

**Did You Ever
Think
of
This?**

*Fresh ideas for
renewing your mind in Christ*

Brian L. Coatney

Coatney Publishing
Hopkinsville, Kentucky

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

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This does not mean that the people I acknowledge all agree with everything I write. In the end, each of us stands alone with what we say and do. That's the way I like it.

Introduction

Just like a carpenter builds houses, a writer writes books. This book tells why God made us, what went wrong, what He did about that, and where faith takes us if we look intently enough at the Bible's revelation. After a good beginning with John 3:16 in my early youth, life started to wear me down as an adult, and by my twenties, I felt the first desperation that prepared me for the fact that God not only looks at what we do, but more importantly, to who we are according to Galatians 2:20.

To my surprise, I discovered that God created us to contain Him, not imitate Him. But to get me to that point, He had to show me broken law after broken law in my life, and then even more broken law the harder I tried not to break His law. Finally I saw that God is a great big tree, and He created us to be branches on that tree. Nothing else works, and I finally saw what Jesus means by abiding.

This book, therefore, starts with the fundamentals about the law and sin and moves on to the Christian's union with Christ (non-Christians are united to Satan) and walking in the Spirit, with some repetition and story telling and poems along the way.

For those curious about the outline of my book, Appendix #1 gives that scaffolding. Apart from that, dig in and prepare for cars, trains, boats, planes, backpacks, and other means of transportation.

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The Sins of All

How does a loving God get through to our hard heads that we are not good, law-keeping people, but guilty of sins deserving an eternal hell? Paul takes up that challenge in Romans 1 and 2 where he shows how God concludes both Gentile and Jew under sin. Thankfully, he doesn't leave us there, but moves to justification by faith; but before justification we have to deal with the sin problem that affects everyone on earth.

In Paul's day, Jew and Gentile included everyone on earth. The distinction was simple: anyone not a Jew was a Gentile. The mindset of the Bible is Jewish: there is the covenant people and then everybody else. Before the New Covenant, God chose an elect nation to give His laws to, and everybody else was excluded.

This sounds severe. Where is God's love with a covenant like this? But the eye of faith sees that the promise to Abraham included a blessing for the whole world, and Isaiah's prophecies also foretold God's light going out to the nations. But in Old Testament days, the covenant with God meant the Jews only, unless a seeking Gentile, like Uriah the Hittite, converted to Israel's faith; and that still meant second-class citizenship. Jesus even sent His disciples only to the house of Israel, though He marveled at the faith of the tenacious Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion.

Why did God do things this way? He had to prove nationally, as well as individually, that even with the Law and God's presence in a temple, prophets, and miracles—no nation could provide spiritual leadership for the world based on a covenant of law-keeping. God had to explode the deception that says, "If we had the right leaders, the right constitution, and the right setting, we could bring in the Golden Age." So God chose a people to prove that idea false.

But before discussing the Jews, Paul first talks about the Gentiles. What faith could a Gentile operate? The world, with all its beauty of stars and rivers, deserts and mountains, presents God's glory. Everyone views that Gospel and says one of two things: "Yes, this is good, but a monster lies behind the whole plot of life," or, "Life is full of suffering, but I see God's glory." My religion professor in college said in one of his lectures, "When someone argues against a God, saying, 'What about the problem of evil,' I answer back, 'But what about the problem of good?'" Paul uses the same inspired reasoning, saying that God's power and divine nature show clearly in Nature so that no excuse holds up.

What about people that look at the glory of God, but fail to say, "God, I see that You are there, and I thank You for Your goodness." They end up turning light into darkness by worshipping things instead of God. Because of the Fall, we have all chronically lived at some point as outer people instead of inner people. This is why Jesus told the woman at the well, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). People can fall in love with their own artistry and imagination. This comes from the infection of self-worship that Satan introduced at the Fall, and Paul calls it exchanging the truth for a lie.

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Once that happens, acts of sin follow.

Thing-worship ultimately ties into that other prime mover—sexual passion. Paul calls it “degrading passion” and points out sin’s reversal of the created order—homosexual lust that burns to the point of consummation. Paul names homosexuality first, after idolatry, and gives it special emphasis because God made man in His image as a procreative being, and Satan has lied about God’s order for sexuality.

Everyone must be right in his or her own mind, however, and continuing to do something that we know is wrong, whatever sin it is, brings torment. Therefore, we must justify ourselves, so lies become our truth, and foolishness becomes our wisdom. But in our hearts we can never convince ourselves, and the proof shows up in our lack of peace. That finally tells the story.

If this is the pattern for the fallen Gentiles, did the Jews do any better? God began a nation with Abraham and the patriarchs, and they stand as testimonies of faith. Then under Moses, God gave the Passover ordinance, the Law, the Tabernacle with its blood sacrifices, plenty of social legislation, and the Levitical priesthood. Yet at best, only a remnant of faith walked in the way of faith to find justification with God.

Should we convict Israel? Paul does in Romans 2, but not because Israel as a nation did not keep God’s law. The Jewish problem lay in recognizing sin only in others, while not looking in the mirror. Isn’t it always easier to see sin in another person? The devil continually tempts us to finger pointing, but the proverbial other three fingers hang pointed back, unnoticed, at us. Even so, Paul does not question God’s covenant privileges to Israel. He rejoices in them, but he points out the bitter irony of having a law used

only to condemn others, while justifying the self and missing the way of faith.

So Gentile and Jew both come under sin; in other words, the whole world throughout all of history comes under the Fall. But just as a few pioneers like the patriarchs found the righteousness that comes by faith, Paul also points out that some Gentiles, not having heard God's revelation through His people, learn to live by the God-given conscience within and by the little faith they know. This leads Paul to define who is really a Jew and who is not, for he says that the real Jew is the one who is such inwardly—the one whose heart has been circumcised by the Spirit of God.

If a Gentile can be justified like that, should we question the value of the Law? No, for the Law brings the consciousness that no one can keep God's law and that God's mercy depends upon something other than self-improvement through law-keeping. Many think the problem is simply one of conquering some sins and getting on with resolutions to live better lives. This misses the drastic depths of the sin problem and its consequences, and it indicates the die-hard mentality of seeking righteousness by what one *does*. This lie even hides in an incredibly deep-set deception—the “be like Christ” heresy in the Christian church. I discuss this in detail in the chapter titled, “Being and Becoming: What Does This Mean?”

Only a severe self-awareness under the conviction of the Spirit can bring someone to the end of the delusion that the self can do even one righteous thing on its own. We must come to that, because if a person can do one righteous thing, then that person can do another, and so on. But if no one can do *anything* righteous, then works are futile and no hope for reform remains.

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So what is righteousness? It is a *person* who offers Himself as a gift in mercy. The Law always leads back to God Himself as the one person who is the Law-keeper. When we get through being mad at God for giving us laws we can't keep, we take hold of the revelation that God always knew that we would break the Law. He meant for us to break it to the fullest depth so that we could see our desperate, helpless condition. What an awakening occurs then! Only God is righteous, and we can only receive righteousness by receiving Him.

We thank God for the precious blood of Christ shed for the forgiveness of sins ("for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" Heb. 9:22 NASB), and we thank Him for coming to live in us to be our righteousness. More will be said about these provisions in the chapter, "Justification by Faith," but for now we see that God must do a work that only He can do, and that we must receive it. This is why Paul says that Jesus is the culmination of the Old Covenant, for Jew *and* Gentile, and that the righteous person lives by faith.

What is faith? The word sounds otherworldly, but the practicality of faith simply means that we take something available that we want. Righteousness *is* available to everyone on earth by faith. All that remains then is to desire it, since faith springs out of desire. Then comes the taking, for even a glass of water is nothing more than available and desirable until the drinker drinks. The eater must eat, the drinker must drink: faith takes a thing!

I Never Made A Blade of Grass

I never made a blade of grass,
So gloriously green,
Or one square of a clear blue sky,
That we have ever seen.

The stately, tall majestic tree,
With sturdy, spreading boughs,
Takes all my breath away to say,
With exclamation, "How?"

The sunny flower petals on,
A spring or summer day,
Have colors that defy my mind,
To create such array.

The evergreens so comforting,
Thicket with needles stand,
And play a role within my soul,
I never could have planned.

Motionless, they give a thrill,
That quiets with a hush,
For like a living scripture they
Need not our modern rush.

A cat with yellow fur just flew
By back behind the house.
He's such an aeronautical,
Amazement to that mouse.

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And just when dinner seemed a cinch,
A little hole appeared,
To spare this time the dreadful death,
The little mouse had feared.

The news of the escape spread wide,
And Mickey and his wife,
Thanked God that He had spared this time,
Their little nephew's life.

In coarser times no little boys
Or girls would ever care,
If all the cartoon mice got killed
By joystick's gaming dare.

I took a breath and squirrels danced,
High on a nearby wire,
Gracefully, their flapping tails,
Seemed not to ever tire.

A white-streak cloud invited birds,
To see if they could rise,
Above the high drawn line they made,
And fool my watching eyes.

For in that moment I forgot,
That birds can't really fly,
Up where big hunks of metal go
So high they pass the sky.

The scientific wonders we've
Discovered blow my mind,
But in their complications there's
Still something I can't find.

It would elude me even if,
A Nobel Prize would pass,
Into my hands for making just
A single blade of grass.

Stopping to Look

Andirons hold up
the burning logs,
but then sun through a window
takes over,
on arms and face: you know how it feels,
gentle—
who would suspect
the incinerating source
we revolve around?

The lawn is not perfectly still,
but waves its pleasure,
while the spread of small purple
clover blossoms,
throughout the green shoots
says, “We are many, many, and more,
not large, but content within our borders.”

One brown leaf, a relic of November,
moves and turns
in the driveway—
rolls on its back,
receiving the sun.

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A bird at a time
drops onto the lawn,
stops, looks,
paces,
stops, looks,
not quite sure,
but awed at the sights.

Two yards away,
in the open,
a clump of daffodils
huddle so closely,
that I cannot separate them,
nor wish to.

In this setting,
insight is always present.

Limits

Limits work in two ways,
the can't and the can.

If you look at a bird,
thinking it can't come down
to you,
what will you say
when it lands?
There is no limit there.

Fools try to fly
when they can't—
try to stop
those that can.

I choose not to fly
unless
the resurrection's
going that way.

That blasts the rocks out of place,
and enables the ascent.

Noah

Reading about the flood,
my heart was lost in hymns—
highest praise—
and then doubted.

How could I sing
during such destruction?

That touch of guilt
quickly disappeared
at the ecstasy that
Noah found grace
In the eyes of the Lord.

So have we.

Justification by Faith

I first read about justification by faith in Roland Bainton's famous biography of Martin Luther, titled *Here I Stand*. At the time, as a college student, I did not understand the point, though Luther's agonies fascinated me. John 3:16 summarized the entire Bible that I knew, for I still faced life with enough confidence to wonder why all the torture in Luther's soul.

Eventually the question surfaced for me about how a person can be right in God's eyes, and when Paul discusses the question, he uses Abraham to contrast justification by law and justification by faith. Justification by law means that a person must be exactly like God with no exception. A person with a ninety-nine on the test of life goes to hell. Only perfection gets one into heaven.

Even the comfort of ninety-nine per cent is a deception, however, for no one can really do even one righteous act. The good deeds of unbelievers come from one of two sources. Either an act is good, but the motive derives from self-for-self, which is what God sees; or an act is good because it springs from God's common grace in the person's heart. Sin comes from not crediting God as the source of all good, for goodness is a person. Even Jesus protested when called good, saying that only God is good. Though good in and of Himself as the eternal Christ, He set aside His

own goodness in the incarnation in order to live as a human. Jesus lived by His Father's goodness dwelling in Him in a walk of faith, showing that God created us as vessels to *contain* goodness rather than as vessels of self-improvement.

My friend Louis Tucker asks new Bible groups, "How righteous are you on a scale from one to ten?" Almost no one guesses ten as the correct answer, for almost no one knows that the answer does not depend on anything that we do. Righteousness has nothing to do with our works at all, but only with the righteousness of Christ that we receive by faith.

When Paul talks about justification, he quotes one of the simplest verses in the Bible: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3 NASB). Abraham's faith meant more than mental assent to a proposition, for Paul tells us, "with the heart man believes" (Rom. 10:10). God's word, His living word, took root in Abraham's heart because Abraham did not resist the living word of the Spirit flowing in to join his own spirit.

In everyday life faith comes easily and simply. When we breathe, we do what comes naturally by not closing off our lungs to air. When we eat or drink, we swallow instead of closing off our throats. When we believe, we let Spirit words flow into our hearts without resistance. Sin arises from resistance to the Spirit of God. This leads to evil, because just as Nature abhors a vacuum, the devil takes over in the person that resists faith.

Abraham did not work to justify himself. He listened instead and let God's promise settle into him. This was not a payment for anything, but came to him from the "eternal will to all goodness" that God

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is, as William Law put it.¹ Abraham longed for an heir, and God promised him that and much more—a nation as countless as the stars.

Abraham and Sarah could not naturally bring that about any more than they could create camels and palm trees. Nonetheless, Abraham believed, even as circumstances got worse. He never threw out with finality God's word to him, and this qualified Abraham as a believer in a God who "calleth those things that be not as though they were" (Rom. 4:17).

None of this makes sense to us regarding justification by faith until we see that just as Abraham and Sarah could not produce an heir together, we cannot produce righteousness ourselves. My wife Tandy told me wryly about a comment in her Bible study that someone made about our need to work on all the fruits of the Spirit in our lives. Wryly I replied, "Yes, we can do that just like we can create an orange."

God's promises always relate to what only He can do. We must come to see self-justification as impossible to us, or we will continue trying. But once we know we cannot attain or earn the state of being called justification, we can then stop fighting God's justification of us—justification through the blood and body of Christ. By these He is our righteousness in the same way that fire is the light of a glowing ingot.

Some people discuss righteousness as our position, but not our condition. What help is that in daily life? Righteousness does not come only from only an imputed ledger entry, but also as spendable money in the bank. When Paul uses the word *reckon*, he uses it as an accounting term, but he also means that God saw *Himself* in Abraham when Abraham believed. He sees *Himself* in every Christian. Do we see that? When we do, our position and our condition are the same.

Forgiveness is not righteousness either; righteousness is righteousness. Sins forgiven by the blood of Christ magnify His mercy, but righteousness means Christ formed in us. Justification equals resurrection life in us. Are you living out of *His* life and not just calling yourself a forgiven sinner?

Theistically Insane

If you're going to be insane,
be theistically insane—
one who stands out
to songs of gossip in the rain.

Theistic insanity
means excessive water—
a heavenly jar containing your brain.

“Elijah, you better run;
that cloud's a gonna burst
under such strain!”

“Jesus, Elohim, my God my God,
why have you *not* forsaken me?”

“I lie slain,
but rise a reeling
from where I'd lain.”

“Living water,
You are the body of my refrain.”

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“Dry toad, take my umbrella out to the desert,
and leave it there
with my disdain.

I, with much learning,
having gone mad,
yet to the loss of
tormenting pain,

will quench
the unquenchable thirst—
then drink some more
out in the rain.”

Open Thou My Doors

Open Thou
my doors,
where You alone
penetrate.

That which only You alone
may see, I reveal.
Who among friends
could I show myself to?

The soldier of the guarded wall
protects a guarded waterfall,
and lilies,
from mockery and intrusion.

I can barely look at this
secret place,
and only then as
You milk my tears.

Into weightlessness I move,
where I see my offenders
like milkweed of silk
in heavenly earth.

The plants sing;
the immense
irresistibility
of Your touch, without push,
draws tears
for those
who wounded me.

A Lively Time

The men's Bible study at the jail that Mimi and I lead usually proves quite lively. Typically, we discuss our way through a book of the Bible—Hebrews serving as our staple at the time of this writing. I notice sometimes, that no sooner do I read and comment on our next verses, that the questions and discussion carry us through to the end with hardly two or three verses covered. That can be a happy dilemma.

One night, in Hebrews 12, we stopped to review the premise of the book—the complete severance of the authority of the Old Covenant in light of the New Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, a succession of Levitical priests, ordained according to God's command, following precisely the genealogy from Aaron, offered animal sacrifices yearly for sins. God inaugurated this system under Moses. Subsequently, many of the Jews glorified Moses and remained overly attached to the temple worship, even after becoming Christians. Still wavering with a mixed understanding of the two covenants, many of these Jewish Christians were tempted back to the Old Covenant when they suffered for being Christians.

The book of Hebrews recognizes the authority of the Old Covenant before the death and resurrection of Christ, but dismisses the Old Covenant as a superseded covenant because of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 1:1-3 says this:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things [...] And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature [...] When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (NASB).

The writer outlines the superiority of Christ over both Moses and the Levitical priesthood under the Old Covenant. In short, all forgiveness of sin for all time took place in Christ in His one sacrifice. Any further offerings for sin now insult the grace of God that completed all atonement for sin in one sacrifice, never to be added to. The Gospel distills to *Christ plus nothing*, requiring only our faith to receive that fact. Faith is different from religion, for religion means trying to improve the self, trying to get better, and trying to conform to a morality that pleases God. Faith, however, accepts that we are vessels to contain God's righteousness.

Life depends on eating and drinking, and this recognition energizes the Eucharist. Jesus said, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:56 NASB). If Jesus had not already won His disciples' hearts, He would have lost them when He made this blasphemous sounding statement, for under the Old Covenant, God decreed that those who ate blood must be cut off from the nation. But now Jesus opens the door to union with God through the faith principle, "What you take, takes you," doing

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away with self-righteousness by the law. Righteousness comes by eating and drinking it. We are Christian by consumption, not by imitation.

Norman Grubb often told the story of his missionary days when he found his early zeal waning because of the need for more love. He prayed a fine sounding prayer: “God, give me more love.” To his surprise, the Holy Spirit answered, “Shut up.” After a pause, the Holy Spirit continued: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Norman then saw that love is not something God dispenses to us in packets that become ours, but rather love is a person—God.

This led him to the clarity of Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (NASB). The Christian life then does not mean that the human improves, but that the human contains, abides in, lives in union with, and consumes the life of Jesus Christ Himself—the one who is the second person of the Trinity made flesh. No wonder our own efforts fail, and Christianity only works by Christ formed in us.

Discussing all of this added a lot to our Bible study at the jail. We affirmed that adding anything to the completeness of Christ’s work puts us back under sin. Arthur, one of our regulars for a while, and one who has loved the Old Testament, commented on his own experiences of trying to improve before he saw his powerlessness. Arthur, moving to New Testament terminology, said, “I died with Christ and now live in the power of his resurrection.”

Poor Satan—every chain he forges breaks in the sunlight of God’s love. Glory to Jesus Christ and glory in the sons of God.

I Buried My Sins

I buried my sins;
I hid them—
under a pile of Light.

I hid them before,
in terrible fear,
under a pile of night.

Hiding is not
the point,
but where—
how will one
do the hiding
right?

Now—in Your full sight,
I hide it all—
never again to see
my darkest night
for all thy Light.

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God's Nature

The Bible says, “God is love” (1 John 4:16), meaning that He made the eternal choice to be self-for-others instead of self-for-self. Evil cannot occur in God, for He eternally swallows up darkness, never manifesting it. How then did darkness come to manifest? A creature had to open up the manifestation of what had never manifested in God and never will be manifest in God.

God has determined creatures to derive their being from Him and operate from freedom, whether they choose to operate from God's nature or not. Knowing that the Fall was coming, God determined freedom anyway in order to accomplish His highest love purposes by paying the ultimate price to restore lost humanity. It's too late for the devil, though, because he made a fixed choice from his spirit, whereas, humans try to hold on to God and sin at the same time.

When the Bible says that God is love, it means that His nature is the opposite of selfish pride. In Philippians 2 we learn that Jesus Christ was equal with God before the foundation of the world, and yet He emptied Himself, according to the Father's will, to become a servant. He went from the life of a “have-all” to saying, “I'll be a have-not for you.” He could not give Himself to us any more than willingly and

completely than by dying on the Cross for us as the Lamb of God.

God's whole nature, therefore, is one of giving, for He puts Himself entirely at our disposal: "I'm bread, eat Me; I'm living water, drink Me; you are lost—drink My blood; come unto Me and take." This is the Ultimate One who submits Himself to our worst in order to save us.

God desires to reproduce His nature in *us*. So when His Word commands us to submit to others, He only wishes to be in us toward others who He is in Christ toward us. It can sound trite to say, "Giving is its own reward," but this describes God. And when the Bible says that God is a jealous God, it means that He desires us totally for the right reasons and for our best interests.

God's nature is one of genuine joy when His children grow in faith and express His indwelling love nature. This is the opposite of the devil's covetousness and envy that lead to hatred when others have something. God's grace swallows up looking at people according to all the reasons we think they do not deserve good from God, and His grace keeps us from obsessing about the ways that others fall short in our eyes.

Finally, Jesus Christ is the peace that swallows up the wrath of Satan's nature. That wrath—the product of pride, covetousness, and envy—kept us once in a personal hell. But peace comes from the nature of Christ in us. Those with minds set on the Spirit experience this peace and all the deeds of righteousness flowing out of that.

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God Became a Man

The Scripture says that no man has seen God at any time, but that the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has declared Him (John 1:18). So no one has ever seen God, and no one will ever see God. All we ever see of God is an expression of Him through somebody's members. Even in the Old Testament, Moses does not see God. He experiences a blinding flash—the backside of God passing by.

The New Testament revelation of God's nature to us, which is the highest that anyone has seen and testified of, is God who became a man. What separates Christianity from religion, meaning our efforts to work our way to God, is that God became a man in Jesus Christ. He took on limitation and came to the earth in a particular form, was born of a virgin to avoid original sin, and He died as the one and only sacrifice for our sins, shedding His blood on the Cross for us. Otherwise we could not avoid an eternal hell.

How could such a one come to earth as a man? That was the difficult thing for the people of His time, and it remains the difficulty for those struggling today with who Jesus Christ is. "How can He be God?" Men could see Him, touch Him, feel Him, hear Him, and write down what He said. They could poke Him and say, "Are You for real?" That was the thing that threw people off. How could a man be God in the flesh? Through the incarnation the purpose of God

becomes clear. God desired human life to express the Spirit of God. Jesus Christ provided an example of God living out life as a man in a total form, and His purpose ever since then has been to reproduce more of those forms.

Jesus Christ's life would have been a waste if He had just come to earth and said, "Okay now, I'm showing you God's life lived out in a human body through flesh—through soul and body—but you can never experience or know it for yourself." That would have been terrible. The best that anybody could know would have been experienced by His earthly disciples: "Well, the meaning of life, then, is that we all get in as close to Jesus Christ, in the body form, as we can." So the disciples would have been the lucky ones, and the people that didn't live anywhere close to Palestine would have been the unluckiest ones of all. The whole goal of life would have been to get as close to the physical Jesus Christ as possible. Obviously, where would that leave us today?

But His message to them, revealed more toward the end of His life, was, "That's not what I'm about. You don't realize it, but I am going away (that terrified them), and will come to you again. And when I come to you again, you will know Me like you have never known Me before, because everything that I am will be inside of you. You will be inside of Me, and I will be in you, and you will be as I am. I will reproduce myself." That's why people began to call the believers Christians at Antioch: it means "little Christs."

We have given lip service to it, but that is the whole point of the gospel, for God to regain His stolen sons from the devil by forming Christ in us. This is why I wrote this book—to tell the story of how all of this happens.

Vessels and Branches

What adequacy do we possess in our human frames? Paul answers this question in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4, saying that we have no adequacy of our own; we must receive it. The New Covenant says that the anointing presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian never fades away, but sustains us with the constant adequacy of Christ's forgiving blood and with the power to walk in union with God. Whereas the condemnation of the Old Covenant leads to disillusionment with the self, we never lose heart under the New Covenant, for "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

We don't think of earthen vessels today like people of Paul's day did. Today, we think of earthen vessels as artisans' crafts. So today, Paul might say that we have this treasure in coffee mugs or Tupperware bowls. But the function remains the same—to contain. A cup that does not leak is an adequate cup! Similarly, to follow the analogy, we do not confuse the cup and the liquid it contains, and so we do not confuse our humanity with His deity. He remains to us the Creator and the only God.

Paul goes on to use the metaphor of a veil to explain why someone does not see God's purpose for humans as vessels to contain Christ. Our humanity, the earthen vessel, acts like a veil to outer eyes search-

ing for it. Yet this is not really the reason someone fails to see the glory of Christ in us. The real troubling veil, Paul tells us, is the one Satan throws over the minds of those refusing to see by faith the glory of Christ in vessels containing Him: “in whose case the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:4).

Hidden glory could lead to discouragement because afflictions can seem to hide this glory. God presents Christ to the world through vessels continually delivered over to death in order to manifest the life of Jesus in others. This is not how we like others to treat us; but for Jesus to come through, God uses a certain type of vessel—one of common make, one that decays, and one that gets beaten up a lot as it offers Christ to others. These vessels come with a warning tag: “Prepare for short term rough handling to produce eternal results.”

Despite affliction Paul makes the human body important in its union to Christ—speaking of it as His “members.” He nowhere implies, “The spiritual—the otherworldly—is what is really important; therefore, it does not matter what one does with the body.” Although the body is an earthen vessel, it also serves as part of God’s temple on earth because in it, the human spirit of a person joins in the oneness of union with the Lord Himself. This is far greater than the one flesh union of sexual intercourse that Paul uses as an analogy of our spirit union with Christ.

Spiritual union to Christ means permanent, uninterrupted oneness that includes the body as His temple and members. Paul further clarifies this intimate connection in Ephesians 1:23 and Colossians 1:18 where

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he describes Christ as the head of the church, His body. The head orders, and the body implements, and both operate in unity as one person.

We are also branches of His vine. Jesus talks about our vine-branch union with Him (John 15:1-5). Nothing is more one with itself than a tree, and a branch only dies by being broken off. The word Jesus chooses is the word *abide*, which some misunderstand as if a branch continually must work to attach itself to an over-demanding tree. Jesus means the contrary, however; he does not imply the effort to get into, but rather the idea of staying in place. Paraphrased, “You are in Me; don’t separate yourself!”

Even the newest Christian is already in union with the Lord, but that idea can take getting used to when all previous thinking only reinforced Satan’s lie of trying to be *like* God instead of resting *in* Him. The truth of resting in union with Christ needs more emphasis among Christians, as well as the simple truth that abiding is the ordinary, natural life of a Christian. It is not some rare peak of perfection attained by a committed few. Jesus’ words further imply that fruitlessness comes from the definite choice *not* to abide. So you *are* abiding unless you choose not to.

Many Christians suffer over the fear over falling away. Yes, apostasy can occur, but confronted with that fear, I repeat what I call the “Keeper’s Creed.” I say to the Lord, “Lord, I will commit any sin if You do not keep me, and thank You that You *are* keeping me.” This eliminates the self-righteousness of, “I would never do that.” It also “puts the heat on God” as my friend Bill Bower says. The “Keeper’s Creed” also expresses the thought, “There but for the grace of God go I”—a thought that also keeps me from judging.

Most importantly though, it affirms that God is doing His job in me. My job is to simply believe that, and this is why I continually say that the Christian life is not difficult. It is excruciatingly painful at times, but not difficult. Faith is easy; our stress comes from the pain of living connected to a fallen world still in the lap of Satan and from bodies subjected to mortality. But God quickens us even in our stress.

The Lava Drinkers

How to drink lava without getting burned.
Swallow slowly and carefully,
and wipe your lips often.

“Lava,” the Volcano said, “is too hot
without something around it—
ah—skin!

Faces, arms, and legs will do fine,
if their looks do not distract them.

The younger ones might preen
their smooth forms or matrix minds;
or make a Wall Street thing out of it all.

The older skins, with the wrinkles,
become a problem—
any flower fades you know;
it’s such a short time of opulence.

But lava, lava, lava;
any old skin will hold it,
and the sage drink it
and forget the rest.”

Slaves, but then Friends of God

The Bible not only calls us vessels, but slaves and friends of God. The slave level comes first because of its focus on obedience—something we run from at first. Having lived for years with Satan’s deception that the self can be like God and that it should not have to submit to any external control, obedience at first sounds like the opposite of liberty. Satan fixedly clutches this delusion. We, however, start out at birth deceived and not yet fixed in our choice. We do experience the shock of realizing our accountability to God for sin and our former resistance to that fact, but we can enter into the sweetness of redemption and the ease of faith’s obedience.

In Romans 6, Paul says that we formerly lived as slaves of sin and now we live as slaves of Christ, meaning that we *always* lived under an owner. Paul also says that we formerly presented our members as instruments to sin, but now by faith present them to God as instruments of righteousness. The word *instrument* translates also as *weapon*, accenting warfare. No one can decide to escape Satan’s slavery and just move out from under it. Christ had to be made sin (2 Cor. 5:21)—meaning that He had to become Satan-indwelt humanity on the Cross and die as that to free us. Only on that basis can we say along with Paul, “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Gal. 2:20).

Faith means taking things, only to find ourselves taken over by what we take. “What you take, takes you.” This is the means of faith—taking and being taken. All of life operates this way down to the simple process of sitting in a chair. Hardly conscious of our choice process after a while, we assess an available chair and decide if it will hold us. Down we go, losing control, until the chair takes us. In the same way, the self-control we looked for in ourselves becomes ours as the fruit of the Spirit. We give up the deception of our own control and take His self-control for our own.

This moves us to the next level—friendship with God. Jesus begins to call His disciples friends instead of slaves because of their obedience of faith and because He explains to them His ways (John 15:14). As friends of God, we dare to be forward with God because we do not seek our own interests any more. Instead of just observing His acts, without the wisdom to relate them to a purpose outside of ourselves, we know His ways (Ps. 103:7).

Let’s look at two examples, Moses and Abraham. When Israel rebels and makes the golden calf in the wilderness, God tells Moses of His plan to wipe out the nation and start over, making a nation from Moses. In response Moses appeals to the certain scorn of the Egyptians. He also appeals to the covenant that God had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Seeking forgiveness for Israel’s idolatry, Moses says, “Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written” (Exod. 32:32).

Abraham also appeals to God as a friend when God tells Abraham of the plan to destroy Sodom. Abraham, fully aware of himself as dust and ashes, persists in his appeal that God spare Sodom for as few as ten righ-

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teous people. A friend takes bold liberties that a slave shrinks from. A friend steps boldly into the inner thoughts and counsel of God.

Jesus calls his disciples friends, “if ye do whatsoever I command you” (John 15:14). What is His command? He had already told them earlier about the primary command—to abide in Him in order to bear fruit, and now He tells them that He no longer calls them servants, for He has shared with them everything He has heard from His father. Just as Moses and Abraham step into the counsels of God, we too, step into them as sons. What we bind is bound; what we loose is loosed (Matt. 16:19). “According to your faith be it unto you” (Matt. 9:29).

In order to assume this friendship, we break loose from the sin consciousness Jesus freed us from through the Cross. Christ’s forgiveness is all we see. If we are always trying to get clean—dragging around with a nagging sense of unworthiness and sin—we will remain self-focused, trying to get a worthiness we already possess through the Cross. He made us worthy in one, never-to-be-added-to sacrifice. A nagging sin consciousness means we think God will do something additional for us, when He tells us that He did all in Christ once. Friends of God accept His verdict on sin, put it behind, and go on as sons of God. Specific sins, when they occur, receive specific forgiveness, and we get on with living as friends of God to intercede for others.

Passion's Proverb:

A lover's exposition of Proverbs 2:1-11

Oh Lord, I opened up a failing heart,
With yearning so intense my body knew,
Its spirit's thirst and hunger in each part,
Though each distinct, yet joined in union too.

For soul must not the life of man dictate,
And drive the spirit into numb retreat;
The nobler part must never delegate,
Its rule to sinking glandular defeat.

But when the body serves the noble seat,
Of spirit, and the voice of God we hear,
The body strangely tunes its every beat
To resonate the wisdom that we hear.

I stored up your commands within my breast,
In heated heaving, slaking all my thirst;
Your fires burnt me to a holy rest;
From inner chambers every passion burst.

Such raging blaze would terrify my mind,
If I knew not your steady, keeping ways;
Some error surely would a pathway find;
To penetrate where out the issue plays.

But where the error seeks its subtle head,
To quench the fiery love that in me yearns,
Your Cross pronounces carnal lust as dead,
And from my crater, love like lava burns.

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I turned my ear to hear you in my heat,
I understood your meaning in each word;
I gave myself to run without retreat,
I surged in everything from you I heard.

For insight filled my longing, hungry will,
And money, treasures' lust, could not compare,
With how you jealously my body fill
As well as spirit's once thought lonely air.

What you speak is utterly complete,
Your wisdom and your knowledge ravish me;
Your shield protects me always from defeat,
And guarantees a total victory.

Your wisdom entered into all my heart,
With satisfaction like the tasty fat,
That drips from sacrifice's choicest part,
Not hell, nor devil can compete with that.

On every path that's good and rightly fair,
I know the just and blameless way to walk,
With pleasant steps not haunted by despair,
Of where my enemy will choose to stalk.

Knowledge fills the spirit's thirsty well,
That flows out to the ever-eager soul,
Where holy fires turn the flames of hell,
Into the script of love's supporting role.

The Sin of All

If sins, plural, make up the theme of the early chapters of Romans, then sin, singular, stands out as the theme of chapters 5 to 8. Sins are the individual acts; sin is the principle behind those acts. God would not insult the precious blood of His Son by opening the fountain to forgive sins, but leave the sin factory not destroyed. We find out what the sin factory is when we read Romans 5. There we find the revelation of our union with the first Adam and how the first Adam—and therefore we, in our union with him—became containers of sin. We learn that sin entered into the world through the disobedience of one man, Adam, and that therefore everyone born from him sinned when he sinned.

What is sin? Sin is a person, just as righteousness is a person. Sin began in the universe when Lucifer chose the mentality, “I will be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14) and set in motion his rebellion, joined in by others of the heavenly host. For the first time ever, self-for-self took on expression in a creature, having previously only been a potential, eternally swallowed up in God by God’s eternal choice to be self-for-others. Therefore, in Eden, Satan took on form in the crafty serpent when he tempted Eve, deceiving her.

Sin is not just some human property. Sin is a spirit. And what resistance does a person have to the spirit

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of sin, to keep it from entering the body and taking over? Romans 6 describes sin as our master when God is not our master, leaving no middle option of *self-mastery*. Every person is a slave to a master, thereby distinguishing both sin and righteousness from our humanity. The prospect of Satan entering into the human body at the Fall sounds like something from a horror movie, but how would Adam have prevented it? Paul writes the Ephesian church that the prince of the power of the air is the spirit living in the children of disobedience—meaning in the non-Christians. In his first epistle, John says that Cain was “of the evil one.” Jesus, in saying that our *yes* should be *yes*, and our *no* should be *no*, says that anything else is from the evil one. This calls for us to reexamine theories of human nature.

I find this the most stressful aspect of Bible truth about the identity of non-Christians: it reminds me of the humorous book by C.S. Lewis on demonology, *Screwtape Letters*.¹ In the preface, Professor Lewis, describing the writing of the book, recalls that despite its humor, it was a difficult book to write because of the subject matter: satanic deception in either the unbeliever or in the Christian does not present an easy subject to consider. Subjects like Satan, sin, and hell make us uncomfortable, but they are necessary. I would not teach them if the Bible did not, and even at that, the Holy Spirit has to press me to do it at times. This is one of those times.

In Romans 5, why does Paul talk about Adam instead of Eve? Adam is the federal head of the race, through whom the satanic nature gets transmitted, just as Christ is the last Adam through whom God makes us partakers of the divine nature, as Peter puts it. Although Eve sinned first, she fell through decep-

tion, and she did not stand as the head of the race. This also explains the necessity for Jesus' virgin birth: had Adam been Jesus' ancestor, Satan would have indwelled Jesus at birth as he did us. Therefore, Paul says in chapter 8 that Jesus was born in the *likeness* of sinful flesh, meaning that He took His nature from God the Father and His humanity from Mary.

Let's look at the sin factory again: God must find a way not only to forgive sins, but also to destroy the sin factory. He must remove indwelling sin from man, His container, and replace it with Himself. It sounds simple, but it required the Cross to accomplish it, and we will see how when we get to the subjects "dead to sin" and "union with Christ." But briefly, the point is this: Jesus became Satan-indwelled humanity on the Cross and died to separate us from our old in-dweller, so that in the resurrection He could rise as us with the Holy Spirit as the new in-dweller. That's briefly it, and we will deal with the point thoroughly later. This destroys the sin factory and turns it into a Christ factory.

This is called being dead to sin, but another problem occurs here: we don't look to ourselves as dead to sin, and we certainly don't feel dead to sin. Furthermore, outrageous temptations continue, and other than a spiritual high now and then, life goes on full of suffering. Christians often judge whether they are dead to sin by their experience and feelings rather than Scripture. Add to that the bewitching possibility of obsessing about the freedom to still sin, and a Christian can find an escape like some Houdini back into countless reasons to say, "I still live very much alive to sin." But this leaves the curious contradiction of what we say in contrast to what the Scripture says.

Not only that, a Christian can still try, try, and try some more to be like Christ, inviting the Romans 7

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syndrome—with effort after effort to be like Christ and keep the law. Trying does not appear to exhaust some as it does others. Sturdier souls go on placidly making resolutions for years with little apparent real trauma over one sunny resolution after another and a litany of minor sins drawing an, “I’m sorry; nobody’s perfect.” This person lives in constant, low-grade misery, with a resignation that leaves the apostle Paul in his Romans 7 agony looking like a candidate for a mental institution—not to mention the long train of readers through history that have read Romans 7, identifying with it in totality.

It takes enough of a fall to get the job done. When I complained to Norman Grubb once about a minister who some years back had fallen into sin, later to be restored to ministry, Norman replied, “We all have a good crack-up along the way, don’t we?” A good crack up loomed as what I feared most, and we know what happens to those that continue in fear don’t we?

Could it be that God laughs at the moderate try-er who bucks up stoically with a false resignation to the world’s imperfection? A real try-er tries and tries and tries some more—with mounting frustration that finally leads to the terrifying question, “What would happen if I quit trying?”

Even better is the question, “Who will deliver me?” In my own trying saga, my friend Sylvia Pearce used to say, “Try until you can’t try any more; God loves a good try-er.” He does not mock us, but waits for us to see what He already sees about us—our own inability, and He is our deliverance when we ask for it and believe.

Death Divided

The outer death is mortal, defiant to the body,
onset from conception, introduced in Eden,
and certain except for one generation.
On the early earth, this death took
a millennium or longer
before the elements disallowed
such leisurely decline into
the one box we all lie in
after 70 or so if ordained.

Need we describe the disease of organs
or the shriveling into infirmity
when cells no longer regenerate?

The inner death came in Eden as well—
invisible, by deception, then by will—
a temple vacated by fire,
maintained with a spark,
animated by an intruder who
offers darkness for light
and life as self-for self,
to hell with you!

“I will be like the Most High”
took on human form,
alive once without the law—
a self-deceived like this:
“I am just I,”
intoxicated, self-willed,
pleasant to the pleasant,
violent when crossed.

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God's death took place in eternity,
never not known to Him,
but chosen just the same:
"I die to self-for-self;
to hell with Me to save you."

Now "I AM" took on form,
construed of a virgin to bypass
Adam's line and avoid one more sinner.

Crucified, He died for us,
but also as us, the man made sin—
the man we were,
indwelled by sin.
Our body He became,
that His we might become,
when from His body—ours—
the sinner left,
and the cold, sinless corpse
went to its tomb.

Dead to sin it lay,
but dead to life as well,
dead, a lifeless clay,
though severed from its hell.

The body had to rise to live
under new occupancy:
"This house is Mine,"
says the Lord.

The outer death and inner death
from Eden destroyed us.
Our body death in Him
recreated us.
But few know this.
“I am crucified with Christ”—
this is the death that saves.

Now yet another death:
I live, but not I,
but Christ in me.
I died to being my own I;
He is the I of my I,
the two as one,
He major, I minor,
but then I major (at His behest)
as long as I am minor;
for He would be as I,
hiding, as once the devil did,
to be I winking
to think it really He.

Now when you think it's I,
you need a twinkling eye
to see I am not I, but He.

Rope around, swing and jump,
skipping light, “Ha Ha,”
I'm on the moon,
and the sun is still the sun,
yet I'm not burned, but warm.

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So play the pipe and dance;
let the children bring their wreaths,
the young men court,
and maidens flirt and run away;
let tambourines go click and hum
like cicadas in the trees;
let the chimes hang out for tunes,
and the grill send up its smoke,
while we all stand and sip a drink
remembering days of woe now gone.

While we sing,
let's talk another death, the daily death
that's life for you—
that holds its peace, forgives—
will wait, will cease to agitate,
will show itself a gentleman and a lady
that you might be served best,
and seeks not its own way.

Oh, and one more death.
I'd go to hell for you.

Original Sin: Romans 5:12-21

Let's take a closer look at Romans 5:12-21 and the implications of those verses. Romans 5:12 says that sin entered into the world by one man. But wait a minute, didn't the Fall come first through Eve? By "one man" does Paul mean Eve, for the Bible often uses the word "man" to indicate mankind, and therefore both men and women? Here in Romans 5:12, however, Paul means Adam, for in verse 14, he traces death to Adam. "Why does Paul trace sin and death to Adam instead of Eve?"

The answer lies in the Bible's understanding of *nature* and how *nature* gets transmitted from generation to generation. Every person is born with an indwelling nature, and that nature derives from the father. Romans 5:12 tells us that Adam became the father of sin in the world. Adam passed on the sin nature to all who would come from his lineage. Now the major consequence of sin is death; apart from sin, nobody would ever die. Each generation inherits death going back to Adam, and actually all men sinned and died in the moment that Adam sinned and died.

We initially distrust assuming responsibility for the actions of someone else. How can it be just to make all men sinners because one man sinned? The justice of lumping everyone together comes from the revelation that all future generations were in Adam when

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he sinned, and therefore, Adam acted as all men. Adam contained within him all men, and no one born of Adam would have done any differently, therefore eliminating the excuse, “I wouldn’t have given in like Adam did.”

Also, “sin is not imputed where there is no law” (5:13). In other words, if God does not give a law, sin cannot exist, for sin by definition means the transgression of a law. Now the law given to Adam and Eve only addressed one issue, the forbidden tree. God’s whole legal covenant with Adam and Eve consisted of only one law, so there could be only one sin.

Therefore, some explanation is necessary for why all the generations between Adam and Moses died, for not until Moses did God make another legal covenant with the penalty of death. The fact of mortality between Adam and Moses proves that we experience mortality because of Adam’s sin.

The virgin birth also verifies this truth, for God ensured that Jesus, His son, was born of a virgin, and Romans 8:3 says that Jesus was born in the “likeness” of sinful flesh. Had Jesus been born of a human father, He would have been in the lineage of Adam, and thus been born a sinner. Therefore, God assumed supernatural fatherhood and planted His own holy seed in Mary’s womb, in order to start a new race, for Jesus is called “the last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45). The plan of salvation, then, means taking those born of the first Adam, putting them to death on a cross for sin, and then birthing them into the new Adam who is righteous.

Paul does not develop how this happens until Romans 6, where he reveals that we were in Christ when He died to sin as us (2 Cor. 5:21), for not only did He die for our sins, but He actually became the first Adam,

dying as the first Adam, and as all who are in the first Adam. Then He was raised as the last Adam, and as such, contained within Him all who would ever choose to be born into the new Adam.

Therefore, sin no longer stands to damn anyone, but only the rejection of Jesus. If I inherit a fatal disease from my earthly father, I do not curse him if I have the antidote. Sin will never send anyone to hell, but refusing Christ will, for that is the one unforgivable sin.

Lastly, in Romans 5:20, Paul tells us “the law entered that the offense might abound.” Originally when we hear law, we think, “Okay, I’ll do that.” We start out thinking this shows devotion to God. But resolutions to reform actually mean we still think the human self can obey God’s law, whereas God knows we cannot keep the law. To overcome our bias that original sin is unfair, God gives plenty of other laws to test us so that we can see with finality that we don’t do any better than Adam did and were never meant to. God’s real purpose is to prove to us that He created us as vessels to contain His righteousness. Only Christ can live the Christian life, so He must live it through us!

In the chapter “Dead to Sin,” we will look in detail at the sin nature and God’s nature and how, through the Cross, we exchange one for the other.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

When I Ruled the Birds

Lord, thank you
that the birds of the air fly free;
were it left to me,
I would organize them,
by color and markings—
“bird” would not be good enough.
I would have fly zones,
specified yard time,
and worm quotas.
“Out of the bath now—
it’s someone else’s turn
you know.”
Feed would be evenly spread,
and announcement of bedtime.
Doves would have to ask
my permission to mate.
I would say “Red”
to the robin’s breast,
civilize the blue jays
into a Vienna choir—
and teach the cardinal
the art of camouflage.
Mockingbirds would praise.
But alas, how boring
this would finally be,
when I had divested
Audubon’s gardens
of all their mystery—
when I had solved the riddle
of Your sovereignty.

Dead To Sin: Who Me?

At the end of Romans 5, Paul makes the shocking announcement that God's purpose in the law is "that the offense might abound." This means that, instead of serving as our aid to doing right, the law serves to expose our utter inability to keep it. This blow to human ego could only come about through law, for without the Law, we wouldn't experience disillusionment and failure. God had to devise a plan that would lead to His point—that He created humans to be vessels (2 Cor. 4:7), temples (1 Cor. 6:17-19), and branches (John 15) to express His indwelling life and not to be originators of righteousness.

Somewhere, however, this fact got lost at the Fall when sin entered through Adam. What happened? Satan employed the serpent to tempt Eve into suspecting that God withheld divinity from her. Satan said to her, "Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). This deception enticed her into seeing herself as less than complete and God, therefore, as her adversary. Adam looked at her fall and then willfully followed her in the lie, choosing her as his God. Adam and Eve became the first codependent couple and partners in Satanic deception, for codependency is just a modern label for sin. We could also call it idolatry.

But something far more sinister than individual

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acts of sin took place in the garden that day. Sinful deeds spring up as fruits from an indwelling root. Sins occur out of a “sin nature,” and the evangelical Christian world knows that the problem lies in a “sin nature.” Paul addresses this distinction in Romans 1 through 4 by speaking of *sins* (plural), whereas in Romans 5 through 7, he speaks of *sin* (singular) as a root, principle, or indwelling nature. What the Christian world generally assumes, however, is that the “sin nature” is an evil aspect of the self. Frequently someone will refer to “my sin nature” or “my old nature.” Does it sound like God, however, that He would forgive all of our sins, implant Christ in us, but leave a corrupt human self?

It is one thing to preserve freedom of choice to sin, but to make sin a matter of human nature misses the point that sin is a person just as righteousness is a person. One of the clearest expositions of sin occurs in Paul’s letter to the Ephesian church where he says that we all started out dead in trespasses and sins (2:1) and “walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (2:2). This means that Satan not only tempts us to sin, but works in us to do the sinning before we become Christians. Satan is Mr. Sin, and his business is to sin through willing humans, using their bodies as his instruments.

John makes the same point when he says, “He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning” (I John 3:8). John does not mean that the devil still owns and lives in the Christian every time he or she commits a sin; he means that sin as a fixed way of life and choice of life makes one a child of the devil, indwelled by the Evil One. Jesus deliv-

ered the same indictment to the unbelieving religious leaders when He said, “You are of your father the devil, and the lusts of you father you will do” (John 8:44).

How did it come about that Satan became the “sin nature” in us? It occurred at the Fall when Adam sinned (and all sinned therefore, as we learned from Romans 5). The spirit of error entered the human vessel and became the disguised inner operator, suggesting his thoughts as ours so that we thought we were just ourselves wanting our own way. We did want our own way, but it was really Satan wanting his own way in us, but making us think we were just ourselves in our wanting.

Therefore, to truly die to sin, one must have the satanic spirit removed and replaced with Christ as indwelling Lord. But wait a minute: if we have never seen ourselves as only vessels, then we have been ingrained to see ourselves as independent, self-operating selves. No wonder then that God gave the Law to make sin abound. God had to get us to the point where Satan’s deception gets exposed in us.

The fact that we are vessels sets up Paul’s whole argument in Romans 6 about being dead to sin; for he will explain that Christ was made sin on the Cross (2 Cor. 5:21), meaning that Christ died not only *for* sin, but *as* sin, therefore becoming the first Adam in order to die as the first Adam. Christ’s body became the body of the whole human race of every generation, indwelled by sin. When Christ died, then, Satan left His body (for death means that the spirit leaves the body). The lifeless body went into the grave. But a dead body, though dead to sin, cannot live, so the Holy Spirit raised Him up as us. The “new nature,” so often referred to by Christians, is none other than,

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“Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

Dead to sin, therefore, does not mean that a Christian cannot commit a sin, but rather that he or she is free not to, for the sin spirit has been put out and can only manipulate our members again through the deception once again that we can keep the law. The real point is our new freedom to live spontaneously as if we are just ourselves, but knowing it is really He living His life, but appearing as we.

I like to say that the Christian life is easy. Yes, it's full of pain and suffering, but nonetheless easy, for Christ lives it and we just go along for the ride, enjoying the ease of His keeping. Now when confronted with fierce temptation, I say, “Lord, I will commit any and every sin if You don't keep me; but thank You that You *are* keeping me.” That way I end up on a note of faith instead of just wishing it so. God loves faith, so latch on and live lively.

The Soul Cracked in the Night

When darkness comes, a body hopes for sleep,
quiet on a restful bed, without sweat and trembling.

As a novice, distress spoke unbelief—
devils in control, hell all around.

The soul cracked in the night,
with none to rescue.

As a novice, answers lay on a cloud,
I wishing to be there.

Now, the soul cracks in the night
on white linens.

“Hush, sweetheart,
you’re weaned now.”

The soul cracked in the night,
but someone new walked out .

Dead To Law: Where's the Exit?

The lie of self-improvement leads to a dreary life. At first our efforts to keep the law stem from conviction that we can do it. But as time goes by and success evades us, we trek across a frustrating wasteland of failure. Resolution leads to resolution. Surely another fresh start will work, but the self grows wearier with each try. “Maybe this isn’t such a good plan after all,” we think, but we can’t escape, for we find ourselves “held” by the law (Rom. 7:6).

Those were great days when we lived spontaneously before the law entered; we came and went as we pleased, with little thought except about our next plan to enjoy life. Paul also knew days like that—days when life moved along almost effortlessly with anticipation of more good to come. Then one day someone shows Paul a copy of God’s Law, and he realizes that he repeatedly does what the Law forbids. Denial springs up as he struggles to hold on to his former life, but confronted with God’s Law, he has to concede that he has been wrong and needs to change.

However, with some adjustments and re-evaluation, most things in life can remain the same; the law allows for many exceptions, and where no exceptions exist, compensatory good behavior in other areas can make up for apparent failures. So thinks Paul in his first wiggling, and so think we all in ours; certainly

some adjustment of the law or our interpretation of it will give us room to move more easily and escape this increasing dread conviction that we are wrong.

We're tempted even to call the law sin; after all, effort to keep the law continually produces the opposite of what we desire. The more we try to keep the law, the more we do the very things the law speaks against, proving us continually to be sinners. Perhaps the *law* is sin, since it serves as the occasion for our constant sinning. Therefore, if the *law* is wrong, we can make it the culprit instead of ourselves.

But in a moment of honesty, Paul acknowledges that the law is not sin (Rom. 7:7); rather it is holy and good (Rom. 7:12). The culprit is not the law, but sin. Sin somehow uses the law to cause sin. At first this sounds contradictory; what is this deception that uses God's holy law to cause sin in the very person wanting to keep the law? Paul at first doesn't know the answer to this question. Furthermore, the power of sin rages so greatly that he says, "For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me" (Rom. 7:11).

What death does Paul speak of here; how is he slain? The clue comes in Romans 7:7 where he narrows things down to a fundamental law of the universe that never changes: "Thou shalt not covet." But "God is love" (I John 4:16), and He can do nothing but love. No covetousness dwells in Him, for covetousness is the opposite of His nature. But Paul says, "I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet" (Rom. 7:7).

This explains why Paul says that the law slew him; Paul found himself a coveting self. No longer can he affirm himself as a good man going wrong in disobeying some of God's laws; he sees himself as utterly self-

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seeking and dies to all hope of holding himself up as good. Optimism flees, hope for self-improvement dies, and hope for escape by any human means disappears.

Sin had totally deceived him by making him think he could keep the law. Now he sees the impossibility of that and lies dead before the law, convinced of his utter captivity to sin. He is “held” (Rom. 7:6), “slain” (Rom. 7:11), and “exceedingly sinful” (Rom. 7:13). In desperate honesty, he admits, “For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin” (Rom. 7:14).

Paul experiences complete disillusionment with his ability to express anything but covetousness. So how does he account for the fact that he does not wish to covet? He holds onto the belief that his essential self does not will to covet, even though he covets. Holding out that he does *not* will to sin enables Paul to discover his vessel-hood.

Paul discovers himself as a vessel when he recognizes that if he does the very thing he hates, “it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me” (Rom. 7:17,20). He does not yet solve the mystery, but he does, through a process of elimination, conclude that the problem is neither the law, nor his “I.” Rather sin (consider the role of Satan as Mr. Sin, though Paul does not clarify this here) deceives him into thinking he can escape coveting, when in fact, on his own, he cannot.

The good news so far comes from Paul’s acknowledgment that he cannot keep himself from coveting—and that the one coveting through Paul is not Paul either. The lie stands exposed; Paul does not independently do either good or evil, and neither do we! A vessel can only express someone else’s nature. Sin’s deception says the opposite; sin says that the human

self performs its own good or evil and that a person can choose to do either.

Paul's brutal honesty saves him from remaining engulfed in deception. If he discards God's law and justifies himself, he remains self-righteously deceived. If he upholds God's law, but decides that he does not want to keep it, he sinks into despair. Only by maintaining the Law's just claims, his own impotence, and yet his own continuing desire not to covet, does he stay on the cutting edge of hope that a solution exists; he hangs on the verge of crying out, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:25).

Paul is about to turn his powerlessness into an asset. If you have followed Paul's brutal, but honest trail, perhaps you hang on the verge of the same cry that can turn your powerlessness into hope. Follow where this leads!

When Evil Goes too Far, It Births a Star

It's natural to wonder how God will
Do great things He promised—but until
He points the issue to the "If"—the mind
Exerts itself—to see if it can find
A means of rescue—hiding its controls.

Unknown—buried self—itsself—extols
The wisdom of the everlasting me.

Then what a shock awakens us to see
The walls—harsh armor wrapped around the will—
So fierce—that no defense can fail to hold
God out—no matter what. The story's told
That God Almighty can do anything.

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But can He, in His power, finally bring
A hostile will to throw down all its arms?

—Surrender all its strong, deceptive charms—
That keep the gate so tightly locked, that no
One—even God—can enter in? The glow
Of His bright sun, in all its love outpoured,
Would fail to melt resisting wills that roared
To keep the sovereign self enthroned. Within,
We think all's safe. Finally, though, He'll win
His entrance by a means so dire, that we—
The ones He knew are desperate to be free—
Will gladly open up the door to Him.

But how does He succeed at winning them?
The answer seems contrary, for He sent
His agent Lucifer—now Satan—bent
On making self-will seem a plan that—well-
Intentioned—subtly hides the depths of hell.
Behind his ploy, time sweats its way along,
And self-will turns so numbly cold, that wrong
Cannot continue in its dismal pain.

What flatters us and not another's gain,
Now violates our union in the Cross.
We strangely will to die and suffer loss.
Inwardly His jealous, strong desire—
In all its seeking, hell-discerning fire—
Makes love to souls the devil has worn down.

For this, the devil sports an ugly frown,
That after tortured work, he aptly gave
His sovereign one more soul raised from the grave.
Ironically revealing, all's disclosed—
That self-for-self had really subtly posed
As tolerance and love—But praise the Light—
That shined into the recess of dark night—
For through the Cross, the evil went so far—
It fooled the devil when it birthed a star.

Just Another Tomato!

By Patsy Lovejoy

Church services were over, and my husband Don prepared a picnic for our Sunday drive. The weather was beautiful! We planned to stop along a rumbling creek on the winding road to Abingdon, Virginia, and I felt excitement about sharing how the Sunday school lesson I had facilitated unfolded, and the highlights from the pastor's sermon that touched me.

We found our favorite spot and began our tailgate picnic, when a truck pulled up behind us. The woman waved, opened her window, and asked if we wanted a tomato. I thanked her and told her we had brought some grape tomatoes from home. Don had his back to her as I was telling him about the sermon, when the young woman, now out of her truck, interrupted and asked if we had a knife because she wanted to make a sandwich. I said, "I don't think so, but I'll double check."

She didn't give me a chance to finish looking, but got back in her truck, slammed the door, and started revving up the engine! She scowled and white knuckled the steering wheel—looking upset and unbelievably disturbed! A chill went up my spine when her body language looked like she intended to plow through us and smash the back end of our Explorer! In real terror, I grabbed Don's arm to warn him,

when she screamed with all her might, “YOU LIAR!” Then, with all the force she could muster, she launched the tomato straight at us! *Great shot!* It struck my husband’s chair, showering us with seeds and juice all over. We sat dumbfounded, spattered with tomato!

Our assailant then spun her tires, jerked the wheel, and narrowly missed our car as she skidded onto the road. With squealing tires, she roared onto the roadway, swerving from side to side. Stunned, Don quickly turned his chair in her direction and took a deep breath. What a mess!

Eventually, laughing about the whole thing, we decided the pastor’s sermon was so powerful that it must have gotten our adversary’s attention as he roams the earth as a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). We just happened to be in the firing line, since we were enjoying the Truth a second time over.

That tomato made such an impression on us! Now, when something happens that appears negative or is a concern, we say to each other with a half grin, “Just another tomato!”

I had two mammograms that same week, both with delays in getting back the results. Delays are inconvenient “tomatoes”—they can’t hurt us but feel unsettling. “Tomato” events potentially set the stage for worry that can lead to not trusting God. All sizes and shapes of “tomatoes” get hurled into our lives. We should expect them, but we must know that the Father is in total control because we are His family. As His sons, we have the assurance that He filters everything through His heart and hands before it comes to us; we can rest assured in all things being for our sakes and all things being of God (2 Cor. 4:16; 2 Cor. 5:18). When we decide that it is not what happens that counts, but our response, we can rejoice

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in negative circumstances and use them as stepping-stones to the faith that pleases God.

Not long after the tomato, we forgot this at our grandson's football game when we met up with our son and daughter-in-law to watch the game. We brought our chairs and two cameras, excited to see that grandbaby shine—whether he had a good game or not. Also, as a mom, it doesn't matter how old my sons get, I still look forward to talking with them. But in a setting like this game, he's busy with the goings on around him. Yet, I wanted to enjoy my grown son, as well.

I have come to a place where I have only “one *true* relationship—with the Father—and the rest is fellowship.” A friend made this comment a few years back, and it has lingered in my spirit, always pressing me to acknowledge it. That thought keeps me focused and detached just enough that the overflow brings about healthy and loving interaction with my family and folks that cross my path.

At this football game, wanting to talk to my son, this truth got experientially worked out in my life again. I hadn't seen him in a while and missed him, so I wanted him to talk to *me*. I loved on him, mentioning how we appreciated his recent ideas for our business, which we were putting to good use. I also asked him where the rest of the grandbabies were, but apparently he didn't hear me. That didn't help. In the meantime, a small child came up and started pulling on him; he playfully responded. He is one of those “Cool Dads” that all the kids like. More folks came, exchanging light-hearted hugs and laughter with him, all at arms length from where I stood. About now, I was feeling “out of the loop.” Poor me! It felt like just another tomato coming in my direction; yet, I was

caught off guard, and as a result, didn't get to laugh this one off.

Our grandson's team won the game, and we loved that he came running off the field, glad to see us, with hugs and kisses; and without any prodding from his parents he thanked us for coming. What a pleasure to receive that spontaneous gesture, and what a credit to his upbringing.

But gloom settled over us on the way home. My pity-drenched emotions leaked over onto Don, and we spoke the negative into being and couldn't shake it. We were considering and listening to our feelings; and as the enemy of our soul would have it, we *felt* neglected and disregarded. It took us a few days to finally be in faith, though we knew God was giving us the necessary space to feel our initial human reaction.

Matthew 18:19 says, "Again, I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." We realized that we had spoken the reverse of this faith Scripture. This resulted from going by sight and dwelling on assumptions instead of God's perspective. We can get so entrenched in our feelings and circumstances that we take things personally, forgetting that God trusts *us* to live out of who we are in Him—from our spirit not from our soulish emotions.

How do we do that? "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above [...]. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with God in Christ" (Col.3:1-3). Only when I'm living out of this Scripture can I move into rest. I remind myself that I am risen with Christ, yet dead to what *I* want and what *I* think should be happening. There is no other way to

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be hid with God, allowing Christ to be my Life.

I had asked the Lord, “What is this all about? Why have I allowed myself to get caught up in a whirl of emotions?” I had forgotten that by God’s provision, I am *dead* in Him; so *why was I doing so much wiggling?* When these knee-jerk human reactions happen, the key is not to stay there. I can *choose* through my renewed mind to say God’s thoughts about me and to take personally the Scriptures that reveal the provision of the Cross in all my situations. Thus, I am set free!

Galatians 2:20 reads, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.” Practically then, I must recognize that Christ is *my* all and in all, *now*, in every situation. I come to realize that I don’t need any person, place or thing—except Him—to complete me (Col. 2:10). I can dare to believe that Christ not only lives in me, but that I also have at my disposal His faith by which to live.

So, what has happened in the spiritual realm? Is the negative bad or of no use? No, I can *glory* in the negative. I can see and experience light shining out of darkness as in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” We actually *need* the darkness as a contrast to project the light.

Isaiah 45:3 reads, “And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by name, am the God of Israel.” So now, how

much more for new creatures in Christ, are we to be called by name as His sons and joint-heirs in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8:17). In thinking about this, I get the impression that God cares about us *knowing that we are His*, and He will use every nook and cranny in our lives, no matter how dark, for His glory.

I begin with my negative situation and by God's faith in me allow the darkness to be swallowed up by the light that shines in my heart. Then I can *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God for others in the face of Jesus Christ. We experience the darkness to share the treasure and hidden riches that come forth as light! How easy then to be able to give thanks in *everything*, knowing it is the will of God in Christ Jesus, concerning me (1Thess. 5:18). Even Joseph in Genesis 50:20 knew that his brothers meant evil, but *God meant it* for good. I have a "post it" on my computer screen that says, "It's *never* the other guy—even when it *is* the other guy!"

As for our son, it wasn't he; he was watching his son play football. He was oblivious to my temptation to feed off of a spirit of self-protection and self-validation, not reckoning myself dead (Rom. 6:11) and sinking fast into self-pity. The result for me was to temporarily forget who God has made me to be in Christ, thus making the Cross of no effect in my life (Gal. 5:4 and Gal. 2:21). *Great shot!*—spattered tomato everywhere.

Therefore, my problem interacting with other people—is me! Remembering that there is "just one relationship; the rest is fellowship," lifts such a weight off of us and brings release; it allows me to know the Father; enjoy who I am in Christ; and have free-flowing, wonderful fellowship with all. I believe we have been given this earthly opportunity to *practice* over

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and over how to disarm the false power of tomatoes!

As a side note, our tomato-lady friend now has two sons of her heavenly Father bringing her before the throne of Grace in intercession on her behalf (Romans 8:31-34; Hebrews 7:25). Because of what Christ has already done on the cross, we plan on seeing her in glory, having the last laugh about tomatoes...together!

Dead to Law: Letting Go

In Romans 7:15, Paul honestly says, “For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to, but I am doing the very thing I hate” (NASB). He’s not talking here about negative thoughts and feelings; everyone experiences those throughout the day, and the writer of Hebrews makes those a matter of soul—what we discern as different from spirit intent (4:12). Paul here talks about what actually rules in his members, the law of sin. He can’t yet figure out how to find deliverance from his bondage to covetousness.

But Paul also works a process of elimination to discover the culprit; the law is not the problem, and his human “I” is not the problem. How do we know this? His revelation of the culprit comes when he says, “Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me” (Rom. 7:17,20). He has previously said that the law held him (Rom. 7:6) and sin deceived him (Rom. 7:11). But now the mask of sin’s deception falls away and a radical choice presents itself. In our ignorance, God winks at a lot (Acts 17:30), but when He opens the truth to us, we move to faith or willingly remain in unbelief (John 9:41).

Paul works carefully through his dilemma twice: he establishes once and then again that since he continues to do what he hates and does not do what he

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desires, that the problem no longer rests with his “I” but with indwelling sin (Rom. 7:17,20). Many Christians arrive at this point only to miss Paul’s meaning, concluding from Romans 7 that Paul means that the Christian possesses two natures—an old nature (the flesh), that continues to sin, and a new nature that walks in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This misses Paul’s meaning entirely; he says the problem is not his “I,” and he equally does not say that his flesh is sinful, though he says that no good thing dwells in his flesh (Rom. 7:18). Notice that he mentions “I,” “me,” and “my flesh” in Romans 7:17-18. If we take the flesh as an evil, old nature, we do two things: first, we make flesh the problem rather than sin; second, we miss the point that the human will cannot control the flesh and keep it from sin. Paul does not make the flesh evil; he merely asserts that the flesh has no more good of its own than does his “I.” His passion here concerns showing the breakdown between his “I” (what he calls his mind in Rom. 7:25) and his flesh; his most determined mental resolutions do not keep sin from grabbing his fleshly members. His “I”—his mind, his inward man—cannot control his “me”—his “flesh,” his “members.” Nothing about Paul (or us) can keep sin out.

So the point is really Paul’s powerlessness to bring about what he wants. He even translates his experience into a principle: never will he find that his will overrides sin and brings about love instead of covetousness. Paul fights to assert, not that we have two natures, but that we have no nature! Two natures do master people: Satan’s self-for-self, sin nature or God’s self-for-others, love nature. But neither nature originates in the human vessel; the vessel only expresses one of these two natures.

We live in an age that disputes demonic control in people: in our day doctors often treat “mental illness” instead of Satan, sin, and demons. The numerous Gospel accounts of demonic control in people’s lives seem out of step intellectually with the findings of modern treatment paradigms. Certainly, mental illness does sometimes stem from chemical imbalances, but modern skeptics will someday have to acknowledge the overlooked deception of Satan that hides from people the demonic origin behind sin. Satan’s chief tool for eventual mental illness is his lie that we originate our own good or evil. No wonder so many people finally have a breakdown; trying to live as anything other than a vessel goes against the grain—against the way God created us to function. He created us to receive life, not generate it.

Paul discovers his vessel-hood in Romans 7; he discovers he has been a vessel of sin. But now he cries out in complete agony, “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24). Now he turns to a “Who” other than himself; he turns his powerlessness into acceptance that his rescue must come from another. Instantly he sees the Cross and says, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:25). Jesus Christ breaks that old law under which our members can only serve sin. Just as the law of gravity causes a rock to fall unless a greater power holds it up, the law of sin holds our members captive unless Christ frees them. And free them He has!

I have a way of saying what Paul says here: I say, “Lord, I will be covetous in five minutes if You do not keep me from it; but thank You that You are keeping me.” Satan still does plenty of tempting every day. He sees our helpless flesh and constantly wishes to snatch

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it for his covetous use, making us think we are bad selves. He tempts us to covet, and then turns right around and condemns us for doing it, all the while hiding himself as the villain. Satan always does his job in this world: my old friend Norman Grubb often said, "This is Satan's camp; he has a right to shoot at us" (Norman's expression for 1 John 5:19). But God always does His job even better; have you reached the end of yourself? If so, you're enjoying the keeping instead of obsessing on the temptation or sin.

When the Mind is at an End

When the mind is at an end,
and its epistemology recognizes
that it would be futile to send
one more thought,
outwardly bound, to defend
its premise,
like an eye-closed astronaut;
then the seeking mind
humbles itself
to depend
upon the Holy Spirit,
and not pretend
to have fought
some righteous battle
by itself,
wherein the puffed up mind
imagines, that alone
it sought
and found
an answer—

going out once more
to rend
the divine domain
and capture by force
what always comes
like rain
to those that tend
a simple soul.

Romans Eight: Led by the Spirit

Paul coins two important terms in Romans 8:8-9: “in the flesh” and “in the Spirit.” The former means a non-Christian—a person not indwelt by the Spirit; the latter means a Christian—the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). An unbeliever’s preoccupation is with fleshly, sensual life as the source of all meaning. Satan tempts believers, trying to pull them back into the same preoccupation. But by faith we live in the power of the Spirit.

We also live in mortal bodies. This creates tension—eternal life in a body dead because of sin (Rom. 8:10). But God leaves us in mortal bodies so that we will live by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) and so that we can identify with others. When we walk in faith, having the same afflictions as others, yet praising the Lord, we demonstrate that our joy is supernatural and not physical. Paul calls it the “bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10).

In one sense, Jesus can never die again, “Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more” (Rom. 6:9); but in another sense, as the body of Christ, the church expresses the ongoing death of Christ for others until the last trumpet sounds when it’s time for the bodily resurrection.

The death of Jesus through His church does not

mean further atonement for sin; the whole of the atonement for sin found completion through the one-time shedding of Christ's perfect blood. However, Christ's dying through His church continues God's expression of love so that the Spirit might be formed in others.

But why does Paul say that the body is dead because of sin? He does not call the body sinful; he calls it "our earthly house of this tabernacle" and says, "in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven" (2 Cor. 5:1-2). Speaking of the future resurrection he says that God "shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body" (Phil. 3:21). That word *vile* does not imply something to despise, for the NASB translates *vile body* (KJV) as *the body of our humble estate*. Today we often think of *vile* as meaning morally debased or filthy; but the King James English, which dates from the 1600's, draws on a meaning for *vile* seldom used today: "of little value or account."¹

The "body of our humble estate" or "vile body," therefore, describes our present earthly bodies as not comparable in glory to the spiritual body of the resurrection. Speaking of the present body, Paul says, "It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:43-44). The humble state and vile aspect of the present body does not make it unimportant; it makes it transitory—passing away—and not the investment for the future. In the meantime we live from the eternal life already indwelling us in our spirits where, joined to His spirit as one, we enjoy our assurance that the real "I" never dies (the body just falls away at physical death). Our high calling now means that we "through the Spirit

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do mortify the deeds of the body” or as the NASB renders Romans 8:13, we “are putting to death the deeds of the body.” Obviously we do not attempt to shut down all functions of the body and try to make the body not exist (the taste not, touch not mentality of Col. 2:21). We do, however, say “No” to urgings of the body that do not harmonize with the leading of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Paul says, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14).

Satan likes to create doubt about our son-ship and trouble our assurance with fear. He brings condemnation concerning every thought and feeling, trying to convince us that our flesh impulses mean that flesh still dominates us rather than Spirit. Paul comforts us by affirming our adoption by the Spirit. The fact that we cry, “Abba! Father!” witnesses to our adoption. Furthermore, the Spirit Himself witnesses to our Spirits that we belong to Him (Rom. 8:16).

Satan tries to lead us into the lie that our bodies still belong to the powers of darkness. But the Holy Spirit assures us that bodily lusts and temptation are springboards to faith. We can walk in the freedom and confidence of Christ’s life in us. Temptations act like volcanoes that make a lot of noise, but we trust God’s keeping. Don’t let those noisy volcanoes scare you; the flesh is under new management.

They Were Like Butterflies

When I saw a multitude
like butterflies in a cloud—
beyond the worst
that they had known—
I remembered the grass
in the wind:
they are the same,
except the grass
does not resist;
and those that strive, do.

How can perfect rest
commence to move?
How will the eternal city
be one,
yet each and each, unnumbered—
both enjoyed,
like a man
and a maiden—
or a ship
at sea.

Grace

I looked up with desire—
You took me up into Your rainbow.

I could not climb,
I could not fly.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

But Your chariot came for me—
through the darkness,
through the light.

Out of amber,
with rings, green in green,
You came for me,
Your little heir.

Your chariot has the latest sound system,
high speed Internet,
and a panel of undiscovered lights and needles
from the year “Now plus forever.”

Your refreshment for me, however,
was simple—from AD 33,
bread and wine.

Then you said to the driver,
“Take us to the stars
and beyond,
where, when one dream ends,
another begins.”

Flying off, I looked back
at the devil,
and put on the headphones.

The Completeness of Each Moment

As a junior, a year and a half from graduation, Larry already obsessed about graduation. Not a candidate for college, he worked slowly, but diligently with a friendly disposition, though you could see the strain as he labored on assignments. I enjoy academics, but related to Larry by remembering years of plodding through work I disliked, or even detested, in jobs I did only to survive. Probably, Larry does what he does to survive.

So Larry sat there for weeks, telling me again and again how much he looks forward to graduation. I chided him at times about living in the future, but then reminded myself often as well not to live in the future while missing the magic of life today.

People often ask me, “Do you enjoy teaching special education?” Most often I answer, “No, but I see glory in it.” My missionary friend Norman Grubb, who went to be with the Lord in 1993 at the seasoned age of 98, once began a talk on suffering with the words, “Suffering is what I do not like.” He then shared at length about seeing through the negative to God’s positive. Just remembering a chapter title in his book *Yes I Am*, titled “From Negative to Positive Believing,” often gets me through a difficult moment.

Therefore, I seldom ask, “Does this situation feel good?” I like to feel good as much as anybody does,

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but find it more important to ask, “God, what are you up to here?” Frankly, I seldom get immediate answers on that level. In my experience only despair comes from demanding to understand things, like things, and control things.

At the darkest point of my life, I feared that I had lost my salvation, and I couldn’t bear the sight of a Bible. The Bible had become a black book for me. The few times I opened it during this dark time, I opened to the scary passages in Hebrews, Jude, and Peter about damnation.

I quit reading the Bible and did not even have one any longer. But one night, unexpectedly, in my car, the still small voice said clearly to me, “Stop obsessing about your family (I was separated) and look at Me.” I replied, “But I don’t understand.” The Lord cut me off and said, “Stop obsessing about your family and look at Me.” I began to reply as before, only the Holy Spirit again cut me off: “Stop obsessing about your family and look at Me; start thanking Me.”

The third time I said, “Thank You.” As I did, peace came over me, and a light turned on. From that moment I began giving thanks and singing in my trials. This puts me on Him and always works, meaning that I get Spirit knowing even when circumstances do not change.

In teaching special education, I live exactly as I began to live in that moment. In the book of Revelation, the saints never fight the devil—they praise and wait on God. This takes the struggle out of the Christian life. When under stress, I “do nothing.” I relax and rest in the Lord, leaving Him to will and to work in me (Phil. 2:13). I frequently say this: “The Christian life is not hard; it is easy. It is often excruciatingly painful, but it is not hard. We simply walk by faith in

the power of the Holy Spirit.” This may sound contradictory, but the reason people see the Christian life as hard comes from *their* efforts to live it. Since the Christian life is impossible to all but Christ, no wonder people see it as hard.

Having said this, I do experience many moments of pleasure in a given day. The principals, faculty, and staff at Christian County High School are wise, high principled, dedicated, and persevering. Their warmth and support make it one of the top work places I have known. And though some students disrupt things, show disrespect, and refuse to do schoolwork, many endear themselves to me. Connections with a few needy students go a long way. I look to turn these opportunities into faith.

Faith brings alive the present moment. For example, usually when I talk to Larry, he is sanguine, though he plods through his work with difficulty. One I noticed a look on his face I had not seen before. His face looked hard cast, while he stared off into the distance. Usually one to pull right up next to me and engage me, he stepped away every time I got close. As he related a picture of present boredom, he suddenly said, “Mr. Coatney, I hate school, it’s boring; I’m about done with it!” For many students I would have had less empathy, but Larry must grind his way through academics, when he has little ability or appetite for the task. I thought, “What do I say?” I don’t say, “Larry, you shouldn’t hate school.” I don’t say, “Larry, you should try harder,” or, “This educational concept will work for you.” I said, “I appreciate how you feel.”

I couldn’t leave him there, however. With the bell about to ring, and Larry withdrawn, I could only resolve to keep an answer ready for the next opportu-

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nity. Larry did not claim to be a Christian; he thinks Christian is a class of people like “redneck,” or “hill-billy.” When I asked Larry if he was a Christian, he replied, “No, man, I’m just myself—a regular guy.”

Even as a Christian, Larry would face the same frustrations in school, but he would have the wonderful person of Jesus Christ to get him through. This became my desire for Larry. But in the meantime I had to try to get him to live in the present moment. Like Larry, I frequently experience the pull to live in a future moment. I have never lived one moment outside of the present. Since I am right here in the present moment, in the system as it now operates, God is meaning this! So my desire for Larry translates to, “Larry, as long as you are here, make the most of it; live in the moment; drain every ounce of life from this right here.” This is what I wanted to say to him.

I live the same way. I may never teach more than this one year as an emergency certified teacher, but this year has already gone down as one that has taught me more about living by faith in the present moment, draining every drop of sweetness out of the bitterest root. That’s how we discover glory.

Norman Grubb once said, “Faith’s only sin is giving up.” That is high-octane living. “Larry, I wish that for you; let’s live in this moment.”

Union with Christ—What a Relief!

We start out thinking that God gave the law so that we would keep it, but we find out that He gave the law so that sin would get out of control. Often others see our sins before we do, and we run and hide. But our losses mount. One day I sat and honestly said, “This thing is in me.” Just as I could never be satisfied with myself, I treated others the same way: if someone did “A,” I expected “B”—if “B,” then I expected “A.” Always, an “I should have” or a “You should have” bore down on every situation with no relief in sight. At age, twenty-seven, I already thought, “This is going to be a long life.”

In those days, steeped in the teaching that a Christian possesses two natures, the old nature appeared trenched for victory by attrition. One day, alone on the sofa at home, I read in John’s epistle, “His commandments are not burdensome.” Reflexively, I replied, “That’s not true.” An uncomfortable quiet settled over me. I thought, “God’s Word is true.” Yet I could not reconcile God’s word with my frustration, so I put the matter on hold while I continued to memorize Scripture and apply principles learned in various books and seminars.

During that time, I began to hear discussion of Romans 6:2 that we are dead to sin, but as with the verse in John, this made little sense as well, for I rea-

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soned, “I can still sin; I do still sin; therefore, I am not dead to sin.” There is nothing like persistent recycling of what doesn’t work when faced with a proposition of what does work. Yet there sits the “dead to sin” verse.

Frustrated completely with my own inability, I began to agree that I was dead to sin, even though I knew that a Christian can still commit a sin. I thought, “The real ‘I’—which is Christ joined to my ‘I’—cannot sin.” This sounded good for a while, giving me a sense of security on an identity level. But I didn’t stay comforted when I sinned because what good is it to keep saying, “The ‘real I’ did not do that”? Also, I did not know how I came to be this “real I” for I had not solved the two nature issue—the old man/new man issue. I knew that Christ lived in me, but I had not answered the question, “If I have always been a vessel, and Christ came to live in my vessel when I became a Christian, then did anyone live in my vessel before that?”

Paul plainly says that we serve a master—either sin or righteousness; so we do not get to be the boss in our lives, either on the sin side or the righteousness side. I felt suffocated and desperate: the idea that Satan had lived in me caused revulsion and horror. Yet what else could Paul mean if the following three things are true? Sin is a person; man is a vessel; and when Adam sinned, we sinned in union with him.

This means that we do not possess a nature of our own: Satan is the nature of self-for-self; and God is the nature of self-for-others. This reveals the “old man” of Romans 6 and the “body of sin.” The old man is the vessel containing Satan, owned by Satan. This man must be crucified as the penalty of sin. Christ must become this man. This immediately explains why

Paul says that Christ died to sin (Rom. 6:10) and why Paul says that Christ was made to be sin (2 Cor. 5:21). On the Cross, therefore, God made Christ to be the body containing sin. That body was crucified, and at death, the indwelling spirit must depart.

But just as a dead body is dead to sin, a dead body is also dead to life: it is just a dead body. God wants more than death to sin. So in the resurrection, when God raised Jesus, He raised us as well, for we died in Him, to be buried in Him, to rise in Him.

Dead to sin therefore means the casting out of Satan and new fixed indwelling by Christ. Jesus said that we *cannot* serve two masters—not that we *should* not. Eventually we settle into and fix ourselves in our choice, for what we take, takes us. Formerly, we lived on Satan’s farm, but every now and then, we wandered off to the Spirit’s farm to do something under the Holy Spirit’s enticement and direction. But we returned home to bunk at the old farm.

Similarly, Christians live on the Spirit’s farm now, and we have all probably wandered off to our old master’s farm, under his enticement, and done some work. But just as God-inspired works do not make an unbeliever a Christian, Satan-inspired works do not make a Christian a non-Christian. The good news is that we don’t have to go work on the old farm, but if we do not know that we are dead to sin, we probably will.

Dead to Law goes along with dead to sin. Paul gives his testimony on that in Romans 7, which we covered earlier. When the recognition of powerlessness sinks in, we cry out for deliverance, for we do possess the freedom to change masters, and the cry goes out, “Who will deliver me?” God, who is His own Law, delivers us by taking over the law-keeping in us. Once

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I saw this, the Lord gave me what I call the “Keeper’s Creed”: “Lord, I will sin any sin unless You keep me, and thank You that You *are* keeping me.”

Now we come back to John’s statement that His commands are not burdensome, and we rejoice in the truth of this; for His commands do not come to *us* now, but to the one *in* us who keeps His own law and eternally is that law. Paul calls this walking in the Spirit and writes the Galatians that walking in the Spirit keeps us from sinning.

What about sin in the Christian? Satan no longer lives in the Christian, but tempts from the outside; he can never own us again. But when a Christian steps outside the flow of the Spirit, Satan makes use of the body again through the same old deception—by the law. When seen, we simply agree with God and recognize again His atoning blood. Why beat ourselves up and say, “How could I have done that?” implying we had the power not to. Confess, take the cleansing, and move on. Tell the Lord, “I’ll do it again if You don’t keep me, and thank You that You *are* keeping me.”

Union with Christ means that His Spirit is joined to our spirit as one. One of my mother-in-law Mimi’s favorite verses, one that she quotes often at the jail, is 1 Corinthians 6:17: “But he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit.” Knowing that and walking in it by faith produces the manifest life of God in us. His love fills us, we hear His voice, and He produces the fruit of the Spirit in us.

Trees

Trees hold down the ground—
keep it in from moving
around.

That's why people like to build
near trees—
for the security:
canopies in season,
bare, but arterial—spread—
in winter.

We know them
like we know our bones,
silent—
powerful.

The roots clutch,
drink thirstily,
eat like a furnace,
and send everything up.

Trees relax,
seldom relocate,
and get a lot done
without ado.

I've been places without trees.
I don't like them:
the ground crowds the sky
and causes dizziness.

Each should do its job:
for the ground to do its,
it needs trees.

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There's no need for a song here,
just the security
that when I look out my window,
they will always be there—
just the security
that I'm abiding as a branch
in His tree.

Decisions

Decisions are made and then tested.
The best way to pass the test—
remember what you decided,
not thinking you decide anew.

Contrary aspects—the pondering of alternatives—
all this does very well for consciousness,
but not for change of heart.

Fixedness feeds on bestial feelings
recognized and denied enough times—
until a corpse,
but nothing new settled.

Know a devil from a distance.
Then the original sealing widens—
to ourselves—not to Him who always knew.

Fools expect no storm.
The made up mind, not in a dream,
lashes down—
“The other shore or die.”

Kept

Dangers right and left—
eye lust, flesh lust,
pride of life—
like loose gravel always underfoot.

The sliding feeling
clutched the former gears:
“here we go again—
sin’s ravine.”

To try is good—
good for falling again—
until one takes to be kept.

The slides then reel the gut,
but you relax
in your magic shoes,
so light.

“Little man, I operate your chooser now;
don’t you love how I do
when you don’t move a muscle of your own?”

That rattle of loose gravel
fills the ear,
and pebbles crumble down,
but we turn, turn, turn
in His way.

*Being and Becoming:
What Does This Mean?*

I can hardly think of two words more worn out by repetition than *being* and *becoming*, so I had to add something else to the title of this chapter, since I might plagiarize a thousand other essays on the subject. At an earlier time of life, *being* posed a threat because I had dedicated myself to becoming—becoming righteous enough. So when I first heard that we humans are the cup and not the coffee, or the vessels and not the treasure, I got mad. The religious self, even the Christian religious self, seeks to be like God, and the average Christian who turns on Christian programming or goes to many a church, finds this seeking venerated. After all, how can we fault someone who wants to be more like Christ?

Now however, worn out and wiser, I often encounter a scenario in Bible studies that turns me a bit mischievous. A newcomer will start talking about how we should be like Christ, and I will reply, “Trying to be like Christ is sin.” After the looks of shock subside over my apparent blasphemy, I explain that only Christ can be like Himself, and that He created us to *contain* Him, not to try to become *like* Him. Just like we learn that we can’t do anything to earn forgiveness for sins, we can’t do anything to improve ourselves. But to say that too loudly in some places en-

dangers one of the cry, "Heresy."

The average Christian misses the connection between the voice in Isaiah that says, "I will be like the Most High," (Isa. 14:14) and the one who says the same thing today. If Lucifer became the devil for saying this, how can such an assertion get baptized in Christian circles? What if striving to be like Christ is the same error that Satan made, and is Satan hiding in the Christian as a deception?

Jesus said that He is the vine and we are the branches, and that apart from Him we can do nothing. Somehow that gets distorted to mean still that God helps us or gives us love, or patience, or whatever—as if He gives us a quality that we then are then endowed with. But what if we study the vine-branch analogy from a point of view other than the "trying to become" point of view. After all, a branch is exactly like the vine because it grows out of the vine and is one with the vine. It never was anything other than a branch and can only ever be a branch unless it gets cut off. The branch will never be the vine, though the vine can be fairly said to be the branch because if the branch gets cut off, the vine is still the vine.

In systematic theology this is called the self-sufficiency of God. Whether God creates man or not, God is still fully God in His nature and essence and enjoys fellowship within the Trinity. But God wants to express Himself as man, and so Paul talks about God forming Christ in us and giving Him the pleasure of a family made in His image. So He becomes we, but we never become He. He remains inscrutable as Paul tells us at the end of Romans 11.

Branches also abide naturally and at ease, without the dilemma of whether to be attached one day and not another. An on-again off-again proposition would

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pose a horticultural nightmare. But Christians feel quite free to posit such a meaning for Jesus' word to abide. What if Jesus meant, "Get there, stay there, and relax." This offends the "trying to become" mentality because what would one do if there were nothing to do? How horrible—to have nothing to do, or seemingly so?

Mankind loves nothing better than to build things, and what could be a greater project than finding a way to attach the Christian to Christ with a program on how to stay attached? This is the worker's dream—to build something and then keep it working. But just as it is an affront to God to add anything to the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, it is equally an affront to Him to try to attain a righteousness by anything we do.

I hear the screams already. "Do nothing?" That's right. If Paul says anything in his epistles, he says that righteousness is a gift. I started to say that it is a gift that we receive by faith, but I feared lest a reader might miss the word *gift*. Righteousness is a gift; moreover righteousness is a person—the person of God.

It shocked me once when a friend questioned my use of the term *person* to describe God. My friend said, "We are persons; God is not a person." Isn't that backwards? God is spirit, and as such He desires, wills, and knows. Therefore, to be created in His image means that we operate the same faculties that He does. But He came first.

If we are created in His image, and He created us to be branches of His vine, why is it that we do not know that and live spontaneously? Genesis tells us the story of the Fall, an act of disobedience by which we were made sinners, but most importantly that in the Fall a terrible deception quietly hid itself away in us.

Satan came to live in the cup, Satan came to live in the vessel, and Satan became the false vine to us, to which we were attached as branches until we received Christ.

Christ can come to live in us because He became us, the first Adam, in His death, so that His death became our death too. He was made to be sin, meaning that He became Satan-indwelled humanity, so that in His death, sin went out of His body and therefore out of ours since we were in Him. But a dead body, though dead to sin, is equally dead to righteousness. Therefore, He had to rise and we in Him, by the Spirit. So the essence of the body death of Christ is that Christ died as a Satan-I and rose as a Spirit-I, and we in Him.

Why does Satan hide his former indwelling from us? It would seem to be his greatest glory. But think also of how terrifying such a disclosure to us would be. How many would run immediately to Jesus Christ if they found this out? So the devil had to hide and satisfy himself only with infecting us with the lie that we are just ourselves—independent selves.

For a long time, even as a Christian, I thought I was independent. I knew that God had forgiven my sins, but I certainly did not want *anyone* managing my life. Yet when we look at Romans 6, Paul says that we are always a slave of either sin or righteousness. We never achieve freedom of such a kind that detaches itself from a vine and lives on its own.

This is the error of many mystical movements today. They deceive the practitioner into thinking that the self can become a god—perhaps even a god that can reproduce, like a salmon hatch, a new world where he or she will rule as a god. Who wants to be a slave forever? Well, I do because I have learned that to be a slave of God brings contentment. It's a relief not to

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have to be God, but to let God be God in me and produce His life in me.

This ends the quest to be, for it puts an end to the law. Law keeps a person enslaved in trying to become what God offers as a gift. So in order to truly come to God, one must not only accept that the blood of Jesus is the only provision for the forgiveness of sins; one must also accept that God is the only provision of life. The human self, even in its glorified state, is forever the receiver. We come to know ourselves when we fall in love with receiving. God created us to be receivers and forever be in love with receiving His life in some way.

Why doesn't everyone discover the deception that Satan has duped us into? Why doesn't everyone know that we are cups, vessels, and branches? Not everyone really wants to know this. It takes most Christians awhile, and non-Christians really revolt at the idea. Here is where I do two things. First, I accept that I am not in charge and don't argue with God about His universe. Job tried that and failed; I tried that and failed; if you try that, you will fail. Second, I act for my own preservation, meaning that I am not going to throw away my own salvation just because others reject the salvation offered to them.

I just keep on preaching the four aspects of faith: first, a thing is available; second, a thing is desirable to me; third, I take it; and fourth, what I take, takes me. I am not responsible for whether others desire what is available. The deception that we can control others' choices dies hard. The alone walk with God is the most terrible height we ascend because at that height we no longer look for approval from others. In this new realm we live existentially unto God alone. Not to do this means that we still worship what others think.

This is why I do not use the term *relationship* toward

other human beings. It connotes something sticky, with attachments—the very attachments to others and myself that Jesus died on a Cross to sever so that we could live unto God alone. I do say that I have *fellowship* with others as the byproduct of the one relationship in my life—the one with God. This cost me a lot to discover, but the entanglements and manipulations necessary to satisfy others produced enough insanity and bondage in me that I let it go for the pure management of the Spirit. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17).

Now I come to *becoming* in a new way. It no longer means becoming like Christ; but now as a new creature—Christ as me—I do become infinitely and eternally. I will eternally be becoming who I already am as this new being. The particulars of my life and yours in Christ will forever expand and vary with distinction, both toward God and toward each other.

When I saw the new and true becoming, I saw that it has nothing to do with becoming righteous, but has everything to do with life in the Spirit, just like one grows daily as a person in regular life, but is never not already the person. A parent loves its baby; and savors and enjoys each aspect of the new baby. Then the parent enjoys each aspect of preteen years, each new discovery of talent and each advancement in learning and development along the way. The Father enjoys us the same way, and we enjoy ourselves in the becoming that already is.

There will always be new manifestations and gifts of the Spirit, and the journey as a distinct son means ever more particulars and new dimensions of infinity. The surprise of God is always more surprises, not regarding righteousness, but regarding manifestation of oneness.

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That is why to arrive means to always be becoming—not a movement toward union, but the eternal movement and expansion within union. Differentiation here takes on endless variation of color, sound, and entity. Wisdom becomes our teacher, and instead of asking, “How is this done?” we say, “How do I respond in this particular moment?” Generalities and principles dissolve into the genius of the Holy Spirit by us in a given moment.

Otherwise, we deteriorate into creeds, and creeds serve us up to a point, but then, if we still live with a bit of deception, we look to a creed instead of Christ. We try foolishly to arrange our present knowledge of the particulars into a predictability that becomes boring and without a passion worthy of God.

Some things will never change. God became a man in Christ Jesus and died for our sins; He arose on the third day; and He will separate the wheat from the chaff at the end of the age. Wisdom decrees that we preach these truths. But Christianity is not historical facts apart from them occurring as actual history in us. A history apart from us does not save us. But as we by faith internalize the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, we come to say, “I am crucified with Christ,” and we see His burial and resurrection as our own in Him.

Am I becoming? If by that one means becoming righteous so as to be some day like Christ, no. I gave up that sin when I recognized it as the devil’s dupe. Am I becoming? If by that, one means enjoying a relationship with God in which I experience a multiplicity of gifts and manifestations, both within myself, and with my fellow believers, all in oneness, I am experiencing that. God can be me; and He can be you; and that can manifest with endless surprises.

I'm Desperately Relaxed

I'm desperately relaxed now,
and can't help it—
held by a view not seen
by outer chaos:
this is fixed on the inner eye.

I could leave it
for an ounce of frenetic;
the headless chicken starts
its mad rush;
I suppose things could go on as before.

But the ease of freedom
for things not to—
that compels me,
with the eye of beauty
and truth.

“Risen Christ—
I did not know you offered such ease:
I had heard,
but measured with
instruments
of my own making.

Now, when You inhale,
peace comes in;
when You exhale,
peace goes out,

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and my body moves
like the breathless maiden's hand
across linen—
her heart
looking in a mirror
without time.”

Three States of Being

There are several states:
heavy-heavy, light-light,
and heavy-light.
In heavy-heavy,
all air is gone;
the weight will just sink-sink,
and no scale-scale can
measure the impossible load.
In light-light,
there is only air,
and it will rise-rise.
This air is so thin,
it isn't.
But heavy-light—
now there's a state:
the weight is hard-hard,
but solid without sinking.
The air is apparent,
but hardly to be indicated.
This fine state
walks in beauty.

The Pilot

I sat in a little booth,
air conditioned,
with meals served punctually
to my liking,
and plenty of movies,
while I raptured at
the panel—

switches to pull,
buttons to press, gauges to read,
a wheel to steer with—

most importantly, a copilot and crew,
passengers boarding,
and luxurious seats
to destination “Yes.”

The panel was a secret panel,
known to me,
and shared,
as long as I would fly;

but otherwise,
“Just buckle in,
enjoy the meal,
and move about
when you hear my voice
on the intercom.”

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The copilot got bored,
the crew wanted love;
the passengers—reading technical magazines—
wanted lessons
on how to fly.

Distraction mounted up:
I couldn't study anger management,
listen to needs,
and fly.

The ship rocked,
I reached for a pill in my pocket,
washed it down with Scotch,
remembering scenes from an "R" movie,
prayed for sleep—
thought, "If they would trust me,
we would get to 'Yes.'"

Agreement failed,
disagreement failed.

I said, "This is not really happening."
I ran.
I fought.

The panel lights by now looked far away,
everything a dream from hell.
These are the times
when thought acts like
dry metal.

Not forward,
not backward,
not anything—
but time.

Suddenly I did nothing.
That worked.
Not-I easily took control.

Relaxed, the panel
looked simple to operate.
I took a deep breath, refreshed,
and never flew the same again.

The copilot felt part of things.
The crew felt loved.
Passenger after passenger asked,
“How do you fly like that?”
“‘Not-I’ taught me how:
here, you try,”

and one by one,
they all took off,
and I lived it all over again
with them.

The Lie of Loneliness

Loneliness drives much of human behavior. When I was in high school, in the days before the Internet and hundreds of television channels, the telephone brought a little comfort. But after a few hours of sitting around, I needed company, even if that only meant going to someone else's house and sitting around bored with that person—wondering together what everyone else was doing. In the 1960s, the Boulevard offered very little, but driving around Jerry's Drive-In Restaurant once or twice an hour after ten o'clock provided some connection with who was with whom. Dating offered some relief, but that still meant going home alone. What would ever fill that inner longing?

Genesis records that God saw Adam's loneliness and created Eve as his companion. Did she meet his need? The Bible does not offer much hope that romance and marriage satisfy loneliness. When Jesus shocked his disciples with the standard for marriage—that a man not put away his wife except for fornication—His disciples answered, "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry" (Matt. 19:10). As a young man I found the disciples' view a cynical one, still myself infatuated with the hopes I grew up on in fairy tales, television, and movies. The disciples operated from the familiar legislation of

Moses that allowed husbands to put away their wives because of displeasure with them, leaving them open to find a new wife. On and on the succession might go, and so it is today. Lose one, find another; get rid of one, get on a high with another.

Many conservative Christians think that the answer lies in finding the right mate, the one of God's leading, and that this will terminate loneliness. I have to say that this was not my experience, though I prize Scriptures such as Proverbs 31 and Proverbs 18:22, "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the Lord." Then there is Proverbs 19:14, "A prudent wife is from the Lord." Add to that the overwhelming celebration of the Song of Solomon, and the case appears fixed for marriage as the answer to loneliness.

Jesus' disciples knew, however, that things are not so simple, and they had dispensed with the ideal. They had discarded the Hollywood parade of living by endless relationships. If Adam and Eve had everything together in Paradise, why did they look elsewhere for meaning? Surely Pascal was right when he said that there is a God-shaped vacuum in every heart, and only God can fill it.

I found this true. After an exciting courtship and start to my marriage, surprise hit me early when low-level depression crept in. I hungered for a spirituality that I had started out on and then forgotten during the energized time of my courtship. My wife and I searched the Bible and began to look for the answers in it. This helped a lot, but our pursuit of happiness by trying to keep God's law only made us increasingly aware of our inability to keep those laws. As I've mentioned, one day, reading 1 John 5:3—"and His commandments are not grievous (burdensome)"—I

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blurted out, “That’s a lie.” I was caught. By my mouth I professed that I believed God’s word to be inerrant; by in my spontaneous heart cry, I found myself struggling to really believe the Scripture.

God has his way of boxing us in. Jesus’ disciples had caught this, and noted psychiatrist M. Scott Peck in his best seller *The Road Less Traveled* voices it in our day with the riveting three-word sentence that begins his book: “Life is difficult.”¹ What is the answer? At first I was not prepared to hear it, still confirmed for years in my own efforts to live the Christian life, until finally, after bottoming out, I could really hear the truth that the Christian life is not we living it, but Christ living it in us. I had not wanted to accept that God created us to contain and re-express His nature of self-giving love as opposed to Satan’s nature of self-for-self love that enslaved us as non-Christians and still kept us in bondage in our days of carnality as Christians.

Finally I could see Christ in me. Praise His name! At that moment, loneliness disappeared forever except for occasional moments of temptation and maybe an occasional foolish visit to the old badlands of loneliness. But I have to confidently say that since 1994, loneliness has not troubled me. God tested this knowing through almost five years of marital separation after an initial two years of separation. The initial two years I lived crazy, but then when I saw my completeness in Christ, I knew I had reached home. The Lord popped a saying into my mind one day, “Christ plus nothing.” I lived on that through years of solitude, but not years of loneliness. I would often tell people who said, “You need a life,” something that surprised them: “I don’t believe in loneliness anymore.” And then I would tell them why.

I also stopped using the word *relationship* except with reference to God, saying, “I have only one relationship—with God, but I have fellowship with others.” That got me plenty of curious or upset looks along the way. But this is scriptural, for Colossians 3:4 says that Christ is our life. He is our very life. He doesn’t give us life; He is our life.

Do I have a good marriage? Yes. But the secret came in desiring for my wife to have only one relationship for herself—with the same One I had come to know. As she stepped into this, she and I met in Him and out of our union with Him we united in a life of expressing the life of Christ in us.

At times, I think, “What would I do without her?” But then the Lord makes me know again that He alone is my life, as He is the life of every believer, whether or not that believer has discovered the secret. But we can only appropriate what we know. Our true marriage is to God, and in that marriage, loneliness can find no place. This is the simple truth of Christianity for any open to discover it. Loneliness can drive you there if you let it. Those living by the law will do as Moses allowed for those hardened of heart. Those questing all the way will find an inner dance, even in their deepest suffering, that completely satisfies.

An Audience of One

I learned to play a part
in symphony,
to an audience of one.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

I played the violin
right side up,
upside down,
to the right,
to the left,
and spun the thing around—

with smiles,
with frowns,
with neckties,
or denim hanging loose—

with notes to fix the skies,
or just your plumbing,
or tulips in between—

to burgers on a bun,
or bistros
decked in candlelight—

to angels' powdered wings,
or men with hairy chests,
but mostly to my mother's wish,

before the notes themselves
took me over,
and whipping the bow
over fiery strings,

high, low,
deft, soft,
with furnace heat,
in cadence to a beat
that sizzles like
a skillet with an egg
on popping oil,

I played,
I sang,
I roared till all was done,
I played the heart's desire,
spent the full desire,
boomed it in the fire,

till naught could take it higher,
for an element too dire,
to make sense to any
audience but one.

Into the ONE

It's a fundamental law of God
that you cannot get rid of
the self.

So go ahead:
go as far into the Oneness
as you want;
for you cannot disappear;
in fact,
your true self will draw near
as you fall;
so fall freely.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

In the end,
your cold iron
and His fire
burn as one.

And there you are;
and there you are not;
and there you are.

Lake of Fire

Could it be
that the lake of fire
is His glory
not received?

or an orb one aspires
illicitly to,
like a man
in a space ship
aimed at earth's sun
to investigate too closely?

Could it be
that the devil is cast
into the lake of fire
by his taking
the leap of faith
in the wrong direction?

Or take a person in this world:
does God cast
the unbelieving one
into the fiery lake,
or is it also
the unbeliever's
leap of faith?
I dare not challenge either.

I leaped into being
the creature I already was,
finding my personal lake of fire
set at proper distance—
now as a radiant glory.

I like being a man.
God likes being God.
We blend well together
this way He says.
This prostrates me in worship—
of Him,
not me.

Once the final choice is made—
at death—
the one cannot cross over
into the other.

Witness Dives,
for whom
the spirit of the prophets
was not enough.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

Yet perhaps he lied,
and still self-righteous,
acted like he wanted out of hell,
or would really rescue
his brothers from it.

The hardest thing
is always the good
we think we are.

This brings Christ
off the Cross
and makes us God
we think.

The mind of simplicity
accepts the dilemma,
drinking the blood
and eating the body.

For this person,
the lake of fire
turns into a crystal sea,
and light's spectrum
multiplies
to sound's harmony
and a resonant One—
even in suffering.

The Dysfunctional Family

My mother-in-law, Mimi, called me about a letter she received from an inmate, now in another facility, who attended our jail Bible study here for a couple of years. In his letter, he talks about his involvement with a therapy type book on getting in touch with anger, and how he is experiencing anger toward his deceased father who was an alcoholic while he was a child. Mimi asked me what I thought on this point, and I could only answer from my experience, which included rage toward my own father until I reached the age of forty-five.

I lived constantly angry with my earthly father until he abandoned our family when I was eleven, never to come back. He disappeared at one stretch for fifteen years until my younger brother, Brent, located him through a genealogy book. During the early years of my father's absence, I felt mostly relief over his departure, but then relief changed to a growing pain inside as I observed my school peers in regular families. This occurred in the 1960s, before the soon to come wave of acceptable divorce and blended families. Pain later turned to anger and rage, so that by my adult Christian years, I faced the need to forgive him, which I did by faith, though my persistent affirmation of forgiveness did not get to the center of my distress.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

My own sins finally brought me to a miraculous place where I did experience God's complete forgiveness toward my father, no longer holding him responsible for my own choices in life. No lingering resentment remained or lack of resolution. However, I was little prepared for the shock of the total answer for getting on with life after this forgiveness.

The Lord showed me that I need never attribute anything in life ever again to the actions of my family in the past, because He had taken me out of that family, placing me in a new family—the family in which God is my Father and in which no dysfunction exists. I had inherited a new blood line—that of Christ, and now received everything that comes from Him.

Some may protest at this that we need therapy; we need to get in touch with the hurts of the past. This is true where denial still exists, and one lives in repression. But to continue overly long in dredging up memory after memory may really represent a refusal to leave the devil's anger and settle into the reality of our new bloodline in Christ. No longer do we trace any effect upon us from the first Adam; we take all family input instead from the last Adam. When I saw this, instantly, every bit of blame toward my parents and family departed in the light of His grace.

Does such a view minimize our earthly families and our ties to them? No. We still acknowledge our earthly families and our responsibilities to them for provision and support; but we do not look to them to meet our real needs, for now the Holy Spirit supplies all of our needs based on our union in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. As Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who

loved me, and gave Himself for me.” In other words, by identifying with Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection—seeing these as really we joined to Him—we find ourselves taken out of the first Adam and his family line, and placed into the blood and body line of Christ.

Are you still trying to dig through endless memories and rehearse them over and over again, feeding anger that you can let go of once you see the truth of who you are, united to Christ? Perhaps you are doing this in ignorance, not knowing both the futility of guilt and blame, and not knowing the truth that as a Christian, you no longer do anything you do because of your dysfunctional family.

Enjoy the grace of God in your new, heavenly family and let go of the past. If you need to bring the past to light to consciously place it all in Christ, then by all means do so, but no longer as a victim of dysfunction—no longer as one held in bondage and acting helplessly as a consequence of the dysfunctional family. “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father” (Gal. 4:6).

The Poker Game

I lost my money
in a poker game
with the devil.

If I had two pair,
he had three of a kind;
if I had a straight,
he had a flush.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

Other times, I folded cards
that would've won,
but chilled at a bluff.

When I bluffed,
he laughed wickedly
and took the pot.

Life was long and dreary
in those days—
lots of cow crap on my boots
and coming in last
at the rodeo.

When me an' the boys drew straws
to see who'd buy a round,
if long straw bought, guess what—
if short straw bought, you guessed it.

Coin flippin' was about the same.

Yep, life sucked in those days,
but I kept on dreamin'—
till it all came to an end.

Even the bar hogs wouldn't haggle
with me no more.

I was truly pissed—
put a revolver to my head.
That was a bluff too.

Didn't wanna live,
didn't wanna die.
"Pick one," the stranger said,
so I did.
I said, "You gotta help me, man."

He had a tin star so bright
I fell back.
He said, "Boy,
I don't help; I do."

He disappeared,
but left that star behind.

So I put it on.

At first, old timers mocked.
When the devil bluffed,
I turned green,
but played my hand.

When I went to bluff,
knees knocked,
but not mine.

The bar hogs warmed up to me,
but I said, "I'm a virgin now;
you gotta act like a fine lady
with me."

That star was the real thing.
and I always marvel at that man.
He gives the same star
to the next loser.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

Poor devil,
he can't take it
when a man really wears a star.

Then They Will Seek You

“Who will go?”
You said, “I will,”
when you heard
the Lord order workers
into the white fields.

You went,
but they did not seek you;
they sought themselves,
and you thought this wrong.

“Seek Him,” you said.

But they caught the meaning—
your version of Him.
That's all one can give, though;
He does not exist apart
from a version
(except transcendently).

But Christ in you
includes you—
always—
“My gospel.”

For that they seek Him;
for that you die,
finding yourself,
and others.

When they find their version,
they find Him,
they find you.

Then they will seek you.

A Very Fine Mystical State

One afternoon I walked
with my friend,
in whom I had confided many times
in the past,
to the sweets table,
where he picked up two cookies.

I saw my moment,
so leaned quietly toward him,
to say, "I've got this issue" when,
disrupted, he dropped a cookie
onto the floor,
whereat two men nearby,
seeing my friend,
engaged him to talk;
so that trying to resume,
I would only create strain.

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It was then; a black missile
struck both eyes.
The abyss opened, I helpless.
I walked away to sit down,
where a severe voice
commanded me,
“You have no problems or issues.”

The burning missile turned
into God’s light.
I agreed again not to tell a lie;
it looks like the truth—it looks like intimacy,
but quenches the finality of completeness,
arousing Holy jealousy that assaults
when it needs to.

Later, I tried to remember my issue,
but couldn’t. I tried briefly,
when another word came:
“You have entered divine forgetfulness.”
I may never remember the issue.
It was a lie anyway.

My Earthly Father's Death and the Manifestation of Jesus Christ

My earthly father left home when I was eleven years old, never to return, and he vigorously pursued various non-Christian cult teachings—ones that promoted in him the idea that he could evolve to become a god, through reincarnation and the removal of the negative from his life. After my hurt and anger, came the recognition that he lived a self-centered life. So had I. Theoretically I forgave my father; furthermore, I believed for his Christian salvation, not unmindful that the miracle that produced a confession of faith in him once, the one that he wrote in his childhood Bible, could produce a similar confession in him after years of apostasy. So, whatever tumults occurred in me throughout my teen and adult life, I stood in faith for my father.

However, I still lived convinced that, as a son of my earthly father, I inherited a link to his dysfunction, one that caused me to walk as an incomplete man. When beset with turmoil, I could always say, “That’s the influence of my father.” Nothing could break that link, or so I thought. The possibility of unforgiveness in me did not rise up, for that would be to deny my word of faith, and since a word of faith is true we should not retract it just because doubt besets us.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

However, manifestation of our word may await us in unexpected ways. The Spirit of God, in His way and time acts to bear witness in us, making our faith into a genuine “I see.” For me, this occurred after my Christian faith dwindled to an ember in the wake of embarrassing depression, suicidal obsession, and humiliating dependencies in my life. I have written of these elsewhere, so this chapter takes up with the aftermath of God’s restoring work of grace in me, when God’s supreme mercies and goodness to me took me by surprise in the wake of my obvious sins and morose regret over them.

First, God spoke to me, something dangerous to say, but true. Driving my car and still in despair, He said, “Stop obsessing about your family and look at Me.” I hesitated, but obeyed. What was to lose at that point? God’s light quietly translated me to my first glimpse of glory in a long time.

Second, the Lord began to convict me—but again in an unexpected way: He convicted me of righteousness at the very time I thought I should be convicted of sin. This came about through John 16: 8-11, where Jesus speaks of His departure so that the Comforter will come. These verses say, “And when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father, and ye see Me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.”

Astonishingly, the Holy Spirit put His finger directly on me that He was at that moment convicting me of righteousness. Tears welled up; this word seemed impossible, but the unmistakable conviction of the Spirit pressed down on me to agree; so I did. The result was the overwhelming sense of the pres-

ence of God and His goodness. Then, I say, *then*, I began to experience the genuine sorrow of repentance. What an indirect route. As Paul says, "The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). Condemnation fled away, and I knew the "repentance without regret" Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 7:10 (NASB). At this point, aware of my own sin, I stopped blaming my earthly father, for I realized that he had not caused me to rebel. I would have rebelled no matter what my father had done. I became aware of my own self-centeredness like I had never been aware of it before. But this took place apart from condemnation, and it led me to springs of gratitude.

Also, God showed me that He had released me completely from all connection to sin in my earthly father that had been a transmission through the generations, leading back to the first Adam. God showed me that through union in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, I have a new blood line in the last Adam and that I only receive from Him now. This became fact in my conversion as a child, but I had not before seen the total severing that occurred in the Cross. Paul calls this the true circumcision.

Having now the witness of the Spirit as the manifestation of my forgiveness toward my earthly father, I felt troubled when he fell into a coma that would lead to death within days. When my sister called me that he had passed, it was February 1996, and I pulled off the shelf my *Streams in the Desert-I*, given to me at Margaret Lester's house by Jane Rogerson and Diane Pearce. The reading for February 22nd brought the witness of the Spirit.

A young man questioning about how to "*take the Lord for needed help*" received this reply from a sage old, Negro woman: "You've got to believe that He's

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done it and it's done.' The great danger with most of us is that, after we ask Him to do it, we do not believe that it is done, but we keep on helping Him, and getting others to help Him; and waiting to see how He is going to do it."¹

As I read this, I believed that the Lord had indeed saved my father. Later that day, my boss sent me in the truck with a load of hardwood to Raleigh, NC. Even before I got into the truck, I had the overwhelming awareness, with tears that buckled me over, that my father and mother had reconciled in heaven (she having departed gloriously in 1985). As I drove toward Raleigh, the Holy Spirit fell upon me with a picture of the thief on the Cross; He showed me a picture of my father at the last instant of his life grabbing onto the outstretched hand of Jesus reaching toward my father.

Hymns began to flow in my mind, along with lyrics like, "Grace that is greater than all our sin." This Spirit state stayed on me and in me for a good part of that drive, and I knew that this was the Lord showing me the manifestation of what I did not hear or see from my father's lips. God is not limited by a coma. Our God is a good God; He is a God who saves to the uttermost at the uttermost time and in the uttermost ways. He is a God who does beyond all that we ask or think. He is a God who manifests Himself to those that believe.

Spirit, Soul, and Body

To answer the question, “Who are we?” we also need to look at the distinctions between *spirit, soul, and body*. Good Bible minds debate whether man is bipartite or tripartite, some thinking that spirit and soul both refer to the immaterial part of man, some seeing them as distinct. Others distinguish them but see them like circles that overlap.

Although linguistically, some overlap at first appears reasonable, the focus of the New Testament moves away from soul as our center, to spirit as our center. The reason for this comes from the superseding of the Old Covenant by the New Covenant. The Old Covenant was a covenant of separation from God, but the New Covenant removes separation from God. In the New Covenant, God reveals us as spirit beings in union with Him through Jesus Christ.

Lexical evidence for the terms *soul* and *spirit* suggests to me that in the New Testament, spirit takes the place of soul as the primary focus. That might appear at first to minimize the body because the Old Testament celebrates bodily life in the here and now. But this might be because the average Hebrew thought of the afterlife as only an indeterminate Sheol. Yet, even though the New Testament does not celebrate bodily life in the here and now with the same vividness that the Old Testament does, the New Testament

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nonetheless liberates the body. The uncleanness of the body, heavily accented in the Old Testament, gives way under the New Covenant, to what the writer of Hebrews calls “bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10: 22). The New Testament reveals the uncleanness as “indwelling sin” in our bodies and not our bodies themselves.

The *KJV New Testament Lexicon* at Crosswalk.com includes as its second definition of the Greek word *pneuma* this entry: “the spirit, i.e. the vital principal by which the body is animated.” It also has two amplifications: “a. the rational spirit, the power by which the human being feels, thinks and decides” “b. the soul.” A subsequent entry for *pneuma* reads this way: “a spirit, i.e. a simple essence, devoid of all or at least all grosser matter, and possessed of the power of knowing, desiring, deciding, and acting.”¹

The word *soul* comes from the Hebrew word *yuchw* that transliterates to the Greek word *psuche*, and means “the breath of life,” “the vital force which animates the body,” “life,” and “the seat of the feelings, desires, affections, aversions (our heart, soul, etc.).”

Though the lexicon suggests some overlap and freedom to use *spirit* and *soul* interchangeably, I believe that a shift occurs under the New Covenant. Under it, the Spirit of the Lord moves from above the ark in the Holy of Holies, to man as the Lord’s temple. Under the Old Covenant, because of the law’s condemnation, intimacy with the Spirit of God seemed foreboding, and only pioneers of faith found it. The writer of Hebrews refers to the Old Covenant as a “blazing fire” and “darkness and gloom and whirlwind” and “the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to

them” (12:18-19 NASB).

Familiarity with the Spirit of God such as that known by Noah, Abraham, David, and the prophets was the exception. A few pioneers of faith did believe beyond the Old Covenant and saw the heavenly city from afar, as well as the resurrection. But the total unveiling of this mystery would come through Christ and the New Covenant. In contrast, the idea of the soul, as breathed out of God and connected to the earth, brought to mind the source of present, animate life.

The New Testament clarifies this present life as transitory preparation for eternity in either hell or heaven. Therefore, God conforms believers to the image of Christ by forming Christ in us (Gal. 4:19) and the part of man corresponding to the Spirit of God comes into focus. In the Old Testament, given the isolation of the Holy of Holies from human contact (other than the high priest once a year), the idea of union with God in spirit would have been considered frightful and blasphemous. The worshipper strove, out of mandated fear, to preserve distance. But in the New Testament the two become one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), and so spirit overtakes soul in significance.

In the New Testament soul still carries the idea the immaterial, but more as connected with earthward things like emotions and thoughts (the kind of feelings and logic based on body chemistry). Spirit, though, corresponds in image to the Spirit of God, and directs itself God-ward as the vehicle capable of knowing, willing, and desiring—as opposed to the reflexive needs and emotional-physical complex of the body. This does not make the body unimportant, but recognizes the priority of spirit in a world of decay and death.

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Life in the body, however, does not mean either the asceticism of “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (Col. 2:21 NASB), or that handling, tasting, and touching are now our ultimate concern. Paul’s point is that whether we touch and handle or do not touch and handle, Christ’s indwelling life manifested through our bodies is what pleases God and manifests His self-for-others nature.

In Galatians and Colossians, Paul uses the controversy over circumcision to distinguish living by soul as opposed to living by spirit. We do not think much about circumcision today because doctors circumcise most male babies in the hospital as a routine. But circumcision originated as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham—a rite performed at life’s source where the male seed comes forth. God commanded circumcision to Abraham as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (not to be confused with the Old Covenant) in order to signify Abraham’s inability by the flesh to impregnate Sarah.

God had given Abraham the promise of an heir despite Sarah’s old age and barrenness, but as time went by, even Abraham’s age became a factor. Circumcision, therefore, was God’s way of telling Abraham that his expired virility would prove an equal impediment alongside of Sarah’s dead womb. God intended all along that Isaac’s birth take place in a supernatural way, apart from any ability in the flesh. This becomes Paul’s metaphor in Galatians for the new birth in Christ and the Spirit’s fruit by us as we walk by faith. Just as Abraham and Sarah could only conceive by the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit, we too can only conceive righteousness by the miracle of the Spirit in us.

Waiting and repeated trying to produce results,

without success, heats up the fires between soul and spirit. It's not that soul/body is wrong—far from it. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. But soul and body represent what Abraham and Sarah thought and felt about their situation, whereas spirit represents the promise of God to bring them an heir despite the withered, impossible condition of their souls and bodies. Feeling all this tension and doubt, Sarah exhorts Abraham to try things again the natural way with Hagar. Waiting on a miracle seems too difficult.

When we do not yet see the necessity of a miracle to fulfill God's promise to us, we ignorantly and imaginatively resort to soul/body methods. Sarah's urging of Abraham to beget the heir through her maid Hagar, after all, was a common practice in the Old Testament. This appears to her a reasonable fulfillment of God's promise. God, however, chooses this occasion to institute circumcision as the sign of His covenant and promise, making the point that the promised heir will come about supernaturally as a work of God and not by the virility of Abraham.

Abraham's circumcision, however, is partial—symbolic of its intent. Circumcision really symbolizes the cutting off of the male organ, so God shows mercy to Abraham by making circumcision only the cutting away of the foreskin. But Abraham gets the picture of what circumcision could have been! The point is the source of fertility. The Spirit of God is the real source, not our souls and bodies.

Paul takes the circumcision of Abraham and uses it as a metaphor in Galatians for the fact that we cannot produce the works of righteousness by living from our souls and bodies. The Holy Spirit must produce righteousness as the fruit of His own nature. This means a complete cutting off of the flesh as the source

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of righteousness, which God did through the body death of Christ to separate us from indwelling sin.

We know that circumcision, as Paul uses it, means the cutting off of the body from indwelling sin by the Cross because an exasperated Paul cries out in Galatians 5:12 that he wishes the circumcision advocates would “mutilate themselves,” i.e. cut themselves off. He wishes that they would see the real point of Abraham’s circumcision so that they could see the real point about works versus faith. The circumcision party looked at circumcision as a surface wound instead of God’s real intent of a complete cutting off. God didn’t insist on mutilation as the symbol for the same reason we don’t really drown people when we baptize them to symbolize their death in union with Christ’s death.

Paul describes the circumcision that took place on the Cross, saying that it is “the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11 NASB)—an obvious reference in miniature to his Romans 6 discourse on the body death of Christ. Jesus died to sin *as us*, and we in union with His death therefore died to sin, so that sin will no longer have a body to live in. The true circumcision that happened once in history, for all time, comes through the Cross so that God can reproduce Himself in us with the same miraculous power that he birthed Isaac by.

Paul also discusses circumcision in the same way that he deals with baptism. As with circumcision, his Colossians 2:12 comments on baptism express the body death of Christ and give the reader Romans 6 in miniature form.

This discussion about circumcision and baptism may seem like a diversion from the distinction between soul and spirit, but it has everything to do with that distinction. No human traditions, philosophy, or rea-

soning (soul) can provide our source. No ascetic treatment of the body can curb it or make it more holy. Christ alone (His Spirit joined to our spirit) is our righteousness and our life.

It is the power of the resurrection that brings spiritual meaning into physical life, making holy what before was unholy. God loves to live in earthen containers, as us, in our ordinary, daily lives; and He also finds glory in His suffering through our bodies for intercessory purposes. We freely accept our human selves without suspicion whether we are getting on with daily business or in the middle of a costly intercession.

We experience plenty of opportunities for daily dying as we discern between soul and spirit, for we all feel threatened or hurt on a soul level at times, or on a body level we think that we cannot live without food, sex, or some kind of comfort. Hebrews 4:12 speaks of this dividing: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

The Spirit (the living word) knows how to cut beneath our fears and affirm in us our real intentions, showing us how to walk by faith when our outer world is falling apart. Apart from the dividing work of the Spirit in us, we will find ourselves back in the divided consciousness of Romans 7, where try and fail—finding ourselves in slavery to our souls and bodies.

One interpretation of Hebrews 4:12 suggests that the writer mentions three pairs of synonyms, making soul and spirit the same, joints and marrow the same, and thoughts and intents the same. This interpretation sounds confusing and vague, leaving us to won-

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der what the word of God divides. The more natural reading of the passage connects soul, joints, and thoughts in one triad—in contrast to spirit, marrow, and intents as another triad. The former triad is outer, and the latter is inner. The inner triad represents our fixed purpose according to our true identity in our spirit-Spirit union with Christ. We say, “Union with Christ is the marrow of who I am; that is my fixed intent as a Christian underneath my feelings and temptations.”

The outer triad relates to variable thoughts and feelings, which formerly we identified with, but which are not our true identity. We do not have to live by our constantly fluctuating emotions and thoughts, for they are like joints that move and respond to stimuli. We can let the stimuli of the outer world move them, which leaves us under the control of our constantly changing, fickle thoughts and emotions; or we can let our spirit union with Christ be the only mover of our joints. When we live from our spirit-Spirit union, we feel the pull to let our joints run with our emotions and thoughts, but we remember that we are crucified to the world and alive now to resurrection reality.

Accordingly, the context of Hebrews 4:12 concerns the failure of the Israelites in the wilderness to enter God’s rest because of their complaining focus on food, water, and escape from conflict. They allowed times of lack to turn into unbelief, insisting on physical provision and security at the expense of stepping into the unseen world of faith.

The application to us, the Hebrews writer tells us, comes in the form of a warning not to do the same thing. Though the body is important and God’s temple, we don’t go around as body-fussers. Instead we are see-throughers in the spirit. We live from the

spirit of rest instead of the turmoil we feel on a soul-body level. God's rest sustains us even in physical and emotional hardship.

Also, intentionally or unintentionally, people frequently do things that irritate us, go against our will, or deny us what we want, even tempting us to think that we don't love them. If we reason according to the outer—the soul, joints, and thoughts—we will believe lies. If we reason according to God's fixed nature of love in us, we will say, "I *feel* like I hate that person, but Christ loves that person perfectly by me."

Only the Spirit Himself can do this dividing in us. We don't have to let our souls and bodies drive us on with their imperatives. Waiting on that still, small voice, I like to say, "Lord, I'll end up deceived if You don't guide me, but thank You that You *are* guiding me." He sorts everything out as I wait and trust in Him. When contentment fails on a soul-body level, we count it all joy to affirm again that He is life—"When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4 NASB).

This kind of faith leaves God free in us to meet our emotional and physical needs through people and things, but it also leaves Him free to meet our needs without people and things. It is He either way. The appearance of deprivation on some level teaches us that. God promised Israel provision, but tested them first with deprivation and threat of conflict. Believing their soul-bodies, they crumbled in faith, believing appearances and not God's word. Abraham and Sarah, in contrast, represent the walk of faith; they let go of their soul-body contradictions and believed the impossible. So do we!

What About Depression?

Mimi and I have a friend in jail (we'll call him Bill). Mimi knew Bill as a boy when he grew up down the street from her, and she began visiting Bill at the jail before I started going with her. He has had a pattern of falling into drinking, followed by drugs, followed by getting caught and ending up back in jail.

Bill has gotten out of jail twice since I've known him. Within two days of the first time he got out, he was back in jail, depressed. I felt angry with him, though I knew judging him would be wrong. After some weeks back in jail, he received again God's once for all forgiveness through the blood of Jesus and started again a walk of faith.

About a year later, he got out again, secured a good job, and found a nice place to fix up. He bought an old truck, started attending church, and came to the Bible study at Mimi's home. But after several weeks, we didn't hear from Bill. Bill is no new-comer to who we are in Christ, having devoured Norman Grubb's books for several years now; but institutional living for long periods of time can create its own safe world apart from the raw edges of life on the outside.

Long divorced, Bill's ex-wife views him unfavorably, and, according to Bill, she negatively influences their son toward him. Knowing Bill's vulnerability, Mimi finally got in touch with him, thinking to call

the jail to see if he had returned there. In a sad tone of voice, he said, “I feel so bad; I’ve let a lot of people down. This will be my seventh straight Christmas in jail.” This time, I did not feel anger toward Bill; I felt a sorrow. Since he lives on probation when out of jail, he’s under scrutiny, and people have the option of reporting his infractions. Someone did just that, and Bill told Mimi, “Someone loved me enough to turn me in.” Mimi answered, “Bill, the Lord just won’t let you get away with anything.”

Bill’s situation does not discourage me this time. I see that the Lord is faithful in bringing Bill through, and that these sin lapses condition him for the fixed walk of faith. Bill’s fall followed a call to his ex-wife (she lives in another state), who refused to let him talk to his son. Increasingly depressed, he drank, and then used drugs a “friend” brought over.

Back in jail, Bill moved to “quick sin/quick cleanse,” and when we next saw him we told him that we do believe with him for the fixed faith to walk as kept. Like many, Bill makes occasional, foolish visits to Romans 7. He just happens to end up in jail for his. I welcomed others in the men’s Bible study to join with us in congratulating Bill on God’s faithfulness in fixing Bill’s faith in the keeping. Praise the Lord!

Then Mimi shared about the strong feelings of depression she felt during the week when she learned that Bill had used drugs again, violated his probation, and gotten locked up. Mimi shared her experience of moving through depression by realizing that she cannot control things—moving then to praise. We also gave Bill the precious letters some had e-mailed, which I printed and took to him.

I shared that I too had felt depression unlike any I had known for a while, wanting to run from those

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feelings or get caught up in some form of hyper-intense activity. Quickly I saw neither would work, saying, “Lord, I will sit in these feelings if it is Your will; they are going nowhere. I have nothing to fear.” We can explore things we do not fear. Now some feelings need no exploring; we can just know they mean nothing and go on. Other times, perhaps an issue lies underneath. But either way, only God Himself can reveal anything He wishes us to see. So I always retreat to my old maxim, “Say nothing; do nothing”—my version of, “Be still and know that I am God.” I am willing to say something or do something, but equally willing not to.

We succeed by not trying to control our feelings, as if we are independent selves who can do that. In the Bible study I said, “God isn’t concerned with how we feel, but how we respond in faith. God’s purpose is not to rescue us from our feelings, but from being controlled by them.” At this point, a man (we’ll call him Cal) opened up, describing a past experience of going to the liquor store to buy cigarettes and “finding myself out in the parking lot with a half a bottle of peach schnapps already downed.” Cal said, “Why wasn’t there a ‘knock at the door’ before I found myself in that situation; why was there only a blank?” I responded, “Maybe the blank *was* the knock on the door.”

I told a story about a temptation I experienced years earlier when I felt like a kid with my nose pressed against a candy store window, finally to realize: “Why am I tormenting myself over something I cannot have. I can just walk away from the window.” We also talked about Balaam, who kept thinking that God would change His mind next time. “Maybe *this* time I can have that thing.” But unlike imperfect parents, God’s

“No” on something means “No.” When we know this, we stop asking.

We also talked about God’s conditioning process that brings us to the willingness to be finished with a thing and be kept. As Rees Howells put it, “Willing to be made willing.” Cal talked about how the feelings rise and build (nothing new here) until he thinks, “I can’t take it any more.”

There it is—the lie: Satan wants us to think that we cannot take the lustful pull any more. What a joke! That’s why I say, “The Christian life isn’t hard; it’s easy to walk in the Spirit. It’s painful, but not hard.” This frees us. “Of course I can’t take it, and *won’t* unless He in me takes it; and thank You, Lord, that You *are* taking it and keeping me.

Mimi and I experienced an amazing time of fellowship, hearing these dear men open up, express their fears, and recognize the opportunity to move to faith. We do not panic and try to rescue ourselves out of our souls or our temptations. We are human; and God uses spirit, soul, and body to perfect His life in us as vessels. Our negatives and positives become the drive for His love as us to others. Praise the Lord!

Bodies Washed with Pure Water

My good friend Dr. Mark Warner sent me this interesting note in response to my email, “Bodies Washed with Pure Water”:

Here’s something for the men in jail. Recently (maybe several months) I have noticed that feelings, both good and bad, do not seem to accompany any actions I take. I am neither aroused by good nor condemned by bad, and yet am reminded continually that I have the mind of Christ, hold every thought captive, and continue living. Truly we are to be no longer conformed to the pattern of this world, but rather transformed by the renewing of our mind. The battleground is the mind, and unless we believe that we have the mind of Christ, then we will believe that there is a “just me” that is having horrible thoughts and not recognize their evil source from the prince of the power of the air. What we take, takes us and every living moment presents an opportunity to lay hold of the mind of Christ. No guarantee of good feelings follows, just an assurance that God’s Word is true and every man (Satan-bossed) is a liar. Love you brother, Mark

Last night at the men's Bible study at the jail, we were in Hebrews 10, and I paused on Hebrews 10:22, saying, "I'm not sure what to do with 'bodies washed by pure water.'" We had just discussed "consciences made clean," a phrase I love from 1994 when I saw, reading Hebrews aloud with Louis Tucker at his house in Concord, NC, the perfect conscience we possess in Christ as His gift through His blood—and our easy means now to refuse the accusation of the devil.

We no longer walk in the consciousness of the condemned, forever guilty, with nagging torment and continuous questioning of our motives. As new creations, now joined to Christ, we experience plenty of assault, but live clean in conscience, unless we foolishly defile it by sin, in some particular manner. If we do sin, the Holy Spirit lovingly—affirming us always as sons—convicts us according to the particular offense and never with that vague, general, "I'm no good" pit of shame.

On this Thursday night, when we got to "bodies washed with pure water" and I paused in uncertainty, Arthur said, "It's that the Holy Spirit has washed our bodies." This instantly witnessed to me: "Of course; He not only cleansed our consciences, but removed from us the lie that says, 'We have these sinful bodies—this evil flesh.'" This was familiar ground, but I had missed that "bodies washed with pure water" is the writer of Hebrews' way of talking about the sanctification of the body. Therefore, we accept in Christ the restoration of our appetites and faculties. Sorry men, those sex pulls are washed with clean water; get used to living with them. As James says, only when lust *conceives* (i.e. when we decide, "I will do that.") does it give birth to sin.

Though a familiar truth, this verse refreshed me

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with the God-made goodness of our humanity (the only problem was that Satan stole it in the Fall, but Christ restores it to us) and reminded me also of the vitriolic cry of some American and English poets that Christianity suppresses the body. Sadly, much of Christianity has deserved that criticism. But New Testament Christianity liberates the body, as well as giving us clean consciences and clean bodies. What a fresh start and what a fresh life!

What About Temptation?

We live tempted, and God means us to, so it helps to understand what temptation is and how to get through it. Lack of clarity here brings unnecessary, nagging guilt or even torment and anguish. James tells us that God cannot be tempted with evil and does not tempt anyone (1:13). God does, however, have a convenient agent to do the tempting, and if God did not mean for the devil to do his job in this present age, he could not do it.

God pointed out Job's righteousness to the devil; some might say God even incited him, and God certainly turned the devil loose on Job, with specific decrees of limitation. We see the same with Jesus: Mark's Gospel says, "And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness" (1:12) where Satan tempted him for forty days. The writer of Hebrews, stressing Jesus' likeness to us in all things excepting sin, stresses that Jesus experienced all the temptations that we do (4:15). So we have plenty of company when it comes to temptation, even the Son of God.

God even knows that we will fail at first if we are still living out of our own supposed strength and not settled in the Galatians 2:20 life. Jesus turned to Peter at the Last Supper and said, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you as wheat; but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail;

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and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32 NASB). God exposes us to opposites because He knows that true faith is a tested faith; love must undergo the test. In this case, Jesus knew Peter would fail in his initial temptation, but then repent and use his experience to help others.

Sometimes a little wisdom goes a long way in dealing with temptation, but that wisdom may take a while to learn. Paul says, “I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3). I remember taking swimming lessons in grade school. For several days the instructor led us through different strokes to practice in the shallow end of the pool. One day he said, “Everyone ready to dive off the board on the deep end, go on down and line up.” Almost everyone scurried off to the deep end. I felt sick because I knew I still could not swim or even tread water, but I also felt embarrassed by what I thought others would think, so I got in line behind the board on the deep end, hoping suddenly I’d be able to swim. When I jumped in, I immediately floundered, trying to keep bobbing high enough to gasp for air. Mercifully, the instructor pulled me out and had a word for my foolishness.

At times we torture ourselves with desire longer than we need to, even though we don’t sin. I remember a temptation once that went on for months. I wanted something I could not lawfully have, but, figuratively speaking, kept my nose pressed to the glass of the store window looking and looking, all the while thinking, “Gee, I wish there were some way to have that.” One day I accepted the verdict I already knew.

By faith I quit torturing myself and walked away from the store window.

But even when we do go too far, we throw off the devil's condemnation. If the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, we confess and move on with 1 John 1:9. Beware, though, of just confessing negative thoughts and feelings, hoping they will go away, because often they don't, and it's not our fault any more than coughing in smog is our fault if we can't help being in a smog zone.

We live with more ease, also, when we stop condemning ourselves for our God-made, strong appetites. The tempter certainly will solicit us through the same avenues that God means to use for His purposes. James tells us not to dread this, but to "Consider it all joy" (1:2). Every kind of temptation is common to man (1 Cor. 10:13)—common like the cold we might say. Nothing in the way of temptation should shock us or lead us to condemnation. God made us with strong appetites for His right use, and those appetites are just as alive when the tempter seeks them for wrong use.

Trying to get rid of human desires proves ineffective: in fact it will finally make you feel rebellious and likely think, "God, why did you make me this way?" "Why am I human?" Here again, God means for us to go through temptations. My friend Dan Stone likes to say, "Do you know when you won't experience temptation? When they look down at you and say, 'Don't he look natural?'" Lust that *pulls* is not sin; lust that *conceives* by the will—"I will do it"—that is sin.

The answer to temptation is not a strong self-will and new resolution. That takes us back to self-keeping. Faith is as simple as Paul's word that we consider ourselves dead to various passions and lusts since we died

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to them in Christ. Faith, therefore, says, “I am dead to that.” Often I start laughing when I realize, “Oh, it’s only lust,” or “It’s only the devil trying to make me think I want my own way.”

Sometimes our thoughts and feelings shock us. “How could that cross my mind?” or “How could I feel that strong of a lust?” Fear not; we might experience any imaginable thought or feeling, and we walk through easily in faith unless we tangle ourselves in condemnation. But the *real secret*, James tells us, is, “Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed” (1:14). The emphasis is not on bodily appetites, but lust that demands its own way. The real temptation is not the soul or body avenue of the temptation, but the temptation to self-will that conceives by saying, “I will take that for myself, regardless.”

Temptation is also a matter of, “Will I wear down or will I eventually give in?” Temptation is about endurance as much as anything else. That’s why the only thing that works is the moment-by-moment faith that we no longer live, but Christ lives in us and is keeping us. God’s greatest purpose with us in temptation is not about the temptation, but His keeping of us.

Acceptance of temptation goes a long way toward serenity. We live tempted. Not to recognize this means that we still long for a “La-La life” not offered in the Scriptures. Faith considers temptations and trials all joy and as everyday occurrences, understanding that God encourages us on to endurance as He provides an escape hatch, custom made for every situation. The ultimate escape hatch I’ve discovered is the one that says, “Lord, I will commit any sin unless You keep me, and thank You that You *are* keeping me!”

Temptation and Trials: Job

We might easily think that Job's worst trial was the destruction of his livestock, or the death of all his children, or his miserable physical afflictions. Yet another hidden trial, deceptive for its appearance of righteousness, ate away at Job's faith. This hidden trial made him reel from a pain worse than any of those catalogued in the first two chapters of the book where Satan assaults him.

Satan's purpose lay beyond the obvious destruction of Job's outer world. He wanted to corrupt Job's faith and turn him away from worshipping God. Satan's formula for success lies in trying to convince Job, or us, that a deep and diabolical engine of deceptive character underlies the sunny blessings and apparent friendship with God that we have known and enjoyed. Satan wants to convince us that God is really a devil!

How does this work? The strategist must give high sounding and time-tested truths about God's blessing on the righteous and His certain, undeviating judgment upon sinners. The righteous must never suffer, and sinners must be brought to justice every time without exception. At the same time, mercy must appear as a tool used by a bullying sovereign who extends it to shore up self-centered demands.

Job got through his early trials, but then Bildad

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struck a vicious blow, with silvery theology: “When your children sinned against Him, He gave them over to the penalty of their sin” (8:4 NIV). Job had feared this very thing (1:5). Bildad also says to Job, “If you are pure and upright, even now He will rouse Himself on your behalf” (8:6). But the coup comes with Bildad’s line, “Surely God does not reject a blameless man” (8:20).

Job falters with doubt in the face of Bildad’s assertion: “How can a mortal be righteous before God?” (9:1). Instead of affirming the character of the God he had known up to this point, Job begins to imagine a different God who likes to torture His friends. “He mocks the despair of the innocent. When a land falls into the hands of the wicked, He blindfolds its judges. If it is not He, then who is it?” (9:23-24 NIV).

Job is truly off balance now and convinced that his efforts at righteousness will only prove futile. A terrible script of cosmic torment has overtaken him. God will not justify him, and he cannot justify himself: “Even if I washed myself with soap and my hands with washing soda, You would plunge me into a slime pit” (9:30). At this point, Job cries out for an “arbitrator” to remove God’s wrath from him (9:33). Messianic hope springs forth in agonizing poetry.

Job, however, is not through defending himself, and he has already been sold a bill of goods. The devil has slipped undetected into the mouths of religious prognosticators, and Job fights with them. He could have endured the physical trials; what he could not endure was the eroding of his faith in the character of God.

Job had built his life on a God who is self-for-others. Despite the sins of his youth, Job had come to know and trust God as loving and forgiving, but he

had one final threshold of doubt, and God went after it, like He did with Abraham in the decree to kill Isaac. The character of God, ironically, appears completely self-centered and cruel in order for us to know Him as nothing but outpoured love. The law of opposites presents its irrevocable face again; good must be sucked out of the bitter root of seeming evil.

Job will come through; we know the story. After sinking into a despairing view of God, he ends triumphantly in repentance and acceptance. God's ways are just and good. But the path to his understanding led him through the subtlest of satanic trials—the voice of evil in the name of religion. Thankfully, Job's friends were not aware of their own deception, and when God unmasked it, they repented too.

What lesson stands out in Job's trials? "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1 NIV). In Romans 8, Paul names many sufferings that equal and possibly surpass the trials of Job. And Satan still has his condemners that patrol around—often well meaning Christians who offer discouragement at the very time we need faith in the character and purposes of God.

When the devil pours out shame and hopelessness, don't take it. Don't let former sins, already forgiven, rise back up, as if God is using them against you: move on to the highest view: the pinnacle of the Christian life is the suffering of the just. Job goes through the fires of condemnation where the self tries to justify itself, but finally justifies God and His ways. He didn't have Romans 8 to guide him. Thankfully we do!

The Origin of Sin

As Christians we all wish sin would go away and we wouldn't have to deal with it. But it does come up. John deals with it simply in his first epistle with three short points. We all have sin in our history; we confess sin now if we sin; and, through union with Christ we can live a life free from sin.

But what is sin anyway? The Bible says that pride is the root of sin. Lucifer became the devil by his "I will" declarations (Isaiah 14) intended to rival and oppose God. Pride exalts the self at the expense of others. C.S. Lewis's little book, *The Screwtape Letters*, is humorous, but also devastatingly serious in its profile of the diabolical. Satan's goal is to consume and eat other people, to get them to follow him, and to build himself up at their expense.¹

Pride doesn't sit still; it leads to covetousness, which basically means wanting something in a self-for-self way. Its mentality is, "The whole world is for me." I heard Norman Grubb tell the story of his conversion many times. He saw his lost condition when he realized his total outlook in life of "everything for me!" Covetousness doesn't sit still either, but leads to envy. When we live from Satan's nature and we cannot get what we want, but others seem to, we hate it that others prosper. Envy then leads to wrath, and wrath is a turmoil—a raging wheel inside that churns with re-

sentment. That is hell—weeping and gnashing of teeth for sure.

The good news is that the body death of Christ removed Satan's nature from us and replaced it with God's self-for-others nature. He's our source and supply for all living now!

A Testimony

For fifteen years as a Christian, I thought of myself as a combination of an old and a new nature. I didn't know that God created us as vessels without a nature of our own. When I experienced joy, I thought it was *my* joy; and when I experienced envy, I thought it was *my* envy.

So in this life of thinking I was just myself, I finally came to experience what Paul describes in Romans 7. Paul says (paraphrase), "There are good things that I want to do that I do not do; there are evil things that I do *not* want to do, and those are things that I *am* doing." Paul hated this dilemma when he went through it, and I did too, saying, "I don't understand myself—I'm confused."

Old mystic writers talk about pride, covetousness, envy, and wrath. This helps put Romans 7 in perspective. The Law says, "You shall not covet." In other words, "You shall not want something in a self-for-self way."

The whole "game" begins here—with the law. What is the law, really, when you get right down to it? Imagine that I have an apple in my hand. I drop it and ask you, "What did you just see?" You might say that you saw the law of gravity. If I want to tease you a little bit, I will say, "No, you just saw an apple drop," for we merely observe Nature and then later formu-

late laws from what we observe and describe.

Isaac Newton came along and saw that when two “bb’s” hit together, they bang back apart: “For every action, there’s an equal and opposite reaction.” We say, “That is Newton’s first law.” We act as if the thing happens because of the law, apart from the thing itself. And really, we have only described what happens. We could fairly say that no laws of Nature exist; only Nature exists. Similarly, God’s laws are really an expression of Himself.

The whole business of finding out who we are involves the discovery that we live life, not as something to be imitated, but according to WHO HE IS. I heard people say for years, “Only Christ can live the Christian life.” It sailed right by me. But if only Christ can live the Christian life, then only Christ can live the Christian life.

God gives laws in Scripture to catch us as long as we can be caught. I’ve been tricked; you’ve been tricked; we’ve all been tricked. Nothing good comes from pouting about it and saying, “How did that happen to me?”

Notice the way in which the trick works in our thinking: “How did that happen to *me*? How could *I* have done something like that?” And we say, “How could *you* be the kind of person who would do that?” If we really believe the saying, “But for the grace of God, there go I,” why do we say, “How could you have done that?” Rather, how could you have *not* done that?

I first heard this from my mother in law, Mimi, when I would explain that I had done thus and so. She would reply, “You couldn’t have done anything differently.” Angrily I would insist that I should have and could have done differently. She sensed, how-

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ever, the spirit behind what I said, hearing the lie of independence in the “I” from which I spoke.

One day, not long after marrying her daughter Tandy, Mimi looked at me and said, “You’re shot full of pride,” meaning of course the pride of seeing myself as a self-operating self. However, I took it that the pride was “ME” and that I was doomed to go on as a proud person. Are you doomed to always be a proud person? If you have a nature of your own and if you have a proud nature, then you *are* doomed to be a proud person. But if only two natures exist in the universe and you always express one of those natures, then you are not doomed to be a proud person, but destined to be a son of God and to express the life of Christ if you receive Him.

We need to know, however, what receiving Him really means, for the law comes along and says that we should be a certain way. Don’t we hear that thought in the back of our minds all the time? I do. Thoughts come pouring through like this: “You know, you really should be more loving, and you really should have said things a different way, and you really should have smiled better at that person. You really should have done this, and you really should have done that.” Sometimes when I open the Bible, it seems to be saying the same things, raking me over the coals until I get sick and miserable. Then I ask, “Why am I falling into that again?” It produces a sense of wretchedness, and it is good that it does; God means it to as long as we try to keep the law ourselves.

Paul’s experience teaches us a lot about unraveling this confusion. Paul begins to experience God’s tricks when the Lord reminds him, “You shall not covet.” God already knows what will happen. Romans 5:20 explains that the law came that the transgression

might abound. But Paul says in Romans 7:10, “And this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me” (NASB). “I was alive apart from the law,” he says in 7:9. He had thought he was alive, but he was going along spontaneously in error.

The law comes and reveals the covetousness hidden in Paul’s heart, and then he fights with it, aggravates it, and stirs it up even more, so that it trips him up left and right. Every time he says to himself, “You shouldn’t have done that” and tries not to do the thing—bang, down he goes. Or if he scolds himself with, “You should have done such and such,” and tries to do it—bang, down he goes again, and turmoil takes over. “I want to do good; I can’t do it. I don’t want to do evil; I do it.” He feels all the worse for being a Christian and asks, “How do I get out of this?”

Some people might rationalize, “Well, there’s a little bad in the best of us, and there’s a little good in the worst of us. Nobody’s perfect.” But Paul quests for perfection; he cannot bear the thought of anything less and wants out of failure and sin’s misery. He knows the possibility of perfection and knows there must be a solution. So he keeps on and keeps on until he finds out the who and what of perfection—Christ living His perfect life in him by faith, but not in the way he initially thought things would work.

His first breakthrough comes when he in essence says, “If I’m not doing the good that I would, and if I’m doing the evil which I would not, I see that it’s no longer I doing it, but sin in my members” (Rom. 7:17). He sees the true desire of his heart—that even to will the good and hate the evil takes the heart of God in him. The first thing he gets straight is that the covetousness he sees operating in his members is not really he.

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I discovered a piece of this revelation myself a number of years ago when I heard someone quote that verse. I got hold of the first part of the verse: "It is no longer I." So when I did things I hated, I at least knew the consolation of not despising myself as someone with a heart wicked at the core. I was frustrated, however, because of the sin operating in my members.

A friend used to quote that verse to me from Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?" I would counter, "No, that is not the real me." My friend would then retaliate, "What *is* the *real* you?" You see, people grow accustomed to responding to what happens in the three-dimensional world according to how they think and feel. All I knew was that the real I was righteous, even though that still did not change the facts of my failure.

I found great consolation seeing my experience as similar to Paul's. He even states the problem once in Romans 7:17, "It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me" and then goes over the same cycle again in verses 19 and 20. He reminds us of a camera not quite in focus. He knows a piece of the truth, but cannot get sin to quit operating in his members.

The answer is close when we know what is and is not the real we and when we know the truth about trying to keep the law ourselves. Paul cannot get his heart's desire operating through his members because he does not yet see that he is trying to do things himself. Frustration actually increases as he starts to believe his heart means right, but sin still operates in him. That drives Paul to those last two verses in Romans 7 that begin, "Wretched man that I am!" I used to think it terrible to experience a condition like that;

but it is wonderful, because we must go down before we can go up; we must learn what we cannot do.

Many believers will sympathize, "Oh, yes, we're all in the same boat, and we live in these bodies and have this old nature; but when Jesus comes back..." The real pioneers, like my friend Sylvia Pearce would rejoice and say, when I felt exasperated, "Oh, Brian, this is so good for you!" I loved her and knew it was the truth, but I cannot decently tell you the things I wanted to say to her. Then I started to run into more people who would respond to my expressions of despair with, "Oh, wonderful!" Well, what was so wonderful about it? It didn't feel wonderful.

The very next cry of Paul after his agonizing lament, "Wretched man that I am," is the beautiful question, "Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" We see people all over the world with all kinds of problems. Addicts come to mind: I have heard explained repeatedly that until they realize they have a problem and ask for help, they cannot receive help. The Lord says that until we realize what we cannot do, He will not deliver us. If He is to be all and in all, why should He compete with our deceived efforts?

Jesus did not even live by His own power during His earthly life for He said, "Of Myself I can do nothing." If He provides our model, why should God anesthetize us from the pain of self-effort? Love, therefore, can often look cruel, when God says, "Go to it. You want to give it your best shot? Go ahead. When you are so wretched that you cannot bear another second of it and you finally say, 'Who will deliver me from the body of this death,' the answer will come." Paul puts it this way: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord!"

Paul says another interesting thing here: "So then,

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on the one hand, with my mind I serve the law of God; but with my flesh the law of sin.” That could sound like a sin nature, for it appears as though he gives up at this point, saying, “Well, I’ll worship God with my mind, but with my flesh I have to resign myself to live in sin.” However, he does not mean that! Otherwise he would not have written Romans 8. What he means is this: “Thank God, I finally see how it works. Thank God, I finally see.”

Let me illustrate. If I take a hammer and drop it on my foot, and my foot hurts, and I neglect to realize why it hurts, and I drop the hammer on it again and again, I hate the fact that my foot hurts, but lack insight into why. My foot hurts because I keep dropping a hammer on it, not because my foot is bad. After an epiphany, I will say, “Thank God, I see that when I drop a hammer on my foot, my foot hurts.” Likewise, Paul means this: “I thank God I see that when I live out of self-effort, as if independent, I serve the law of sin.” That kind of self-effort will always produce sin in the flesh; God means it to, so that it will produce wretchedness. Therefore, do not ever feel sorry for anyone going through that experience; you will do that person no favor. Instead, help the sufferer see her members in union with Christ and therefore Spirit-operated by faith.

In Romans 8, Paul continues, “The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.” He sees a higher law and thinks, “I see how this sin-and-death law has been operating; it has to operate that way on that level. But now I put a higher law into operation—one that produces a righteous life.”

The chapter breaks, inserted in the 1500s, help the reader in general, but can lend an artificial break

in thought, such as between chapters 7 and 8 where Paul's thought reaches a crescendo of triumph and resolution. The break in thought is awkward because it could leave the reader hanging with the notion, "Well, this is the way it is, you know. We're going to love God with our hearts, but we're going to always go out and mess up at times." But almost without a breath, Paul immediately continues in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation." The beauty of no condemnation comes from the realization that since we cannot live life apart from the Spirit, we no longer condemn ourselves any more as if we could have. Why condemn ourselves for what we cannot do anyway?

Why have we taken so much guilt and accusation into ourselves? Because Satan rips and tears and sifts when he says, "Oh, see what you did?" or "You shouldn't have done that." So we take in all the condemnation and the blame. Granted, the wrong thing happened in our members and it happened because of our unbelief. In that sense the responsibility lies with us. Repentance, however, does not come from those horrible feelings of failure and self-flagellation, but from the godly repentance of 2 Corinthians 7:10—"a repentance without regret" (NASB).

The world's lament is this: "I'm sorry and I hate what I did; I loathe myself for doing it, because I really shouldn't be that kind of person. I want to think more highly of myself than that." This kind of self-aborrence comes from pride: "I see what I did and hate *myself* for doing it."

Peter learns his lesson in a bitter way. In Luke 22:31 Jesus says to him, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not

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fail” (NASB). Jesus knows what hides in his heart and that Peter needs sifting by the devil. God knows that we do too, for a season, until we learn our utter human helplessness.

Satan tries to trick us in order to produce in us the sense of self-sufficiency, and God means him to work this way as what Norman Grubb called “the convenient agent.” Norman often paraphrased the apostle John’s comment about the whole world lying in the lap of the evil one this way: “We are in Satan’s camp; he has a right to shoot at us.” Norman also loved to say, “What you fight, fights you.” So let Satan do his job of tempting, but go right on ignoring his lie.

Often we are tempted to think that we are the problem because we feel a certain way. We feel this pull, this hate, this resentment, or this lust. When we feel these in our members, we do experience the temptation to think that it is we. If we still over-identify with our members, we will say, “Oh, that *is* me,” and the fruit of the flesh will occur as the result. If we say instead, “Christ is my life,” then we will enjoy the fruit of the Spirit.

In *The Way to Christ*, Jacob Boehme describes the devil’s work as pressing through and sifting the flesh and blood of our lives. He means that God allows Satan to come into our members and rattle and bang around, creating clamor and all kinds of evil pulls in our God-created thoughts, feelings, and desires. That is the sifting. We have often assumed guilt for feeling those pulls. We thought the pulls were really we—that they sprang from an old nature. Unaware of the enemy, we did not know how to say “No!” to the ploy.

Boehme expresses this well: “The soul often stands in anguish when Hell thus presses in it and wishes to reveal itself in it.”¹ Most Christians probably dread

something terribly wrong if they experience deep anguish over things they think or feel. How then do we interpret Jesus' saying to Peter that the kingdom of God belonged to him and the gates of hell would not prevail against it? It is not as if the gates of hell were way off somewhere away from Peter—somewhere distant where Satan hollers over every now and then saying, "Hey, I'd like to tempt you a little." No. The devil gets right up close, inside your members even, and he starts jerking and pulling—tearing and hollering at you.

If you hear the voice of the enemy and do not recognize it, down you will go. If you recognize it and say, "That's the devil pulling on my members and not me, for my life is Jesus Christ," you will walk safely through by faith. If you are not quite sure, and just barely holding on, the anguish will continue and God means it to, because the anguish presses you to the point. The point is this: what breaks the gates of hell is not something you do for God or God does for you. What breaks the gates of hell is the person He is in you!

Finally, we stop lamenting what we cannot do and triumphantly say, "When I am weak, then I am strong," and "I can do all things through Christ Jesus." God has used our Romans 7 failings to bring us to the knowledge of His sufficient grace in us. Therefore, we live ongoing lives as "more than conquerors" in the very things we formerly thought we could not do. We walk in the spirit of, "As He is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17).

I Want A Perfect Flower

Eating lunch at the teachers' table in the high school cafeteria offers two views, one facing the serving line and one facing the student body. On this Valentine's Day I chose the one facing the student body and after a few moments noticed a tall, graceful girl, gliding across the cafeteria, carrying a large, blush-red banner announcing carnations for sale.

Already this year, I had bought a box of apples, a box of candy, two valentines, and three pounds of raw cookie dough. One teacher remarked, "If you buy anything, they'll be after you all the time." I replied, "I buy from the first student approaching me each time around." This is one more way of being part of a student's world.

I looked at the carnations. The long, neatly folded, green florist paper around the hidden stem invited me to buy one. At the end suddenly appeared the small, white flower itself, laced along its edges with a pink, rose tint also flecking the milky looking petals. I had already bought Tandy's Valentine's gift, but as I walked out of the cafeteria, I couldn't resist buying a carnation.

I stood with my twenty-four inch stem, wrapped in soft, green paper, with an attractive seal securing it in the middle, and that enchanting flower gracing the end. Thinking about how fragile it was, I took it to

my car, gently laying it on the back seat. That one carnation would become precious a few hours later.

In the meantime, I anticipated the final stress of the day—fourth period—the most difficult group of all my classes. After a good reading session, I allowed some Valentine celebration. One of the girls, Tina, had two carnations. Then Angela was suddenly standing in front of me saying, “Daniel broke one of Tina’s carnations and then switched it with mine.” Her little voice started to rise: “Make them give me back my carnation,” she persistently said.

I hadn’t seen Daniel near her bag, and he denied everything. I didn’t know whom to believe. I had only two conflicting words, and the other students were milling around my desk as if nothing had happened. Tina stood there with two carnations in her hand, claiming them as her original two. In the confusion around me, Angela was getting more upset with each second.

Feeling pressured, I explained several times to Angela that I could not say with certainty that Daniel broke her flower. She persisted, “I saw him do it.” All of this was bold for a girl that in middle school a year or two earlier rarely spoke and once had climbed into a cabinet to escape—refusing to come out until the teacher patiently coaxed her out.

The pressure mounted as I saw that she would not relent. I asked Angela, “Who were you going to give your carnation to?” “To my mother,” she answered. I felt pangs of grief. Angela had not had a lot of things go perfectly in her life. I had noticed that she never talked about her father, and one day when I asked about him, she scrunched her face, looked down, and almost inaudibly murmured, “He was murdered.”

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Now on Valentine's Day, she had a chance to give something perfect to her mother, and she held a carnation with a broken stem. She began to sob with no sign of stopping. "Come here and let me tell you something," I said, hoping I could get her to accept things the way they were. She refused to come near.

Leaning toward her, I said, "I have a carnation in my car; after the bell rings, I'll trade you mine for yours." In her soft, wrenching voice she said, "Is yours broken?" "No," I said, "It's perfect." The bell rang and reaching into my car, I gave her the beautiful carnation on my back seat. The green paper still had that crisp tuck around it, fastened by the seal in the middle. The bloom offered its elegant perfection of blush on white.

No hesitation slowed me, and I had resolved not to expect her "Thank you," but as she received the unbroken carnation, she looked at me and said, "Thank you." I was happy for her and her mother. At home, I explained to Tandy why my Valentine to her included a carnation with a broken stem, taped back together. Touched, she took it and put it in a clear vase on the counter by the sink.

I know that I can't fix everything that breaks in a kid's life. But this time I could. Angela wanted a perfect flower to give her mother, and she got one.

Daily Life: Live It

A lot of the time, life is just living in the moment, doing the next thing, whether working or relaxing. Little details occupy us, and the most mundane things by appearance take our energy and thought. Christ is living His spontaneous life in us. A few poems illustrate this.

Two Doves

Yesterday I saw a dove,
and today again,
one bird or two
I can't say.

It walked across the
custom stones,
uneven in shape,
set in dirt,
for one to walk
stone to stone.

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Today my bird
drank rainwater
intermittently
from grooves
in the stones.

At the picture window,
I look,
and the dove looks back.

My mug of tea
has a tandem
of pastel fish,
in their element,
underwater,
and serene.

Meanwhile,
my one, daily ladybug,
for the moment
sits in place
on the large window.

I sit too.

Fatty, Fatty Robin

Fatty, fatty robin,
you bulge—
more prosperity, and you will
be in the next coat size.

But your feet and legs
fly across the walkway stones
by the porch.

The blue sky
pours through
the bare branches;
the buds will soon
squeeze out.

The sun shines in
as you traipse by
and makes patches
at angles on walls
in the sunroom.

Creation rejoices,
fatty robin,
and so do I.

Three Rabbits and a Fourth

May is rabbits in the yard
until July—
cautious,
but today for Tracey,
sanguine and feeling safe,
or just preoccupied,
three tumblers race into view,
in shrubs
across the street.

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“Oh look—three rabbits,” Tracey laughs;
then a fourth appears,
sprinting
around a hedgerow.

One is a mathematician’s dream
of sine curves
in succession,
only feet away,
Leaning on her old,
red Mustang
convertible,
Tracey watches them all.

The three across the way,
Leap and sprint
over one another,
playing jump and chase.

I’ve seen birds play like that,
or rabbits in a pair.
This morning, a bird
flew low in chase,
just above
a fleeing squirrel.

Tracey likes Nature poems—
she even visits now and then,
but slightly paranoid,
has said, “I feel watched;
you might write a poem
if I visit.”
Well, here it is!

Nature's Resurrection Begins

There it lies,
spread with healing green,

dark and still,
in the understated morning sun—
shaded in design
from a bare maple tree.

This port of quiet,
after winter,
slows breathing.

The austere bark
of trees not budded
cannot discourage this meditation;
even the animals do not yet
invade this private picture—
until the moment is complete.

In a neighboring yard, patches
of dead November leaves
hardly tell their memory.

Now, random, green blades
of grass
vibrate in the transverse
currents.

An ordinary bird walks across
the warming pavement.

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Another looks out
from his spot on an awning shingle.

Nature's resurrection
has begun.

The Bush-Hog Road

A mile from the house
lies one of those short-cut roads.
It lies along an untended stretch of river,
marked by a few sections of random houses.

It's nondescript for a road,
except for the trestle
arching over it,
abandoned by day,
but rumbling with the bass guitar
of its night roar.

Then it has a mystical whistle,
blown along a freight-bearing path,
going somewhere,
having been somewhere,

leaving me in bed
with ancestral fantasies—
of boxcars,
and tracks to the world of Peter Pan.

I see this trestle
when I hear the night blast,
hear the tracks vibrating,
driven down by calculated weight,
holding up
under tremendous pht pht pht
of car after car,
and the engineer's alert, leaning
on the deafening sound,

that mellows out to a distance
to dream by.

By day, it's a shell—
a baked, empty skin in the sun—
a bleached, pale place for a stop sign,
interrupting the short-cut
to the other side of town.

The road holds little notice,
but occasionally a sight puts me in arrest.
Today, in a field of knee high grass
gone to seed, a large bush-hog
buckled the helpless grass
under its blades,
leaving glistening criss-cross clumps,
meekly behind,

with freshness
like the first bite of wintergreen gum,
when the smell still comes off the wrapper,
and the taste goes, "Whoa!"

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The sun will bake the clippings;
for in this field,
no manicure awaits,
and ugliness will leave a brown, yellow mess
in a few days.

But for now, every engine sound
of the bush-hog, and every knee-high row,
that folds under the blades,
and then comes out green and whacked behind,
captivates me..

I wouldn't recommend
letting grass get that high;
but I think it's worth it
to a good bush-hogger—
and those that enjoy watching.

This road isn't my favorite place,
but some days it is.

Dandelion Surprise

April proceeds
as hoped,
but today,
No—not the Red-bud,
not the Bradford,
or weeping cherry,
or Forsythia,

but on a ragged road,
a cut-through,
shocking and surprising me,

an embankment of dandelions,
thick among
Nature's random grasses,
elevates the fancy.

A tinge of guilt rises,
but gives way to
eager pleasure
in the pitiful slope,
untended,

along a display lot
of towering combines
for sale.

Nearby, strewn or stacked—
massive, ridged tires sit,
along with pieces of wood and articles,
like the motley trailer
on a gravel road.

How dare you dandelions,
with no apparent order
or symmetry—
without care from your proprietor—
stare like that,
in such emblazoned yellow,
demanding attention.

Yet, though not manicured,
but wild in your assertions,
who can resist loving you?

If called upon,
would I change you?

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Or would I always remember you the way
you are?

Thanksgiving at Jennifer's

We arrive, and Jennifer banks up the wood stove.
The turkey sits on the platter without its feathers,
without its head for that matter,
an 18 pound sacrifice,
sliced at the right time in sheets neatly down,
waiting for golden gravy,
steamy stuffing and cranberries
banked in ruby jelly
against the piles on plates—
green beans crisscrossed to the side.
Add a chosen wine of white or red,
yams sweet like pie,
with bullets of white marshmallow
shot across the top,
and only the blessing lacks
before Mm,Mm,Mm,
and returns to the long counter
with dish after dish spread the length of it.

There's not much to scrape from the plates.
At Jennifer's the dishwasher works
when the first pair of arms gets to the sink
and fills the tub with hot water and bubbles.
The men make the crew tonight.

Soon 10 fools from 3 generations
gather in the living room around Caleb,
the fourth generation.
In the room we have Gloria begat Jennifer,
Jennifer begat Mindy and Abby.
Billy and Mimi begat Tandy,
Tandy and Brian begat Carson,
Carson and Mindy begat Caleb,
Lynn and Abby will beget someday.

Caleb laughs most at the whitest hair.
Jennifer passes out surprise slips with numbers,
each a task to perform.
Lynn reads the Christmas story from Luke:
the son of God is born from the other side of a
hymen,
while Joseph still ponders,
his DNA waiting to map onto the next child born
to Mary after the Messiah.
Gloria shows a video clip of a woman deaf from birth
who learned music from the vibrations of her
mother's singing breast.
The woman sings "Silent Night."
Paupau prays for America, that the Lord will grant
diplomacy and not war.
Brian recites lines of his poetry.
Mimi, her cane nearby, and brittle of bone,
gives thanks for the 400-mile trip to be here,
and hopes for another such celebration next year.
Tandy reads three scriptures on giving thanks:
there is nothing like the word of God.
Mindy leads a chorus.
Abby, of the theater persuasion, directs a charade.
Carson's pecan pie is nut-filled to the crust;
his pumpkin pie made with full cream.

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Sipping coffee and tea,
we spontaneously tell a round of jokes,
with laughing that Caleb hears, nursing in the next
room,
determined not to take that nap.
Each burst of laughter leads him to jerk his head
away
from his Thanksgiving milk.
Turkey for you next year, my boy.

He's learned to sputter like baseball cards on
spokes.
10 marshmallows watch, listen,
kiss, hold, swing, pat, and pass around.
Picture books come out.
New pictures get taken—
Great-grandmothers with Caleb,
3 generations of mothers with Caleb,
combinations with Caleb.

Everything's better with sugar.

The cars heat up in the bitter cold
up on the mountain—
off the dirt road,
in the driveway almost hidden.

We all drive away with one heart
from dreams that made a day,
and a day that makes more dreams.

Suffering is Part of the Victory Life

Just when “dead to sin” and “dead to law”—i.e. no more trying—come into focus, suffering comes our way. Out come the butchers to carve us up for lamb roast while piling up accusation and condemnation against us. Or the mortal world just keeps on groaning and travailing in pain. Not every illness gets healed (though many do) and friends turn against us. Someone else gets a promotion.

Maybe worst of all, the glory of the good news we’ve discovered causes horrified looks on others’ faces: “Why can’t I give away the best news I’ve ever found?” We are still in the devil’s world, and he has a right to shoot at us. God means for the devil to be the devil and do a devil’s job. There’s no point in getting angry with God for keeping an employee like the devil. But God uses the devil to attain His highest purposes in us. We will look into those later, but for now, we can say that by faith we can live with a consciousness of glory in our sufferings.

Suffering comes in four kinds. First, there is the suffering that is the wages of sin. Second, there is the suffering of Romans 7 trying and failing. Third, there is the suffering that Romans 8 describes—the suffering that we experience by being part of the mortal world of corruption and death. Even the most stoical spirit can’t block out all the feelings that come to our

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souls and bodies. We find ourselves constantly jarred by the negative. Last, there is the suffering of intercession, which we will talk about in a later chapter.

Have you ever tried telling yourself that you're more than a conqueror when you don't feel like it? This is not pop psychology, but the truth of the Bible. Faith conquers before appearances change; it conquers when things are at their worst—by saying the word of faith. When we feel miserable, we want to know if contentment is available in our worst circumstances. Is it possible to go through hard experiences and rejoice?

Paul says to the Colossians that we are complete in Christ, so we possess everything needed for all situations. Suffering tests whether we are seeing with the outward eyes or the inward eyes of the heart, whether we're looking from our seat in the heavenlies, or from the tar pits of hell. I remember Norman Grubb saying once that a person can feel like he's in hell, yet be in heaven.¹ So the outer doesn't have to line up with our feelings for us to take the next step.

Since contentment is available, we are right to desire it. We decide that we do not want to stay in self-pity, but attach ourselves in faith to God's available abundance. We do this even when we see no prospect of change. As desire takes over, we move to the third aspect of faith—the taking. Here we leap into what God says and off we go into the unseen, where faith walks by the invisible word of God and not by sight. Our inner eyes take over, and the unseen world is our real world. Our outer senses no longer determine our contentment.

Lastly, what we take, takes us, but usually not until things get worse on the appearance level. The obedience of faith means speaking the word of faith and

not giving up on saying it, even when circumstances do not change. Don't ask, "Why hasn't a thing happened yet?" That is not faith. Say that it has happened.

One day at work, I felt awful. The conflict on the job seemed worse than ever, and fatigue had set in. "How can I do this job one more minute? I can't wait to get out of here for the day." Everyone feels like that sometimes. What do we say? The Scripture "More than conquerors" flashed in my mind—the Holy Spirit's provision for me. As I thought of those words from Romans 8, I knew I could believe them or wallow. Without fanfare or emotion, I agreed with the Lord, still feeling the same as before. But I began to give thanks, and soon lost myself in the next thing God had for me.

Loneliness is another chief lie of the devil. After two years of a marital separation, feeling depressed and angry all of the time, I accepted God's word that "I am not lonely." That changed my life. I still desired reconciliation, but I discovered my completeness in Christ and started living by the saying, "Christ plus nothing." It took another five years before my wife and I worked out our problems, and most of that time, I could not do or say anything that changed how we related. But during that time I learned the meaning of two good Bible words—*wait* and *endure*.

I can't count the days that I felt awful. Sometimes at the end of a day I would complain to the Lord, to which He would reply, "Did I keep you today?" His voice was so quiet and serene. I answered, "Yes," to which he continued, "You just don't like how it looked," again quiet and serene in His tone to me. I would give in and actually feel relieved that life could look and feel so awful and yet be His Spirit going on in me.

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Much loneliness comes from the need for a mate, with all the romantic fantasies and dreams that accompany a hoped for future that will fulfill us. I don't want to sound skeptical of marriage, for I thank God every day for my wife. He has worked in each of us to show us our completeness in Christ, which brought us into harmony—the kind we had never known in our past efforts to get our needs met from each other.

Driving around my block the other day, I saw a couple sitting on a porch, side by side, and who knows what they were really thinking? They reminded me of two people trying to find a whole by joining the two halves. But when you join two, lonely halves, you don't get a full whole. You get two lonely halves joined together, frustrated because they think they can complete each other—trying to make a whole out of two empties.

Another tool of the devil, and maybe his worst, is false guilt. It comes with stinging shame and accusation, for Revelation calls the devil the accuser of the brethren. Think of how many times we've slumped under feelings of lust, anger, or fear, thinking, "There must be something wrong with me, or I would not feel this way. If I said the right words of faith, these negatives wouldn't even pop up, much less persist with agonizing intensity." I am not saying that sin cannot cause guilt and torment; the devil's tactics do not change there. However, even at that, the Holy Spirit's conviction brings light, uplifting, and relief, without the "You're a bad person" message of shame. God's Spirit draws us into light and peace. Satan is the author of all condemnation.

Most often, however, what we let bind us is the continual sin consciousness that never lets up no matter what we confess or do. Hebrews tells us that Christ's

sacrifice did away with the consciousness of sin, so there is nothing spiritual or even true about going around with a consciousness of “I’m no good.” What if we *expect* our feelings to fluctuate wildly, and what if we *expect* plenty of condemnation from the devil?

I received an unwanted shock one day years ago when I poured out my negative feelings, along with the anguish of my temptations, to my old missionary mentor, Norman Grubb. To my horror, his face turned bright and radiant, and he boomed out, “Very healthy! Good practice!” I hated hearing that, but today it provides relief. Another time, when I felt like I might be obsessing over bothersome feelings, the Holy Spirit, said, “Laugh at them.”

The devil also likes to lie to us that we should not be weak, and even Paul had a thorn in the flesh that he doesn’t name. He tried three times to get the Lord to remove it, without success. Instead, Paul heard, “My grace is sufficient for thee,” and “My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Another thorny area pops up when people do not believe exactly like we do. Conflict really heats up when the controversy starts, and the temptation to take sides can feel overpowering. Everybody wants to belong to the right church with the right doctrine. The desire to please others pulls us one way and then another, and our brains and emotions tear us apart. If we fight our feelings and each other, we will get a fight back, even if only from the devil.

I often tell Bible study groups that my thoughts and feelings are no different than they ever were. I don’t fight, however, but relax and wait on the sure word of the Spirit. That word may come through someone else, or directly. So I listen to what others have to say, but make the final test the word of the

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

Lord to *me*—the one that comes easily by faith. I often say that the Christian life is not hard; it's easy to walk in the Spirit. It's painful at times, and we experience suffering, but it's not hard to walk in the Spirit. We are more than conquerors.

So relax and ride through the turbulence without worry. Don't try to figure everything out, but rest in the Lord, even in your pain, for your pain is really His pain. The serene voice of the Lord will shine through with clarity at the right moment.

I Ate a Little Book

I ate a little book
that tasted sweet as pie,
but when I swallowed it,
I thought that I would die.

I ate a little book
that like a flute I heard;
I ate a little book
that was a holy word.

I licked my lips in glee
until the words down low,
produced digestive misery
and told of bitter woe.

You took the bitter word,
when next our souls did greet;
you ate the book from me you heard,
for you the book was sweet.

Sacrifice of Praise #1

I put my body
at the foot
of Your Majesty:
in all the pain
You mean me to endure—
in rejection of the pain
You mean us to let go of,
always discerning.

Tears press up
from Your well—
turn to drops of light
in Your joy,
the both
a sacrifice of praise.

The singing voice,
of Your beloved ones,
drawn into the otherworldly,
squeezes out
this unlikely rapture.

When You appear on the clouds
at the END,
You will already
have come
now.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

But then—
the fruit of Your
joyful sorrow
will appear,
when hearts
we believed for—
see You and believe.

Sacrifice of Praise #2

From Jupiter to Jupiter,
I left,
only to arrive,
in the rhythm,
note on note
of divinity—
strings and drums,
in the midst of hosts
no longer themselves.

Singing, they lose what was theirs;
they gain what is His—
rocking, swaying—
one mouth leading,
the elders bow,
the Four never stop—
Holy, Holy, Holy,
here come the tears—
hot, sweet,
better than sweat,
giving way to fading echoes
of “It is!”

I lifted the hand of my soul,
wincing, did not resist tears
in praise,
to ask You to come in—
high and lifted up,
majestic in train.

Your mighty ones sing
with blazing lips,
pointing up
jubilantly.

Dropping back to soft chants,
we quietly see.

You have held me
to the course;
You clasp me
now that I awake.

Celestial Death

However close I get,
I'm forever far away,
Unless You shine on me,
Your everlasting day.

I sought Your fading face
With every inner strain,
But at the end I found
An everlasting pain.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

You opened up Your door,
And showed Your lovely face,
But in those floods of light,
I saw my own disgrace.

Your love called me to reach,
A star I could not climb,
No matter how I tried,
My dust is not sublime.

I loved my neighbor's soul,
And offered him my peace,
But when he failed my dreams,
My agony increased.

I turned to You in prayer,
And Scripture seeking rest,
But You could not be found,
Or my efforts ever blessed.

A tiny little reach,
Toward an ever rising sky,
Makes Your temple too remote,
For these working hands to try.

But You teased my struggling reach,
For I had to try and see,
The infinity of distance,
Between Yourself and me.

Then the demons shrieked aloud,
And their haunts disclosed to me,
Their certain seeming capture,
Of a sinner's destiny.

Suffering is Part of the Victory Life

When the floodgates burst awide,
And the enemy breathed scorn,
In a flash, I saw I'd died,
As a creature newly born.

This tender new beginning,
Came when I lay helpless down,
And a hand reached down from heaven,
Not with wrath or fearful frown.

For until I lay in failure,
In a dark and anguished place,
No hand I saw from heaven,
Reaching out with urgent grace.

He left His canopy above,
His lofty towering throne,
To plummet down into the mire,
Where humans cry and groan.

The sin I was, He had become,
A devil driven man,
To break that bondage through His death,
In the counsel of God's plan.

His body seared and burned with sin,
His soul cast off from God,
He bore the weight of sin's worst blow,
As a demon worm and clod.

But silent death serene stood still,
As the body drooped in death,
With sin expelled, the clod hung there,
Without it's former breath.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

The body silently was laid,
In Joseph's ornate tomb,
A seeming failure in the plan,
Killed still while in the womb.

But abortion's ugly face enjoyed,
A three day toast to sin,
And then the body rose in power,
When the Spirit entered in.

And now at times when fearful death,
Slams my soul against his gate,
My limbs fail fast, and I lie drained,
But His keeping power is great.

Just as I could not climb a star,
To rise above my sin,
I cannot live a holy life,
Where He's not entered in.

My failure led me to His Cross,
Where with Him I have died,
No more to work, but one with Him,
I have been crucified.

And I entombed without a hope
To raise myself from death,
Rose up when He blew fresh in me,
His resurrection breath.

Many times since first I saw,
The one and only Cross,
I've lain down crushed and threatened with,
Some devastating loss.

Suffering is Part of the Victory Life

But every time hope flickers faint,
And torments wrap my soul,
I clutch the Cross whereon I died,
And rose again as whole.

Some new imparted purpose clear,
Falls fresh upon my ear,
Some intercession newly gained,
Dissolves some other's fear.

I find this life a desperate field,
I daily die, but live,
I wouldn't do it, but I must,
If I'm His life to give.

Intercession I: The Word of Faith

In Romans 3 and 4, Paul lays the foundation that Abraham's faith rested on believing what is humanly impossible and furthermore, what is invisible to the outward eye. God called Abraham to believe when he and Sarah could not have children apart from a miracle. In Romans 4:18 Paul says that Abraham's highest faith came by "calling the things that be not as though they are." I remember a letter from Norman Grubb years ago in which he quoted this verse and added his own comment, "because they really are." For faith, what is real is the unseen. We start out thinking matter is real, but spirit is what is real. "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth" (John 4:24 NASB). If we don't believe that, we will always live locked in to the five senses and the limitations of the external world. But God's word creates anything at will, and with ease, according to His pleasure and promise. We become inner people when faith gets a hold of us. We discard what we see with our natural eyes in favor of what we see with the eyes of our hearts.

Abraham anguished over the seed that God had promised him: how would it manifest? Paul also anguished over another promised seed to come—the restoration of his countrymen as a nation of faith. Both paid the intercessor's price, and as the famous

intercessor Rees Howells proved, an intercessor must get the completion of his intercession. The same remains true for us, when God gives us His word about a loved one or friend. Once God speaks that word into our spirits, we know that He will perform what He promised. Yet, doesn't it also prove true that when we receive that word, all hell breaks loose and appearances scream out the opposite of what we say in faith?

Abraham did not waver in faith, but he also didn't live on a pink cloud with good feelings all the time about his faith. He certainly had plenty of negatives to see through and speak back to. But he didn't waver by abandoning the promise God gave him. Abraham never said, "I'm not running this race any more; I can't win." His feelings of doubt or fear, and even his hope that Ishmael would be the heir—these did not mean that Abraham wavered. They did mean that God trained and perfected Abraham's faith along the way.

God taught Abraham along the way what we all learn—that God does not need our help. He only needs our availability and receptivity. When God promises the impossible, *He* does the impossible. He calls us to do nothing but believe. When we try and try to make a thing happen that God has promised, we only hit the walls of impossibility until we know that only God can do it. In this way our faith comes to completion. God told Abraham that the seed would come from him *and* Sarah, even though their bodies were as good as dead, and He did it.

So too, Paul paid the full price of intercessory faith for his countrymen. He takes on suffering for them so much that he says that he would be separated from Christ if that would save them. Paul would go to hell

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to save them if that were the intercessor's price. In this, Paul enters into Christ's passion for others.

This can not be worked up; no one should try to generate this kind of passion for others. Trying to do so puts us back under the law that Paul says we are out from under. Paul's passion, instead, comes from the Spirit of God having taken him over. God chose Paul for His foreknown purpose.

We do not sit around and think up callings like this. As we walk along, enjoying our freedom in the Spirit in our daily lives, the Lord catches us with some commission and presents it to us. We probably even shrink from it, and if we are not sure that it's the Holy Spirit's pressing of us, we should run, for there are too many "ought to" guilt pressures already. This is not outer law, but inner "can't help it" drive that must sacrifice for another because the Holy Spirit in our body drives us to do it. If we could let the matter go, we would, and if you can let a thing go, by all means, do so. If the thing is of God, you will not be able to shake it: He will have made the matter clear to you by His voice, and He will have led you to speak the word of faith. And He will keep alive in you the drive to complete what He began in you—even providing joy in the suffering. God's comforts and consolations far exceed the price paid to see a thing completed in another.

When God calls us to intercession, He clarifies the calling, keeps us faithful when the cost comes, and brings about the completion in His miraculous way and time.

Intercession II: Expanding Out to the World

One of history's great sorrows is Israel's national rejection of its messiah, Jesus Christ. How could a nation so gifted of the Lord reject the only prophet that ultimately matters? No pathos rings deeper than John's "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not" (John 1:11). Because of this, many commentators focus on Paul's declaration that "He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly but he is a Jew which is one inwardly" (Rom. 2:28-29). They interpret this as a reason to discard Israel as an elect nation of faith.

Doesn't Paul also say in Ephesians that the Cross broke down the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, namely the law, so that the two are one now. And doesn't Paul write the Galatians that there is neither Jew nor Gentile. So what about Israel as a nation? What does it matter? The reason that it matters is that *our* intercessions today for impossible looking people and situations are no different in principle than Paul's intercession for Israel. Fulfillment of an intercession is not based on whether others deserve restoration, it is not based on whether restoration appears likely, and it is not based on how much time has gone by without fulfillment.

Paul could not let go of the blessings of God to Israel and cast them off with finality. He grieved so

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much over his unbelieving countrymen that he said that he would suffer separation from Christ to see them saved. This cannot mean every Jew or every generation of Jews, though God is not willing that any perish. The question is this: "Did God begin a work in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that He intends to complete through His elect nation?" Will Israel at some point nationally accept Jesus as messiah?

Paul's agony for Israel may seem remote to us today. As I said, some thinkers see Israel nationally as forfeit to any future domain because of her rejection of Jesus as messiah. But I find that difficult to reconcile with Paul's intercession for his people because an intercessor always sees the completion of his calling, even if it's initially the seeing of faith from afar, as Abraham saw the celestial city from afar.

The roots of Paul's intercession go all the way back to Genesis and God's promise, "The elder shall serve the younger." Paul tells us that God made this choice before the twins were born and before they had done anything good or bad; so apart from works, God reversed the long-standing tradition of primogeniture, according to which the blessing and birthright went to the first born male. God foreknew that Jacob would be the man of faith, and He elected Jacob based on that. This has the ring of Romans 8: 29: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined."

For Jacob, all his choices concerned the promises of God made to his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham. Jacob consumed himself with these promises and how, since Esau was the elder, these promises could come true. The time arrived when Jacob got the birthright with a pot of stew, and Rebekah later conceived the daring plot to secure Jacob the blessing. We can debate the conniving of mother and

son, and I personally think that Jacob operated at root out of faith and his passion for God. But even if one does concede some working of the flesh, Jacob had his mind set on God's business of blessing the world through a nation out of the loins of the patriarchs.

God intended a nation of faith, but for the most part, only a remnant ever believed. Then as a nation, Israel rejected her messiah. What would happen then? By appearance Israel had failed as a nation, and the Gentiles had started coming into the kingdom in great numbers. As wonderful as that is in and of itself, Paul also addresses another point regarding the Gentiles' inclusion in the kingdom of God. This comes out in the last part of Romans 9 where Paul quotes the prophecy from Hosea, "I will call those who were not My people, My people" (9:25) and the prophecy from Isaiah, speaking of disobedient Israel, "It is the remnant that will be saved" (9:27). God gave the Gentiles the gift of righteousness, which they received by faith; and the work-hard, deserve-a-promotion Jews failed to receive the gift of righteousness because of their trying to do it by their own efforts.

This is classic Paul again. Under the theological complexities of Romans 9, here again is the theme of faith versus works in attaining righteousness. The application remains today in the religious world. Consider the regular churchgoer who has never committed any of the grosser sins and has worked hard to earn respect and influence. Yet the anointing of the Spirit is not there. Now consider the flagrant sinner who is the news of the "I would never do that" crowd. Then someone presents Christ to that person, and he or she lights up with forgiveness and God's righteousness by faith. Someone has just been promoted to the top who doesn't deserve it.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

Israel fits in the same way, for God does not base election on our works, good or evil, but on foreknowledge that our day of faith is coming. So Paul's intercession for Israel has nothing to do with their present history as enemies of the gospel, but everything to do with God's promise. Underneath the difficulties of Romans 9, we end up with the simplicity of what Paul always says about the flesh and the Spirit—about the way of works versus the way of faith.

This is the glory that produces the agony of Paul's intercession for his countrymen, his fellow Israelites, and this leads to the issue of whether as a nation they will experience restoration through Christ as their messiah. Now we look again at Paul's heart for his countrymen. Paul celebrates God's mercies to the Gentiles and sees them also as what God means to finally provoke Israel to enough jealousy as a nation that she reclaim her election by God. For even though Israel is presently the enemy of the Gospel, she is still loved by God because of the patriarchs. Romans 11 says that God still loves the Jews as a nation because of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He still intends to bring into manifestation a nation of believing Israelites as the completion of His promises to the patriarchs.

Paul has already laid a foundation of believing the impossible with Abraham and Sarah. He has also laid a foundation that God's promises are not based on works but faith, so no amount of sin disqualifies a person or nation. The only disqualification is terminal unbelief. So the question is not the worthiness of Israel, but Paul's intercession for them. Did God give Paul an intercession for his nation, leading him to speak a word of faith about his nation?

It's hard to read Romans Chapters 9 through 11 and think that Paul writes only about a spiritual Israel

now comprised of Jews and Gentiles. It's easier to read those chapters and believe that Paul means that God will someday, because of election based on His love for the patriarchs, bring to completion a work in Israel such that the remnant will blossom into a believing nation.

Underneath the historical point lies the issue of the principles of intercession—the calling the things that be not as though they are and the willingness to go to hell for others. Paul says these things about his countrymen, but the point is also relevant to us in every word of faith that *we* speak and trust God to bring to completion. Consider that fact that words of faith spring out of the faith process built up through the first eight chapters of Romans. In them Paul establishes justification by faith, death to sin through the body of Christ, death to law the same way, and on into walking in the Spirit as preparation for taking on the glory of suffering in Romans 8. So now Paul speaks his words of faith and shares his agony, and will we say that what he believed for will not happen?

Faith does lead to manifestation, for what is true in the Spirit does come to manifest itself. We may not always live to see the completion, but somebody will see it because we believe. Some may think that I write these things about Israel because I have a penchant for prophecy, but the contrary is true. I have never had the gift of understanding or discussing future events with much confidence. Therefore, Romans 9 through 11 for years always seemed to me a bit of a letdown after Romans 8. Why the big fuss over Israel that comes up?

The big fuss relates to specific words of faith that something will happen because God has spoken those words through us and made us intercessors as part of

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bringing about His plan. In Romans 9-11, if Paul is not interceding and laying the foundation of how to intercede for others, what is he writing about?

Thanksgiving #1

Think of warring chain saws
without oil,
or boiler walls
at maximum duress—

the careless match thrown
without caution
at leaves crunching
their warnings
underfoot.

Think of two cars colliding
head on,
because no one slowed down
to think,

music furiously wrought
with tension.

Then—
imagine the green leaf,
leaning toward the sun,
its ritual,

beaded after rain,
imperceptible in growth,
lovely with petals.

Nothing just happens.

When obsession distracts,
move immediately
to thanksgiving.

There,
where no motion distorts,
God gives insight
with no
emotion.

Delicate, with ease,
we see truth
where no judgment lies.

The angry pulse startles,
but sips nectar
to radiate.

Quietly, life goes on,
with wisdom.

The Sinking Ship

Do we always rescue a sinking ship?
Can we?
When we try, whom do we love?
Self?

The ship that will sink will sink,
and when the bow
sinks into ocean floor,
whom will its ghost blame?

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

Pale and destroyed,
in the belly of a great fish,
the one offended relents.

Alone,
a cry goes up,
a song, a sacrifice,
a vow made good.

The single heart, united,
sees itself;
then slowly the carpenters,
engineers, and caulkers
play their roles
to a grateful heart.

But the sinking comes first.

Intercession

Intercession is the price you pay for the freedom
you enjoy,
and the freedom you never stop wanting for others.

Intercession is the lamb-chop blessing the eater,
saying,
“Eat enough lamb chops and you might become
one too.”

Intercession is the call you run away from,
but run smack into because the caller won't take
“No” for an answer.

Intercession II: Expanding Out to the World

Intercession is when someone asks, “Do you like what you’re doing?”
and you answer, “No, but I see great glory in it.”

Intercession is laughing while you’re dying—
not sing’n the blues, but sing’n through em,

Intercession is what you do that’s already been done—
Calvary that no one adds to,
but never stops making new branches after its kind.

Intercession is Jesus doing His thing as you again
and again,
because He can’t be any other way,
and you can’t either now.

Intercession is wanting to get your way,
but letting it go.
Intercession is wanting your way
and getting it.

Intercession is knowing what you must do regardless.

Intercession is the body breaking.

Intercession talks like players in the playoffs,
“We can sleep in the off-season.”

Intercession is a very bad investment according to world markets.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

Intercession says, “I love you” when you don’t
mean it,
but know you really do.

Intercession finds a way,
or rather is found by one at the last minute.

Intercession whispers holes through steel,
melts butter in Alaska with a kiss,
holds ground in the wind,
and bathes in volcanoes without sweating.

Intercession reaps at the reaping time,
laughed a thousand times along the way,
suffered losses with dignity,
and says, “I would do it again.”

Intercession is a whole lot more,
but you’ll have to say about that.

After 9/11

The Twin Towers collapsed:
“Is this the end of the world?—
or an almost warning?”

Suddenly, you couldn’t watch a game
for a while,
and a sitcom was almost blasphemy.

In Joel’s book,
weddings in progress
got canceled.

Intercession II: Expanding Out to the World

The Towers melted
and fell.

Briefly, holy books
and the flag
got people's attention—
now mostly the flag.

Everyone has Two Towers
and a Pentagon,
the breach of which
means the end.
This is the song of the individual soul.

One world ended,
another began
the day of Jesus' resurrection:
Babylon fell.

This is also the song of the world;
it too will fall;
the armies will not stop this.

But people of the resurrection
will continue.

These are the ones who will
live forever
and cannot die now.

Life in the Church

Even in a small town, the number and variety of churches amazes me, so doubtless in Rome, the seat of the empire, uniformity within the faith disappeared quickly, replaced by worrisome fragmentation. The same complexity occurs anywhere that a single, national religion doesn't maintain conformity. This complexity is marked by individualism that can be unpredictable and tempt people to wish for enforced uniformity.

In such a free-for-all ethos, some speak in tongues and others do not, but seldom the two shall mix, with some seeing the phenomena as the Holy Spirit, and others as psychological aberration, a deception of the devil, or simply not for our time since we have the "completed Word." Healing occurs sometimes, but not others, with views ranging from accusations of fakery to skepticism that says, "Well, we all will die of something; not every disease gets healed." Others anguish over lack of faith when a miracle does not occur.

Church governments vary from martinet leadership at the top, to boards, deacons, house groups, or the stay at home worshipper who watches a television preacher. Communion is open or closed, or offered with more or less frequency. Then baptism is sprinkle or dunk and according to various insisted on formulas. Can we or can we not lose our salvation? What

about the details of futuristic prophecy?

How Christian can a Christian be if the government isn't Christian? Some think that the true Sabbath is Saturday; do we observe Lent? What about vegetarianism? Church splits give me a headache; how about you?

The devil will always tempt us to try and reign everyone else in to do as we do, with retribution as the consequence for noncompliance; that's his job, and God means for him to do it as well as he does. Paul, wary of the world's tendency to externalize everything into rigid predictability that suppresses the surprises and freedom of the Spirit, exhorts us to find out personally from the Holy Spirit how we can sacrifice ourselves within the body of Christ.

What if I just look at myself and say, "I am one person in a big, spiritual body, where the members are at every different stage of maturity and expressive of a startling array of viewpoints; therefore, what is central to maintaining harmony and fellowship?" Paul does address some problem areas, but surprisingly, he writes his exhortations in Romans 12 through 16, I think, as a form of wisdom literature—like Proverbs—that does not attempt to foresee every contingency, but provides the milieu of the Spirit of Wisdom for the seeker in areas where Biblical sin is not clear cut—in areas where we want to map our experience with the Lord onto others in a regulatory way. Paul talks about the renewing of the mind, and appeals to us to maximize Christ in our fellow believers and respect what each does in faith unto the Lord, mindful first that we walk in faith sacrificially ourselves, sensitive to the fact that the Holy Spirit may restrict one person and allow another freedom on a particular issue not set forth in the Bible as sin for all.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

Our Christian unity cannot be based on possessing the same spiritual gifts, views on government, leadership styles, ecclesiology, method of baptism, dietary rules, etc. Paul gives us our foundation for Christian unity in the first eight chapters of Romans. If we miss that, no amount of exhortation in the following chapters will work, for we will have missed the foundation of ceasing from our own works to let Christ live His life of self-for-others love in us.

Where someone recognizes the Bible as God's single, saving Word, the Fall of mankind through sin, the need for Christ's atoning blood sacrifice and bodily resurrection to save us from hell, the body death of Christ, and the life of walking in the Spirit by faith so as not to do the deeds of the flesh, we can know our common bond of Christ in us and allow for the faith of those with differing views on other points.

The Softer Side

We live by the sweet, dripping Blood
of Christ,
first for us,
then for others.

We live by the gentle Spirit,
like a boat without oars,
gliding on a river—
first for ourselves,
then others.

What chance does kindness have?
More than not.

Handling Stress

Television menus offer numerous “fix up” shows on how to handle anything from minor leaks and repairs to remodeling rooms, or even whole houses. If something can’t be fixed with pencil and paper, I probably can’t help. But ironically, when it comes to people and situations, I spent a lot of time and energy trying to fix things. In this area, direct knowledge from the Holy Spirit and timing mean everything. Often, the person that waits on these looks like he or she does not care about a crisis.

Once, a family member, seeing the long toll of stress from marital separation and my new posture of simply going to work every day and praising the Lord, enjoying His living word to me, said, “You mean you’re going to do nothing?” I replied, “The Lord’s word to me is this: “Don’t obsess about your family; just look at me.”

I first heard that word driving in my car in Charlotte, NC after spending six weeks in a state mental hospital and then going to a vocational rehab house in Charlotte, which basically meant a boarding house with a small staff. When I heard that still, small voice of the Holy Spirit, my first impulse was to say, “You don’t understand,” but I did not resist, and the Lord’s voice said, “Thank me.” As I did, light came on. I got a hold of some praise music and began playing it in

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my car driving around Charlotte, and to my surprise and delight, I would lose myself in the Lord. Understanding about my problems ceased as my primary concern.

Sometimes relief wasn't quite that simple: crushing feelings of depression would threaten to overwhelm me, but the Lord brought to mind the words "sacrifice of praise." In those times, I simply went on and praised the Lord anyway, even though at first it seemed impossible to do. Yet, I was learning the great secret of using stress as an opportunity to slow down and receive the word, "say nothing and do nothing." Deliverance always came then apart from all my former methods of trying to fix things.

All of this took place in 1994 to a bottomed out guy that got so low, he didn't even have a Bible any more and couldn't bear to read it anyway; because every time he opened it up, it seemed to fall open to a doom and gloom passage. I knew about my sins and the devil's power in my life, but only now had the Lord showed me His way through for me.

I still live by praising God and waiting for His living word to me on any given situation. Until His word comes, even if I look like a fool, I wait and give thanks, for the Lord fixes things in ways and according to timetables that make our calculations look way off. For example, I remember how depressed I was in 1992 and 1993 over my family situation: I just wanted my family reconciled again. One day, my friend Sylvia Pearce said to me on the phone, "Brian, let God take all the time He needs: you don't want them back half-baked do you?" And of course, I was half-baked too. Little did I know that all the cookies come out of the oven right on time. As painful as that may sound personally, when we praise the Lord and wait on His word

in a situation, He gives us amazing rest. I've lost count of the times that people have asked me in shock or disbelief how I can have peace in certain situations. Often, even well-meaning Christian friends that I would least expect a downer from would say, "You need to get on with your life," meaning that I must be lonely and in need of a "relationship." I learned not to take that personally either, but to keep my eye on the One who directs my life.

In an old Watchman Nee book—I don't remember which one—he tells a story of a lifeguard that let a man almost drown at the beach. This looked cruel and unfeeling, but the lifeguard later explained, when Watchman angrily questioned him, that if a lifeguard goes in too soon after a drowning person, the one drowning possesses too much strength and can drown himself *and* the rescuer by fighting. Sometimes it's hard to let people wear down until they are ready to hear: we want them to see so badly!

I learned this basic lesson in 1994, and I'm not going to tell you that I haven't been tempted many times to repeat the same folly that depressed me before, or that I haven't hit the sign, "Pass this point and you're in sin territory." Also, the Lord has increased my insight through the years. But on this basic point, I have to say that I have not outgrown God's first leading in Charlotte to look to Him and praise. Solitude became my friend, and I learned what it means to sit by myself and enjoy the Lord.

Sure enough the cookies started to come out of the oven. In 1998, Sylvia and her husband Scott, along with Sharon Roy, had just been down from Louisville for a little retreat at my house in Hopkinsville over the Fourth of July weekend. I had hired a maid to clean the house, since batching it there for a year made

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it kind of depressing to look at.

My wife and I had not been reconciled in seven years because of a long-standing conflict over how to live the Christian life. That may sound odd, but that was it: we always reached an impasse, and we had lived separately for so long, that the Lord showed me the beauty of complete sexual abstinence. I would think to myself, “So this is what a monk experiences.” My sexual life consisted of a wet dream or two a year, but I experienced an amazing holy sense of my masculinity as well as a new virginity from the Lord.

Sylvia, Scott, and Sharon left, and the next day, lying in bed, the Lord spoke to me from the parable in Matthew 18 about the servant that owed the huge debt, and how when forgiven, he nonetheless extracted payment mercilessly from one owing him a minuscule amount in comparison to what his master had forgiven him. The Lord said, “When your wife comes home, don’t even think of being mean to her at all after what I have forgiven you.”

I had been thinking about Tandy a lot because I had found several lost cassettes—from 1971 and 1972—that she sent me while I was deployed by the Navy in the Western Pacific. Listening to those tapes made me realize that I had always missed seeing her: I had only seen the person I needed her to be and missed the person God made her as. I fell in love quietly with the real Tandy, not the one of my imperative.

God’s word to me about the unforgiving servant was not condemning, but firm, and I simply agreed. To my complete surprise, a day later, I came in from work to find a message from my wife on the answering machine. I could hear something in her voice I had not heard in years. I called, and what both of us

had tried to do in earlier years, all melted away in a moment only the Lord could create. We've enjoyed a wonderful fellowship since our restoration, first to the Lord, and then to each other!

The same hands off approach I've been describing continues as the Lord's leading in stressful situations. If the Lord tells me to say or do something, I obey in faith; but I find that He regularly brings me back to that same beginning of freedom that He did in 1994. Recently, stress multiplied again for me with a different situation, and in the course of my daily reading, a verse quietly lit up in the middle of the story about the Exodus.

Before citing the verse, however, let me say first that Moses' request to Pharaoh repeatedly concerned the freedom for Israel to go three days' journey into the wilderness to worship God according to His command. Had Pharaoh granted this request, doubtless Egypt would have experienced incredible blessing. We know the Story, however, and that God even hardened Pharaoh's heart ten times, and Pharaoh hardened his own heart ten times, and the two go together in the mystery of human freedom and God's sovereignty.

Now I cite the verse: "The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent" (Ex. 14:14 NASB). The KJV says "the Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace." The Exodus represents the singular, redeeming act of the Old Testament, picturing as well, our redemption in Christ. The enemy angrily pursues, only to drown in destruction while the saints walk on through water that stands apart for them in miraculous walls of protection. We know from Romans 8 that we do not always receive physical deliverance, though often we do receive deliverance in the outer.

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Yet, the Lord always has His place of refuge that we walk into and through by faith.

Tight situations come up regularly, and the Bible says that they will continue to. Pressed down with the stress of a certain situation, I went to bed recently, disturbed and anxious—feeling the beginning of depression symptoms again. “What do I do?” “What do I say?” “How will this ever work out?” “What if so-and-so says such-and-such?” This was old stuff in a new form. As I was waking up, the Lord gave me a word: “This is a shakedown; buckle your seat belt and ride out the turbulence.” That sounds dramatic and heavy, but the word was light and joyful, with a tone of, “That’s all this is; just buckle in and ride through without ado.” I bounded out of bed. Life seemed effortless again, and it is!

#1141

I cried out to the rocks,
but they fell on me.
I cried out to the stream,
but it drowned me.
I cried out to the clouds,
but they were too high.
I cried out to the wind,
but it went past me.
I cried out to the tree,
but it wouldn't move.
I cried out to the grass,
but it turned brown.
I cried out to the sun,

but it got too hot.
I cried out to the birds,
but they built nests.
I cried out to the fire,
but it went out.
I cried out to my lover,
but she could only hold me.
I cried out to myself,
but I could not hear.
I cried out to nothing,
and laid down in peace.

Simplicity

Thank You Lord
that You took a
complicated devil
out of a plain heart
and put Your simple word
back in.
At that I did not say
“Why?” or “How?”
but “Yes.”

Your love pleases me.
Other loves mean
intricate steps
of never ending work—
the puzzle never solved,
nothing ever full,
the telos always
one more mile away.

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But with You,
in an instant,
all is there *and* arriving
in every step.
That same anticipation
fills each second
of the imaginary clock—
the one that's just a prop
for the "already is."

Wars fought and lost
are later won.
Wars fought and won
are no more wars.

Wars move past
negotiation
to a single lawn chair,
under a single sky,
with a single, soft word heard,
in a single ear,
of a single Cross.

The Secret

The secret?
extraordinary tension
that turns routine.

The strings of a violin
shiver
if they don't know
their settings by design.

Stretched over seasoned wood,
and knotted to a bridge,
they find themselves
wound on the finest pegs,
only to wait.

They see each other
but arrive at perfect pitch
when the universal note says,
“You are now right.”

Does each string feel
its own tension?
At first, yes,

but when the bow hits,
the violent movement
from the outside
produces melody.

That’s where the string
can lose itself.

The other strings say,
“We too.”
How can one string, though,
know another?

It can’t.
It’s tension is its own,
and the bow strikes it alone;
but the music is for all.

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Have you ever heard
of a violin string
with mental illness?
That only happens
in real life.

But where purity
reduces everything
to simplicity,

I mean where normal people
finally crack up,
and the rest of us
find peace,
the best music
has always been heard.

The Pursuit

by Lani Wilson

I have always been drawn to the words of the Song of Solomon. The romantic, poetic rhythm of the words first grabbed my attention years ago, but their full impact just recently sank in. I *am* the Shulamite woman. I have felt the tension of this romantic pursuit for many years and questioned why I continued to embrace a relationship that I desperately desired and at the same time feared.

The Song of Solomon is a love letter, and it is very personal. For me it is the beginning of wisdom pertaining to the very foundation of life—Love. What woman, or man for that matter, would not want to receive a beautiful love letter? This is in fact what God has given us in this very small book in the Bible.

The inspired words of the author take us from falling in love to *being* in love, with all the mountains and valleys in between. Knowing that you are loved by God is one of the most life-changing events one can ever experience. Oh to live in those early stages of that love, and yet this world is proof that something pulls us to let our fickle emotions take us down a different path. That curious glance we are cautioned not to take has created the problem, but rejoice: God sent a remedy for that condition, and the remedy is Christ.

Our finite minds cannot grasp the essence of Love.

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It undoubtedly is what every living, breathing creature is seeking, and yet we run in circles chasing this quiet mystery. It is a relationship of exposure: stripped naked, nothing held back, I calmly give myself to Love, and all that is false fades into the background until all I see is my Beloved.

God is always calling us to see another facet of who He is and who we are in Him, and so this poem, this “Song of Solomon”, was perhaps a little difficult to see through, but always intrigued me. I knew God was using these words to show me something deeper. The recent death of a young twenty-year-old boy that I have known and loved all his life became the circumstance God used to drive in more deeply just how much He loves me and how much I have distanced myself from that love.

Within a few short days spent in much grief and despair, God opened my eyes to realize that He is working abundant life from the inside out. When Brian sent me his beautiful and insightful interpretation of the “Song of Solomon,” I literally fell to my knees. As I stood beside the coffin of this troubled young man, I felt the intensity of these words. I saw a lifeless container, nothing at all that resembled the boy I knew.

I listened to the many testimonies of his friends and family, sharing the anguish of a boy crying out for God’s love but never able to embrace what was always inside of him. A wave of revelation swept over me that Life really is in the Spirit. Why do we look everywhere else? Of course I knew that in my mind all these years, but now I know it in the Spirit. I see so clearly what the enemy tries to do—keep us apart!

Many people rush to the altar to believe that God absorbs sin, and thank you Jesus for that; but how many

of these trusting souls become One with that life? The conception of sperm and egg produce the seed; you can believe that all day long, but life is only produced when they are joined together, and the two become One.

The realization of this union has taken me a long time to grasp, but all of a sudden—on what seemed to be a dreary, dark, and sad day in June—with a flash of revelation, I surrendered into an intimate relationship that I never thought possible; a true love affair. I guess I am seeing what God has always seen and it's beautiful!

The Song of Solomon

The Song of Solomon provides a multi-layered poem that celebrates everything about the ecstasy of falling in love, the psychological intricacies of courtship, the fears and deep satisfaction of wedded consummation, and the knotty issues surrounding romance and reality in daily life. The poem speaks to all lovers since Adam and Eve, and beyond that to our union with God.

The Song acknowledges Solomon as the poet, quickly followed by the maiden's opening line, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth; for thy love is better than wine." The maiden has two things on her mind—kisses and wine. This is human desire without apology: the Bible knows no such spirituality that views humanity with suspicion and curtailment—making the appetites unclean. Sin is the culprit, not the appetites. The maiden also compares her lover's reputation to fine ointments, a metaphor perhaps in mind when Paul says, "We are a sweet savor of Christ" (2 Cor. 2: 16). Some girls like bad boys, but in this Song, the virgins adore Solomon and will run after him if he but draws them, preferring him even to wine.

The maiden, however, feels some hesitation, for her history with men is hardly kisses and wine: her brothers treat her as a farm hand in the vineyard, making her sweat under a hot sun that turns her black.

Dreaming of princes, romance, and beauty, she fears what Solomon will think when he sees her and she wonders, “Will he be angry too?” “Will he see me as common?” The Shulamite brings to mind David, who experienced that same anger from his brothers when as a young shepherd, and the eighth son, he aspired to fight in Saul’s army. Jesus Himself faced the same challenge from the synagogue teachers when they ridiculed the idea that the messiah could be a Nazareth wood-worker. We ask the same questions about ourselves: toiling away, hurt by the world’s anger (really the devil’s) we wonder, “Does God really love me? Is He just another angry male in control who keeps us under the Genesis curse of pain and toil that never produces rest?” But God’s favorites start out as ordinary people, and they remain ordinary people by whom God does extraordinary things.

Responding to someone’s drawing always produces feelings of vulnerability as we let ourselves go to respond. Solomon draws the maiden, and she runs into his chambers where she finds a connection between her rustic life and Solomon’s royal life: she sees her sun-blackened color—like the tents familiar to her in the field—in Solomon’s curtains. Royal and rustic fit together. Black here does not connote sin but the opposite of white—white standing for the spiritual or ethereal and black for the contrast of earthiness. Gaining confidence, she praises her blackness, but still hesitates, thinking all of this too good to be true. Has she made a foolish mistake by running to his chambers at his beckoning? Will he make a mockery of her? Now she needs confirmation from him that she has not let down her guard only to be disappointed and humiliated by someone toying with her. We feel the same way when we run to God: is He too spiritual to accept

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our earthiness? Does our humanity really fit in union with His deity?

Desire overcomes the fear of vulnerability and leads to pressing for confirmation. The Shulamite first seeks validation in the pastoral setting of Solomon's flocks, for if Solomon confirms her among his family and workers, they will not treat her as cheap or as an object. She will be in with them, and with awe and respect they will protect her and tend to her needs. Unlike her situation at home among her brothers, she will fit in. Solomon responds to her desire for confirmation with far more than her request: he also offers her jewelry, a seat at his table, and says, in modern terms, "I would rather have you than a fleet of Rolls Royces." She's at the top! No slow working and earning her way up.

The Song also captures the spirit of first love in its romance, with the tension between the heavenly and the earthly: Solomon's palace represents the heavenly and the maiden's rural roots illustrate the earthly. How will they unite? How will their first flush of love sustain itself? Sitting at Solomon's table, his fragrance is like an anointing to her, and the metaphor of her breasts awakens all the aspects of love—the emotional, the nurturing, and the erotic. First experiences with the Lord are often like this, when His anointing is fresh to us: He offers an eternal home with Him, and He intoxicates us with acceptance and praise. We feel good! Notice also that Solomon praises her eyes; she looks radiant and peaceful, like the contentment of doves. This look in her does not originate in her, but in him, but she takes it and radiates it back to him. He is handsome, praises her, and has a royal house; what more could she seek? Similarly, our radiance does not originate in us, but in God: overwhelmed with His

Spirit and blessings, we radiate His own love back to Him.

Newly gained confidence opens up the freedom to praise ourselves rightly without fear. The Shulamite speaks, not in palace terms yet, but in the rustic terms she knows from Nature. The union of the earthly and divine bubbles in infancy as she calls herself the “rose of Sharon” instead of a swarthy vineyard worker. She now speaks of herself as he sees her. In this first flush, she drops her fear and walks right into Solomon’s view of her, transformed by how he sees her. As he speaks, she renews her mind by what he says, rather than looking at herself the way her accuser brothers formerly looked at her. Spiritually for us, Solomon and the Shulamite represent something we learn to do—we see ourselves as God sees us and not as the devil sees us with his condemnation. We find ourselves increasingly drawn to God’s word about our loveliness to Him in Christ, and we find ourselves wiser in recognizing the accusations of the devil.

When we first begin to praise ourselves rightly as God sees us, He echoes back with affirmations more than we could expect. Solomon mirrors this when he calls the Shulamite, a “lily among thorns,” meaning “you have no idea how beautiful you are to me”—akin to the “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” of Ephesians 3:20. The news sounds too good to be true, which is of course the typical offense of the Gospel, for the maiden does nothing to earn Solomon’s love, and she does not offer a worthiness of her own. Doubtless, she physically appealed to Solomon under her dark, weather-beaten exterior, and he saw what oils and the softening of love could do for her. Much more, God, who made us beautiful, sees what His oils and the softening of love can do for us.

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When we find ourselves drawn to someone, however, we can experience the fear of losing ourselves in the overwhelming experience of our suitor. In rustic speech, the maiden calls Solomon an apple tree with comforting shade and delicious fruit. She reverses Eve's deception and eats from the tree of life, enjoying the shade from the burning heat of her own exhausting works; she also finds his fruit satisfying and producing the ecstasy of life. Overcome with this ecstasy, she senses herself losing control—possibly overcome by his spirit to such an extent that she might lose the freedom to offer herself in choice; but God never overcomes us to the extent that we lose our own capacities to love Him with. We always maintain our ability to take things in faith and be taken by them. The maiden's swoon leads her to the brink of losing her humanity—something Solomon does not wish. Some lovers like giving maidens potions to lose consciousness in order to ravish them, but Solomon wants her to maintain full consciousness in her flush of love so that she can possess herself, to offer herself, in the designed manner of mutual love. As Paul says, "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Cor. 14:32).

The initial fear of losing the self can lead to a defensive posture. The Shulamite swoons, and following her swoon, she retreats behind a wall of lattice-work. She hears her lover like a gazelle and a stag, but she does not have the confidence to go out and join him in his frolic. The gazelle and the stag represent beauty and potency in the freedom to live all out without fear; spontaneity governs, and fear drops off along with self-trust. God, however, desires this freedom, not only for Himself, but also for His bride—the joining of the divine nature and humanity such

that we live in heaven and on earth simultaneously with no rupture between.

A sensitive lover does not barge in, but approaches gently in order to invite trust. Solomon takes the initiative to approach her wall and peer through her barrier, summoning her to the life he knows and enjoys and wishes to share in union with her. Lacking the boldness to go out to him on her own, she hides behind her wall in the hope that he will call her out into the springtime he continually thrives in—a constant Eden unfolding, both to his own delight, and the delight of sharing with her. For God, it is not enough that He enjoy all out freedom in His creation, not that He is not sufficient unto Himself; but love seeks an other, so the Lord revels in us. He knocks at the door, inviting our response.

A gentle, inviting lover affirms the fading away of coldness and separation and accents the easing into new freedom. Therefore, Solomon describes spring beauty to the Shulamite—the passing of winter, the singing of the birds, and the color and fragrance of spring. He does this in order to stir up faith in her to come out of herself and join him. She does not yet see or hear any of what he describes except as faintly experienced through the lattice on the other side of her wall. The freedom he enjoys like a gazelle and a stag appeals to her behind her walls of separation: everything in her longs increasingly to live as he does and with him, and he continues to entice her with his word about how lovely things can be for her. But she will never experience all of this inside of herself; she must let herself go and step into the springtime he describes. As she does that, what she risks to take then takes her. This vignette speaks also of the nature of faith and the way God calls to us. First He offers Himself avail-

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able, enhancing His desirability to us until we do desire and then respond.

Response however, may not be immediate. The Shulamite does not respond all at once, and Solomon continues to draw her out of her isolation so that she can leap about with him. He describes her as a dove hidden away from predators, in a cleft of the rock, out of his sight, and he asks to see her form. At first, this seems too much, for she thinks of her blemishes—perhaps even warts, or what she considers warts. Undaunted, her lover presses her to believe her beauty, while she at the same time asks him to catch the foxes of her hesitation. His offer sounds too good to be true, and she fears that when he sees her in the full light and for any length of time, her luster in his eyes will fade: the foxes will eat away at his first enthusiasm, leaving him disillusioned with her. To come out and run like a gazelle with him—to let him see her as she really is—all this would prove heartbreaking if he then said, “I thought you were more beautiful; I thought you would please me more.” I remember the times when Tandy, my wife, used to say, “People wouldn’t like me if they really knew me.” We feel that way toward God even, until we become convinced of His love and safety, His pleasures and security.

The Song calls this transition period the time of “tender grapes,” a time vulnerable to the foxes. With the Shulamite, a silence follows Solomon’s entreaty, possibly as she looks at him and trust rises in her, for she says, “My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies” (2:16). Apparently, rather than argue with her about her feared imperfections in herself—knowing that she would only continue to counter his praise of her with the “but, but, but” of her blemishes—he retreats to his garden of lilies and seeks no

other lover. No turmoil of hers will deter him from waiting quietly among his lilies. Similarly, God does not break us down with manipulation or control, but leaves us to ponder behind our walls of separation until we see the quietness of His Spirit that waits our joining Him.

Part of the pondering is the decision to come out of self. Not yet ready to come out herself, the Shulamite nonetheless wants to know that Solomon again ranges the mountains as a roe or a young hart. His continued play as such keeps alive in her the stirring for the freedom she desperately wants, but she still hesitates to fling herself out into this freedom. Her fears war with her increasing desire, until nightfall comes, when from her isolation on her bed, she takes her step of faith into the dark night. Really, the city rests secure with the watchmen, even in the dark, but she experiences the frantic first uncertainty of faith when she comes out from behind her walls. The night is also metaphoric, for spring has not yet taken her. Everything still looks like night and tension, but she will find herself taken by what she now takes. We too, fret in our isolation until we can't stand it anymore, and we step out into what looks like darkness to us but is the first form of faith.

In the tremors of first faith we hope to know ourselves immediately taken by God as He first appeared to us in His wooing, but first we run into the watchmen—wondering, “What is going wrong? Should I go back inside my walls of protection?” This is God’s way of letting our faith stretch itself out all the way, for this makes us fully human in our choice making. Rather than swallow us up without our own operation of faith, God extends, to full tension and agony, every faith muscle in us, because our being taken will

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only be as good as the striving with which we take. This does not mean a work, as if not grace: it means a self fully alive to take something!

Faith includes persistence of desire. The maiden persists until she finds herself taken: “I would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me” (3:4). She wants to know further if he really accepts her: does he accept her origins, her family—the condition out of which she came? We know that he does, for she again falls into a love swoon, appealing to the daughters of Jerusalem to help her so that she can give of herself without losing her sense of consciousness. Similarly, we too, fear losing ourselves in God until we become convinced that no other way works other than letting go; and like Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, we trust that we will live.

Union is the reward of faith. The reward of the Shulamite’s faith arrives with her wedding. Solomon appears out of the wilderness in all his royalty, with frankincense and myrrh for the soul that finally leaves the walls of self, persists through the out-of-control feelings, clasps the one taken, and ends up taken by God.

We all know what follows a wedding. Now Solomon initiates the move toward consummation by praising the Shulamite in graceful, romantic terms. He praises her eyes, hair, teeth, lips, speech, neck, and breasts. The tone communicates peace and serenity—grace and strength—assuring her of her perfection. The masculine image of her neck as the tower of David, “whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men” (4:4) may not sound romantic, but it sets her forth as the prominent motivation and homing for his strength. He does not intend to lead an

army of warriors in conquest apart from her as the motivation—apart from her as the resting-place of his weapons. God the warrior similarly beautifies us with the ruggedness of His Cross and the military beauty of His victory over the devil; He says to us, “You are the center of My highest conquests; I fight all battles to secure My union with you so that no enemy can disrupt.”

Having given her this assurance, the groom’s passion rises. He does not seize her to ravish her, however, but speaks to her of his excitement over her at the prospect of their imminent union. He assures her of her perfection and invites her to descend from the mountains with him, meaning that their love will not only taste of the heavenly and exalted, but also of the earthly and sensual. Even the smallest detail of her appearance elevates his pulse in anticipation. His mention again of frankincense and myrrh pictures God’s ravishing excitement in the incarnation—the union of the earthly and the divine.

Having slowly wooed her with assurance and verbal foreplay, the groom intensifies the eroticism of his words: “honey and milk are under your tongue” (4:4). But he refrains from describing her from the waist down, because he has not yet seen her. Avoiding a sudden move to ravish her, he entices her to offer herself, comparing her to an exquisite, locked garden. Not only that, he calls her a garden of living waters, a metaphor Jesus uses with the woman at the well and also in John 7:38: “He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” The groom invites his bride to let her living waters flow out to him. By now we see the Spirit’s excitement over us!

The Spirit never forces us, however, but affirms

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us continually until we say, “Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden [...] Let my beloved come unto his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits” (4:16). The passion and mutuality of love occurs without the slightest forcing. Norman Grubb used to say that God doesn’t change our wills: He changes our wants, and our wants drive our wills.¹

The glorious consummation takes place, and the ravished groom speaks with the utmost satisfaction in having enjoyed his bride’s delights (5:1). Those next to him say heartily, “Eat, O friends; drink, yea drink abundantly, O beloved.” There is no enjoying love too much. God as well, enjoys His union with our humanity—spirit, soul, and body—all of us. He does not find the slightest disappointment with us. Bemoaning the flesh accomplishes nothing, for the problem does not arise from flesh in the created sense, but from flesh not enlivened by the Spirit. Walking in the flesh, in New Testament terms, does not mean that the flesh is evil, but that the flesh is powerless on its own. It means continuing to seek life from the flesh, apart from the Holy Spirit. Walking in the flesh, therefore, means making the flesh the domain of life, rather than the Spirit. Once we know ourselves as in the Spirit, we live ravishingly all out!

Now that the groom has expressed his satisfaction with the delights of his bride, how does she handle his enthusiasm over their consummation? Some irritation has led her to back off from her husband’s affections; therefore, she dreams that she locks him out after retiring to bed. Perhaps she does not understand the other interests that keep him from arriving home at the expected time: his kingly mission sometimes presses him to commitments that lead her to feel neglected or not loved as much, whereas, we see that his

enthusiasm for her remains at its highest pitch, even though his intercessions do demand attention. Equally, we discover that God's love for us is not diminished even though He attends to others besides us. At first, this hurts the ego.

The hurt ego often responds with ambivalence; the Shulamite puts him off, but then rushes to the door after him, only to find that, after an unsuccessful struggle with the lock, he has gone off. What is his disposition? Full of fear, she rushes out into the streets to find him, with her countenance paled from its earlier radiance. She is draped in a shawl. No wonder the watchmen wound her: she does not look like herself. Who is this fearful, frantic woman hidden behind a shawl?

The bride's irritated and fearful responses resemble our experience when tedious routine and wounded expectations set in after spontaneous anointing seemed like it would go on forever. This does not mean that spontaneous anointing does not go on forever, but that the context for it becomes suffering—the shocks of all the daily dyings we step into. This awakening can lead some to abandon love, but the bride, instead, experiences a new wave of love sickness. Unable to find him, she asks the daughters of Jerusalem to tell her husband of her love sickness. Therefore too, we learn to walk in the Spirit's anointing in the sufferings He appoints for us.

As we learn the new anointing that comes through suffering, others goad us into acknowledging again the beauty of the Lord. Cleverly, therefore, the daughters of Jerusalem ask the Shulamite why her husband deserves more accolades than any other does. To this question, she bursts into a stream of ornamental praise, speaking of him as friend and lover. She now praises

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him as he has praised her all along and her fervency rises to match his. Love meets love in equal passion as she sets aside her irritations and expectations. Whatever he is doing that appears to take him away from her must still excel in every way, because she sees him for who he is—both to her and in the eyes of others that see his glory.

This new awareness of God's nature opens our hearts to the number one way to handle our negatives. Suddenly, when asked where he is, the Shulamite realizes where Solomon goes under stress. Rather than fight at the locked door of their home, he steps back to meditate in his lily garden. A wise husband, he chooses peace with God within his own soul, rather than a plunge into self-defense and argument with her. He leaves her to the Holy Spirit to discover again her love for him, despite the things that do not suit her at first.

Solomon's approach here gives us the key to responding when angry and things do not go our way. We learn to go inside to the Lord, into His lily garden, and lose ourselves in Him. Then we know the freedom to say nothing or say something as the Lord leads, free from the slavery of angry compulsion. God Himself operates this way: His nature is ever at rest without the fretful turmoil we have known as anger and falsely ascribed to God as the nature of His wrath. His wrath and love are the same; Satan is the one projecting all the condemnation and seething.

The Spirit Himself is the husband of husbands. Never argumentative or in turmoil, never condemning or self-centered, He remains at perfect rest, knowing His own good plan and what we need to go through in order to wear down and accept the serenity with which He manages His universe. When He seems aloof

or unresponsive to our wishes, His love and wild enthusiasm for us have not diminished, but He may be drawing us into a larger focus.

The bride's move to serenity concerning her husband's character and activities brings forth his praise for her again: he compares her to the two chief cities of Israel—Jerusalem and Tirzah—and an army in full color, with banners, that evokes terrific awe. By this, he draws her spiritually into a picture larger than the individual self—inclusive with him in his dominion purposes. Yet he does not minimize her individual beauty; he once again modestly avoids the erotic, while centering on the overwhelming power in her eyes and her rich, pastoral beauty.

With a little stretch, we can even find humor in the poem. Solomon goes down to “the garden of nuts to see the fruits of the valley” (6:11), i.e. the strange varieties that make up any community. Who hasn't struggled with the concept of “normal”? Norman Grubb often talked about the “silly self.” Quirks make life interesting, bringing relief when we accept them as God's special way as us. Then we loosen up toward all the other fruits and nuts in the kingdom.

Having said that, we all know too, that the normal hope and expectation of life is reproduction. Solomon went out to “see whether the vine flourished” (6:11). Jesus' words, “I am the vine, ye are the branches” (John 15:6) also imply the desire to see fruit. So when Solomon continually plays back and forth between royal, palace imagery and pastoral imagery, he also opens up for us the tension of the incarnation: “How can the divine and the human unite so that neither loses distinction, yet a union emerges?” Just as Solomon loved to lose himself in pastoral settings, yet equally knew his royal, military home, God seeks the

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full pleasure of both the divine and the earthly. Why sacrifice either? God enjoys His royal courts above, yet loves to express Himself in us; we love our earthly domain, yet love to see ourselves translated into His spirit realm. Opposites not only attract, they unite.

When we live in two realms or two dimensions simultaneously, the mind can go back and forth between the two. When Solomon makes a trip to his vineyard, his focus turns back suddenly to his royal chariots and his leadership as king. Our vine-branch union with God, through Christ, works the same way. As we rest in Him, we suddenly find ourselves energized for work. The pastoral imagery Solomon describes reflects the quiet center from which we find our strength. This contrasts to the frenzied approach to work that used to leave us drained and without hope. Now, knowing how to rest, we move back and forth between heaven and earth in our incarnational living.

The Shulamite bride has observed this renewal process in Solomon and follows him in it, leading the queens and concubines to lament losing her from their gaze. Solomon therefore asks why they look at her as at “the company of two armies” (6:13) or “as at the dance of the two companies” (NASB). The word translated is *Mahanaim*, an important clue. In Genesis 32, Laban departs Jacob’s camp after angrily chasing Jacob for departing back to Canaan without notice. For Jacob, the problem of Laban is now behind, but memories of Esau’s threats lie ahead. In preparation, fearing Esau will kill him, knees no doubt knocking, God’s angels meet Jacob. He therefore names the spot Mahanaim, because he divides his large family and herds into two camps so that if Esau destroys one, the other can escape.

Mahanaim also represents two camps spiritually—the natural and the supernatural, fear and faith. Jacob enters the travail that makes him into Israel, a prince of power with God and man (Gen. 32:28). Esau looms ahead, but retreat back to Laban would mean bondage and loss of dignity. Nothing remains but to wrestle with God all night until someone prevails. The angel could not prevail. Jacob would not quit until he found the power of God in his weakness.

With this background in mind, Solomon asks the queens and concubines why they look at the Shulamite as if she is Mahanaim. He means that she too has prevailed with him, as Jacob prevailed with God. Just as Jacob could no longer bear living divided within himself at the onset of fear, the Shulamite too has faced her insecurities, taking on the strength of Solomon in their union. She too, becomes a person of strong initiative and power—one who will not retreat into her old divided consciousness toward him. This opens up dazzling creativity and passion in her. The application to us in union with God means a shift of emphasis from God making Himself available and desirable, to the persevering faith on our part until we know ourselves taken by Him and kept.

This kind of faith excites passion in the original pursuer: the Shulamite's new boldness excites Solomon both erotically and spiritually as he begins to praise her, starting with her feet and working his way up to her head. As he does this, he combines obvious aroused desire for her with metaphors rich in mystical meaning. Praise of her feet suggests her new ability to walk anywhere without fear. Despite her rustic upbringing, he calls her a prince's daughter, implying a new birth in her consciousness. Then he moves exotically to her thighs, but in a way more rich

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than just the physical. This could allow for an allusion to Jacob's out of joint thigh from wrestling with the angel (Gen. 32:25). Solomon also calls the joints of the Shulamite's thighs "jewels, the work of a cunning workman" (7:1). God had broken the Shulamite's strength as well, lending her thighs the beauty of jewels. God loves us with that same passion and praises us as His jewels for the Mahanaim we go through to know our union with Him.

The rich, mystical images continue. Solomon calls her navel a goblet of liquor and her belly a heap of wheat set about with lilies, and he finds her constantly intoxicating. Wheat set about with lilies may not sound romantic, but the liquor and the wheat imply harvest time and the complete satisfaction of abundance after all of the work from sowing to reaping. But the labor of producing this wheat has become a sport—a work that takes place from rest and not striving apart from the Spirit. The picture is not just wheat and not just lilies, but both together in a union signifying work from rest—work from competency—work that we savor.

Solomon continues with what, by now, we see as a familiar mix of pastoral, regal, and military figures of speech, having worked his way from feet to head. This order, for all of its erotic excitement, equally shows tremendous restraint that refuses to overwhelm the receiver, but proceeds with mounting erotic and spiritual tension toward the consummation.

Solomon is now ready to act. He indicates this by saying, "How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!" The palm tree imagery that follows signals foreplay, anticipating the swaying grace of her availability and the ambrosial ecstasy of her pleasures. He still, however, does not seize upon her, but leaves

her initiative for a response—one in which she does not describe him in the same energized, physical way that he describes her, but one in which she celebrates what she values most—that she is her beloved’s and that he desires her; and she relishes his desire for her now without fear.

Following her affirmation that she feels secure with him, she invites him to tour a garden to see if the early grapes have appeared and if the pomegranates have budded. This shows her continuing move from the early spring of awareness to full fruition: she has even stored up pleasures for him! The escalating dance between them tells us as well of God’s pleasure in us and of ours in Him—a union not less powerful than the interplay between Solomon and the Shulamite.

The Song of Solomon does not give us the details of consummation; these exist privately between lover and beloved, and spiritually, the same is true: what belongs to you and God alone remains unique to you and Him. Having yielded in such a complete way, however, the Shulamite experiences vulnerability and the fear that Solomon will despise her after she has given herself up completely: how can one surrender that much to be taken over by another’s desire? But she did—experiencing momentarily a shiver of fear at the loss of herself as a separate self.

This moment of fear leads her to strangely wish Solomon to be like a brother to her: “O that thou wert as my brother” (8:1). But wait a minute; they were the ones that expressed anger toward her and made her work hard in the vineyard. But at least they were her brothers—familiar to her, and those she justifiably and morally could remain aloof from. Now, however, although Solomon is not angry with her—not conscripting her to bondage—she fears that men are

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men: will he prove in character to be as her brothers? If so, why did she give herself so freely without defense? She will need her old defenses to protect herself again. Cynicism tempts her: at least her brothers already despised her, and she knew that. Why should she now suffer new contempt from onlookers who ask, after the honeymoon, “What did you expect from a man when the courtship ended?” In the Christian life, Satan expresses this same kind of cynicism, based on his own nature of appearing to offer freedom, only to bring people into bondage: he uses people briefly in lust and then discards them. God, however, does not turn against us after using us, but offers full security that never ends.

We can know the difference. The Shulamite catches herself, not wilting in fear, but desiring to take Solomon to her mother, who instructed her as a child and whom she wants Solomon to respect and learn from as well. The Shulamite does not mention her father, but her mother—urging the need for her lover to gain maternal wisdom. But he already possesses it as shown by his demeanor toward the Shulamite every step of the way so far. He quickly assents to her now, and his readiness and look of knowing tell her that she is on safe ground with him: he too, loves her mother in her humble setting, easily sitting at her mother’s feet, drinking the pomegranate juice.

The Shulamite’s mother represents the wisdom of the Holy Spirit that incarnates Christ in the lowliness of our humanity. When feelings of fear arise at the majesty of God, we do not deny His majesty, but we appeal to God’s wisdom in birthing His son, first in a poor virgin, and then in us by His Galatians 2:20 indwelling.

The Shulamite pictures our response to the amaz-

ing union of God with our humanity, responding in two ways: first she experiences another passionate swoon and second, she leans on her lover without reserve. Aroused again, she feels overwhelmed and again asks the daughters of Jerusalem not to prematurely awaken love. By now we recognize a pattern: she recognizes the ever readiness of her lover's passion, but also acknowledges her own need for escalation without getting overwhelmed and losing consciousness; she must remain a person throughout the whole process—one possessing all the faculties of love.

Spiritually, we experience the same thing: "God, don't give me more than I can take; I'll black out." Also, if we surrender and lose ourselves in Him, we may not reemerge distinctly—a terrifying threat if we do not trust Him. Having had a sense of self before our union with Him, we may tend briefly to hold on to that old sense of the self because of the boundaries we felt secure with in it.

We do finally let go, however, without reservation. The Shulamite lets go and leans on Solomon, indicating her trust. We too, settle into leaning on God as we discover Him as the all in our all. Thankfully, as we lean into His deity, we find Him equally at home in our humanity—the two not in conflict. God smiles as He drinks pomegranate juice in our forms.

Having surrendered to the union of humanity and deity, strong words now come from our mouths. The Shulamite utters a fiery invocation to Solomon, unlike anything in her previous words to him. With images of herself as a seal upon his heart, death, jealousy, and fire—along with threatening floods and the selling out of all goods for love—she fixes herself in her side of the union, seizing upon him to affirm the same. Having gone this far in the loss of herself (to

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find a new identity in union with him) she touches the primeval quake of her being—where in the terrible contractions and expansions she has undergone, there is no going back to her former consciousness. So it is with God: once we let go of our former sense of independence—moving into the consciousness of two-ness in one-ness, one-ness in two-ness—any retreat to our old consciousness closes off. We find ourselves in a life beyond our control. Really, we never had control; that was Satan's lie, as personified by the brother's treatment of the Shulamite growing up and in her responses to them.

The sealing of this union affects others around us who do not know it yet, but now find themselves stirred by desire. The Shulamite's brothers see Solomon sipping pomegranate juice and learning from their mother—a declension from his royal state, for he is a king. But they also see their sister elevated to royalty in him. Smitten by the union of the royal and the pastoral, the divine and the human, the brothers now see their other younger sister for who she can be and desire to treat her like a queen in the making. So also, when we see God's acceptance and promotion of someone we once treated angrily, as an object for toil, we see the key for ourselves as well. Race, class, and gender disappear as criteria for anything. This is wisdom, and she is our mother as Paul says (Gal. 4:26).

The poem ends triumphantly with the Shulamite powerfully affirming who she is in her lover's eyes: she sees herself as he sees her—a wall, with breasts like towers, and one having found favor and peace in him. The seal of her confidence comes out in her speech about commerce, a metaphor for life in the present world. Customarily, an owner would let out a vineyard for a fee. Now, having risen to competence

as a manager, she tends a vineyard of her own (in contrast to her former life of working for others and not herself). She earns a fee and gives it to Solomon, but not out of compulsion. This is a free will gift. She has moved in consciousness from slave, to friend, to bride in oneness with her lover, knowing no walls of separation. Fully conscious of herself as a person, she chooses to love. This is also who we are with God and in the fullness of His desire for us.

With all this freedom, we find ourselves now courting God! The Shulamite illustrates this when she now incites Solomon: “Make hast, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices.” She lacks nothing now and we too lack nothing in God.

I am a Fish

The air is wet.
I breathe it.
I am a fish.

I am not really a fish,
but a man of paradise,
where everything
is water
and of water
and by water.

DID YOU EVER THINK OF THIS?

I drink,
I swim,
I play,
I go to school,
I play in every
combination of
rhythmic water,
the genius
of a fin as it moves.

Color and shape
go with the water,
and the water would be pure
without them,
but the water
shares its ecstasy.

The air is wet.
I breathe the water.
I am a fish.
I am a man of paradise.

Notes

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Appendix

Romans is probably the most written about epistle of Paul's, partly because of its length, but also because of the way Paul combines a historical and theological comprehensiveness in presenting the plan of salvation. Right away, many today would say, "Oh yes, the 'Roman Road.'" The number of Gospel tracts based on Romans may be countless. Where else does the New Testament so carefully trace our lost condition to our saved condition?

Romans breaks down into five major sections, each of which can be looked at both positively and negatively. On the negative side we have these five: 1) the sins of all 2) the sin of all 3) suffering as a part of the victory life 4) the dilemma of Israel's unbelief 5) problems in the church.

Positively stated, we have these five: 6) justification by faith 7) union with Christ 8) God's plan for glory in suffering 9) God's sure election based on His promise to the patriarchs and Paul's intercession for Israel 10) the renewing of the mind.

The plan of this book follows the broad outline of Romans, but does not intend exposition of the book. Rather, using the general outline of Romans, this book offers an overview of the Christian life from lost sinner to saint with a renewed mind—one who discovers the majesty of God; the love of God; the sacrifice of God in the Cross; and the full provision of God for the forgiveness of sins, for temptations and trials, for the mind of a conqueror in suffering, for an integrated view of Jew and Gentile, and for life rubbing up against others in the church.

