells us, we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven. "In my Father's house are many rooms," the Lord Jesus once said, "I am going there to prepare a place for you....And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:2-3). Yes, from there we expect the Lord Jesus Christ as Redeemer. The signs of the times of the second coming of He who "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21) are very clear, so it could happen very soon.

Jesus will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body

We know something of Jesus' body from what the Bible tells us. He could enter through closed doors. We read that about the gathering of the ten, and later eleven apostles. He ate and drank; He could travel great distances; He could make himself invisible. Just read the story of the road to Emmaus. But the most important thing was that Jesus' glorious body had no sin, illness, or death, and that He will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body. The purification already starts here, and so it must.

When John speaks of the second coming, he says, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). How? Looking to Jesus makes us mirrors of His love. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

When the Indian missionary Sadhu Sundar Singh was in England and rang at the door of a house somewhere, a little girl said, "Mummy, it's Jesus standing there!" Sadhu had looked to Jesus so much that he had received something of Jesus' appearance. I saw him myself when I was young, and I can imagine that Jesus looked like that.

The resurrection power of Jesus changes us

Yes, perhaps we can accept it of someone like Sadhu. But this text in Philippians 3:21 is written about you and me. Is that possible? By the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control. There is a resurrection power, which is so strong that Jesus can bring everything under His control, and that power is strong enough to change us small, insignificant, sinful people so that we will be like Jesus' glorious

body. He will bring everything under His control; that is a wonderful future. Philippians 2:10–11 says, “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Judge or Savior?

Will He be your judge or your Savior? Do you know that you are holy, set apart for such a wonderful reality? Paul writes, “I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day” (2 Timothy 1:12). And you and I can say that too.

Thank You, Lord Jesus, that You have made us citizens of heaven and that You will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like Your glorious body. Thank You, Lord, that the best is yet to come. Amen.

[This reflection was originally given by Corrie Ten Boom as part of a series of devotional radio broadcasts made for a Dutch audience beginning in 1966 and through the 1970s. The transcripts were later edited for written publication and copyrighted (c) 2008 by the Trans World Radio Voor Nederland en Belgie. The English translation is excerpted from the book, *I Stand at the Door and Knock: Meditations by Corrie Ten Boom*, published by Zondervan, 2008.]

Brief bio

Corrie Ten Boom (1892-1983) grew up in a devoutly religious family in Haarlem, Netherlands. Corrie's father ran a watchmaker's shop on the ground floor of their home. Corrie trained to be a watchmaker and in 1922 became the first woman licensed as a watchmaker in Holland. In addition to working in her father's shop, she established a youth club for teenage girls, which provided religious instruction as well as classes in the performing arts, sewing and handicrafts.

In May 1940, the German Blitzkrieg ran through the Netherlands and the other Low Countries. Within months, the "Nazification" of the Dutch people began and the quiet life of the ten Boom family was changed forever. During the war, the house became a refuge for Jews, students and intellectuals. The façade of the watch shop made the house an ideal front for these activities. A secret room, no larger than a small wardrobe closet, was built into Corrie's bedroom behind a false wall. The space could hold up to six people, all of whom had to stand quiet and still. A crude ventilation system was installed to provide air for the occupants. When security sweeps came through the neighborhood, a buzzer in the house would signal danger, allowing the refugees a little over a minute to seek sanctuary in the hiding place.

The entire ten Boom family became active in the Dutch resistance, risking their lives harboring those hunted by the Gestapo. Some fugitives would stay only a few hours, while others would stay several days until another "safe house" could be located. Corrie ten Boom became a leader in the "Beje" movement, overseeing a network of "safe houses" in the country. Through these activities, it was estimated that 800 Jews' lives were saved.

All ten Boom family members were sent to prison, including Corrie's 84-year-old father, who soon died in the Scheveningen prison, located near The Hague. Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to the notorious Ravensbrück concentration camp, near Berlin. Betsie died there on December 16, 1944. Twelve days later, Corrie was released for reasons not completely known.

Corrie ten Boom returned to the Netherlands after the war and set up a rehabilitation center for concentration camp survivors. In the Christian spirit to which she was so devoted, she also took in those who had cooperated with the Germans during the occupation. In 1946, she began a worldwide ministry that took her to more than 60 countries. She received many tributes, including being knighted by the queen of the Netherlands. In 1971, she wrote a best-selling book of her experiences during World War II, entitled *The Hiding Place*. In 1975, the book was made into a movie starring Jeannette Clift as Corrie and Julie Harris as her sister Betsie. She died on her 91st birthday, April 15, 1983. ([source](#))



Prayer Is the Language of Hope

by Christoph Schonborn

Just before her conversion, Blessed Edith Stein went into the cathedral in Frankfurt and saw a simple woman come in from the market, kneel down, and pray. By Edith Stein's own testimony, the sight of this woman made a decisive impression upon her on her journey toward the faith: a simple woman, kneeling and praying in the cathedral. Something inexpressible, very simple, so ordinary, and yet so full of mystery: this intimate contact with the invisible God. Not a self-absorbed meditation, but quiet relaxation in the presence of a mysterious *Other*. What Edith Stein sensed in this humble praying woman would soon become a certainty for her: God exists, and in prayer we turn toward him.

Longing to pray

Think of the impression the silent prayer of Jesus made on his disciples, prayer that often went on for hours, all night long, in fact! What was it about this secret place, this long turning in silence to him whom our Lord calls "Abba"? "He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'" (Luke 11: 1).

Teach us to pray. The disciple yearns to enter this place of silent intimacy, this vigilant prostration before the presence of the Invisible One. He feels such a great reverence for the mystery of the prayer of Jesus that he does not dare to interrupt, to "burst in" on our Lord with his question. He waits till Jesus himself comes out of his prayer. Only then does the disciple make bold to ask, to implore: "Teach us to pray!"

Does it not move us when we come into church and find someone silently praying there? Does this sight awaken in us the longing to pray? Do we hear at this moment the murmuring of the spring that summons us to the living water? As the martyr Ignatius of Antioch writes: "Living water murmurs within me, saying inwardly: 'Come to the Father!'" (1) *The longing for prayer is the lure within us of the Holy Spirit, who draws us to the Father, Yes, this longing is already prayer, is already the prayer of the Spirit within us, "with sighs too deep for words"* (Romans 8:26).

Is the ground of prayer dried up today?

There is, of course, a question we have to consider carefully: Is the *ground* of prayer dried up today? Isn't the hidden "murmuring" of the wellspring of the Holy Spirit drowned out by the noise of our times? Can prayer prosper when, as Neil Postman writes in his disturbing book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the average American spends fifteen years of his life in front of the television? ... There is no doubt that there is much in today's society that is detrimental to prayer.

And yet we are permitted to *hope* that no secularization can entirely drown out the call of God in the hearts of men. ... For prayer is the expression of a longing, which has not been "produced" by *us* but has been placed in the hearts of men by God. It is an expression of the "fecisti nos *ad Te*" of Saint Augustine (Thou madest us *for thyself*). ... *He who prays hopes*. For someone who cannot hope to be heard cannot ask. After all we only ask other human beings for something when we have the hope that our petition has a chance of being granted. "Prayer," says Saint Thomas, "is the spokesman of hope"(2)

For what do we pray and hope?

By our prayer we can gauge the state of our prayer. For what do we pray? For what do we hope? The reason why prayer and hope are so closely related is that both realize that what we pray and hope for does not lie within our own powers but can only be *given* to us. But what are we permitted to hope for? And what should we pray for? In his long *quaestio* on prayer (the longest in the whole *Summa*), Saint Thomas says:

Since prayer is a kind of spokesman for our desires with God, we only ask for something in prayer rightly if we desire it rightly. In the Lord's Prayer not only do we ask for all that we may rightly desire, we also ask for them in the order in which we are supposed to desire them. This prayer, then, not only teaches us to ask, it also shapes all our affections (*sit informative totius nostri affectus*). (3)

A wonderful statement: The Our Father shapes our whole affective life into its right proportions; it places in us desires and yearnings and therefore the right priorities in our praying.

Is it really reasonable for our primary hope, and therefore our greatest longing, to be: "*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done*"? We have a concern for our "daily bread" (think how many of our people are worrying about their jobs or have already lost them!). We want to get on well with one another ("Forgive us our trespasses ..."). Above all, we beg for protection from evil and temptation, from anguish and despair ("Lead us not into temptation," "Deliver us from evil"). All of these petitions develop out of the problems of our life. They force their way to the front of our attention and harass our hearts. They are usually, therefore, our first and most pressing petitions.

Prayer is the language of hope

The fact that we turn to *God* with these petitions shows that we expect, that we hope for, help from him in all these needs. As Cardinal Ratzinger has said, prayer is "hope in action," for "prayer is the language of hope."(4) "The despairing man no longer prays, because he no longer hopes. The man who is sure of himself and his own strength does not pray, because he relies only on himself.

The man who prays hopes for a good and for a strength that go beyond his own powers."(5) If we really pray for what we ask for in the four petitions of the second part of the Our Father, then we are already *hoping*, and that hope goes beyond the thing we ask for, it is directed toward the *Person* of whom we ask it: "Hallowed be *thy* name, *thy* Kingdom come, *thy* will be done...." These petitions become the articulation of an ever greater

trust, which dares to call God "Our Father".

Saint Thomas [Aquinas] says that the Our Father is "informativa totius nostri affectus": it shapes all our desires and feelings. And indeed, time and again, we hear of people being healed in the very roots of their lives through the Our Father. I am thinking, for example, of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's friend Dimitri Panin,⁽⁶⁾ or of Tatiana Gorischeva, who received the grace of conversion through reciting the Our Father.

When our *affectus* is shaped by the Our Father, our desires and yearnings are sound and in conformity to the action of God, and then our prayer will be more and more efficacious, because it really will be in harmony with God's plan, really will be cooperating with God's providence. Then our praying will be in harmony with the "sighs" of the Spirit, who "intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:27). In the *Compendium theologiae*, Saint Thomas says: "The Our Father is the prayer through which our hope in God is raised up to the highest degree."⁽⁷⁾

Just as faith is *certain*, because it believes *God*, so hope does not disappoint (cf. Romans 5:5), because, full of trust, it expects *from* God what he promises. It is from God *alone* that hope derives its triumphant certainty: "In *te*, Domine speravi, non confundar in aeternum" (In *thee*, O Lord, have I trusted, let me never be confounded).

[Excerpted from [Loving the Church](#), by Christoph Schonborn, Archbishop of Vienna, Austria; translated by John Saward, © 1998, [Ignatius Press](#), San Francisco. Used with permission.]

Notes:

(1) *Epistula ad Romanus* 7, 2.

(2) STh 2a2ae 17, 4, obj. 3.

(3) STh 2a2ae 83, 9. 3.

(4) *Auf Christus schauen: Einübung un Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), 68f.

(5) *ibid.*, 69.

(6) See *The Notebooks of Solodgin* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

(7) *Compendium theologiae* 2, 3.

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Jesus heals a lame man, by James Tissot

The Prayer of the Ever-Living Christ

By Edith Stein (1891-1942)

The prayer of the church is the prayer of the ever-living Christ. Its prototype is Christ's prayer during his human life.

Jesus' public prayer life

The Gospels tell us that Christ prayed the way a devout Jew faithful to the law prayed. Just as he made pilgrimages to Jerusalem at the prescribed times with his parents as a child, so he later journeyed to the temple there with his disciples to celebrate the high feasts.

Surely he sang with holy enthusiasm along with his people the exultant hymns in which the pilgrim's joyous anticipation streamed forth: "I rejoiced when I heard them say: Let us go to God's house" (Psalm 122:1).

From his last supper with his disciples, we know that Jesus said the old blessings over bread, wine, and the fruits of the earth, as they are prayed to this day. So he fulfilled one of the most sacred religious duties: the ceremonial passover seder to commemorate deliverance from slavery in Egypt. And perhaps this very gathering gives us the profoundest glimpse into Christ's prayer and the key to understanding the prayer of

Blessed by the Cross

The Heroic Life of Edith Stein
in Nazi Germany

A Biographical reflection by Jeanne Kun

A young woman in search of the truth

"I keep having to think of Queen Esther who was taken from among her people precisely that she might represent them before the king," Sister Teresa Benedicta wrote to an Ursuline religious sister late in 1938. "I am a very poor and powerless little Esther, but the King who chose me is infinitely great and merciful. That is such a great comfort."

Edith Stein was born into a prominent Jewish family in Breslau, Germany (present-day Wroclaw, Poland), on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, in 1891. As a teenager she abandoned Judaism and became a self-proclaimed atheist.



She attended the university in Breslau and, later, in Göttingen, where she sought intellectual truth in the study of philosophy and became a protégé of

the church.

While they were at supper, he took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you."

In the same way, he took the cup, filled with wine. He gave you thanks, and giving the cup to his disciples, said, "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven."

Blessing and distributing bread and wine were part of the passover rite. But here both receive an entirely new meaning. This is where the life of the church begins. Only at Pentecost will it appear publicly as a Spirit-filled and visible community. But here at the passover meal the seeds of the vineyard are planted that make the outpouring of the Spirit possible.

In the mouth of Christ, the old blessings become *life-giving words*. The fruits of the earth become his body and blood, filled with his life. Visible creation, which he entered when he became a human being, is now united with him in a new, mysterious way. The things that serve to sustain human life are fundamentally transformed, and the people who partake of them in faith are transformed too, drawn into the unity of life with Christ and filled with his divine life.

The Word's life-giving power is bound to the *sacrifice*. The Word became flesh in order to surrender the life he assumed, to offer himself and a creation redeemed by his sacrifice in praise to the Creator.

Through the Lord's last supper, the passover meal of the Old Covenant is converted into the *Easter meal* of the New Covenant: into the sacrifice on the cross at Golgotha and those joyous meals between Easter and Ascension when the disciples recognized the Lord in the breaking of bread...

Jesus' solitary prayer life

We saw that Christ took part in the public and prescribed worship services of his people, i.e., in what one usually calls "liturgy." He brought the liturgy into the most intimate relationship with his sacrificial offering and so for the first

the famed philosopher Edmund Husserl. She earned her doctorate of philosophy in 1916, but her search for truth remained unfulfilled.

The following year Edith was impressed by the calm faith that sustained a Christian friend at the death of her husband. "It was my first encounter with the cross and the divine power that it bestows on those who carry it,"

Edith later wrote. "For the first time, I was seeing with my very eyes the church, born from its Redeemer's sufferings, triumphant over the sting of death. That was the moment my unbelief collapsed and Christ shone forth—in the mystery of the cross."

Taking up the cross of Christ

Edith chose her religious name, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, anticipating that she would share in the Lord's sufferings. "By the cross I understood the destiny of God's people which, even at that time, began to announce itself," she later explained to a friend. "I thought that those who recognized it as the cross of Christ had to take it upon themselves in the name of all."

As the situation worsened for Jews in Germany, Sister Teresa Benedicta knew she was not safe in the Cologne monastery and also believed that her presence there put all the nuns in danger. On the night of December 31, 1938, she crossed into the Netherlands where she was received at the Carmel monastery in Echt. Her sister Rosa, who had also become a Catholic, later followed her and served as a lay portress at the monastery. However, the Nazis occupied the Netherlands in 1940 and Jews, even those who were converts to Christianity, were no longer safe there either.

A martyr through the silent working of divine grace

time gave it its full and true meaning that of thankful homage of creation to its Creator. This is precisely how he transformed the liturgy of the Old Covenant into that of the New.

But Jesus did not merely participate in public and prescribed worship services. Perhaps even more often the Gospels tell of solitary prayer in the still of the night, on open mountain tops, in the wilderness far from people.

Jesus' public ministry was preceded by forty days and forty nights of prayer. Before he chose and commissioned his twelve apostles, he withdrew into the isolation of the mountains.

By his hour on the Mount of Olives, he prepared himself for his road to Golgotha. A few short words tell us what he implored of his Father during this most difficult hour of his life, words that are given to us as guiding stars for our own hours on the Mount of Olives. "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine."

Like lightning, these words for an instant illumine for us the innermost spiritual life of Jesus, the unfathomable mystery of his God-man existence and his dialogue with the Father. Surely, this dialogue was life-long and uninterrupted.

Christ prayed interiorly not only when he had withdrawn from the crowd, but also when he was among people. And once he allowed us to look extensively and deeply at this secret dialogue. It was not long before the hour of the Mount of Olives; in fact, it was immediately before they set out to go there at the end of the last supper, which we recognize as the actual hour of the birth "Having loved his own..., he loved them to the end."

He knew that this was their last time together, and he wanted to give them as much as he in any way could. He had to restrain himself from saying more. But he surely knew that they could not bear any more, in fact, that they could not even grasp this little bit.

The Spirit of Truth had to come first to open their eyes for it. And after he had said and done everything that he could say and do, he lifted his eyes to heaven and spoke to the Father in their presence.

Sister Teresa Benedicta and Rosa were arrested on August 2, 1942, as part of Hitler's orders to deport and liquidate all non-Aryan Catholics. This was in retaliation for a pastoral letter issued by the Dutch bishops that protested Nazi policies. As the two were taken from the convent, Sr. Teresa was heard to say to her sister: "Come, Rosa, let us go for our people." Their lives ended a week later in the gas chamber at Auschwitz.

Like Queen Esther, Edith Stein identified with her fellow Jews in their grave danger and interceded for them. When she was formally declared blessed in 1987 by the Catholic Church, a selection from the Old Testament's Book of Esther was read at her beatification ceremony.

When she was formally declared a saint on October 11, 1998, Pope John Paul II noted: "A young woman in the search of the truth has become a saint and martyr through the silent working of divine grace: Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who from heaven repeats to us today all the words that marked her life: 'Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.' . . ."

Now alongside Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux, another Teresa takes her place among the hosts of saints who do honor to the Carmelite Order."

Life in a Jewish Family

From the writings of Edith Stein

The highest of all the Jewish festivals is the **Day of Atonement**, the day on which the High Priest used to enter the Holy of Holies to offer the sacrifice of atonement for himself and for the people; afterwards, the "scapegoat" upon whose head, symbolically, the sins of all the people had been laid was

We call these words Jesus' great high priestly prayer, for this talking alone with God also had its antecedent in the Old Covenant. Once a year on the greatest and most holy day of the year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest stepped into the Holy of Holies before the face of the Lord "to pray for himself and his household and the whole congregation of Israel."

He sprinkled the throne of grace with the blood of a young bull and a goat, which he had previously to slaughter, and in this way absolved himself and his house "of the impurities of the sons of Israel and of their transgressions and for all their sins."

No person was to be in the tent (i.e., in the holy place that lay in front of the Holy of Holies) when the high priest stepped into God's presence in this awesomely sacred place, this place where no one but he entered and he himself only at this hour. And even now he had to burn incense "so that a cloud of smoke...would veil the judgment throne...and he not die." This solitary dialogue took place in deepest mystery.

Day of Atonement - Most Solemn Day of Prayer

The Day of Atonement is the Old Testament antecedent of Good Friday. The ram that is slaughtered for the sins of the people represents the spotless Lamb of God (so did, no doubt, that other chosen by lot and burdened with the sins of the people that was driven into the wilderness). And the high priest descended from Aaron foreshadows the eternal high priest.

Just as Christ anticipated his sacrificial death during the last supper, so he also anticipated the high priestly prayer. He did not have to bring for himself an offering for sin because he was without sin. He did not have to await the hour prescribed by the Law and nor to seek out the Holy of Holies in the temple.

He stands, always and everywhere, before the face of God; his own soul is the Holy of Holies. It is not only God's dwelling, but is also essentially and indissolubly united to God.

He does not have to conceal himself from God by a protective cloud of incense. He gazes upon the uncovered face of the Eternal One and has nothing to fear. Looking at the Father

driven out into the desert.

All of this ritual has come to an end. But even at present the day is observed with prayer and fasting, and whoever preserves but a trace of Judaism goes to the "Temple" on this day.

Although I did not in any way scorn the delicacies served on the other holidays, I was especially attracted to the ritual of this particular holy day when one refrained from taking any food or drink for twenty-four hours or more, and I loved it more than any of the others. . .

For me the day had an additional significance: I was born on the Day of Atonement, and my mother always considered it my real birthday, although celebrations and gifts were always forthcoming on October 12. (She herself celebrated her birthday according to the Jewish calendar, on the Feast of Tabernacles; but she no longer insisted on this custom for her children.) She laid great stress on my being born on the Day of Atonement, and I believe this contributed more than anything else to her youngest's being especially dear to her.

[Excerpt from Edith Stein's autobiography, *Life in a Jewish Family*, written in 1933, translated by Josephine Koeppel, 1986]

will not kill him. And he unlocks the mystery of the high priest's realm.

All who belong to him may hear how, in the Holy of Holies of his heart, he speaks to his Father; they are to experience what is going on and are to learn to speak to the Father in their own hearts.(24)

[Excerpt from *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, translated by Waltraut Stein, © 1992 ICS Publications. See online collection at [Kolbe Foundation](#)]

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Jeanne Kun is President of [Bethany Association](#) and a senior woman leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

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Our Hearts Will Rise

song and music by Ed Conlin

Eye has not seen, no ear has heard,
No heart conceived the hope prepared for us.
Now we see dimly, but one day clearly.
Face to face we shall behold our God.

*Our hearts will rise as you open our eyes
And we see you in glory and we're taken by love.
Then we shall know / even as we're known
You are love eternal, you are the One!
[To end:] You are the One!*

And all creation waits with eager longing
Until the Father then reveals his own.
So we are pilgrims, searching for that city.
Our hearts are restless for your love alone.

And in that city there is no temple
There is no grieving and there is no night.
But there is Jesus / before the Father,
And by the Spirit we will wake to light.

Click to [listen](#) to an mp3 [audio clip](#) of the song

song and words: (c) Ed Conlin
Album title: Sing a New Song to the Lord
Produced by The Servants of the Word

Ed reflects on the song

This song was written as an adaptation of 1 Corinthians 9 to be an inspiration toward the life of heaven. The melody and pace of the song are to carry an energy that raises the heart and the chorus is written to lift us in worship. My favorite line is "Taken by Love". Indeed when we see Him face to face, we will be taken with him... and the Lord will do it by the sheer magnitude of his love for us! I can't wait!



Ed Conlin is a member of the [Servants of the Word](#), a missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord. He lives in community in the inner city of Detroit, Michigan, USA, and works as a licensed substance abuse counselor and chaplain with Capuchin Franciscan Ministries in Detroit.

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Community is a Sign of the Coming Kingdom

By Eberhard Arnold

No less significant than the symbol of the Body is the symbol of community as the harbinger of God's kingdom – as the news that God will triumph over the earth. When God reigns there will be joy and peace and justice. In the same way as each individual living body consists of millions of independent cells, humankind will become one organism. This organism already exists today in the invisible church.

When we acknowledge the reality of this invisible church's unity and order, we acknowledge at the same time the freedom of the Spirit within that order. The more clearly a community defines its unique task, the more deeply conscious it must be of belonging to the *una sancta*, the One Church. Because it is part of a larger organism, it needs the give-and-take that comes from serving the whole Body, and it needs to be instructed and guided by the united witness of all those who believe in the church.

Self-determination – and self-surrender

The secret of community lies in the freedom of self-determination, in the personal decision of each member to surrender to the whole and, at the same time, to exercise his will for the good. This freedom, without which communal life cannot exist, is not a matter of power exercised by human self-will, just as little as it is a matter of spinelessness or unrestraint. In a community of deeply moved people who believe in the Spirit, the freedom of the individual lives in the free decision of the united will brought about by the Spirit. Working from within each member as the will for the good, freedom becomes unanimity and concord. The will of a

man or woman liberated in this way will be directed toward the kingdom, toward God's unity, and toward the good of the whole human race. As such it becomes life's most vital and intense energy.

Standing as it does in a world of death, an active will must constantly assert itself against the destructive and enslaving powers of lying, impurity, capitalism, and military force. It is engaged in battle everywhere: against the spirit of murder, against all hostility (including the venom of the taunting, quarrelling tongue), against all the wrong and injustice people do to each other. That is, it fights in public as well as in private life against the very nature of hatred and death, and against all that opposes community. The call to freedom is a call to a battle without pause, a war without respite. Those who are called to it must be continually alert. They need not only the greatest willpower they themselves can muster, but also the aid of every other power yielded them by God, in order to meet the plight of the oppressed, to stand with the poor, and to fight against all evil in themselves and in the world around them.

This fight against evil must be waged more strongly within a community than against the world outside, but it must be waged even more relentlessly within each individual. In community, it is fought by the spirit of the church, which takes its foothold in each individual and fights the old Adam within him from the position of the new. In this way all softness, all flabby indulgence, is overcome by the burning power of love.

We must live in community because the struggle of life against death demands united ranks of souls and bodies that can be mobilized wherever death threatens life.

Community of goods

Community of goods presupposes the willingness of each individual member to turn over unconditionally to the common household whatever he acquires in the way of income or property, large or small. Yet even the community does not regard itself as the corporate owner of its inventory and enterprises. Rather, it acts as a trustee of the assets it holds for the common good of all, and for this reason it keeps its door open to all. By the same token it requires for its decision-making undisturbed unanimity in the Spirit.

Loyalty to the end

It is clear that the war of liberation for unity and for the fullness of love is being fought on many fronts with many different weapons. So too, the work of community finds expression in many different ways because the Spirit is rich. But there is a certainty of purpose for every stretch of the way we are called to go, and when we possess this certainty we will be given the strength for loyalty and unerring clarity, even in small things, to the very end. Nothing can be entrusted to the person who cannot hold out. Only those who stand firm can bear the standard.

Subordination to the whole

There is no great commission without a specific, clearly defined task. Yet it is of decisive importance that any special task lead only to Christ – that it truly serve the whole, the church, the coming kingdom. Wherever people see their task as something special in itself, they will go astray. But when a person serves the whole, even if in his special place and in his own particular way, he can well say, "I belong to God and to life in community," or to God and to any other calling. Before our human service can become divine service, however, we must recognize how small and limited it is in the face of the whole.

A special calling – living in community, for instance – must never be confused with the church of Christ itself. Life in community means discipline in community, education in community, and continual training for the discipleship of Christ. Yet the mystery of the church is something different from this – something greater. It is God's life, and coming from him it penetrates community. This penetration of the divine into the human occurs whenever the tension of desperate yearning produces an openness and readiness in which God alone

may act and speak. At such moments a community can be commissioned by the invisible church and given certainty for a specific mission: to speak and act – albeit without mistaking itself for the church – in the name of the church.

Community is a call to love and unity

The church we believe in lives in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit we believe in bears the church within itself. This church of the Spirit will give life to the future unity of humankind. It gives life already now to all truly living communities. The foundation and basic element of every community is not merely the combination of its members but simply and solely the unity of the Holy Spirit, for the true church is present there.

An organism becomes a unit through the unity of consciousness brought about by the spirit that animates it. It is the same in a believing community. The future unity of humankind, when God alone will rule, is ensured by the Holy Spirit. For this Spirit is the coming leader and Lord himself. The only thing we can hold on to here and now, the only thing we can already perceive of this great future of love and unity, is the Spirit. Faith in the Spirit is faith in the church and faith in the kingdom.

Excerpt from [Why We Live in Community](#), by Eberhard Arnold, first published in German in 1925. First English edition in 1967 by (c) Plough Publishing House.

Eberhard Arnold (1883-1935) founded the [Bruderhof](#) in 1920 along with his wife Emmy and her sister Else von Hollander. The Bruderhof began in 1920 in Germany when a group of Christians, seeking answers to the devastation of post-war society, founded a community based on the belief that Jesus' words in the Gospels are a guide to daily living. Today the Bruderhof consists of over 2,600 men, women, and children living in twenty-three communal settlements of varying sizes on four continents.

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A Community of Disciples on Mission

by Bob Tedesco

In the [Sword of the Spirit](#), we say that we are a “community of disciples on mission.” Much has already been written about this phrase, and I hope only to give an additional perspective. I believe that this is one of those areas where all Christian churches could benefit from a re-examination of each element, and, hopefully, this might result in a deeper commitment to each characteristic of the Christian life.

“A Community”

Uses

As mentioned earlier, “community” is a word that can have many meanings and many applications. I was surprised to read a Model Airplane News editorial which spoke about the “modeling community” – and even spoke of “brothers and sisters” in modeling! So, some applications of the word can be functional or activity-oriented: the banking community, the racing community, prayer community, etc. These functions can and do involve relationships, but it is often the function that initiates and holds the relationship together.

Other uses of the word have a more relational intent, while some groupings *imply* community without using the word: family and convent. In these cases certain activities are implied, but the relationship continues by definition, whether or not certain activities continue. I was a member of my parents’ family long after I was not there for evening meals. Members of a religious order can change the focus of their work while maintaining their relationship and way of life.

A brief description

Covenant Christian community is first of all *Christian* followers of Christ. It is a set of intentional relationships (not necessarily family) where the members seek to live a common way of life described by their covenant. This relational aspect of community must be carefully fostered and nurtured to keep from drifting into becoming functional in our expression of community life. If we overly identify with our activities, we can lose the “brother –

sister” aspect intended for the family of God. We might not care for the lonely, strengthen the weak, visit the sick or comfort the mourning. We are brothers and sisters for eternity, and I need to care about your life in the “here and now”.

Within the Sword of the Spirit there are varieties of expressions that result in brothers and sisters spending more or less time together; yet we pursue a common way of life. A single person living with a community family will spend more time with community members than if living alone. Folks living in a cluster (community neighborhood) will find it easier to be together or see one another than those living at a distance from each other. Time together is an essential aspect of relational strength, and decisions should be approached with the question, “*Will this decision mean more community or less community?*” If we decide that our son should be an Olympic ice skater, we might never see the Body of Christ again! Moving to that great house 25 miles away may not be as wise as the less-than-perfect house in a community cluster.

So, community is intentional; it is relational; it involves spending time together; and it should be a factor to consider in significant life decisions.

“Of Disciples”

Believers

I would like to make a risky distinction here between believers and disciples. It’s risky because the scriptural use of the word believer is more serious than my intention here. I would question the modern pattern of being a “believer” where we might believe in Jesus, go to church on Sunday, yet live Monday to Saturday with little concern for the demands of the gospel. Scripture says that even the demons believed. (James 2:19)

Discipleship

Discipleship is a discipline that involves instruction, study, correction and obedience to the Lord. It involves not only the initial conversion, but also learning “...to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). (See *Appendix below – Principles of Discipleship*)

Discipleship for us includes pastoral care from brothers or sisters more experienced in the way of the Lord. It involves a measure of Christian environment, as well as having a number of models of Christian living that we can respect and aspire to.

“On Mission”

Described

Our mission involves evangelization and establishing communities throughout the world who will, in turn, evangelize and raise up trained and formed disciples living our way of life.

“...and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” 2 Timothy 2:2

Outreach

We support the mission with prayer, with finances, and with missionaries who join in the work. The Servants of the Word (our brotherhood) have been key catalysts in that work and they have been joined by other disciples regionally and internationally. Our regional community-building teams have supported communities at all stages. Our regional youth teams have helped and supported young Christians. Thousands have given their lives to the Lord in these outreaches.

Mutual and Necessary Elements

Management terms

Two pertinent modern management terms are:

1) Synergy:

- A dynamic state in which combined action is favored over the sum of individual component actions.
- Behavior of whole systems unpredicted by the behavior of their parts taken separately.

2) Symbiosis:

- Close and often long-term interactions between different biological species.
- The living together of unlike organisms.

A combination of terms

To me, nothing better expresses a combining of necessary elements in a divine/human endeavor than “a community of disciples on mission”. As with farming, multiple elements are necessary, but the Lord provides the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). Christian community is made up of disciples who have mission as the natural expression of their maturity. Disciples are trained and formed in community life by older brothers and sisters with whom they may one day join in mission. Christian mission re-quires Christian disciples and is supported and served by the strength of community.

Mutual importance

Each element (community, disciples, and mission) is necessary and mutually important. The Body of Christ needs all three. When one or another is over-emphasized, something is lost. When one is almost or entirely missing, it is “code blue”.

As [Steve Clark](#) has often described, I may be able to function without one of my legs, but that is not the original intent, the original design. Many of our Christian churches suffer from the lack of community, the lack of discipleship, or the lack of mission. Some are even crippled. The Holy Spirit is healing some of these weaknesses and equipping us to stand.

“And his gifts were to be that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and up-builds itself in love.”

- Ephesians 4:11-16

Appendix: Some Core Principles of Discipleship

1. At the time of Jesus, the crowds were made up of apostles, disciples, believers, on-lookers, officials and enemies.
2. All Christians are called to be disciples. (Matthew 28:19)
3. Most worthwhile pursuits require some initiations/training to begin.
4. Most worthwhile pursuits require ongoing training to continue successfully.
5. To varying degrees, discipleship and training are lifetime pursuits.
6. There are multiple stages of life.
7. There is much natural and spiritual wisdom appropriate to the various stages and challenges of life.
8. God has a plan for my life.
9. The devil has a plan for my life.
10. There is much to learn at each of the stages of life to embrace God's plan and thwart the devil's plan.
11. Discipleship involves several elements: the disciple, the pastoral leader, the community, the scriptures, the Sword of the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit.
12. Improving any of the elements of discipleship can help the process to succeed.
13. Personal attitudes and posture are critical to the progress. Am I: teachable? correctible? arrogant? superior? critical? hopeful? weak of character? selfish? positive? negative? individualistic? addictive?
14. Faithfulness and commitment are crucial qualities. (Whimsical "Seinfeld" people will get nowhere).
15. Kingdom and societal roles are important to the Lord and His order. They give us regular opportunities to either rebel or humbly subordinate our wills, taming the flesh. (Ephesians 4:11, Hebrews 13:17, Colossians 3:18-20, 1 Timothy 5, 1 Peter 2:13-17)
16. You are fundamentally responsible for your own life.
17. There are no guarantees about how you will turn out.
18. We are a community of disciples on mission.
19. We believe that Christ has called Christians to be much more than they have been: for Christ, for themselves, and for the world.

> See related articles on [Christian Community](#) by [Bob Tedesco](#)

Bob Tedesco is the author of [Essays on Christian Community: Do Covenant Communities have something to contribute to our models of church?](#)

Bob Tedesco is past President of the North American Region of the Sword of the Spirit, a founder of the People of God community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, and has been one of its key leaders for the past 40 years.

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The Sword of the Spirit Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

January 18-25, 2015

Introduction

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is actually an eight-day observance or “octave” of prayer. It has been this way from the beginnings of this international movement in 1908. Following are a set of eight daily scripture readings, a short commentary on the readings and a prayer. These materials were developed by a group of ecumenical scholars living in Brazil and have been sanctioned by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. These readings and prayers are intended to be prayed in common by all those participating in the Week of Prayer around the world.

Included with the common readings and prayers are some additional questions to help individuals and families participate in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We would encourage families to take some time to engage the readings and prayers for each day and talk about them together, perhaps around the dinner table or in family worship time. Please feel free to adapt or change them as helpful.

We have also included a short Lord’s Day prayer that can be inserted in the section following the Blessing of the Wine which can be used similar to the other seasonal variations in the Lord’s Day prayers.

Please use these materials in any way you find most helpful in your personal and family worship times during this season of prayer.

Note: The Psalms listed in this booklet follow the numbering of the Hebrew tradition.

Sunday January 18, 2015

It is necessary to go through Samaria (John 4:4)

Readings

- Genesis 24:10-33 Abraham and Rebekah at the well
- Psalm 42 The deer that longs for running streams
- 2 Corinthians 8:1-7 The generosity of Macedonia
- John 4:1-4 He had to go through Samaria

Commentary

Jesus and his disciples travelled from Judea to Galilee. Samaria is between these two areas. There was a certain prejudice against Samaria and the Samaritans. The negative reputation of Samaria came from its mix of races and religions. It was not uncommon to use alternative routes to avoid stepping into Samaritan territory.

What does the Gospel of John mean, then, when saying, "it is necessary to go through Samaria"? More than a geographical issue, it is a choice of Jesus: "going through Samaria" means that it is necessary to meet the other, the different, the one who is often seen as a threat.

The conflict between Jews and Samaritans was old. Samaritan predecessors had broken with the monarchy of the south which required the centralization of the worship in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12). Later, when the Assyrians invaded Samaria deporting many of the local population, they brought to the territory a number of foreign peoples, each with their own gods or deities (2 Kings 17:24-34). For Jews, Samaritans became a people "mixed and impure". Later in John's Gospel, the Jews, wanting to discredit Jesus, accuse him saying, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (John 8:48).

Samaritans in their turn, also had difficulty accepting Jews (John 4:8). The hurt of the past became even greater when, around 128 BC, the Jewish leader, John Hyrcanus, destroyed the temple built by Samaritans as their place of worship on Mount Gerizin. On at least one occasion, reported in Luke's Gospel, Jesus was not received in a Samaritan city simply because he was on his way to Judea (Luke 9:52). So resistance to dialogue came from the two sides.

John makes it clear that "going through Samaria" is a choice Jesus is making; he is reaching beyond his own people. In this he is showing us that isolating ourselves from those who are different and relating only to people like ourselves is a self-inflicted impoverishment. It is the dialogue with those who are different that makes us grow. 22

Questions for reflection and family discussion

- What does it mean for me and for my community "to have to go through Samaria?" and encounter those Christians who are different than we are?
- What are the steps that my community has made to meet other Christians and what have we learned from being together?

Prayer

God of all peoples, teach us to go through Samaria to meet our brothers and sisters from other churches. Allow us to go there with an open heart so we may learn from every church and culture. We confess that you are the source of unity. Grant us the unity that Christ wills for us. Amen.

Monday January 19, 2015

Tired of the journey, Jesus sat down. (John 4:6)

Readings

- Genesis 29:1-14 Jacob and Rachel at the well
- Psalms 137 How can we sing the Lord's song?
- 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 I am for Paul, I am for Apollos
- John 4:5-6 Jesus was tired out by his journey

Commentary

Jesus had been in Judea before his encounter with the Samaritan woman. The Pharisees had begun to spread the word that Jesus baptized more disciples than John. Perhaps this rumor has caused some tension and discomfort. Perhaps it is the reason behind Jesus' decision to leave.

Arriving at the well, Jesus decides to stop. He was tired from his journey. His fatigue could also be related to the rumors. While he was resting, a Samaritan woman came near the well to fetch water. This meeting took place at Jacob's well: a symbolic place in the life and spirituality of the people of the Bible.

A dialogue begins between the Samaritan woman and Jesus about the place of worship. "Is it on this mountain or in Jerusalem?" asks the Samaritan woman. Jesus answers, "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him" (John 4: 21- 24).

It still happens that instead of a common search for unity, competition and dispute mark the relations between the churches. This has been the experience in many places around the world. Communities extol their own virtues and the benefits that accrue to their adherents in order to attract new members. Some think that the bigger the church, the larger its number of members, the greater its power, the closer they are to God, presenting themselves as the only true worshippers. As a result there has even at times been violence and disrespect to other denominations and traditions. This type of dispute creates both distrust between the churches and a lack of credibility in society towards Christianity as a whole. As the dispute grows the "other" community becomes the enemy.

Who are the true worshippers? True worshippers do not allow the logic of competition – who is better and who is worse – to infect faith. We need "wells" to lean upon, to rest and let go of disputes, competition and violence, places where we can learn that true worshippers worship "in Spirit and in Truth."

Questions for reflection and family discussion

- What are the main reasons for competition among our churches?
- Are we able to identify a common "well" upon which we can lean, and rest from our disputes and competitions?

Prayer

Gracious God, Often our churches are led to choose the logic of competition. Forgive our sin of presumption. We are weary from this need to be first. Allow us to rest at the well. Refresh us with the water of unity drawn from

our common prayer. May your Spirit who hovered over the waters of chaos bring unity from our diversity. Amen.

Tuesday, January 20, 2015

I have no husband (John 4:17)

Readings

- 2 Kings 17:24-34 Samaria conquered by Assyria
- Psalms 139:1-12 You have searched me, You know me
- Romans 7:1-4 You have died to the law
- John 4:16-19 I have no husband

Commentary

The Samaritan woman answers Jesus, "I have no husband." The topic of conversation is now about the married life of the woman. There is a shift in terms of the content of their dialogue – from water to husband. "Go, call your husband and come back" (John 4:16), but Jesus knows the woman has had five husbands, and the man she has now is not her husband.

What is this woman's situation? Did her husbands ask for divorce? Was she a widow? Did she have children? These questions arise naturally when dealing with this narrative. However, it seems that Jesus was interested in another dimension of the woman's situation, he acknowledges the woman's life but remains open to her, to encounter her. Jesus does not insist on a moral interpretation of her answer but seems to want to lead her beyond. And as a result the woman's attitude towards Jesus changes. At this point, the obstacles of cultural and religious differences fade into the background in order to give space to something much more important: an encounter in trust. Jesus' behavior in this moment allows us to open new windows and raise further questions: questions that challenge the attitudes that denigrate and marginalize 'the other'; and questions about the differences which we allow to stand in the way of the unity we seek and for which we pray.

Questions for reflection and family discussion:

- •Are there ways that we tend to marginalize those Christians who are different than us?
- •What are some ways we could establish 'encounters in trust' toward Christians who are different than us?

Prayer

O you who are beyond all things, how could we call you by any other name? What song could be sung for you? No word can express you. What Spirit can perceive you? No intelligence can comprehend you. You alone are inexpressible; all that is said has come from you. You alone are unknowable; all that is thought has come from you. All creatures proclaim you, those who speak and those who are dumb. Every one desires you, everyone sighs and aspires after you. All that exists prays to you, and every being that can contemplate your universe raises to you a silent hymn. Have pity on us, you who are beyond all things. How could we call you by any other name? Amen.

Attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus

Wednesday, January 21, 2015

Then the woman left her water jar (John 4:28)

Readings

- Genesis 11:31-12:4 God promises to Abram
- Psalm 23 The Lord is my shepherd
- Acts 10:9-20 What God has made clean
- John 4:25-28 Then the woman left her water jar

Commentary

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman shows that dialogue with the different, the stranger, the unfamiliar, can be life-giving. If the woman had followed the rules of her culture, she would have left when she saw Jesus approaching the well. That day, for some reason, she did not follow the established rules. Both she and Jesus broke with conventional patterns of behavior. Through this breaking forth they showed us again that it is possible to build new relationships.

As Jesus completes the work of the Father, the Samaritan woman, for her part, leaves her water jar, meaning that she could go further in her life; she was not confined to the role society imposed on her. In John's Gospel she is the first person to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. "Breaking forth" is a necessity for those who desire to grow stronger and wiser in their faith.

That the Samaritan woman leaves behind her water jar signals that she has found a greater gift, a greater good than the water she came for, and a better place to be within her community. She recognizes the greater gift that this Jewish stranger, Jesus, is offering her.

It is difficult for us to find value, to recognize as good, or even holy, that which is unknown to us and that which belongs to another. However, recognizing the gifts that belong to the other as good and as holy is a necessary step towards the visible unity we seek.

Questions for reflection and family discussion

- Meeting Jesus requires that we leave behind our water jars, what are those water jars for us?
- What are the main difficulties that prevent us from leaving them behind?

Prayer

Loving God, help us to learn from Jesus and the Samaritan woman that the encounter with the other opens for us new horizons of grace. Help us to break through our limits and embrace new challenges. Help us to go beyond fear in following the call of your Son. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, January 22, 2015

You have no bucket and the well is deep (John 4:11)

Readings

- Genesis 46:1-7 Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt
- Psalm 133 How good it is to live together in unity
- Acts 2:1-11 The day of Pentecost
- John 4:7-15 You have no bucket and the well is deep

Commentary

Jesus needed help. After a long walk, fatigue strikes. Exhausted in the heat of noon, he feels hungry and thirsty (John 4:6). Furthermore, Jesus is a stranger; it is he who is in a foreign territory and the well belongs to the woman's people. Jesus is thirsty and, as the Samaritan woman points out, he has no bucket to draw water. He needs water, he needs her help: everybody needs help!

Many Christians believe that they alone have all the answers and they need no help from anyone else. We lose a lot if we maintain this perspective. None of us can reach the depths of the well of the divine and yet faith demands that we delve deeper into the mystery. We cannot do this in isolation. We need the help of our Christian brothers and sisters. Only then can we reach into the depths of the mystery of God.

A common point in our faith, regardless of the church to which we belong, is that God is mystery beyond our comprehension. The search for Christian unity brings us to the recognition that no community has all the means to reach into the deep waters of the divine. We need water, we need help: everybody needs help! The more we grow in unity, share our buckets and join the pieces of our ropes, the deeper we delve into the well of the divine.

Brazilian indigenous traditions teach us to learn from the wisdom of the elderly, and at the same time, from the curiosity and innocence of infants. When we are ready to accept that we do need each other, we become like children, open to learn. And that's how God's Kingdom opens for us (Matthew 18:3). We must do as Jesus did. We must take the initiative to enter into a foreign land, where we become a stranger, and cultivate the desire to learn from that which is different.

Questions for reflection and family discussion

- Do you remember situations in which your church or community has helped or been helped by those from another church or community?
- Are there reservations from the part of your church to accept help from another church? How can these reservations be overcome?

Prayer

God, spring of the Living water, help us to understand that the more we join together the pieces of our ropes, the more deeply our buckets reach into your divine waters! Awaken us to the truth that the gifts of the other, are an expression of your unfathomable mystery. And make us sit at the well together to drink from your water which gathers us in unity and peace. We ask this in the name of your son Jesus Christ, who asked the Samaritan woman to give him water for his thirst. Amen.

Friday, January 23, 2015

Jesus said: "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14)

Readings

- Exodus 2:15-22 Moses at the well of Midian
- Psalm 91 The song of those who take refuge in the Lord
- 1 John 4:16-21 Perfect love casts out fear
- John 4:11-15 A spring of water welling up to eternal life

Commentary

The dialogue that begins with Jesus asking for water becomes a dialogue in which Jesus promises water. Later in this same gospel Jesus will again ask for a drink. "I thirst," he says from the cross, and from the cross Jesus becomes the promised fountain of water which flows from his pierced side. We receive this water, this life from Jesus, in baptism, and it becomes a water, a life that wells up within us to be given and shared with others.

Here is the witness of a Brazilian woman who has drunk from this water and in whom this water becomes a spring:

Sister Romi, a nurse from Campo Grande, was a pastor in the Pentecostal tradition. One Sunday night, all alone in a shack, in Romi's neighborhood a sixteen year old indigenous girl called Semei gave birth to a baby boy. She was found lying on the floor and bleeding. Sister Romi took her to the hospital. Enquiries were made – where was Semei's family? They were found, but they did not want to know. Semei and her child had no home to go to. Sister Romi took them into her own modest home. She did not know Semei, and prejudice towards indigenous people is great in Campo Grande. Semei continued to have health problems, but Sister Romi's great generosity brought forth further generosity from her neighbors. Another new mother, a Catholic called Veronica, breastfed Semei's child as she was unable to do so. Semei named her son Luke Nathaniel and in time they were able to move away from the city to a farm, but she did not forget the kindness of Sister Romi and her neighbors.

The water that Jesus gives, the water that Sister Romi received in baptism, became in her a spring of water and an offer of life to Semei and her child. Prompted by her witness, this same baptismal water became a spring, a fountain, in the lives of Romi's neighbors. The water of baptism springing into life becomes an ecumenical witness of Christian love in action, a foretaste of the eternal life which Jesus promises.

Concrete gestures like these practiced by ordinary people are what we need in order to grow in fellowship. They give witness to the Gospel and relevance to ecumenical relations.

Questions for reflection and family discussion

- How do you interpret Jesus' words that through him we may become "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14)?
- Where do you see Christian people being springs of living water for you and for others?

Prayer

Triune God, following the example of Jesus, make us witnesses to your love. Grant us to become instruments of justice, peace and solidarity. May your Spirit move us towards concrete actions that lead to unity. May walls be transformed into bridges. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Saturday, January 24, 2015

Give me to drink (John 4:7)

Readings

- Numbers 20:1-11 The Israelites at Meribah
- Psalm 119:10-20 I will not forget your word
- Romans 15:2-7 Live in harmony with one another
- John 4:7-15 Give me to drink

Commentary

Christians should be confident that encountering and exchanging experiences with the other, even other religious traditions, can change us and help us to reach into the depths of the well. Approaching those who are strangers to us with the desire to drink from their well opens to us the “wonders of God” that we proclaim.

In the wilderness God’s people were without water and God sent Moses and Aaron to bring water forth from the rock. In the same way God often meets our needs through others. As we call upon the Lord in our need, like the Samaritan asking Jesus, “Sir, give me this water,” perhaps the Lord has already answered our prayers by putting into the hands of our neighbors that for which we ask. And so we need to turn also to them, and ask, “Give me to drink.”

Sometimes the answer to our need is already in the life and goodwill of the people around us. From the Guarany people of Brazil we learn that in their language there is no equivalent word for the term “religion” as separate from the rest of life. The expression usually used literally means “our good way of being” (“*ñande reko katu*”). This expression refers to the whole cultural system, which includes religion. Religion, therefore, is part of the Guarany cultural system, as well as their way of thinking and being (*teko*). It relates to all that improves and develops the community and leads to its “good way of being” (*teko katu*). The Guarany people remind us that Christianity was first called “The Way” (Acts 9:2). “The Way,” or “our good way of being” is God’s way of bringing harmony to all parts of our lives.

Questions for reflection and family discussion

- How has your understanding and experience of God been enriched by encounters with other Christians?

Prayer

God of life, who cares for all creation, and calls us to justice and peace, may our security not come from arms, but from respect. May our force not be of violence, but of love. May our wealth not be in money, but in sharing. May our path not be of ambition, but of justice. May our victory not be from vengeance, but in forgiveness. May our unity not be in the quest of power, but in vulnerable witness to do your will. Open and confident, may we defend the dignity of all creation, sharing, today and forever, the bread of solidarity, justice and peace. This we ask in the name of Jesus, your holy Son, our brother, who, as victim of our violence, even from the heights of the cross, gave forgiveness to us all. Amen.

Prayer for the Lord’s Day

This prayer may be used after the blessing of the Wine similar to the other seasonal variations in the ceremony.

Leader: Let us thank Him this day especially for the unity we enjoy in the Body of Christ and for our call to Ecumenical Life in the Sword of the Spirit. May we all become perfectly one, so that the world may know and

believe. Lord our God, You are bringing us into the fullness of unity through the work of Your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Group: Now we live with Him through the Holy Spirit, and we look for the day when we will dwell with Him in Your everlasting kingdom.?

Sunday January 25, 2015

Many believed because of her testimony (John 4:39)

Readings

- Exodus 3:13-15 Moses at the Burning Bush
- Psalm 30 The Lord restores us to life
- Romans 10:14-17 Those who bring good news
- John 4:27-30.39-40 Because of her testimony

Commentary

With her heart transformed, the Samaritan woman goes out in mission. She announces to her people that she has found the Messiah. Many believed in Jesus “because of the woman’s witness” (John 4:39). The force of her witness stems from the transformation of her life caused by her encounter with Jesus. Thanks to her attitude of openness, she recognized in that stranger “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14)

Mission is a key element of Christian faith. Every Christian is called to announce the name of the Lord. Pope Francis told missionaries, “wherever you may go, it would do you well to think that the Spirit of God always gets there ahead of us”. Mission is not proselytism. Those who truly announce Jesus approach others in loving dialogue, open to mutual learning, and respecting difference. Our mission requires us to learn to drink from the living water without taking hold of the well. The well does not belong to us. Rather, we draw life from the well, the well of living water which is given by Christ.

Our mission must be a work both of word and witness. We seek to live out what we proclaim. The late Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara, once said that many have become atheists because they have become disillusioned by people of faith who do not practice what they preach. The witness of the woman led her community to believe in Jesus because her brothers and sisters saw coherence between her words and her own transformation.

If our word and witness is authentic, the world will hear and believe. “How are they to believe if they have not heard?” (Rom 10:14).

Questions for reflection and family discussion

- What is the relationship between unity and mission? How can our ecumenical unity in the Sword of the Spirit be an effective aid to our mission?
- Do you know people in your community whose life story is a witness to unity?

Prayer

God, spring of living water, Make of us witnesses of unity through both our words and our lives. Help us to

understand that we are not the owners of the well, And give us the wisdom to welcome the same grace in one another. Transform our hearts and our lives So that we might be genuine bearers of the Good News. And lead us always to the encounter with the other, As an encounter with you. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, In the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Sharing a meal with the Voice of the Gospel Community

Training for Mission - Summer 2014

by Paul Jordan

“As we lose our lives, we gain our lives.”

This is the Gospel truth most on my mind these days.

Only a work of God would see young men and women taking joy in their ‘loss’. Leaving comfort zones, serving the need, setting aside our phones, stripping away our material comforts in order to hear God, ‘tired and worn but with a light in our eyes...’

I find myself called on by their words and deeply encouraged to see God’s action in their lives through the giving of their lives.

This past summer [Kairos in Europe and the MiddleEast](#) sent out 30 young people from 10 different nationalities on mission. With another 30 at Bible Week, 30 at our senior training for pastoral work and another 40 following the Student Worker conference it was a busy summer. The soil of Europe remains hard ground but things are continuing to steadily grow.

Please join in praying that the labors of the past summer may continue to bear fruit, and that our God may capture the hearts and minds of the students and young people we are meeting these days.

Paul Jordan is the Director for [Kairos-EME](#)



Getting to know and playing games with local children

Culture Shock

John Mamonluk | London, England

I initially signed up for the mission trip to Mumbai because of a desire to deliberately separate myself from first-world comforts that have cradled me my whole life. Heading into India for two weeks with nine other young adults from Europe and Australia, I knew that my standards for comfort, convenience and safety would all be tested. However, no amount of mental preparation would even come close to the level of poverty I witnessed.

The first time I walked through the slums of Mankurd, everything felt surreal. The experience can sort of be likened to walking through a movie set. I seriously couldn't register the idea: what I was experiencing was real life for people. As the trip continued, I came to terms that this was the horrific reality for the kids we met at the center. After our sessions, they would be returning to their tight buildings among the filth, flies, rats and rank stench. These sessions in the slums really developed an appreciation for blessings I possess.



A significant amount of our work was serving kids. Time with them helped me see that much of what we designate as a need is actually a want. Despite the language barrier, you could fill a child with joy merely by being with them. They longed to be played with, to be picked up, to sit on your lap, to simply be loved. These basic actions came at no cost to us yet made their day. This made me re-evaluate the amount of weight and attention I give to my relationships. I really should be investing more in my relationships with people and developing a deeper appreciation for the love and service they show me.



Through Christ Who Strengthens Me Christine Doyle | Dublin, Ireland

This summer I was blessed to have spent two incredible God- centered weeks in the city of Mumbai, India. My team and I were so abundantly blessed during our time in India through all the people we met, the places we visited and the tasks we faced.

My first experience of India was the distinct smell and the humidity. However, it was the poverty that struck me the most. The population of Mumbai is 11.9 million people, more than half of whom live in highly-crowded slums. We served in an area called Mankurd, the second largest slum in Asia, where we focused on reaching out to the children by putting on a sports day, a medical camp, workshops, dancing, singing and just generally having fun with them.



We were also fortunate to work closely with a local youth group called Gensys. We wanted to share a hunger for the Lord that would encourage Gensys to reach out to more and more young people in Mumbai. We put on a retreat for them which gave us the opportunity to grow in fellowship, discipleship, worship, prayer and praise. We were able to share our own experiences on how the Lord touched and changed our lives.

A big highlight for me was our very last night in Mumbai. The team all went down to the seafront for our last team meeting, and we sat on the wall facing out over the city. We had successfully completed our journey. It was such an overwhelming moment, something that I will never forget: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

I experienced so many blessings while I was on the trip. The Lord spoke to us individually and as a team, which is what made our time together so special. One of the biggest life lessons that I picked up from being there was how poor one can be on the outside but how rich on the inside simply because of the joy in our hearts for the Lord. It seems like such a simple lesson, but it stood out for me, and I brought it back home.

The wonderful thing about mission is that I come home to it; mission didn't end when I got home from India. I have a constant mission to not only follow the Lord but bring more people to him, and that is something to celebrate.

Building Across Culture

Bronagh McGlinchey | Belfast, Northern Ireland

When I first was told that I'd gotten a place on the Kenya mission trip, I was delighted. When I arrived on 6 August with seven other young people, it definitely was not what I was expecting!

Having been on a previous mission trip to South Africa, I thought I'd fully experienced doing mission work: feeding the hungry, handing out blankets, being shocked and horrified at the conditions people lived in. This time round, however, we weren't handing out the food or looking on; we were experiencing it with them. We used a drop hole for a toilet, had no running water, washed from a bucket, and ate the same food day in and day out, things that we wouldn't dare dream of doing at home. Instead of handing out blankets and food, our main goal for the trip was reaching across the language and culture barriers to build relationships with the Voice of the Gospel Community.

For all of us, this was a struggle and at times frustrating. We weren't sure if we were making a difference. However, it was these experiences which made us grow in a deeper faith. With materialism stripped away, we could fully embrace God and hear him more clearly. For the first time since becoming a Christian, I was able to take a brave step and open myself up to God, allowing him to work and heal me in an amazing way.

We were presented with great opportunities for building relationships across cultural differences. The women on our team were able to have a small group time with the women of Voice of the Gospel Community. Another gem was staying at the Little Angels Orphanage and playing with the children. Every day we were inspired by the grace and love the children showed each other and by how they worked together as a family, with their faith at the center.

This experience to Kenya changed me and allowed me to grow in so many ways, increasing my passion for mission. It was a truly fantastic experience!



The Kairos team performs a skit to start conversations about hope with those walking by

Wherever We're Willing to Serve
Clare Holmes | Glasgow, Scotland

The Glasgow Commonwealth Games mission trip seemed like a unique opportunity to serve in my own city, to get to know a range of people from across Europe and beyond and to be open to challenging myself right at the center of a place I would usually call my comfort zone.

For the two weeks during the games, our team of fourteen worked, served, lived and prayed in Glasgow. It was a time when God worked not only in our team and the people we came into contact with but also very personally with each one of us. I never expected to learn so much about myself while in my own city!

One of the most striking things I received from the trip was how God uses our weaknesses over our strengths. One of the ways he did this was by making us vulnerable as we openly witnessed about difficult times in our lives during street dramas. The drama was focused on finding hope when we feel stuck. The result was incredible: we had strangers writing down times they also felt stuck on pieces of paper and how they found hope. We had people stopping to talk with us and even get prayed with.

Something else God revealed to me is that he works wherever we are willing to serve. He transformed my view of Glasgow from being a place of familiar streets and buildings to a city filled with people he wanted to reach out to. He showed us that even in a place that you call your 'comfort zone', He can make you uncomfortable in order that you might be open to how he wants to use you. He also made it clear that some of the most incredible stories and witnesses can happen during a normal, mid-week bus ride or an average lunch hour on a busy main street. I can truly say I see my city very differently now and I know it is because I was open to God working in it. As became our team motto, 'Praise the Lord!'

See also > [Bible Week - Learning and Growing Together in the Word of God](#)

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Kairos EME Bible Week held in Northern Ireland - July 2014

Bible Week - Summer 2014

Learning and Growing Together in the Word of God

Resting and Reliance

Mary McCarthy | Dublin, Ireland

Bible Week 2014 was my first-ever Bible Week, and I really hope it wasn't my last! Being at Kilmore House, nestled for a week in the rolling Glens of County Antrim in the north of Ireland, alongside a group of young people who were hungry to grow in their relationship with God is an experience that I hope I will never forget or stop thanking God for.

I could feel the Holy Spirit's presence throughout the whole week, from the silence of our morning meditations to the soft murmur of group discussion and the joyous laughter during mealtimes. Every day of Bible Week was a warm, gentle and affirming reminder of God's love for me and his perfect plan for my life in him. I learned that putting my complete reliance in Jesus is imperative in living out a Christian life, and that the importance of daily morning prayer cannot be over-emphasised.

Unplugged

Karl Ghosn | Beirut, Lebanon

Bible Week 2014 was a very good week, full of fun activities, Bible teaching and prayer times. There were two main things in this Bible Week that really helped me focus on God. First, there was no internet coverage in the area we were in, so we were a little isolated from the outside world. This really helped in setting aside our families, our problems, our friends, even our boyfriends and girlfriends. We were set apart for the Lord.

Secondly, we had 28 people at Bible Week. This small number of people really gave us a chance to know each other well, and not just by name. Even though we were from different countries and different cultures, we quickly built close friendships. What always amazes me at Kairos events is that we can quickly and easily become helpers and encouragers for each other despite the fact that we don't know each other that well at the start.

Bible Week - Preparation for Mission

Mark McMorrow | Dublin, Ireland

My experience of Kairos events this year was somewhat unexpected: I had failed to realize what it would entail to attend a week-long event going straight into another trip four days later. Far from the usual experience of “Retreat, Recuperate, Repeat”, I found myself thrust from the rolling downs of Belfast country, surrounded by like-minded Christians, straight into the heart of Glasgow city center, offering prayer to some people who might not have had any experience of Christ except through the media. It was a challenging and eye-opening experience.

For me, Bible Week was very much a week of preparation. It was the time one spends in training before setting out to accomplish something amazing. It was the time one spends before the battle donning one’s armor. It was Aragorn giving his speech before storming the Black Gate, if the Black Gate was Glasgow and Aragorn was Don Schwager!

On the very first day of Bible Week, I received a word that I would leave Northern Ireland with a heart for evangelism. Th is word was confirmed for me during our introduction session when Tadhg, who was leading, picked three random people out of the audience to give examples of what the Lord would say to us during the week. “Mark”, he said, looking me in the eye. “You will leave here a changed man.”



The Glasgow mission was amazing in a different way. Until the first day of mission in Glasgow, my experience of Christian events that I had attended - I’d never been on a mission trip before - consisted of flattening out a nice patch of grass somewhere in the country and telling each other how wonderful we were. With regards to preparation for mission, that would be akin to charging the Black Gate with a toothpick.

As it was, we were fully fitted with “the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and the readiness in our feet that comes from the gospel of peace.” Thusly equipped, we were seen safely through the challenging week of mission in Glasgow, from which we emerged tired, worn, but with a light in our eyes and a peace in our hearts that comes only from God. A special thanks to all the staff on Bible Week, to the Community of the Risen Christ who hosted and helped us during our stay in Glasgow, and to everyone in Kairos who made it all possible.

See also > [Training for Kairos Mission - Summer 2014](#)

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“We’re All Adolescents Now”

From Here to Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity

by Dr. Thomas Bergler

Americans of all ages are not sure they want to grow up. If you listen carefully, you can sometimes hear thirty- or forty-year-olds say things like “I guess I have to start thinking of myself as an adult now.” Greeting cards bear messages like “Growing old is inevitable. Growing up is optional.” A recent national study of the sexual lives of eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds found that most want to get married and have children – eventually. But they think of settling down as the end of the good part of their lives. One young woman spoke for many in the study when she said that having children will be “what makes your life, like, full, after like, you are done with your life, I guess.”¹

Try this experiment. Ask a group of college students to raise their hands if they think they are adults. They won’t know what to do. You can be sure they won’t all raise their hands.

The problem goes deeper than just a fear of growing old. Early in my teaching career, I asked a group of undergraduate students, “What does a mature Christian look like? Let’s list some traits of spiritual maturity.” The question made my students uncomfortable, so they pushed back with responses like these: “I don’t think we ever arrive in our spiritual growth”; “We’re not supposed to judge one another”; “No one is perfect”; and “We can’t be holy in this life.” Sadly, these students who had been raised in church and were attending a Christian college did not think of spiritual maturity as attainable or perhaps even desirable. They wrongly equated it with an unattainable perfection.

Where did this problem of low expectations originate? Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, three factors combined to create the juvenilization of American Christianity. First, new and more powerful youth cultures created distance between adults and adolescents. Second, in an attempt to convert, mobilize, or just hang on to their teenage children, Christian adults adapted the faith to adolescent tastes. As a result of these first two factors, the stereotypical youth group that combines fun and games with a brief, entertaining religious message was born. In the years since, this model of youth ministry has become a taken-for-granted part of church life. Finally, the journey to adulthood became longer and more confusing, with maturity now just one among many options. The result was juvenilization: the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted – or even celebrated – as appropriate for Christians of all ages.

This dynamic of juvenilization leaped out at me when I realized that there was nothing happening in the seeker-friendly ministry of Willow Creek Community Church in the 1990s that had not already been done in the Youth for Christ rallies of the 1950s. The only difference was that the pioneers of Youth for Christ believed that what they were doing was not suitable for Sunday morning worship, but should only be done in an evangelistic rally outside the four walls of the church.²

Other branches of American Christianity – I examined Mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and African Americans – either were latecomers to juvenilization or picked the wrong elements of youth culture to imitate. As a result, the white Evangelical model of youth ministry came to dominate not just the church basement, but increasingly, the adult worship service as well.³ To be sure, not all churches look like white Evangelical ones in their worship practices or other activities. But all churches compete for customer loyalty in a religious

marketplace in which many people of all ages share similar adolescent preferences for an emotionally comforting, self-focused, and intellectually shallow faith.

It is important to realize that many benefits have come from injecting more youthfulness into American Christianity. Church growth, mission trips, and racial reconciliation all received a big boost from the youth ministries of the past seventy-five years. Churches that made compromises with youth culture sometimes managed to inspire long-term loyalty in their young people and even make church more attractive to adults. In contrast, churches that ignored the preferences of young people tended to decline in numbers and in effectiveness. For example, conservative Protestant churches have grown relative to liberal Protestant ones over the past forty years because conservative church members have had more children and conservative churches have done better at retaining those children through juvenilized youth ministries.⁴ Big churches are not necessarily more faithful to Christ than small churches, but churches without members have a hard time fulfilling their missions.

Youth ministries are laboratories of innovation that at their best keep churches vibrant and help them adapt to the unique challenges of each generation. One of the few studies we have that asked the same questions about religion in the same town over a long period of time showed that between the 1920s and the 1970s the top reason people reported for going to church changed from “habit” to “enjoyment.” Because youth culture put teenagers especially at risk for abandoning their faith, youth ministers were the first to learn how to make church more enjoyable. And what they learned along the way has kept people of all ages coming to church.⁵

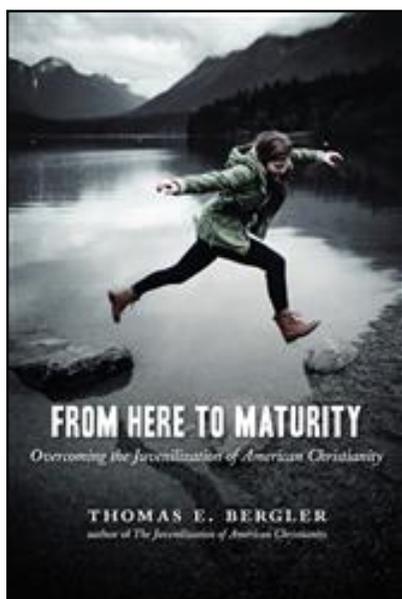
But this attempt to make Christianity as pleasurable as youth culture had some dangers. In the 1950s, one teenage girl who was a member of Youth for Christ had this to say about Elvis Presley: “The fact of the matter is, I’ve found something else that has given me more of a thrill than a hundred Presley’s ever could! It’s a new friendship with the most wonderful Person I’ve ever met, a Man who has given me happiness and thrills and something worth living for.”⁶ In other words, Jesus is just like a teen idol, only better. Juvenilization kept Christianity popular, but did little to promote spiritual maturity.

It is important to realize that because of juvenilization, the problem of immaturity is no longer just a youth problem to be solved by adolescents, parents, or youth ministers. One pastor told me that the concept of juvenilization helped him understand some of the struggles he is having with congregants in their sixties. These Baby Boomers raised in the founding era of juvenilization want church to revolve around their preferences. But the problem is not just the old oppressing the young. The young leaders of a church that targets twenty-somethings asked a middle-aged woman to leave the music team because she did not “project the right image.” That is, she looked too old. Not only is it easy to find people of all ages who are immature, it is now the whole life course – the normal pattern of moving from childhood to adulthood – that has been compromised as a path to spiritual maturity.

Growing up isn’t what it used to be

There have always been immature people, and there always will be. When I was young, if someone pulled a selfish prank, a classmate or sibling might yell “Grow up!” or “That’s really mature!” To be sure, growing up was typically something that other irritating kids should do, rather than something to which we all aspired. Yet this admittedly immature form of exhortation implied a shared notion that growing up included something called “maturity.” Today, there is less shared understanding of what “growing up” should include. In recent decades important changes in the patterns of human development have made immaturity easier and maturity harder. Both the journey to adulthood and the destination have changed.

Also see > [Guest Author Interview - Five Questions with Tomas Bergler](#)



This excerpt is from the book, [From Here to Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity](#), Chapter 1, (c) 2014 Thomas E. Bergler, published 2014 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.

Thomas Bergler is professor of ministry and missions at Huntington University, Huntington, Indiana, U.S.A. He is a frequent speaker for Kairos and Sword of the Spirit conferences.

His 2012 book [The Juvenilization of American Christianity](#) was featured in [Christianity Today](#) and [Preaching](#) and won an award of merit from [Christianity Today](#).

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Reversing the Juvenilization of American Christianity: Fostering Spiritual Maturity in Congregations,
presentation by Thomas Bergler, at Huntington University, Huntington, Indiana USA

From Here to Maturity
*A new insightful book on overcoming the juvenilization
of American Christianity*

A Guest Author Interview with Thomas Bergler

"This book explains what spiritual maturity is, why we should pursue it, and how we can reach it. Readers are treated to a compelling vision of what mature Christian discipleship looks like and at the same time given practical means to implement that vision in real life... A significant contribution to a hugely important subject for the church today."

- Dr. Daniel Keating, Sacred Heart Major Seminary

The following interview was originally published by Eerdmans Publishing Co. in their blog: EerdWord.wordpress.com. Used with permission.

What makes From Here to Maturity such a unique contribution?

There are lots of good books on spiritual growth and lots of good books on leading churches. Some books focus on youth, others on adults. Meanwhile, much research suggests that American Christians of all ages do not understand what spiritual maturity is and are not sure how to get there. This book provides a focused look at spiritual maturity as taught in the New Testament and a straightforward, practical process for helping individuals and whole congregations grow to spiritual maturity. And it shows how adolescents, emerging adults, and older adults can all work together to help one another mature in Christ. A growing body of research shows that the right kinds of youth ministries can help the whole church grow up, and this book provides practical advice for how to create that kind of youth ministry in your church.

What's one thing that not enough people know or understand about spiritual maturity?

According to the New Testament, spiritual maturity is attainable (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-4; Ephesians 4:11-16; Philippians 3:2-16; Hebrews 5:11-6:1). The exhortations to grow up that we find in these passages clearly assume that the readers should already have become mature. Such exhortations make no sense if maturity is impossible to achieve in this life. We would be more faithful to the biblical witness if we started thinking of spiritual maturity as basic competence in the Christian life. It is the foundational stage of spiritual formation that makes further growth in holiness possible.

Whom do you envision reading *From Here to Maturity*?

The book is designed for pastors, youth pastors, and other church leaders. My dream is that church leadership teams would read the book together. The last chapter provides a step by step process for assessing the current state of spiritual maturity in your congregation and discerning some strategic next steps to take together. I tried hard to make realistic recommendations and to describe a process that could be implemented with a reasonable level of effort. Some books establish a rigid paradigm and suggest that church leaders need to change everything they are doing. That's not the approach here. Instead, my hope is that church leaders will look at everything they are already doing through the lens of spiritual maturity and make targeted changes. Churches are more like gardens to be cultivated than they are like math problems to be solved. Small changes made consistently over time really do make a big difference.

What difficulties did you face in writing *From Here to Maturity*?

I knew that it was important to talk about emotional maturity in the book, but the topic of emotions in the Christian life is vast, confusing, and sometimes even contentious. Even so, given the fact that I think disordered emotions are among the most common manifestations of spiritual immaturity in our age, I wanted to provide some substantive guidance on the topic.

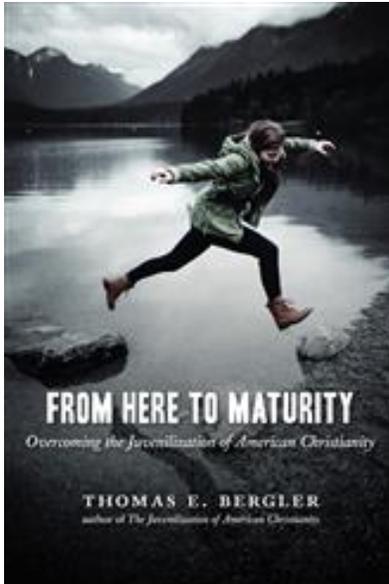
As it turns out, I found a growing consensus among philosophers, psychologists, and Christian spiritual formation writers regarding what is being called the cognitive theory of emotions. This way of understanding how emotions work is actually very ancient, and is the dominant way that Christians have thought about emotions throughout the ages. For example, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley both taught about emotions in this way.

Understanding emotions not as fundamentally irrational and opposed to thinking, but rather as being in constant, dynamic interaction with our thoughts and our will, helps us make sense of our lived experiences with emotions. Even more importantly, this understanding of emotions leads to better approaches to spiritual formation. As we do our part to submit to his working in our lives, God can and does transform our emotional patterns so that they become resources for, rather than obstacles to, spiritual growth.

What's next for you?

In the first chapter of *From Here to Maturity*, I provide a sketch of the extremely difficult and perhaps even broken process of growing from adolescence to adulthood in America today. For my next project, I'd like to dig deeper into this problem to discover what exactly has changed in the process of growing up, why it has changed, and what that means for the church. There has been a lot of interest in recent years in the problem of emerging adults leaving the church. I think that problem is just one symptom of a deeper sickness in our society that makes it harder for Christians in all stages of life to become the human beings God wants us to be. There is a scholarly conversation out there about changes in the patterns of human development and in how people's identities develop, but I have yet to see that conversation translated into terms that can guide pastors, youth pastors, parents, and other concerned Christians in their work. That's the kind of writing I love to do, so I'm looking forward to seeing where that research leads me.

Also see related article > [We're All Adolescents Now](#)



[From Here to Maturity: Overcoming the Juvenilization of American Christianity](#), by Thomas E. Bergler, published 2014 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U. K., paperback, 189 pages. Book can be ordered from [publisher](#).

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CHALLENGES IN LIVING TOGETHER AS COMMUNITY



What is Wrong with the World? I am and You Are!

by Tom Caballes

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

- Romans 7:15-19

One question I faced recently: what is the biggest problem with the world today? Is it social injustice? Greed? Inequality? Politics? Yes, to some degree, to all. But from an angle we can say the problem with everything is – you and I. Why? It goes back to our fundamental identity before God, that we are all sinners [Romans 3:23].

Suffering, pain, abuse, hatred, death, injustice, etc. – all these came as “wages of sin” [Romans 6:23]. So are we doomed? Is there a hope for us? Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! [Romans 7:24-25A]

There is hope for sinners like you and I – Jesus can change and transform us, through the transforming power of God’s Holy Spirit. There is hope for the world to change and become a better place for all of us.

So how do we change and transform the world to become a better place?

1. Our world can change by first changing ourselves. We cannot expect anyone or everyone to change if we ourselves do not change. We need to become redeemed sinners, not yet perfect but growing in holiness and love for God daily. We all need all need ongoing deeper conversion. Our behaviour and character needs to be transformed day by day. How? By prayer and God's Word. We need to grow to be God-like in the way we live – to be more loving, patient, kind, forgiving, etc. We need to think and act like Jesus in all things.
2. The next biggest thing we can do to change the world is to share Jesus to all those we know – by the way we live our lives and by speaking to them about God and the new life that awaits them. Transforming the society involves transforming people from within. It is like setting a very dark world alight one person at a time. We are in a rescue mission – to save everyone within our grasp, from the wages of death and death itself. We also need to pass on our faith to our children, so they continue to transform the world even when we are gone. If we do so, our children will be world-transformers of the future.
3. We should not judge anyone, but have sympathy. We are all sinners, and we are all capable of sinning big and small. Let us see ourselves in other sinners too – because we are like them.
4. We need to stand our ground against the onslaught of evil around us. We need to be in a supportive environment that conforms to our beliefs, values and priorities rather than in an atmosphere that opposes, contradicts and challenges them. We need to speak the truth in love even if we will be rejected.
5. Look forward to eternity. Sin can only conquer our physical bodies and our time on earth, but not eternity. Seek heavenly treasures, not earthly ones. Delight in God and in heaven - even now.
6. Imagine a home, neighbourhood, workplace, school and a university where people are loving, caring, peaceful, joyful, patient, forgiving one another, etc. - wouldn't they be a much better place to live in?

Other Scripture passages:

- Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions--is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. [1 John 2:15-17]
- "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin ... But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [1 Corinthians 15:55-57]
- Other references: Matthew 5:14; John 13:34-35; Romans 12:1-2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Revelation 21:4.

For personal reflection or group sharing

1. How can you transform your home, neighbourhood, workplace or school in your own simple way?
2. What weaknesses in your character can you start working on now? How?



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Hearing God in Meditation

by Sam Williamson

“God speaks time and again—in various ways—but nobody notices” (Job 33:14).

Most people I know have an innate desire to hear God; actually, more than a desire, an intense longing. We want to connect with the divine, to somehow see the face of God, to touch and be touched. It’s inborn, an inherent ingredient of our humanity.

Scripture says God is always speaking, but we miss it. We don’t notice his voice because we don’t recognize it. Oh, sometimes he breaks in through writing on the wall or through a speaking beast of burden, but mostly he speaks in a still, small voice.

We miss his voice because it is drowned out in the sea of other voices. The cacophony of sounds, like an orchestra tuning, obscures that still small voice. Stomachs growl their hunger, bosses bark their

orders, and that insult from twenty years ago still shouts its condemnation.

How do we learn to discern God's voice? In meditation. Christian meditation trains our ears to distinguish God's voice—that one instrument—amidst the orchestra of others. And once we learn to recognize God's voice, we begin to hear it “time and again, in various ways.”

To hear God's voice, we need to learn to meditate. Unless, like Balaam, you have a talking ass.

Christian meditation

You and I are already meditation experts. We practice it all the time in everyday matters. With our first child still fresh in the womb, our mind imagines the new bedroom. We picture fresh paint, where the crib fits best, the changing table and rocker.

We envision our future life—nursing, teaching soccer, and Christmas mornings—and it changes us today. We take a truth—our wife's bulging belly—and consider with our mind and heart. We let the thoughts of our mind mix with the meditations of our heart. And something inside is stirred.

Christian meditation is like that. Unlike eastern meditation—which empties its mind—we fill our mind with a truth, examine it, let it examine us, and in that meditative mix, God speaks.

[Theophan the Recluse](#) (a household name to be sure) said, “To [meditate] is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever present all seeing, within you.”

How does this work in day-to-day life?

A common Christian prayer time involves scripture study and worship (sprinkled liberally with confession, thanksgiving, intercession, and a Christian book or two).

Our study tends to be information gathering (which is good) while our worship is an expression of our spirit and heart (which is also good). Sometimes the move from study to worship feels like shifting from first to fourth gear. We need to link scripture study with worship.

Meditation is that bridge.

Here is what I do. I usually read an Old Testament passage, a Gospel, and a New Testament letter. (Right now I'm reading 2 Kings, Mark, and 1 Corinthians.) As I read the passage (and slow is better than fast), I wait—I remain alert—for a quickening in my heart.

I'm not sure how else to describe it, maybe a stirring in my spirit or just a sense of God. The two on the road to Emmaus said, “Were not our hearts burning within us.” That works.

When stirring begins, I stop reading and meditate on the verses. I ask myself questions like,

What does this truth say about God? Why would God even say it?

What would my life look like if I believed it were true?

Why did this passage make me curious? What stirred that curiosity?

How does my culture twist, distort, or reject this? How has culture affected me?

Why don't I really believe this; or, to what degree do I doubt it?

How does this truth—if it's really true—make me love God more?

What do I need to change in my thinking or actions to align myself with its truth?

I begin by analyzing the idea presented; but after a time, I move from analyzing the text to gazing at God. I move from word-ful thinking to word-less admiration. Jordan Aumann wrote, "Contemplation signifies knowledge accompanied by delight that arouses admiration and captivates the soul" (slightly edited).

What next?

It doesn't happen the same way every day, and certainly not with the same intensity. Some days I'm stirred by verses in the first passage, and I skip the other passages. Other days I finish all the passages, I ask myself which stirred me the most, and I return to that. And gaze.

The safest—and smartest—place to learn to discern God's voice is in scriptural meditation. But once we begin to recognize his voice, we hear it all over the place, in a movie, on a billboard, through a friend, from a stranger on a bus. And we meditate with similar questions.

But we don't stop there. Once we hear God speak, we share it. The best way to know something is to express it; with your spouse, friend, colleague, or with that stranger on the bus. We began with our mind, we descend into our hearts, and with our mind again we articulate with words the wordless vision of God.

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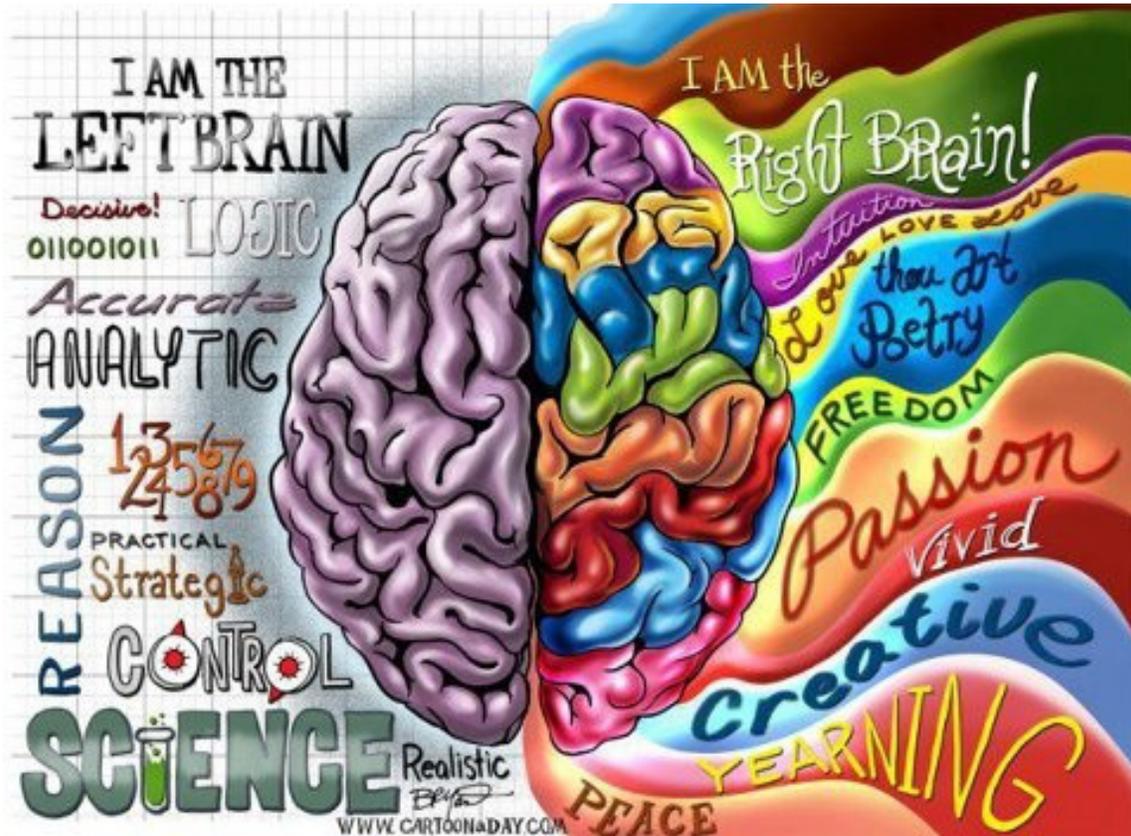
Sam Williamson grew up in Detroit, Michigan, USA. He is the son of a Presbyterian pastor and grandson of missionaries to China. He moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1975. He worked in London England from 1979 to 1982, helping to establish [Antioch](#), a member community of the Sword of the Spirit. After about twenty-five years as an executive at a software company in Ann Arbor he sensed God call him to something new. He left the software company in 2008 and now speaks at men's retreats, churches, and campus outreaches. He is married to Carla Williamson and they have four grown children and a grandson. He has a blog site, www.beliefoftheheart.com, and can be reached at Sam@BeliefoftheHeart.com.



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Spiritual Lobotomy

by Sam Williamson

I recently heard a Christian speaker say, “Thinking is the devil’s territory; I just want to experience God.” He continued, “Hearing God is a totally rightbrained activity. We need to turn off our analytical thinking and lean into our intuition.”

He’s wrong, totally wrong, and dangerously wrong. But I think (oops, I feel) that I understand his dismissal of the analytical. He is reacting.

He’s reacting to the modern era’s enthronement of reason. In the modern age (which began with the Enlightenment), rational thinking became the epicenter, the very essence, of humanity. So Descartes — a prominent rationalist—penned his famous declaration, “I think therefore I am.”

Many people (including the speaker above) react against crowning reason as king. They see too many “intellectual” Christians who spend too many hours studying [supralapsarianism vs. infralapsarianism](#) * (who makes these terms up?); such highbrows might hold right doctrine, but they often live harsh, anxious, and

miserable lives. Something isn't working.

So nowadays we reject reasoning. Instead we feel, intuit, or "just believe" because it "seems right." We prefer the right-brain, we choose imagination over discernment (unless the discernment is based on a gut feel), and we leave thinking to those brainiac eggheads.

The Enlightenment divorced the heart. Today we chop off the head. Both approaches are stupid. Divorcing the heart doesn't help us think better, and a lobotomy doesn't help us feel better.

Guillotining the head is not an improvement over stabbing the heart.

The whole person

We are meant to be whole people, neither a heartdeprived Tin Man nor a lobotomized tomato. In the Old Testament, God commands, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength" (Deut. 6:5, edited). But when Jesus quotes that passage, he inserts a word, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" (Mark 12:30).

Did you ever notice that? Why did Jesus add "mind"? Because the Greeks are the ones who birthed the idea of divorcing the head from the heart, and their word for "heart" failed to capture the full meaning of the Hebrew word. We are meant to love him with our whole being.

Including our mind. God made us both thinking and intuitive beings, and "What God has joined together, let no man cast asunder [or separate]."

The whole brain theory thing

The Greeks birthed the baby of head vs. heart; the Enlightenment re-birthed it; now believers proclaim it born again, baptizing it with the right-brain/left-brain idea. They say we only hear God in our right-brain, intuitively and spontaneously. Just empty your logical, left-brain minds.

The problem is, this newborn right-brain idea is stillborn. And neither scientific nor biblical.

The right-brain/left-brain idea came from the work of Roger Sperry who studied a specific set of brain surgery patients (however Sperry himself claimed the idea has no broader value beyond those specific patients). Numerous studies prove false the modern myth of any right-brain/ left-brain dominance (see these [Psychology](#), [Huffington](#), and [Wiki](#) (articles)).

The analytical (left-brained) person analyzes better when also using the right-brain, and the creative (right-brained) artist creates better when also using the left-brain.

And we don't hear God better through our intuitive right-brain. Rather, divorcing the two halves of our brain disrupts any ability to communicate at all. Halfbrained thinking is half-as... (well, you know what I mean).

Rejection of the right or left brain is hare-brained. God means us to be whole-brained.

Christianity and thinking

I don't know how to say it plainer to our feelingdominated society of believers; but Christianity

means thinking, and thinking hard. Yes, it's more than mere mental activities. But not less.

To feel good, we need to believe good, and believing good begins with thinking good.

When Jesus addresses anxious people—who feel bad because they're scared—he says, “Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin...” (Luke 12:27). He instructs us to, “Consider.” Jesus says the answer to [bad feeling is good thinking](#).

And thinking a lot. The Greek word for “consider” (*katanoeo*) means to think hard, to ponder furiously, to immerse ourselves in contemplation; to scrutinize until we perceive. Jesus says to ponder God's approach with lilies, to think and re-think, until we perceive God himself.

We don't stop at thinking (that's the Greek, Enlightenment, left-brain heresy). We “consider” until we begin to see God. It is seeing God that leads our hearts from anxiety to confidence.

Let's retake our vows

Let's divorce ourselves from culture's stupid answers, and let's re-marry our head and heart. Try this experiment. God frequently tells us to, “Remember!” Take five minutes and actively remember an action of God (the lilies, crucifixion or resurrection, or one of his answers to a prayer). Ponder furiously his actions, his goodness, love, and incredible power.

As we consider with our minds something changes in our hearts. His great riches overshadow today's credit card bills. We begin to see God with the eyes of our hearts. Remembering joins together—it [re-members](#)—our head and heart. Besides, a wedding is always more fun than a divorce.

* I'm neither supralapsarianism nor infralapsarianism. I'm super-napsarian. Whenever I try to understand those speculative schemes, I just want to take a super, long nap.

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Growing in Christian Character Series



Whose Likeness are We?

Being Formed in the Character of Jesus Christ

By Don Schwager

Scripture tells us that God created human beings “in his own *image* and after his own *likeness*” (Genesis 1:26-27).

Sometimes we hear people say, “he is just like his father,” or “she acts like her mother.” In the ancient world the understanding and use of the words for “image” and “likeness” went even further than our modern understanding. The ancient Greek word for “image” is *icon* (*eikón*).²⁵ Our modern notion of “image” usually involves an outline or symbolic representation, such as a picture, illustration, or sculpture. The Greek term “icon” included this, but went further: in Greek an image shared in the nature of the thing that it was an image of. Ancient rulers often erected statues of themselves in the cities of their kingdom, thus signifying the presence of their rule throughout the realm. Another very common usage of icon in Greek was the portrait. A true portrait was regarded as an authentic or exact representation of the person being portrayed. Royal coins issued by rulers very often portrayed their own image or likeness stamped on the coins. Legal documents, such as contracts, would often involve some kind of “icon” or descriptive image so you could recognize who the contracting parties were.

When God revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, God gave a description of what his character is like:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’ (Exodus 34:6-7).

A key characteristic of God is his love and faithfulness. These motivate and orient everything he does. His judgments are tempered by love and faithfulness, and his mercies are never exhausted. The prophets declare that “the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:122-23).

God’s love is connected with his holiness. His love both purifies his people of their sinful ways and draws them into his infinite holiness. When God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the Ten Commandments which embody God’s way of love and righteousness. That is why God commanded his people to be holy as he is holy (Leviticus 11:44; 20:26) – he wanted a people who would be like him in goodness. God gave the commandments to his people to orient them back to the original purpose for which God created the human race – to be in his image and likeness.

In the image of God

When God the Father sent his Son into the world, he gave us a redeemer who would offer up his life as the atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world. Jesus reversed the curse of Adam’s disobedience through his willing obedience to his Father. Jesus both revealed the nature of his Father in the way he lived and laid down his life for us, and he gave himself as a perfect example for how we should live as men and women who belong to God. Jesus unites in himself both the fullness of God’s divinity and our humanity. That is why the Apostle Paul states that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation” (Colossians 1:15). Jesus is the new Adam who restores a fallen race and makes us a new creation – a people reborn in God’s holiness and character. Jesus is much more than a reflection of God. He is an exact portrait of what God is like. He shares in God’s very nature and reflects God’s character perfectly. Jesus transforms us through the gift and working of the Holy Spirit so that we can share in his glory and be conformed to his image.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews states that Jesus reveals God’s glory and character in his own person.

He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power (Hebrews 1:3).

The Greek New Testament word for stamp (*charaktér*), which is used in this passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, is literally the same word we use in English for character.²⁶ This Greek word was used to describe both the stamped impression left on a coin or document and the instrument used to make the impression. The impression on the coin or document has the exact form of the image engraved on the seal. Jesus used the example of a Roman coin to drive this point home when the scribes and Pharisees tried to trick him with a legal question regarding the payment of taxes. Jesus said:

‘Show me a coin. Whose likeness and inscription has it?’ They said, ‘Caesar’s.’ He said to them, ‘Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’ (Luke 20:24-25).

When the author of the Letter to the Hebrews states that Jesus “bears the very *stamp* of his [God’s] nature” (Hebrews 1:3), he is telling us that Jesus is the very image of God – he bears the exact form and character of God. When you look at the impression made by a seal, you see exactly what the seal is like. When we look at Jesus we see exactly

what God is like.

Since the Lord Jesus has redeemed us and adopted us as children of God, then we also ought to bear the “stamp” of God. It should be clear by how we behave, speak, and think, that we've been formed, not simply by our earthly parents and teachers, but by our Father in heaven.

Godly character is more than simply a quality or attribute – such as being thoughtful, considerate, and respectful. Godly character goes much deeper than that. To take on godly character is to take on the image of God, so that we can be a people who think, speak, and treat others as he would. Scripture tells us that sin and rebellion marred the image and likeness of God within us. That is why God sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to redeem a fallen human race and to restore it to the fullness of his image and likeness. Jesus not only died on the cross to forgive our sins. He died to raise us to new life – abundant life in him. His death and resurrection brought about a new creation. That is why the Apostle Paul states that whoever is baptized into Christ receives a “new nature after the image of his creator” (Colossians 3:10). We are called to put off the old nature corrupted by sin and to “put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24).

Father-son image

When Jesus' authority was being challenged by the Jewish leaders, he defended himself on the basis of his identification with his heavenly Father:

‘I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.’

They answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do what your father did.’ They said to him, ‘We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.’

Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God’ (John 8:37-47).

This passage is a study in sonship. There are two possible understandings of the meaning of “son” here. First, a son (or daughter) is one who is physically descended from his father. Second, a son or daughter, is one who has the character of his father.

Jesus here speaks of the second meaning. The one who is your father is the one you are trying to imitate. The proof is in the actions which reveal one's character: here is your father whose “imprint” or “stamp” you bear. Everyone has a father in the second sense. Everyone is made in the image of someone not himself or herself, and ultimately the only two from whom the images come are God, the father of truth (John 17:17; Psalm 119:160) and goodness (Matthew 7:11), and Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44). Each person's identity is a derived identity. It can't be formed by the individual on his or her own.

Manufactured identity

Our age is particularly complicated regarding image and identity because we are prey to a variety of media influences that insist that our personal worth depends on physical appearance, youthfulness, money, gadgets, and an ability to impress people.

Many people build their sense of self around their possessions. They value themselves according to what they wear, eat, where they travel, and what gadgets they use for recreation. People also mold themselves around positive and negative achievements. “I am a self-made person,” “I am a doctor,” “I’m a liberal,” “I’m a dropout.” Others find their identity in what they feel themselves to be. The media today often portrays people as “heroic” simply because they have abandoned traditional values and morals for a post-modern way of life that has no social and moral restraints, no commitments nor obligations, no responsibilities for or personal involvement in the wider society. Many media characters are portrayed as heroic and courageous, but their chief characteristics show them to be rebellious, anti-social, self-centered, vengeful, and grossly immoral. They often achieve fame and success by exploiting others. They are often valued in terms of incidentals, such as wealth, fame, success, beauty and physical strength. People who have the courage to not conform to these worldly standards are often judged unworthy, boring, and a hindrance to the promotion of an amoral and selfist life-style.

There is a massive identity war going on. Dick Keyes, in his book *Beyond Identity: Finding Your Self in the Image and Character of God*, describes the modern crisis in heroism:

To make matters worse, heroism has become separated from moral values; often morals and models work against each other in the same person and in the same society. The heroes and heroines of music, film, literature are only rarely heroic for their moral qualities. Rather they are heroic for their rebellion against the values of society, for their freedom from restraint and limitation. The worst in them is often pictured as being desirable. This is a drastic change from the mainstream of Western cultural history. How rare are writers like C.S. Lewis whose genius as a writer of fiction lay in his ability to make moral goodness attractive and heroic.

The other side to the separation of heroism from morality is illustrated by a story about two women talking over their back fence. One asked the other, ‘What do you think of Mrs. So-and-so?’ After a long pause the second woman responded cautiously, ‘I think she’s a good person.’ With a look of satisfaction the first woman replied, ‘That’s what I thought you would say. I don’t like her either.’ Moral goodness today is often portrayed as something unheroic – unattractive, deadly dull, excruciating.²⁷

Many people suffer today and cause suffering to others because they are highly insecure and overly self-assertive, or excessively timid – and they do so because they have been stripped of important “identity-forming” pillars, such as a strong relationship with God, and with people of moral integrity who possess strong moral character.

The true value of an individual doesn’t come from their innate goodness, innocence, creativity, stature, claim to greatness, contribution to society, or to the size of their bank account. The Scriptures tell us that each person has intrinsic value because they are created in the image and likeness of their creator who is God (Genesis 1:26-27). As men and women reflect God’s character they realize their own true character and identity. Many men and women attempt to manufacture their own identity apart from God. They cannot succeed because the true identity of every human being is derived from their Creator.

Full identification with Christ

Many Christians profess faith in Jesus Christ but remain under the influence of anti-Christian images and models. Let's not be fooled into this trap. Full conversion entails a full identification with the Lord Jesus. The question set before us is: "Whose children shall we be?" In taking on the character of Christ we need to actively resist taking the character, the stamp, of those who are Christ's enemies.

We each have our own images and models of who we would like to be. Our models exert tremendous control over our lives, often more than our morals. We must examine who our models are and ask: Do they conform to the image of Christ? Paul prays for the Christians that they may receive knowledge and all discernment so they can "approve what is excellent" (Philippians 1:9-10). We are tempted to let Hollywood and the sports and entertainment industry or Wall Street and the business world provide our models. But God redeems us and calls us to be conformed to the true image, the model of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28-29).

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Our identity needs to be founded on Jesus Christ and on the godly character which Christ himself exemplifies – not on the mishmash of attributes and qualities that comes from a world hostile to Christ or ignorant of him – models that appeal to our "flesh," what is earthly in us.

Place of natural gifts and abilities

Sometimes we draw our identity and worth from our natural gifts and abilities, such as our talents and acquired skills – the virtuoso pianist, the great writer, the effective decision maker. What is the place of natural gifts and abilities? They are important and even crucial to many jobs and leadership positions. They are given by God for that purpose, but they are tools.

Many pursue the development of their skills and abilities, but leave character behind. Yet character is more attainable and more emphasized by God. For many servants of God, character more than gifting or talent has been the secret to their success in service. An exemplary character frees our gifts and abilities to be used well. Poor character stifles our gifting and talents or causes them to be used wrongly or erratically. It is character that determines what effect the gifts or abilities will have, whether for good or for ill.

Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977), a prominent German Catholic philosopher and theologian, courageously opposed Hitler and the Nazi ideology. He was sentenced to death in absentia by the Nazis after he fled to continue his writing. In his treatise on *Fundamental Moral Attributes*, he wrote:

Goodness, purity, truthfulness, humility of man rank higher than genius, brilliancy, exuberant vitality, than the beauty of nature or of art, than the stability and power of a state. What is realized and what shines forth in an act of real forgiveness, in a noble and generous renunciation; in a burning and selfless love, is more significant and more noble, more important and more eternal than all cultural values. Positive moral values are the focus of the world, negative moral values, the greatest evil, worse than suffering, sickness, death, or the disintegration of a flourishing culture. This fact was recognized by the great minds, such as Socrates, or Plato, who continually repeated that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it. This pre-eminence of the moral sphere is, above all, a basic proposition of the Christian ethos.²⁸

Character is the more fundamental, and the more important quality for every individual to possess.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1).

As Christians we are called by Christ to set good example for others to imitate. And good example requires good character. People learn by imitation as much as by teaching, and maybe even more. Christians must incarnate the teaching and character of Jesus Christ in their personal lives. Paul the Apostle used himself as an example because he had so clearly identified his life and teaching with that of Christ. Since he strove to imitate Christ, he urged his followers to imitate him as well.

Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us (Philippians 3:17).

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:9).

I urge you, then, be imitators of me (1 Corinthians 4:16).

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you (1 Corinthians 11:2).

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim of life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra, what persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me (2 Timothy 3:10-11).

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you (2 Thessalonians 3:7).

Gifts without character

Bad example and lack of good character can produce bad character in others, a loss of respect for those who relate to us, a great likelihood that we will fall into sin and discredit the gospel, and an inability to discern in others the same lack of character. Here are some examples from the Scriptures of gift without character.²⁹

Lucifer

Lucifer, before his fall, ranked highest among the angelic host. Known as Satan since his rebellion, he is the greatest leader today on the face of the earth save Christ alone, being able to get the majority of mankind to follow him. But he lacks God's character: most evident is his pride and his unwillingness to serve. Whatever his qualities of intelligence and leadership, his lack of godly character and his spiritual blindness resulted in the misuse of his gifts which are now employed for evil rather than good. This contrasts with Michael the archangel, who remains loyal to his King and who uses his strength and intelligence to effect good.

Solomon

Scriptures depicts King Solomon as the wisest man who ever lived. He was fabulously wealthy, possessing a kingdom at peace, and he was well established on his throne. Yet, over time, his wisdom became corrupted through vice. He lacked self-control and was obsessed with women – he had over 700 wives and 300 concubines. And most of these women were foreign idol worshippers who turned his heart away from God. We read in 1 Kings 11 that he

even built a place of worship for other gods. The Book of Sirach tells us what resulted from this excessive folly:

How wise you became in your youth! You overflowed like a river with understanding. Your soul covered the earth, and you filled it with parables and riddles. Your name reached to far-off islands, and you were loved for your peace... You gathered gold like tin and amassed silver like lead. But you laid your loins beside women, and through your body you were brought into subjection. You put a stain upon your honor, and defiled your posterity, so that you brought wrath upon your children... so that the sovereignty was divided and a disobedient kingdom arose out of Ephraim (Deutero-canonical Book of Sirach 47:14-21).

The result was civil war, the dividing of Israel, and attacks by hostile nations which the Lord had raised up as punishment. What an unworthy end for such a supremely gifted man!

Godly character triumphing

Here are some examples from the Scripture of godly character triumphing.

Abraham

Abraham was old when called by God. He was a sojourner and his wife was barren. He was told by God that he was to be the father of many nations. On what basis? On competence and gift? No, but because of faith and obedience. Faithfulness, not gift, gave Abraham success, and allowed the promise of blessing to be fulfilled.

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations... He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God (Romans 4:18-20).

Thus Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith (Galatians 3:6-9).

Jeremiah

The prophet Jeremiah was called at a young age. His ministry was based upon obedience and faithfulness. His gift of prophecy was "released" by his submission to God. His lack of strength and lack of ability to speak were compensated for by the Lord himself.

'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.' But the LORD said to me. 'Do not say, I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you shall speak' (Jeremiah 1:5-7).

And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land (Jeremiah 1:18).

Jesus, the supreme example

Although supremely, even perfectly capable in everything, the keystone of Jesus' ministry was faithfulness to God, a character quality.

And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:3-4).

Every follower of Jesus Christ is called to imitate him – in faithfulness, love, and obedience to the will of God, in courage, and in every other virtue that enables us to conform our lives more fully to Christ. We can conform our lives to Jesus Christ because the Lord has put his own Spirit within us. The Holy Spirit purifies us and strengthens us in faith, hope, and love so that we can persevere in following and serving the Lord Jesus Christ to the end of our lives.

Notes

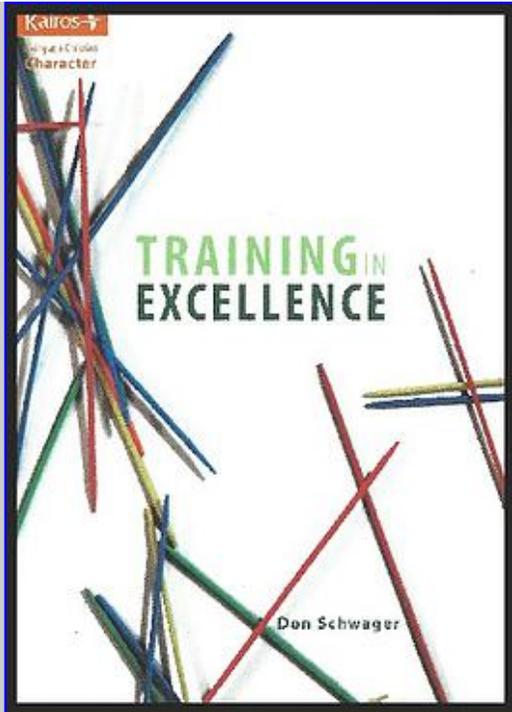
25. A helpful word study on "icon" or "image" used in the Scriptures can be found in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume II, pages 381-397, edited by Gerhard Kittel. *Kittel's Theological Dictionary*, which comprises 10 volumes, is a valuable biblical word study resource. This dictionary examines key Greek words used in the Septuagint (Hebrew Bible written in Greek) and the Greek New Testament. A history of each word is surveyed beginning with its Hebrew roots and usage in the Septuagint. Its usage is then described in secular Greek. Then its use is surveyed through the New Testament, grouped according to Pauline use, Johannean use, use in the Gospels, etc. In the process the reader can see the scope of meanings of a given word, and how those meanings developed, revealing the rich "flavors" attached to many Greek words.
26. *ibid.* *Kittel's Theological Dictionary*, Volume IX, pages 418-423
27. *Beyond Identity: Finding Your Self in the Image and Character of God*, by Dick Keyes (Servant Publications, 1984, Ann Arbor, Michigan), pgs. 20-21.
28. Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *Fundamental Moral Attitudes*, 1950 Longmans. View [online text](#).
29. I am indebted to Fr. Michael Keating for his course on *The Character of a Christian Leader* given in 1987 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

> See related articles on [Christian character](#) in the Living Bulwark archives.

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God in the Manger at Bethlehem

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

My Soul Praises the Lord

Sermon given on the Third Sunday in Advent - December 17, 1933

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down the rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”

This song of Mary's is the oldest Advent hymn. It is the most passionate, most vehement, one might almost say, most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. It is not the gentle, sweet, dreamy Mary that we so often see portrayed in pictures, but the passionate, powerful, proud, enthusiastic Mary, who speaks here. None of the sweet, sugary, or childish tones that we find so often in our Christmas hymns, but a hard, strong, uncompromising song of bringing down rulers from their thrones and humbling the lords of this world, of God's power and of the powerlessness of men. These are the tones of the prophetic women of the Old Testament: Deborah, Judith, Miriam, coming alive in the mouth of Mary.

Mary, filled with the Spirit and prepared. Mary, the obedient handmaid, humbly accepting what is to happen to her, what the Spirit asks of her, to do with her as the Spirit will, speaks now by the Spirit of the coming of God into the world, of the Advent of Jesus Christ. She knows better than anyone what it means to wait for Christ. He is nearer to her than to anyone else. She awaits him as his mother. She knows about the mystery of his coming, of the Spirit who came to her, of the Almighty God who works his wonders. She experiences in her own body that God does wonderful things with the children of men, that his ways are not our ways, that he cannot be predicted by men, or circumscribed by their reasons and ideas, but that his way is beyond all understanding or explanations, both free and of his own will.

Where our reason is offended, where our nature rebels, where our piety creeps anxiously away, there, precisely there, God loves to be. There, he confuses the understanding of the clever. There he offends our nature, our piety. There he will dwell and no one can deny him. And now, only the humble can believe him, and rejoice that God is so free and so wonderful, that he works miracles when the children of men despair. He has made the lowly and humble to be lifted up. That is the wonder of wonders, that God loves the lowly: "God has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."

God in the "humble state" – that is the revolutionary, the passionate word of Advent. First, Mary herself, the wife of a carpenter. We may say, the poor working man's wife, unnoticed by men – but now, insignificant and in her humble state as we might see it, she is significant to God and appointed to be the mother of the Savior of the world. Not because of some remarkable human trait in her, not because of some great piety, not because of her modesty, not because of any particular virtue in her, but apart from any of these characteristics, only because God's gracious will is to love the humble and lowly, the insignificant. He chose to make them great.

Mary, living in the faith of the Old Testament and hoping for her redeemer, this humble working man's wife becomes the mother of God. Christ the son of a poor working man's wife in the East End of London! Christ in the manger...

God is not ashamed to be with those of humble state. He goes into the midst of it all, chooses one person to be his instrument, and does his miracle there, where one least expects it. He loves the lost, the forgotten, the insignificant, the outcasts, the weak, and the broken. Where men say, "lost," he says "found;" where men say, "condemned," he says "redeemed;" where men say "no," he says "yes." Where men look with indifference or superiority, he looks with burning love, such as nowhere else is to be found. Where men say, "contemptible!," God cries, "blessed."

When we reach a point in our lives at which we are not only ashamed of ourselves, but believe God is ashamed of us too, when we feel so far from God, more than we have ever felt in our lives, then and precisely then, God is nearer to us than he has ever been. It is then that he breaks into our lives. It is then that he lets us know that that feeling of despair is taken away from us, so that we may grasp the wonder of his love, his nearness to us,

and his grace.

“From now on all generations will call me blessed,” says Mary. What does that mean? Mary, a maid of “humble state,” called “blessed?” It can be no other than the miracle of God that he has astonishingly performed on her; God has been “mindful of the humble state” of Mary and raised her up; God, coming into the world, seeks out, not the high and mighty, but the lowly; that we might see the glory and the mighty power of God making the down and out great.

To call Mary “blessed” does not mean to build her an altar; but with her to pray to God, who is mindful of the lowly and chooses them, who has done great things – holy is his name. To call Mary blessed is to know with her that God’s “mercy extends to those who fear him,” those who watch and consider his astonishing ways, who let his Spirit blow where it will, those who are obedient to him and with Mary, humbly say, “May it be to me as you have said.”

When God chose Mary for his instrument, when God himself in the manger at Bethlehem decided to come into this world, that was no romantic family portrait, but the beginning of a total turning point, a new ordering of all things on this earth.

If we want to participate in this Advent and Christmas happening, we cannot simply be like spectators at a theater performance, enjoying all the familiar scenes, but we must ourselves become part of this activity, which is taking place in this “changing of all things.” We must have our part in this drama. The spectator becomes an actor in the play. We cannot withdraw ourselves from it.

What part then do we play? Pious shepherds who bow the knee? Kings, who bring their gifts? What play then is being performed when Mary becomes the mother of God? When God comes in the lowly state of a child in the manger? It is the judgment of the world and the salvation of the world that is being acted out here. And it is the Christ child in the manger, who judges and saves the world. He turns back the great and the powerful. He has brought down the thrones of the rulers. He has humbled the proud. He has used his power against the high and mighty, and has raised up the lowly and made them great and glorious in his compassion. And therefore we cannot approach this manger as we approach the cradle of any other child. But who would go to this manger goes where something will happen. When he leaves the manger, he leaves either condemned or delivered. Here, he will be broken in pieces or know the compassion of God coming to him.

What does that mean? Isn’t it all rhetoric, pastoral exaggeration, a beautiful, pious legend? What does it mean that such things are spoken of the Christ child? If you take this as mere rhetoric, then you will celebrate Advent and Christmas in the pagan way that you always have. But to us, this is no mere rhetoric. For what is true is that God himself, the Lord and Creator of all things, here becomes little and helpless, here in a corner, in seclusion, unnoticed, he enters the world. Helpless and powerless as a baby, he meets us and wants to be with us. This is not trifling or playing games, but real! The Christ child indicates to us where he is and who he is and from this place judges all human pretensions to greatness, dethroning the rulers and devaluing the proud.

The throne of God in the world is not as human thrones, but is in the depths of the human soul, in the manger. Around his throne, there are not flattering courtiers, but obscure, unknown, unrecognizable forms, who cannot see enough of this wonder and gladly live from God’s mercy alone.

There are only two places where the powerful and great in this world lose their courage, tremble in the depth of their souls, and become truly afraid. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ. No man of violence dares to approach the manger, even King Herod did not risk that. For it is here that thrones tumble, the mighty

fall, and the high and mighty ones are put down, because God is with the lowly. Here the rich are nobodies, because God is with the poor and the hungry. "He fills the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." Before the Virgin Mary, before the manger of Christ, before God in his lowly state, the rich have no rights and no hope. They are convicted. The proud man may think that nothing will happen to him today, yet tomorrow or the day after, it will happen. God brings down tyrants from their thrones. God lifts up the humble. For this purpose, Jesus Christ as the child in the manger, as the son of Mary, has come into the world.

In eight days, we shall celebrate Christmas and now for once let us make it really a festival of Christ in our world. Then we must prepare ourselves by getting rid of something which plays a great role in our lives. We must be clear about how, in the face of the manger, we shall think about what is high and what is low in human life in the future. Of course, we are not all powerful, even if we wish we were and we reluctantly admit it. Only a few are really powerful. But there are many more with little power, who when they can, exert what power they have, and live with one thought: that they might have greater power!

God's thoughts are the opposite. He desires to be even lower, in humble state, unnoticed, in self-forgetfulness, in insignificance, in worthlessness, not wishing to be high. And it is on this road that we meet with God himself. Everyone of us lives side by side with some whom we call great, and some whom we call low. Every one of us has someone who is below us. Is it possible that this Christmas we could rethink this radical point, learning and knowing that our way, insofar as it is the way to God, leads us not to the high and mighty, but really into the depths, to the humble and poor? And that every way of life, which is only a way up higher must end in disaster?

God is not mocked. It is not a light thing to God that every year we celebrate Christmas and do not take it seriously. His word holds and is certain. When he comes in his glory and power into the world in the manger, he will put down the mighty from their seats, unless ultimately, ultimately they repent. It is a very important matter for a congregation that they understand this point and that they see the consequences for their life together. There is much to think about here about the direction this congregation is taking.

Who of us would want to celebrate Christmas correctly? Who will finally lay at the manger all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all pride, and all selfishness? Who is content to be lowly and to let God alone be high? Who sees the glory of God in the humble state of the child in the manger? Who says with Mary: "The Lord has been mindful of my humble state. My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior?" Amen.

Excerpt from *I Stand at the Door and Knock: Advent and Christmas Sermons* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited and translated from German into English by Edwin Robertson, copyright © 2005, published in the UK



Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor and a founding member of the Confessing Church. He was the first of the German theologians to speak out clearly against the persecution of the Jews and the evils of the Nazi ideology. In spring of 1935 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was called by the Confessing Church in Germany to take charge of an "illegal," underground seminary at Finkenwalde, Germany (now Poland). He served as pastor, administrator, and teacher there until the seminary was closed down by Hitler's Gestapo in September, 1937.

In the seminary at Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer taught the importance of shared life together as disciples of Christ. He was convinced that the renewal of the church would depend upon



recovering the biblical understanding of the communal practices of Christian obedience and shared life. This is where true formation of discipleship could best flourish and mature.

Bonhoeffer's teaching led to the formation of a community house for the seminarians to help them enter into and learn the practical disciplines of the Christian faith in community. In 1937 Bonhoeffer completed two books, *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. They were first published in German in 1939. Both books encompass Bonhoeffer's theological understanding

of what it means to live as a Christian community in the Body of Christ.

He was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo in April 1943. On April 8, 1945 he was hanged as a traitor in the Flossenburg concentration camp. As he left his cell on his way to execution he said to his companion, "This is the end – but for me, the beginning of life."

photo of Bonhoeffer in the courtyard of Tegel prison, summer 1944; source: Christian Kaiser Verlag

Adoration of the Shepherds, painting by El Greco - 1603-05

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“You Shall Call His Name Jesus”

A Scriptural reflection

by Jeanne Kun

Reflecting on the Word

The moment long awaited by Israel is now at hand. Devout Jews had been yearning for centuries for the fulfillment of the messianic promises. Their hopes and expectations – and much more – would soon be realized: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5). Another English translation, “In the fullness of time,” evokes the vivid image of year being added to year, like an empty measure being filled drop by drop until it brims over.

“Born of woman” – God chose to send one of human flesh and blood to overcome the curse of sin that Adam and Eve had brought upon humankind. And so he asked a daughter of Israel, Mary of Nazareth, to be the mother of his Son. Of Mary’s role in God’s plan, Cardinal John Henry Newman noted,

The Seed of the woman, announced to guilty Eve, after long delay, was at length appearing upon earth, and was to be born of her. In her the destinies of the world were to be reversed, and the serpent’s head bruised. On her was bestowed the greatest honor ever put upon any individual of our fallen race. God was taking upon Him her flesh, and humbling Himself to be called her offspring; – such is the deep mystery! (Sermon 12, “The Reverence Due to the Virgin”)

Mary gave her consent to God’s request – “Behold, I



Adoration of the Shepherds by El Greco (1603)

The Scene

Matthew 1:18-25

18Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; 19and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly. 20But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; 21she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (which means, God with us). 24When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, 25but knew her

am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38) – and Jesus was conceived in her womb through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit (1:35). Yet Mary must have been overwhelmed as she heard the angel Gabriel describe the child she was to bear: He was to be named Jesus (1:31), meaning “the Lord saves,” and would be called “Son of the Most High” (1:32) and “Son of God” (1:35). He would be the fulfillment of the promise God made to David so long ago (1:32-33).

Matthew tells us that Joseph took Mary, his betrothed, to be his wife after God assured him of the divine purpose at work in her. The child Mary was carrying had been conceived in a way that surpassed nature – “of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18) – and would “save his people from their sins” (1:21). “[Joseph] took Mary as his wife in humble acceptance of the mystery of her maternity. He accepted her along with her Son who would come to the world by the action of the Holy Spirit. St. Joseph can therefore be compared to Our Lady in his great docility to the will of God as revealed to him by an angel” (Pope John Paul II, *Guardian of the Redeemer*).

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth begins with his genealogy (Matthew 1:1-16). Jewish genealogies followed the male line. Joseph belonged to the family of David and was, as the husband of Mary, the legal father of Jesus. As such, God entrusted Joseph with the responsibility of naming of the child (1:21, 25). Since this was a parental duty, Joseph’s action indicates that he adopted this child into his lineage. Through Joseph’s lineage and his legal paternity, Jesus is the son of David – and thus fulfills God’s promise to David that his dynasty would last for all generations. Since it was common for people to marry within their clans, most likely Mary was also descended from the house of David.

But it is through the Holy Spirit and the miraculous virginal maternity of Mary that Jesus is the Son of God. Concerning the manner of Jesus’ birth, Matthew refers back to the prophecy of Isaiah 7 and explains, “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (which means, God with us)” (Matthew

not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

The Scene

Luke 2:1-21

1In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. 2This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. 4And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. 7And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; 11for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!”

15When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; 18and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

21And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

1:22-23). Archbishop Oscar Romero pointed out that as the virgin mother of the Messiah, “Mary is the human instrument . . . who by her holiness was able to incarnate in history God’s divine life.”

In words that have become so familiar to us that we know them by heart, Luke describes the journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, David’s city, and the unassuming circumstances of Jesus’ birth there (Luke 2:4-7).

Bethlehem lies in the Judean hills, six miles south of Jerusalem. Rachel, the wife of the patriarch Jacob, was buried there, and Ruth, who became the great-grandmother of David and ancestress of Jesus, settled in the town. Bethlehem was the birthplace of David as well as the place where Samuel anointed David king to succeed Saul. Bethlehem is a small and seemingly insignificant town, yet the prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah in the latter half of the eighth century B.C., said of it,

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.
(Micah 5:2)

Jewish tradition interpreted Micah’s prophecy as predicting the exact place of birth of the anticipated Messiah, a king who was to be far greater than David. Centuries after Micah, the Roman census decreed by Caesar Augustus brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, where the birth of Jesus took place. Learned scribes of Israel who studied the ancient writings of the prophets recalled Micah’s prediction of where the Christ was to be born when the wise men came to King Herod’s palace seeking the newborn king of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-6). God’s plan to redeem the human race, begun at the gates of Eden, reached now to the gates of Bethlehem.

The angel’s message to the shepherds contains the announcement of the birth in the city of David of a “Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). This child is a savior, because he has come to redeem and save us from our sins. He is Christ (*christos* means

Pondering the Word

1. Summarize Joseph’s role in God’s plan of salvation. What does the narrative in Matthew 1:18-24 indicate to you about Joseph’s character? What qualities does he exhibit?
2. List all the titles attributed to Jesus in Matthew 1:18-24 and Luke 2:1-20. Why, in your opinion, did Matthew and Luke begin their gospels with such attention to Jesus’ identity?
3. Identify the links between David and Jesus recorded by Matthew and Luke. Why do you think the Evangelists pointed so frequently to the Old Testament prophecies in describing Jesus and his birth?
4. Luke mentions many concrete details about the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth (the Roman census, the city of David, the lack of space in the inn). Do you think Mary and Joseph understood the significance of these circumstances at the time? What does this physical setting add to your understanding of Jesus’ birth and mission?
5. Why, in your opinion, did God announce the birth of his Son to shepherds rather than to the leaders of Israel? Note the verbs that describe the shepherds’ actions. What do these actions and their response to God’s message suggest about them?
6. What is the significance of Jesus’ incarnation –that is, of the fact that he took on human flesh to redeem us? How is this related to God’s promise in Genesis 3:15?

Living the Word

1. How does the fact that Jesus is both God and man affect you personally? Have you ever felt reluctant to bring your troubles to Jesus, thinking that he wouldn’t understand? If so, how can you overcome that reluctance?

anointed one), the Messiah now born in fulfillment of the ancient hopes. Yet the angel also told the shepherds that they would find this newborn “wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (2:12), a humble setting for one they announced so exaltedly. Luke’s text echoes the description of Solomon, King David’s son, found in the Book of Wisdom:

And when I was born, I began to breathe the common air, and fell upon the kindred earth, and my first sound was a cry, like that of all. I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths. For no king has had a different beginning of existence; there is for all mankind one entrance into life, and a common departure. (Wisdom 7:3-6)

By his human birth Jesus, Son of God and son of Mary, shared our common humanity, our vulnerability, our mortality,

The humility of God condescending to being born as a human child in a stable is almost unfathomable. Jesus’ birth in the flesh is a manifestation of the mercy and grace of God. The shepherds were privileged to be the first to greet the incarnate God and to testify of him to others (Luke 2:17-18). Surely what they saw that wondrous night transformed their lives and set them aglow with hope, for now a child was growing up among them to be their savior!

Mary “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19) through the years ahead as her son grew and God’s unlikely plan of salvation unfolded before her.

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior womens' leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

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2. Israel awaited the coming of the Messiah for long centuries, until “the time had fully come” (Galatians 4:4) for God to send his Son. Reflect on a situation in your life in which you were forced to wait on God and his timing. How did you deal with it? How can “waiting on God” be an active rather than a passive activity?

3. Joseph trusted God and obeyed him in the face of unexpected situations such as Mary’s miraculous pregnancy and the lack of accommodations in Bethlehem. What current situations in your life call for trust in God and obedience? How can Joseph’s example help you?

4. The name “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation,” that is, “savior.” In what concrete ways has Jesus “saved” you?

5. The shepherds shared the good news of what they been told by the angel with Mary and Joseph and others (Luke 2:17-18). Have you ever had the opportunity to share Christ and the gospel message with others? Can you think of instances when you missed an opportunity to spread the good news? What prevented you?

6. At the birth of Christ, a heavenly host of angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest” (Luke 2:13-14). Imagine yourself joining in their song of worship, and write your own prayer praising God for his Son’s incarnation and thanking him for his great love for you.



The Nativity, Rembrandt, etching 1654

Jesus: a portrait of humility

by Jeanne Kun

Who is more helpless than a newborn child? Yet Jesus did not hesitate to share in our humanity, and his birth was only the first manifestation of his humility—that self-emptying which he freely embraced for our sake, for the forgiveness of our sins. For “Christ Jesus, . . . though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:5-7). As Theodotus of Ancyra explained so eloquently in a homily he preached at the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431),

The Lord of all comes in the form of a servant. He comes as a poor man, so that he will not frighten away those people he is trying to capture like a huntsman. He is born in an obscure town, deliberately choosing a humble dwelling place. His mother is an ordinary girl, not some great lady. And the reason for all this lowly state is so that he may gently ensnare mankind and bring us to salvation. If he had been born amid the splendor of a rich family, unbelievers would surely have said that the face of the world had been changed by the power of wealth. If he had chosen to be born in Rome, the greatest of cities, they would have ascribed the change to the power of her citizens. . . . [But] he chose nothing

but poverty and mean surroundings, everything that was plain and ordinary and (in the eyes of most people) obscure. And this was so that it could be clearly seen that it was the Godhead alone that was to transform the world. (“On the Day of the Lord’s Nativity”)

Jesus’ humility was not only manifested in his birth, but through his entire life—and, most significantly, in his death. He lived the life of a common man and set the example for us to follow in our service to one another. Finally, “he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

Read and prayerfully reflect on these additional Scripture passages describing Christ’s example of humble servanthood and the humility that we, too, are called to imitate:

Thus says the LORD:

“This is the man to whom I will look,
he that is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word.”

(Isaiah 66:2)

[Jesus said:] “Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:4)

[Jesus said:] “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:11-12)

Jesus called [the apostles] to him and said to them, “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45)

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. (1 Peter 5:5-6)

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