

**"She stared death in the face and  
laughed..."**

Life is suffering. This is true for everyone to some degree, and it impacts us in every phase of life from birth to death. No one escapes unscathed. Many try to cope with this fact by avoiding suffering and discomfort as much as possible. Their lives revolve around the prevention of pain.

But some, instead of hiding from suffering, find something worth suffering for. **This book is about those people and that something.**

Something Worth Suffering For: The Ideas That Drive Crosstree Music explores the process of discovering and embracing that which gives meaning to even the worst of life's hardships. It shows how doing so will:

- Generate the courage to pursue things that matter
- Produce a genuine care for others that leads to fulfillment
- Provide depth to the most important relationship one can have
- Reveal one's place in a universal community of committed companions
- And manifest hope in even the most hopeless of circumstances

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

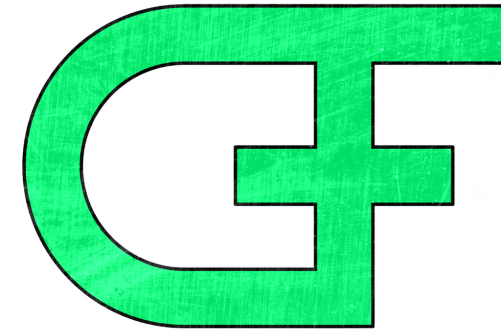
Andrew Bibb is the songwriter, lead singer, and guitarist for the rock band Crosstree. His ideas have been field tested in combat in the Middle East, relationships at home, and the common struggles we all face. Find his other writings, music, and more at [www.crosstreemusic.com](http://www.crosstreemusic.com).



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Something Worth Suffering For

Andrew Bibb



# Something Worth Suffering For

The Ideas That Drive Crosstree Music

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**SOMETHING WORTH  
SUFFERING FOR**



*The Ideas That Drive Crosstree Music*

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## DEDICATION

To Dad, for giving me that vital start in the faith.  
To my wife, for helping me stay true to that faith.  
To my brother, for making Crosstree music a reality.  
And to all my friends who have had a hand in the completion of this  
book.  
Thank you.

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## INTRODUCTION

Crosstree music is guitar-driven pop rock with an edge. This book is an explanation of what, or rather who, that “edge” is. It is the meaning behind the music. This book discusses explicitly what Crosstree music explores poetically. For free music, a free audio version of this book, and more Crosstree content, visit [crosstreemusic.com](http://crosstreemusic.com).

## CHAPTER 1 – FAITH OF THE MARTYR

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. – Jesus<sup>1</sup>*

*We are all destined to be martyrs because our destiny is not merely to experience joy while remaining the same person, not merely to fill our existing capacity for joy. Rather, it is to increase that capacity infinitely by a bursting of our seams, a shedding of our snakeskins, a transformation from caterpillars to butterflies. We are not just to imitate Christ but to “put on Christ,” to “be in Christ,” to “share in the divine nature.” – Dr. Peter Kreeft<sup>2</sup>*

She stared death in the face and laughed.

Whips shredded her flesh. Sticks and fists pounded her skull and broke her bones. They attacked her violently from morning until evening without interruption. They did not have the energy to break her all at once, so they took turns. Even as the daylight began to fade, however, she had yet to give in.

This young, fragile slave girl had just undergone a series of tortures that would have broken many able-bodied warriors. She had run the gauntlet of pain and, so far, refused to be broken. But her assailants were only getting started.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:10.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*, Kindle ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), 150.

Her name was Blandina. She was one of a group of believers in Jesus Christ who were oppressed for their faith in the second century A.D., in the part of the world that is now Lyons, France. She was physically the weakest of those chosen to suffer, so much so that her fellow believers feared that she would withdraw her public allegiance to Christ.<sup>3</sup> As it turned out, she was the most resilient of them all. After her initial day of torture and a brief return to prison she was led alongside three other believers into an amphitheater.

As the others were savagely mutilated, Blandina was hung from a wooden stake as wild and starving lions were released into the arena. Instead of begging for mercy or cowering at her impending doom, Blandina asked God to strengthen her companions. Her only desire was that they remain faithful until the end, as she was committed to. Her display of uncommon courage fortified her fellow believers. They endured in their commitment to Christ until they were finally killed, proving that they possessed the purest kind of faith. Blandina, however, remained untouched by the lions. She was, for the second time and to the astonishment of her persecutors, returned to prison alive.

The following day Blandina was brought to the amphitheater again, this time alongside a fifteen-year-old boy named Ponticus. They were exposed, she for the third time, to a variety of sadistic tortures. They were repeatedly urged to renounce Christ by their assailants, who promised to end the suffering if they would only let him go.

One such torture was called the roasting seat. The victims were

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<sup>3</sup> John Behr, "Life and Death in the Age of Martyrdom," in *The Role of Death in Life, A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Relationship between Life and Death* (James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2015), 80.



placed in an iron chair that was heated to extreme temperatures, scalding the flesh of its occupants. They faced many other tortures such as this, but yet again Blandina leveraged her strength of faith into encouragement for Ponticus, urging him to remain strong and embrace the end like a man. This he did, and Ponticus died clinging to Christ, whom he had come to love more than life itself.

The persecutors, frustrated that Blandina still lived, wrapped her in a net and threw her to a wild bull to be gorged and trampled to death. She was beaten and tossed mercilessly, but she survived even this. Finally giving up on death by torture, her disgruntled assailants were forced to end her life with the sword.<sup>4</sup>

Having spent some time as a combat arms soldier, I have had the opportunity to work and train with some very hard, tough men. Yet the feats of mental and physical endurance I have witnessed cannot compare to those of believers who epitomize toughness and tenacity under persecution. All of the trials and hardships that I have faced over the course of my entire life cannot compare to a moment of suffering that many of these believers have endured simply because of their reliance upon Christ.

Blandina and these other endurance athletes of the faith showed through their actions that they were convinced that Jesus is the savior he claimed to be. Outsiders could doubt the truth of their beliefs, but not their sincerity. Their faith was by no means perfect or complete. There were many theological and philosophical concepts they did not understand or even know about, but what they knew they practiced.

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<sup>4</sup> John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. Harold J. Chadwick (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2001), 15.

When it came down to it they knew what mattered. They had found something worth suffering for. But what was it? They had come to know someone worth dying for. But who is he? And what about him made the suffering worth going through?

## THE NATURE OF FAITH

To understand their faith, first we must understand that faith needs an object. Faith is, put simply, reliance on someone or something. Faith is depending on that someone or something in any or all aspects of our lives. To talk about faith apart from its object is nonsense, like leaning on thin air for support instead of a wall. That which we depend on is the object of our faith, so the quality of our faith is determined by the quality of the object in which it is placed.

Christ-centered faith, which is simply, “Reliance upon and trust in”<sup>5</sup> him, is no different. It is dependence upon him in any and all aspects of our lives. Blandina and the others knew that Christ is absolutely reliable and so refused to disavow him.

But reliable for what? What was Jesus offering that these believers needed more than rescue from torture and death? What did they consider worth sacrificing everything else to gain? What did they really and truly desire? And is it what we desire too, maybe without even knowing it? To answer this, we must return to where it all started.<sup>6</sup>

When God created Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, he did not place them in a harsh environment, but a paradise. They had

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<sup>5</sup> Nijay K. Gupta, "Faith," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1-3.

everything anyone could want: sustenance, companionship, purpose and peace. He did not deny them any of these, but gave them complete mastery over all they could see. Humankind was to be the executor of his will, the “steward-master of creation,”<sup>7</sup> his image-bearing ambassadors, commissioned to expand his kingdom on earth. Most of all, Adam and Eve were to be the start of his human family, purposed to enjoy God and be enjoyed by him.<sup>8</sup>

God also planted two trees in the Garden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life, the physical representation of the “life-giving presence of God,”<sup>9</sup> was not denied to them. They were free to enjoy life itself without limit. This is indicative of the very nature of God in that he held back no good thing for their pleasure. This truth shaped Adam and Eve’s entire consciousness at the beginning: God is our Father, he is good, he is the object and source of everything we desire. We need nothing else but what he provides and are free to enjoy his creation.

They did not gradually come to this conclusion but understood this truth from the beginning because God’s goodness was all they knew. They were capable of perfect obedience to their Father because they were entirely dependent on him. They did not view this dependency as a burden or imposition because they had no reason to distrust him. They were designed for that state of dependence and every good thing flowed from it. It allowed for uninterrupted intimacy with Love himself.<sup>10</sup> What

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<sup>7</sup> Michael S. Heiser, “Image of God,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, Kindle ed. (Blind Spot Press, 2018), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Enrique Baez, “Tree of Knowledge,” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*.

<sup>10</sup> “God is love,” I John 4:8.

could be better?

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was, however, forbidden to the human couple. It seems that, as their reliance upon their Father seemed so natural and desirable, they initially felt no need for whatever knowledge this tree could bestow. It was not until Eve was presented with the idea of being her own god, independent of her Creator, that it caught her interest. She was promised insight and wisdom while at the same time the integrity and reliability of her Father were subtly called into question. She was being elevated in her own mind while her need for him became less and less significant.

Eve reached a point of decision to either reassert her inherent need for God or to rely instead on what she could control without him. She chose to pursue knowledge, which gave her the perception of independence. Adam, who was with her, made the same choice.

In eating of the tree Adam and Eve abandoned God as the object of their reliance and instead chose to depend on their own ingenuity. Rather than entrust their souls to their caring Father they, to paraphrase Dr. Louis Markos, selfishly chose to call their souls their own.<sup>11</sup> They “chose to cease being adjectives for the glory of God and to seek, instead, to be” their “own self-sufficient nouns.”<sup>12</sup>

And thus, the fall of man was complete. Adam and Eve gained what was promised and became self-absorbed beings seemingly independent of God. Only then did they recognize the reality of their situation. The One they had just severed themselves from was the only thing they truly

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<sup>11</sup> Louis Markos, *Lewis Agonistes: How C.S. Lewis Can Train Us to Wrestle with the Modern and Post-Modern World*, Kindle ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

and deeply desired.

When they were fully dependent upon God there was no need to feel ashamed because his purity was theirs. There was no need to clothe themselves because they were clothed in his approval. There was no need for concern of any kind because they were provided for by the Creator.

This was no longer the case. There was nothing to rescue them from their self-imposed isolation from Love himself. And now “evil exists because people abuse God’s wonderful gift of freedom and use it for self-gratification, revenge, and the mirage of autonomy.”<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Markos explains the consequences of this decision:

Having rejected God’s higher laws, we immediately fell prey to the lower laws of nature originally created to control the animals. Our soul ceased to be the lord of our body and became its prisoner instead. As a result, our body fell sway to base and destructive appetites and to the suffering and pain that naturally ensue when our lusts are given the upper hand. Even our mind, once free of all phobias, fell sway to material, psychological forces. Without the soul to guide it, our body waxed rebellious and thus opened itself to natural decay. Our mind, on the other hand, unable to handle its own lusts and those of the body, began a long and tortured process of repression and denial which, in time, formed the unconscious mind.<sup>14</sup>

This is the state of man without a savior.

## VANITY AND IDOLATRY

The capacity to enjoy God’s presence is the same capacity to feel the emptiness of his absence. Much like being away from someone you love, it is the memory of that lost connection that makes being apart

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<sup>13</sup> Heiser, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Markos, 102.

miserable. It would be worse not to want their company at all. “Our best havings are wantings.”<sup>15</sup> But, like a soldier who leaves his or her spouse to go to war, not knowing if there will be a reunion at the other end is the worst kind of separation.

Despite the passage of millennia since the incident in the Garden of Eden, we have not lost the craving to be with Love himself. We have been very creative at coming up with temporary distractions but these reprieves are short-lived and unsatisfactory at the deepest level. These distractions, whatever form they take, fail to deliver on their promises when it comes to satisfying our deepest yearnings. We were not made for them, and so they are inadequate. King Solomon discovered this the hard way:

I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure...Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.<sup>16</sup>

Many lives are spent dancing around and never discovering this universal truth. Our instincts have been corrupted to pursue these indulgences as necessities instead of what we really do need. Entire industries find their existence legitimized by providing apparent solutions to our problem of unfulfilled desire. That these solutions are always temporary works to their advantage because it keeps their clients coming back for more.

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<sup>15</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis and Walter Hooper, Kindle ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 565.

<sup>16</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:8, 10a, 11.

Dr. Kreeft asserts “that our deepest failure” is:

...the failure to satisfy our deepest desire. To cover up our failure, we compensate with other successes: we feed the other animals. We have a wonderfully efficient animal-feeding machine: that prolific diversion factory, that endlessly self-perpetuating game we call our modern technological society. It keeps us too busy ever to hear our nightingale, for we hear that voice only in silence.<sup>17</sup>

This failure to recognize our Creator as the object of our desire is the true nature of idolatry, or idol-worship:

Idolatry in its larger meaning is properly understood as any substitution of what is created for the creator. People may worship nature, money, mankind, power, history, or social and political systems instead of the creator who created them all. The New Testament writers, in particular, recognized that the relationship need not be explicitly one of cultic worship; a man can place anyone or anything at the top of his pyramid of values, and that is ultimately what he serves.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever is at the top of one’s “pyramid of values” is what he or she relies upon for meaning, purpose, identity, and existential validation. This determines the whole direction of his or her life.

This substitution of cheap thrills for divine love as the object of our dependence is the essence of sin. The apostle Paul wrote that sin is “whatever does not proceed from faith.”<sup>19</sup> The writer of Hebrews warns against having “an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”<sup>20</sup> Sin is not any singular, isolated act, but finds its origin in idolatry. It is the failure to entrust our deepest desires to the only one who can see them fulfilled.

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<sup>17</sup> Kreeft, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Romans 14:23.

<sup>20</sup> Hebrews 3:12.

This narcissistic tendency is the root of the problem of evil. Dr. Markos observes that:

...evil and suffering are not so much a punishment for disobedience as they are the natural outgrowth of our decision to call our souls our own. When we refused to live in direct communion with and full reliance upon the One who created us—when we chose to go our own way and to amass our own private happiness—we catapulted ourselves out of the eternal richness and harmony of the Garden and into a fragmented world of disharmony and decay in which time is always running down.<sup>21</sup>

Our inclination ever since declaring independence from the divine has been to replace fullness of happiness with lame excuses for pleasure.

## FAITH AND WORSHIP

Jesus himself was tempted in the same way just before he began his teaching tour of Judea.<sup>22</sup> The purpose for this was to prove whether he would make the same mistake as Adam and replace the Creator as the object of his dependence, or remain united with his Father despite what he would have to suffer if he did.

The author of I John writes that every desire that seeks to replace the pure desire of unity with God falls into one of three categories: desires of the flesh, desires of the eyes and pride of life.<sup>23</sup> It was with these same temptations that Jesus was confronted. But he did not consider union with his Father something to be bargained away. It was to be guarded at all costs. He succeeded where Adam failed and looked to his Father to be his source. He illustrated the truth that “the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God

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<sup>21</sup> Markos, 103.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13.

<sup>23</sup> I John 2:16.



abides forever.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite his status as God-incarnate, Jesus had to resist the same self-destructive inclinations we experience and purposely guard his relationship with the Father. These inclinations, though when followed are completely unfulfilling in the long run, always seem necessary and logical at the time. Jesus, however, kept his true desire in mind rather than be distracted by fleeting ones. Not only was he fighting to protect his own relationship with the Father, he was safeguarding the only path for the rest of humanity to be reunited with him as well. Jesus continued to promote the Father’s will through suffering and death, until by his resurrection he became the way by which mankind may be reunited with the true object of our deepest desire, Love himself.

The difference between Jesus’ success and Adam’s failure was, in the end, a matter of reliance upon and trust in the will of the Father. Adam refused God’s guidance, and this led to separation from the only One able to offer true peace and satisfaction at the deepest levels. Jesus, despite temptations and trials, made his will subservient to God’s will and depended on the goodness of his Father to see him through.<sup>25</sup>

In the same way, those like Blandina who suffer for Christ do so not out of conceit or stubbornness, but simply because they realize that anything worth having is found in him. They realize what Solomon did not until the end of his life, that nothing accomplished in this world means anything in the long run unless it is done through, for, and with him.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I John 2:17.

<sup>25</sup> John 8:28.

<sup>26</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:13.

In recognizing Christ as the only path to the satisfaction of our deepest longing, reunion with our loving Father, these believers give us a picture of the purest form of worship. Worship “expresses an awareness of God’s—and thus our—proper place in the order of things, and it also transforms us into what we were designed to be.”<sup>27</sup> The purest form of worship is to abandon oneself completely to his will, to rely on him utterly and without apology, and to present our “bodies as a living sacrifice.”<sup>28</sup> This gives him the opportunity to act as our provider and care for us as our Father. It is very easy to tell God how great, wonderful, loving, and powerful he is. It is a completely different matter to rely on those attributes.

Dr. Michael Heiser explains, “Worship is therefore not something that originates with us. We are *invited* to respond to God’s goodness and love.”<sup>29</sup> Love is who he is in his very essence, so to deny God the chance to come through for us, to rely instead on something or someone else to give purpose to our lives and define our identities, is the ultimate insult to him. When Adam and Eve lived in reliance on God’s goodness they worshiped him simply by recognizing their need for him and acting accordingly. Their worship ceased when they withdrew their trust.

## THE DIGNITY OF CHOICE

So, why put the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden in the first place? It was the only way Adam and Eve could show

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 30.

<sup>28</sup> Romans 12:1.

<sup>29</sup> Heiser, 84.

their reliance on God.<sup>30</sup> In other words, if there were no Tree of Knowledge in the garden then man would have no choice but to fully rely on his Creator. The relationship would have been involuntary on man's part, and thus imperfect. He would have no choice but to depend on God's goodness. In allowing man to choose to trust him or not God created a mechanism by which the relationship could be voluntary for both parties. He gave man the dignity of choice.

Any fulfilling relationship is built on a foundation of trust, and the greater the trust the deeper the relationship. This is why people who have gone through difficult situations together, such as combat or shared loss, build a strong personal connection with one another. They have learned to depend upon each other. Realizing the other person's reliability results in a deeper trust and, as a result, a deeper relationship. Depth of relationship is not a result of how much you know about someone, but how much you trust them and they you.

In putting the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden God posed a simple question to man: "Do you trust me?" It was a decision between man's reliance upon or independence from God. Mankind faces the same decision today.

When Adam and Eve replaced God as the object of their reliance mankind did not cease to desire him. "The fact is we still retain the knowledge that our proper good is to surrender to our Creator, even as we continue to refuse to offer that surrender."<sup>31</sup> The problem with the deep longing we feel to be reunited with divine love himself is that

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 18.

<sup>31</sup> Markos, 104.

instances of its showing are sporadic, momentary, and not immediately identifiable. They are also unrepeatable, because they do not originate from us in the first place. Dr. Markos asks:

Have we not all experienced sudden moments of suspension during which our souls and minds are lifted up by a yearning for something other, something rich and strange, something (and this is the vital part) that our natural, merely human world cannot supply? What can possibly be the source of this yearning, this moment of joy? It certainly cannot be something from our own world since the very nature of the desire points the one experiencing it beyond the limits of the physical and the earthly. The desire must itself flow from a reality that transcends the physical, one that can act as a legitimate source and origin.<sup>32</sup>

These deep-seated yearnings are referred to by the Psalmist as “desires of your heart.”<sup>33</sup> They are good because it is these deepest of desires that long for God. They are essential to our very being.

Self-destructive lusts, on the other hand, are God-given desires that have been twisted, perverted, and torn out of their proper contexts. These are “desires of the flesh.”<sup>34</sup> Everything that exists was created by God, which means that even things that are considered evil are perversions of things that God originally created as good. Our desires are no different, as “every desire we have has a legitimate satisfaction. God gave us no illegitimate desires. We make them illegitimate when we use them in the wrong ways.”<sup>35</sup>

Whether we like it or not, desire is the driving force behind everything we do. Dr. Kreeft writes that “our deepest desires constitute

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>33</sup> Psalm 37: 3, 4.

<sup>34</sup> I John 2:16.

<sup>35</sup> Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 76.

ourselves, decide our identity. We are not only what we are but also what we want.”<sup>36</sup> Even those things we do not enjoy we do for the sake of our deeper desires. For example, no woman enjoys the process of childbirth but mothers are willing to endure it because of their deeper desire for a child. A liberal arts major in college may not want to take that mandatory math class but does so for the sake of earning his or her diploma. So it is with the things we really want.

The problem of unfulfilled desire is at the center of every religious and philosophical system, and each one attempts to solve it differently. Josh and Sean McDowell observe:

Knowing that unfulfilled desire brings great misery, Eastern pantheistic religions see desire itself as evil. The essence of these religions is to get rid of all desire so that one no longer really wants anything. They hope to achieve a state in which they have absolutely no desire for anything at all, and only then can they step out of this evil existence and become one with their non-personal god and cease to exist as conscious individuals.<sup>37</sup>

In contrast, the message of the gospel, or “the good news about salvation,”<sup>38</sup> is that through Christ we can return to the purity of these untainted desires and, through reliance on him, allow our Father to bring them to their fulfillment. Jesus “offers not merely a way to cope; he offers the real answers to our deepest longings.”<sup>39</sup> We are not expected to ignore our desires, but surrender them to the One who created them.

This is what the apostle Paul means when he asserts that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart

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<sup>36</sup> Kreeft, 44.

<sup>37</sup> McDowell and McDowell, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Heiser, 56.

<sup>39</sup> McDowell and McDowell, 114.

that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”<sup>40</sup> To confess Jesus as Lord is to declare him “supreme master”<sup>41</sup> over our entire being, including the desires we feel are impossible to satisfy. Paul was echoing Jesus who, when he was asked, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” replied, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”<sup>42</sup> Jesus summed up everything God wants from humanity into one idea: “Trust me.” Everything else flows from that.

Since evil desires are simply distortions of pure desires, the fulfillment of the pure desire kills the evil desire, as there is nothing left to pervert because the core desire is fulfilled. The more we come to understand ourselves the more we find that our absolute deepest desire, and the root of all others, is to be reunited with our Father. Even the heart of one who has not embraced faith yearns for the depth of affection that can only be offered by the Creator himself, even if he or she refuses to acknowledge it.

It is the willingness to embrace this reality that separates believers from those who reject Christ. It is through reliance on Christ that we become capable of reunion with God, and growth in faith leads to a more perfect ability to experience his love and share it with others. We grow in the realization that he, Love incarnate, was our desire all along. It is not impossible for anyone to receive God's goodness. We start out in the faith by relying on Christ. We grow in the faith by relying on him more.

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<sup>40</sup> Romans 10:9.

<sup>41</sup> M.G. Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), "Lord".

<sup>42</sup> John 6:28-29.

It is the proper identification of this desire for reunion with God that produces a lifestyle of submission to him. If we realized just how much we want him we would not waste time with those things that we now, in our immature view of reality, think we want. This immature view leads to chasing things that we think fulfill our core desire but never do. The key is to identify and embrace this overwhelming need for intimacy with and approval by God. Through reliance on Jesus, we already have it. The more we grow in faith the more deeply we are aware of this truth and the more we begin to demonstrate it in the way we live.

## POINTS OF CONNECTION

As a kid I loved anything that remotely resembled a sword or, even better, a Star Wars lightsaber. When I was four or five years old my dad and I were browsing the Wal-Mart toy section and we came across some cheap (but awesome) red, white and blue extendable plastic swords that looked like the candy-cane displays you see outside of barbershops. As a self-commissioned Jedi-in-training I had to have one. Our family was not financially well off at the time but Dad, seeing my excitement, bought two of them for us. When we got home we engaged in one of the most epic melee battles ever to take place on Fort Rucker, Alabama, and we met again on the field of battle on several occasions.

Dad could have seen those swords as objects of a little kid's petty greed or as a frivolous financial decision, but instead he saw my desire for them as a point of connection for us. It was a way for us to spend time together. In buying them for me he not only gave me what I wanted but also used them as a way to strengthen our relationship.

God, to an infinitely greater extent, sees our desires in the same way.

Our deepest wants are the places where God can connect with us and we can come to know him experientially. It is where he can show how much he cares about us and where we can show our appreciation for him.

From that point of view it is easy to see why things such as pride, self-reliance, idolatry, fear and sin are so offensive to God. They rob him of the opportunity to show us how much he loves us. He wants to do this by fulfilling those desires that he put there in the first place, in his time and his way.

Since my experience with the barbershop-striped swords my desires have matured. At the time my focus was on the swords and the fighting. Now the swords are nowhere to be found but the memory of time spent with my dad remains.

As we mature in faith we learn to stop getting hung up on the mundane goings-on of life, and instead we begin to approach all of life's happenings, whether good or bad, as opportunities to get to know our Father better. They become opportunities for us to rely on Christ and be surprised yet again by the intensity of his love. The desires of your heart are infinitely important to God. How important they are to you will determine how seriously you take your faith.

We should take care not confuse reliance with laziness. Even in the Garden of Eden Adam was commanded by God to develop and fill up the Earth. That was definitely work. The difference was in the desire to do it. God created Adam to want to do the things that God had in store for him to do. Adam probably worked as hard as any of us ever have but he enjoyed every second of it because he was doing what God had designed him to do, and he was doing it with his Father.



Because of Jesus this promise has been restored to us: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”<sup>43</sup> Dr. Heiser elaborates:

Our perspective is tainted by the flawed, damaged world we experience. But the Bible doesn’t portray our final destiny as a boss-employee relationship. It’s a father-child relationship. We, God’s children, work with him alongside our siblings, whether human or divine. We image God together now the way we were intended to do. And the brother we all look up to most is Jesus. All of God’s children have been made like him, the ultimate imager of our Father.<sup>44</sup>

We have hard work to do as sons and daughters of God but it is fulfilling because it is what we were made to do.

What about the martyrs we discussed earlier? What about the desires of those who suffered and died for their faith? I am sure that most of them had no aspirations to die brutal deaths, yet that is where their commitment led them. Is this a blatant failure on God's part to provide for their desires?

I have no doubt that those who have died for their faith would rather be where they are now than anywhere on this earth. When a believer passes away only his body dies. His spirit goes to be with his Creator. Since pure desire is a thing of the spirit it does not die either. The desire goes with the spirit to him in whom all pure desires of the heart are fulfilled. King David, a man well acquainted with both the pleasures and pains of mortal life, confidently sang that in the Creator’s presence “there is fullness of joy,” and at his “right hand are pleasures

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<sup>43</sup> Ephesians 2:10.

<sup>44</sup> Heiser, 49.

forevermore.”<sup>45</sup>

C.S. Lewis echoes the psalmist in *The Great Divorce*, affirming, “I believe, to be sure, that any man who reaches Heaven will find that what he abandoned (even in plucking out his right eye) has not been lost: that the kernel of what he was really seeking even in his most depraved wishes will be there, beyond expectation, waiting for him in ‘the High Countries’.”<sup>46</sup> I believe it is safe to say that desire-fulfillment is happening on a cosmic level for those believers who died depending on Christ.

Instead of seeing death as the end we should see it simply as a transition to a much sweeter state of life, a state where there is nothing opposing our intimacy with God and thus no impediment to the fulfillment of that deepest of desires. Like Paul, we should “consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”<sup>47</sup> True hope is found in viewing our lives here on earth through that lens.

## ENDURANCE

Sociologist Rodney Stark recognizes, “The fundamental problem facing all religions is one of credibility. Ultimately, all religions require an act of faith—that adherents be willing to believe in a supernatural realm that is not directly observable.”<sup>48</sup> He also contends:

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<sup>45</sup> Psalm 16:11.

<sup>46</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 466.

<sup>47</sup> Romans 8:18.

<sup>48</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion*, Kindle ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2011), 150.

Of all the proofs and all of the testimonials, nothing approaches the credibility inherent in martyrdom. How could mere mortals remain defiant after being skinned and covered with salt? How could anyone keep the faith while being slowly roasted on a spit? Such performances seem virtually supernatural in and of themselves. And that was the effect they often had on the observers. Christian viewers could “see” that the hand of God was on the martyrs. Many pagans also were amazed: the distinguished physician Galen wrote of Christians that “their contempt of death...is patent to us every day.” Accounts of martyrdom make frequent mention of pagans having gained respect for the faith from having observed or even having taken part in, the torture of martyrs. The pagan onlookers knew full well that they would not endure such tribulations for their religion. Why would so many Christians do so? Were they missing something about this strange new faith? This sort of unease and wonderment often paved the way for new conversions.<sup>49</sup>

Glenn Siniscalchi agrees:

Early [Christian] worship attracted outsiders because of the way in which it changed its adherents. Another reason why it spread so quickly had to do with the adversarial encounter of other religions which drove and shaped the movement. Martyrdom was ‘the most vivid form in which devotion to Jesus was expressed in the earliest centuries’. Dying for one’s beliefs indicated to the public on a large scale that some Christians were willing to go to any length of penalty to remain faithful followers of Jesus. Of course, this made outsiders curious and attracted them to investigate the new Christian heresy.<sup>50</sup>

This pattern of persecution resulting in the numerical growth of believers persists. Philosopher and theologian Dr. William Lane Craig observes, “A reading of a missions handbook such as Patrick Johnstone’s *Operation World* reveals that it is precisely in countries that

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>50</sup> Glenn Siniscalchi, "Early Christian Worship and the Historical Argument for Jesus' Resurrection," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1048 (2012): 724-5, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01447.x>.

have endured severe hardship that Christianity is growing at its greatest rates, while growth curves in the indulgent West are nearly flat.”<sup>51</sup>

No evidence of the truth of Christ’s divinity is more compelling than those believers who appear weak but endure hardship past the point of physical breaking. They believe and are evidence of the fact that Christ can be relied upon for strength, peace, and purpose, even in the darkest and most hopeless of circumstances. In fact, they are so convinced of his love that they embrace this suffering, knowing that only inexplicable joy awaits them on the other side of death. Even the most skeptical critic must admit that the conduct of these believers makes a convincing case for the truth they profess. As former U.S. Secretary of State Lewis Cass is credited with saying, “People may doubt what you say, but they will believe what you do.”

The key to understanding these believers’ actions is to recognize, as Dr. Craig explains, that “to know God, the locus of infinite goodness and love, is an incomparable good, the fulfillment of human existence. The sufferings of this life cannot even be compared to it. Thus, the person who knows God, no matter what he suffers, no matter how awful his pain, can still truly say, ‘God is good to me!’ simply by virtue of the fact that he knows God, an incommensurable good.”<sup>52</sup>

This endurance is the quality that separates those who really believe from those who try to fake faith. Endurance comes through the deliberate practice of reliance on Christ. Jesus placed a much greater emphasis on the endurance of one’s faith than its sophistication and

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<sup>51</sup> William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, Kindle ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 163.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

equated spiritual depth to one's ability to endure. For example, in the parable of the sower Jesus makes a clear distinction between the stalk of wheat that sprouts immediately and the one that takes its time to grow its roots down deep before producing grain.<sup>53</sup> The one that springs up quickly dies quickly, but the one that takes its time produces exponentially and lasts long enough to be an asset.

Dr. Larry Arnn observes, "We know from the classic authors that the meaning and purpose of peoples," such as those who call themselves followers of Jesus, "are revealed when they are in motion, under stress...We see what they value to the point of perishing...We do not learn the whole story until they come to the testing point."<sup>54</sup> Establishing what we are willing to die for determines how we will live. It is also a great way of determining what really matters from what does not. Dr. Metzger shares that, for him, a "good way to separate essentials from nonessentials is to ask myself, 'What hill am I willing to die on?'"<sup>55</sup>

Most of us in the West are not planning on being killed for our beliefs. The harshest persecution most of us will probably ever face is criticism from people whose opinions do not even really matter all that much to begin with. But the question of whether our faith is sure enough to withstand hostility, physical or otherwise, is still relevant.

For many of us the answer is an honest "no," and that is okay. It just means we are still growing to accept the reality of Christ, who he is, and what he has done. That being said, we need to develop past that, both

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<sup>53</sup> Mark 4.

<sup>54</sup> Larry P. Arnn, *Churchill's Trial: Winston Churchill and the Salvation of Free Government*, Kindle ed. (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), xx.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Louis Metzger, *Connecting Christ: How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths*, Kindle ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 13.

individually and as a body of believers. If our faith is not solid enough to endure to the point of death then it is not yet solid enough to carry us through the life he wants us to live.

## ROOM TO GROW

Stark points out that from “the earliest days through the present, accounts of the persecutions focus on the martyrs, on those who displayed extraordinary courage to stand firmly in their Christian commitment through the most abominable tortures.” However, we also know “that very substantial numbers of Christians denied or renounced their faith when faced with such ordeals.”<sup>56</sup>

Even Jesus’ disciples started out as weak in faith. When Jesus was going through the most difficult time of his life they all ran away. Not a single one had enough confidence in him to stick with him through his trial and crucifixion. At one point or another all of them either hid in the crowd or left completely, with only John standing by him at the end.

By the end of their lives, however, they had become so convinced of the reliability of Christ that every one, except for Judas, was willing to die for him. Their persecutors were unsuccessful at breaking their fully established faith, so much so that “rather than destroy the church or even retard its growth, Roman persecutions probably sped the rise of Christianity as the fortitude of the martyrs amazed and deeply impressed many wavering pagans.”<sup>57</sup> Even of those who “had lacked the courage needed to stand firm, the overwhelming majority wanted to regain the

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<sup>56</sup> Stark, 147.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 137.

kingdom and asked to be readmitted.”<sup>58</sup>

What was the difference between the men those disciples once were, the men who tucked tail and ran at the first sign of danger, and the men they became, refusing to be broken by any amount of pain and suffering? The answer can be found in the writings of one of these men. The apostle Peter encourages his fellow believers that the trials they encounter are necessary “so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”<sup>59</sup> The reality of Christ’s promise to return for them and the eternal perspective that it brings made all the difference to his disciples.

Even the most insignificant trial that we go through can be used as an opportunity to exercise our faith. Dr. Craig observes, “Innocent human suffering provides an occasion for deeper dependency and trust in God, either on the part of the sufferer or those around him. Of course, whether God’s purpose is achieved through our suffering will depend on our response. Do we respond with anger and bitterness toward God, or do we turn to Him in faith for strength to endure?”<sup>60</sup>

Many believers throughout history failed before they succeeded. Faninus, a follower of Jesus in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy, was brought to faith by reading “godly books” translated into his native Italian tongue. Eventually, Faninus was arrested and imprisoned for proclaiming Christ in a way that did not please the religious powers of the day. Due to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>59</sup> I Peter 1: 6, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Craig, 163.

repeated badgering from family and friends during his imprisonment he recanted his faith and was released. But his conscience would not let him rest and his own heart convicted him of his failure to rely on Christ.

He returned to what he knew to be the true faith, this time with increased dedication, and did everything he could to convince others of the reliability of Christ. As a result, he was again imprisoned. His captors expected him to break under pressure as he had before and they again pressured him to deny his faith.

This time, however, Faninus was ready. He refused to be broken again. When his accusers asked him who would take care of his family if he died, Faninus replied that they had been given to a trustee to take care of. When asked who this trustee was, he replied, "The Lord Jesus Christ...a faithful keeper, and a conserver of all that is committed to him."<sup>61</sup>

When the time for his execution came, Faninus appeared especially cheerful about his fate. One who noticed his positivity asked how he could be so relaxed when even Jesus sweat drops of blood before he died. Faninus replied that Christ "sustained in his body all the sorrows, and conflicts with hell and death, due unto us" and by his "suffering we are delivered from sorrow and fear of them all."<sup>62</sup> He then met his fate contentedly, being hung and then burned for his loyalty.

Faninus started out on his journey of faith the same way all of us do: weak, fragile, and unsure. When confronted with the test of pain and death his faith crumbled under the pressure. It was at this point that a

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<sup>61</sup> John Foxe, "Martyrs in Italy," accessed August 22, 2016.  
<http://www.exclassics.com/foxe/foxe161.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



decision had to be made: to continue on this path of indecisive weakness or to embrace his need for a Savior and determine whether or not he really believed what he said he did. He chose the latter, and when the second opportunity came for him to prove his faith he remained true to the end.

An important distinction needs to be made here: endurance does not produce faith. Faith produces endurance. All of us go through trials but not all of us rely on Christ. What trials do is show us where our faith is placed, whether in Christ or somewhere else, while at the same time providing perspective as to what matters and what does not. There is only one way to build faith: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”<sup>63</sup>

This is not difficult to understand. We build trust in Christ the same way we build trust in other people. When someone gives you a promise and you act as though they are going to do what they said, you have put your faith in them. Their word, supported by their reputation and your first-hand knowledge of them, is the source of your faith in them.

In the same way, the reports of believers who have gone before us and our own encounters with Christ act as the catalyst for our reliance on him as our savior. The starting point, though, are the accounts of those who actually saw, interacted with, and knew Jesus while he was on the earth. Levering writes, “The handing on of Christian tradition is always an interaction with those who saw, heard and touched Jesus, and thus with those whom Jesus specially chose, as his apostles, to

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<sup>63</sup> Romans 10:17.

communicate what they had seen, heard and touched.”<sup>64</sup> This first-person, eyewitness “testimony to Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels as the consummation of the whole of Israel’s Scriptures, means that we have access to him through his disciples and apostles, chosen from among the people of Israel.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew Levering, "Historical Memory and the Resurrection of Jesus: Encountering the Risen Christ," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 2 (2018): 160-1, accessed May 12, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12273>.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

## CHAPTER 2 - LIARS MAKE BAD MARTYRS

*Where messianic movements tried to carry on after the death of their would-be Messiah, their most important task was to find another Messiah. The fact that the early Christians did not do that, but continued, against all precedent, to regard Jesus himself as Messiah, despite outstanding alternative candidates...is evidence that demands an explanation. – N.T. Wright<sup>66</sup>*

*I believe only the histories, whose witnesses got themselves killed. – Blaise Pascal<sup>67</sup>*

The truth or falsehood of everything discussed to this point hinges upon the answer to this question: Is Jesus really the savior that Blandina, Faninus, and their fellow believers throughout history thought he was? If he is not, then he is simply one in a long line of failed messianic figures. If he is, however, then he is the very center and fulfilment of history itself.

Knowing the truth “allows us to cooperate with reality, whether spiritual or physical, and tap into its power.”<sup>68</sup> It is our responsibility as

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<sup>66</sup> N. T. Wright, "Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins," *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 16, no. 1 (2008): 45, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://search.informit-com-au.ezproxy.liberty.edu/documentSummary;dn=308419608069881;res=IELHSS>.

<sup>67</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, Kindle ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1958), 141.

<sup>68</sup> McDowell and McDowell, 32.

rational beings to search for this “truth that concurs with reality.”<sup>69</sup> Dr. Kreeft calls truth the “first of the human needs” because “the only good and honest reasons for faith in anything is the thing’s truth,”<sup>70</sup> or its “conformity to reality.”<sup>71</sup> The McDowells rightly argue, “If we use reason and insist on evidence when we approach the daily decisions of our lives, why should we discard these tools when it comes to our religious convictions? We absolutely should not! In fact, given the stakes, we should be even more careful in making our religious decisions.”<sup>72</sup>

Many competent scholars and thinkers over the last two millennia have undertaken to determine whether and how we can know the truth about Jesus’ identity and actions. Stark contends that “the major result of the many unrelenting scholarly attacks on the historical reliability of the New Testament has been to frustrate the attackers because again and again scripture has stood up to their challenges.”<sup>73</sup> He concludes “that the Gospels are a quite reliable report of the Christ story *as it was believed and told* by the original eyewitnesses—members of what is now known as the Jesus Movement.”<sup>74</sup>

When Jesus himself was asked to provide a sign that he was the prophesied savior of humanity, he replied “no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>70</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, Kindle ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>72</sup> McDowell and McDowell, 111.

<sup>73</sup> Stark, 55.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 57.

three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”<sup>75</sup> Jesus himself established his death, burial, and resurrection as the standard by which his divinity could be determined.

The apostle Paul also places the resurrection of Jesus at the center of the believer’s universe, emphasizing that “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” If Jesus never rose, “your faith is futile and you are still in your sin,” and, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”<sup>76</sup> Without that one historical event Christianity is pointless. Paul goes as far as to advise that, if the resurrection never happened, we should just give up on finding any meaning in this life and to “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”<sup>77</sup>

There has been a sustained attempt over the last few centuries to strip the Christian story of any of its supernatural elements. But just as faith without an object is nothing, so is Christianity without the deity of Christ, as confirmed by his resurrection. During the time of the first Christians, “That transcendence and distinctness of the deity which some Christians now want to remove from Christianity, was really the only reason why any one wanted to be a Christian.”<sup>78</sup>

According to Paul, though, we do not live in a Christ-less, resurrection-less reality because “in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.” This is the critical truth for the believer because, if Christ lives, then he is “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a

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<sup>75</sup> Matthew 12:39, 40; Luke 11:29.

<sup>76</sup> I Corinthians 1:14, 17, 19.

<sup>77</sup> I Corinthians 15:32.

<sup>78</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Kindle ed. (London: William Clowes and Sons, Ltd., 1908), 59.

man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”<sup>79</sup>

This is the vital issue. If Jesus’ resurrection occurred then he has shown himself to be the savior Blandina and Faninus believed him to be, and their sacrifices were well worth the reward. Even most “critical scholars, whether conservative or liberal, agree that the resurrection is the key to the Christian faith.”<sup>80</sup> In fact, the “resurrection was the catalyst in the early recognition of Jesus’ deity.”<sup>81</sup> So how can we know in the 21st century whether this 1st century resurrection in fact occurred?

First, we should define the term itself. To claim that Jesus was resurrected is not to say that he lived on in the hearts of his followers metaphorically, nor is it to say he escaped death entirely or became a ghost. According to New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, the term resurrection in paganism, Judaism, and early Christianity referred not to a disembodied existence, but “the reversal, the undoing, the conquest of death and its effects.”<sup>82</sup> Bishop Robert Barron describes resurrection as “not a repudiation of the body but a justification, transformation, and elevation of the body to a new and higher pitch of existence.”<sup>83</sup> The claim is that Jesus was physically dead and then was raised to life in every sense of the term, including physically.

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<sup>79</sup> I Corinthians 15:20-22.

<sup>80</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), viii.

<sup>81</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *Evidential Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Kindle ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000; repr., 2010), 119.

<sup>82</sup> Wright, 42.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Barron, *Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?*, 7, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://www.wordonfire.org/wof-site/media/did-jesus-really-rise-from-the-dead.pdf>.

## THE RESURRECTION CREED

Philosopher Dr. Gary Habermas has researched the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus since the 1970s. He experienced his own doubts, almost became a Buddhist, and concluded that if the resurrection of Christ proved to be the most plausible explanation of the historical evidence accepted by virtually all scholars in relevant fields of expertise then believers have good historical reason to believe in his divinity and identity as savior.<sup>84</sup> If not, then faith in Christ should be abandoned for a more accurate view of reality. The more he studied, however, the more Dr. Habermas was convinced that the resurrection did in fact occur, even based on only the data accepted by credentialed, even skeptical, scholars.

The primary, though far from only, text supporting the historicity of Christ's resurrection is I Corinthians 15:3-8. According to Dr. Habermas, it "is taken to be the strongest evidence for the historicity of" Jesus' bodily resurrection. Written by the apostle Paul in a letter to the church at Corinth, it reads:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Except for the last line, this material is not original to Paul. According to Dr. Habermas:

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<sup>84</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 26-7.

Virtually all scholars agree that 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. records an ancient oral tradition(s) that reports the Gospel data: Jesus Christ's atoning death, burial, resurrection, and appearances to many persons. Although the apostle Paul wrote the passage, it is not his material, but is actually much older than the book where it is recounted...Most scholars who provide a date think that Paul received this creedal tradition between two and eight years after Jesus's death, or from approximately A.D. 32 to 38.<sup>85</sup>

He concludes that this passage "presents the foundation for a discussion of Jesus's resurrection. This proclamation connects a clear presentation of the earliest Christian claims with those who were present and experienced these events."<sup>86</sup>

Dr. Craig agrees that "the belief in Jesus' resurrection was universal in the early church. The tradition that Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7...shows that this understanding of the Gospel goes all the way back to the very beginning of the church in Jerusalem."<sup>87</sup> The essential claims it makes "can be traced back so close to the time of Christ's death that legendary development is impossible."<sup>88</sup> In fact "the very origin of the Christian faith depends on the belief of the earliest disciples that God had raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead."<sup>89</sup>

Dr. Larry Hurtado observes, "Perhaps within only a few days or weeks of his crucifixion, Jesus' followers were circulating the astonishing claim that God had raised him from death and had installed him in

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>87</sup> William Lane Craig, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, Kindle ed. (Pine Mountain, Georgia: Impact 360 Institute), 481.

<sup>88</sup> McDowell and McDowell, 173.

<sup>89</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 242.



heavenly glory as Messiah and the appointed vehicle of redemption.”<sup>90</sup> Jesus’ burial, death, and resurrection are asserted so soon after the events themselves that they could not possibly be embellishments or mythologizing on the part of later Christians.

Dr. Hurtado affirms that “the origins of the worship of Jesus are so early that practically any evolutionary approach is rendered invalid as historical explanation.” Instead, “What we have suggested in the evidence is a more explosively quick phenomenon, a religious development that was more like a volcanic eruption.”<sup>91</sup> The centrality of Jesus’ resurrection to “early Christian belief” serves as “a helpful indicator of its truth. The resurrection being the pivotal doctrine led to increased amounts of attention, with investigations by the earliest witnesses increasing their faith rather than revealing any obstacles.”<sup>92</sup>

The significance of the Resurrection Creed of I Corinthians lies in both its near historical proximity to the events it describes and the explicit, verifiable claims it makes. It invites, rather than avoids, skeptical inquiry. For example, “when the disciples were going around preaching the good news about Jesus’ resurrection, no one produced His dead body, which would have spelled the end of Christianity at its very inception.”<sup>93</sup>

Dr. Craig notes, “One of the most remarkable facts about the early Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection was that it flourished in the very

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<sup>90</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions About Earliest Devotion to Jesus*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), Loc. 94.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., Loc. 301.

<sup>92</sup> Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” 111.

<sup>93</sup> Jeff Morrow, *Jesus’ Resurrection: A Jewish Convert Examines the Evidence*, Kindle ed. (2015), 424.

city where Jesus had been publicly crucified. So long as the people of Jerusalem thought that Jesus' body was in the tomb, few would have been prepared to believe such nonsense as that Jesus had been raised from the dead."<sup>94</sup> Consequently, "The city of Jerusalem is the last place the disciples should have preached the gospel message"<sup>95</sup> if they had been lying or misinformed. On top of this, the "enemies of the Christian movement were prepared to challenge any over-zealous disciple who might have desired to exaggerate the story to make it sound more appealing."<sup>96</sup>

In broadcasting that most of the five hundred who had seen the risen Jesus were still alive at the time of his writing, Paul invites investigation. He "would not have said this if the event had not occurred. He wouldn't have challenged people to talk to the eyewitnesses if the event had never taken place and there were no eyewitnesses. But evidently there were witnesses to this event, and Paul knew that some of them had died in the interim. Therefore, the event must have taken place."<sup>97</sup>

The inclusion of James, Jesus' half-brother, in the list of those Jesus appeared to is especially important. "Critical scholars almost always acknowledge that James, the brother of Jesus, was also an unbeliever and perhaps even a skeptic during Jesus's public ministry." After Jesus' death and alleged resurrection, however, "we find James as the leader of the Jerusalem church." This radical change in James' attitude towards Jesus' message indicates that "a major event" occurred. Because of his radical

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<sup>94</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 221.

<sup>95</sup> Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," 111.

<sup>96</sup> McDowell and McDowell, 147.

<sup>97</sup> Craig, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, Loc. 314.

transformation, Dr. Craig asserts that “James’ conversion is one of the surest proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>98</sup>

Finally, Paul himself saw the resurrected Jesus. This “is established beyond doubt by Paul’s references to it in his own letters.”<sup>99</sup> For Dr. Craig, “Paul’s testimony makes it historically certain that various individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus after His death and burial.”<sup>100</sup>

A notable characteristic of eyewitness reports of Jesus’ resurrection is how coherent and unimaginative their accounts are. “James Charlesworth points out that, ‘The New Testament authors are under careful control when they describe Jesus’ resurrection. There is none of the unbridled speculation of the authors in’ later second and third-hand accounts.”<sup>101</sup>

These are only examples of the wealth of evidential knowledge scholars are able to glean from this passage and others like it. Because of these, Dr. Craig concludes, “The evidence firmly establishes that on separate occasions, different individuals and groups had experiences of seeing Jesus alive from the dead. Scarcely any historical scholar today disputes this conclusion.”<sup>102</sup>

## ACTIONS SPEAK

True belief is exemplified by what one does rather than says. What we practice, not what we preach, “is usually our great contribution to the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., Loc. 348.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>100</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 236.

<sup>101</sup> Morrow, Loc. 328.

<sup>102</sup> Craig, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, Loc. 386.

conversion of others.”<sup>103</sup> We know about the resurrection of Christ primarily through the eyewitness testimony of those who were there at the time, and it was on this basis that they “could believe that Jesus was the Messiah.”<sup>104</sup> If we can determine that they acted in a way consistent with their assertion that Jesus died and rose again, thus certifying his messianic claims, then we can plausibly conclude that Jesus is who he said he was and can be relied upon for what he promised.

Dr. Sean McDowell shows that, while scholars can show with strong historical probability that at least some of the disciples died for their belief in the resurrection of Jesus, there is no doubt that they were all at least willing to.<sup>105</sup> He concedes that “there are many martyrs outside Christianity” and does not “claim that only Christians have martyrs.” But there “is a massive difference between willingly dying for the sake of the religious ideas accepted from the testimony of others” and “willingly dying for the proclamation of a faith based on one’s own eyewitness account.”<sup>106</sup>

Modern “martyrs die for what they sincerely believe is true, but their knowledge comes second-hand.”<sup>107</sup> In contrast, “The disciples went to the grave with the conviction that they had seen the risen Jesus.” For that reason, “It is more than fair to conclude that we can trust their testimony.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 571.

<sup>104</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 242.

<sup>105</sup> Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2015).

<sup>106</sup> Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, Kindle ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 366.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>108</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 146.

Dr. Jeff Morrow agrees: “Jesus’ apostles were executed for their belief in Jesus’ resurrection. People die all the time for things that are not true, but no one dies for something they know is not true...Sometimes even when they believe something, they recant under torture and threat of death. But no one endures torture or willingly goes to the death for something they know is false.”<sup>109</sup>

This point is all the more relevant because, as we saw in the previous chapter, the disciples were not predisposed to acts of courage. When Jesus was arrested, they ran away. They “showed signs of craven cowardice and hid themselves. Peter even denied that he knew Christ.”<sup>110</sup> When Jesus died, they returned to their old lives and gave no thought to trying to carry on without him.<sup>111</sup> That all changed when they encountered him alive after he had been dead and buried.

Dr. Habermas explains:

The transformation of the witnesses, even to the point of being willing to die for their faith, is an additional indicator of the strength of their convictions that they had seen their risen Lord. It is true that people are often transformed for false causes that they also believe in, but there is a qualitative difference. Both the disciples and the others who are willing to die share a sincere belief. But very much unlike the others, the disciples were willing to suffer not just for their belief concerning who Jesus was, but precisely because they had seen him after his death. In brief, their transformation was not simply on beliefs about Jesus, like so many others, but on the knowledge that they had seen him alive after his resurrection.<sup>112</sup>

In short, their transformation “could only have occurred because of

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<sup>109</sup> Morrow, Loc. 415.

<sup>110</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 188.

<sup>111</sup> John 21.

<sup>112</sup> Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," 111.

something like the resurrection.”<sup>113</sup>

The apostles were not unaware of the dangers that proclaiming the resurrection message entailed. “Persecution against the first Christians...was sporadic and local,” but “there is evidence that the public proclamation of the faith could be costly.” Despite this, “The apostles publicly proclaimed the resurrection of a crucified criminal with full awareness of what their actions might cost them,” even before the “first statewide persecution of Christians” under Nero in A.D. 64.<sup>114</sup>

In addition to physical persecution, the disciples and early Christians suffered subtler forms of mistreatment. Dr. Hurtado observes, “It is fairly clear that a good many Christians did face the possibility of paying social costs for their faith, ranging from ridicule to much more painful opposition, whether from family members or wider social circles. And some Christians did find that their faith even led to trouble with the political authorities (usually local authorities).”<sup>115</sup>

Josh and Sean McDowell point out that the first generation of believers had everything to lose and nothing to gain by fabricating a false story about Jesus’ resurrection:

Had there been visible benefits accruing to them from their efforts—such as prestige, wealth, or increased social status—we might logically account for their actions. As a reward, however, for their wholehearted and total allegiance to the risen Christ, these early Christians were beaten, stoned to death, thrown to the lions, tortured, crucified and subjected to every conceivable method of stopping them from talking. Yet they were the most peaceful men and women, who continually demonstrated love and never forced

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<sup>113</sup> Morrow, Loc. 432.

<sup>114</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, 362.

<sup>115</sup> Hurtado, Loc. 123.

their beliefs on anyone. Rather they laid down their very lives as the ultimate proof of their complete confidence in the truth of their message.<sup>116</sup>

This behavior only makes sense in light of the resurrection of Christ and his promise of the same resurrection for those who rely on him.

## OBJECTIONS

Truth loves a competitor. It is the best way of showing itself to be true. The best way to tell whether a thing is authentic is to examine it side-by-side with a fake. Contrast and comparison, not isolation, emphasize the unique features of an object, idea, or hypothesis.

This holds true with the events surrounding Jesus' resurrection. Those who insist on explaining the disciples' behavior in some way that does not involve Jesus' resurrection have yet to propose a coherent and feasible explanation. One of the alternate theories proposed supposes that the eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection were hallucinating and only thought they saw him. This is unlikely, as Dr. Morrow explains:

If you are having a hallucination...you are seeing something that is not actually there. This means that the hallucination is coming from your mind, i.e., is private and personal. No two people will see the exact same hallucination...[E]ven in instances where people are gathered together and all hallucinate because of a shared experience (e.g., from drugs or sleep deprivation, etc.), they will not see the exact same thing...But what we find in the Gospel accounts are visions of the risen Jesus where he appears to people who do not expect to see Him, and yet they all have the same experiences when they are gathered together. The accounts do not read the way hallucination experiences would read."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 232.

<sup>117</sup> Morrow, Loc. 308, 17.

Even if they had hallucinated, “Hallucinations simply do not cause new beliefs in sane, rational people.”<sup>118</sup>

Another theory supposes that Jesus did not actually die, but was only unconscious when he was brought down from the cross. He then escaped the tomb and showed himself to his disciples. The McDowells write of this theory, “To claim that Jesus survived the rigors of crucifixion and then convinced his disciples that he was Lord of life...would be a greater miracle than the resurrection itself.”<sup>119</sup>

Regarding this hypothesis, Dr. Habermas explains, “If he had shown himself to his followers a few days after the crucifixion, as the early sources indicate, he would have been in horrible physical condition: bruised, beaten, bloody, pale, limping, and in obvious need of medical assistance. But such a condition would have disallowed the view that he had been raised from the dead in a resurrected body.”<sup>120</sup>

The disciples and their contemporaries were pre-scientific, but not pre-common sense. “They had eyes that saw, and they used them quite well.”<sup>121</sup> They knew the difference between a hallucination, a suffering survivor of a botched crucifixion, and the supernaturally resurrected Christ.

As observant Jews, they were also raised never to “bear false witness.”<sup>122</sup> This was especially important in the days before forensic science, fingerprinting, and DNA evidence. Honesty among witnesses, as well as the penalty for lying in such courts of law as the disciples were

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<sup>118</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 210.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>120</sup> Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” 108.

<sup>121</sup> Markos, 76.

<sup>122</sup> Exodus 20:16.



compelled to testify in, was essential in determining the truth of legal claims. The words and actions of the disciples under these conditions were those of honest, sane, and rational people who affirmed only what they knew to be true.

Most who discount the possibility of Jesus' resurrection do so because they refuse to believe miracles that are possible at all. Dr. Markos points out, however, "Believing in miracles does *not* mean believing that  $2 + 2 = 5$ . It means believing that there is a supernatural being (or at least force) in the universe that is capable of intervening in human events, suspending the laws of nature, and consequently altering the natural flow of cause and effect."<sup>123</sup>

Because they are exceptions to usual natural processes, miracles exist outside of the realm of scientific investigation, but they are not irrational. Dr. Craig asserts, "Miracles are impossible only if it is assumed that God does not exist. Short of an absolute proof of atheism, one has to be open to the possibility that God has intervened directly in the world and thus also to evidence that he has done so."<sup>124</sup>

Given this, the McDowell's determine, "Only one conclusion takes into account all the facts and does not adjust them to preconceived notions. It is the conclusion that Christ is in fact risen—a supernatural act of God in history."<sup>125</sup> Dr. Craig also concludes, "Once you give up the prejudice against miracles, it's hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts."<sup>126</sup> Even though "the

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<sup>123</sup> Markos, 56.

<sup>124</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 132.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>126</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 262.

incarnation and resurrection of Jesus are wondrous and awe-inspiring,” there is “no good reason to think them intrinsically improbable.”<sup>127</sup>

Wright goes as far as to declare:

Were it not for the astounding, and world-view-challenging, claim that is thereby made, I think everyone would long since have concluded that [the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead] was the correct historical result. If some other account explained the rise of Christianity as naturally, completely, and satisfyingly as does the early Christians’ belief, while leaving normal worldviews intact, it would be accepted without demur.<sup>128</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus, being the simplest, most cohesive, and most adequate explanation of the disciples’ behavior, “is to be preferred.”<sup>129</sup>

The durability of the faith despite both external and internal challenges also serves as evidence of its truth. Soon after Jesus’ resurrection the apostles were arrested for spreading what the religious leaders saw as idolatrous claims of Jesus’ divinity. The apostles waited under guard while the Jewish ruling council, who “regarded this elevation of Jesus as completely inappropriate, even blasphemous,”<sup>130</sup> determined what to do about them.

Gamaliel, a “prominent rabbi and leader of the Pharisees,”<sup>131</sup> told his fellow councilmembers to “take care what you are about to do with these men.” He recalled that other revolutionary figures had arisen in recent years, but once the leaders died so did the movements they

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<sup>127</sup> William Lane Craig, *A Classical Apologist’s Closing Remarks*, Kindle ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000; repr., 2010), 326.

<sup>128</sup> Wright, 49.

<sup>129</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, *Cumulative Case Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Kindle ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000; repr., 2010), 155.

<sup>130</sup> Hurtado, Loc. 310.

<sup>131</sup> John D. Barry et al., eds., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ac 5:34.

started. He recommended that the council “keep away” from the apostles and “let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail.”

Gamaliel also warned that if the message the apostles preached “was of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”<sup>132</sup> Obviously Gamaliel saw the circumstances surrounding the birth of Christianity as being so inhospitable that for it not to fail would constitute an absolute miracle. As we can clearly see two thousand years later, it did not fail.

It was the apostles’ willingness to suffer for what they knew to be true that set the example for future generations of believers:

From [an] ancient letter of Pliny the Younger, we learn that the Christians would rather die than worship and bow down to any of the multitude of gods in the Roman pantheon, or to an image of the emperor himself...Something powerfully attractive must have resonated with outsiders, making early Christianity attractive, enough to the point where thousands were willing to suffer the negative consequences and sometimes die for the cause of Jesus.<sup>133</sup>

These future generations served only to strengthen the case for the resurrection because they affirmed the testimony of the apostles with their lives. A “few were beheaded, that being regarded as the humane sentence, but the rest were put through such an amazing array of tortures that it seems beyond credibility that anyone persisted—especially since most could have escaped at any point along the way

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<sup>132</sup> Acts 5:17-39.

<sup>133</sup> Siniscalchi, 725-6.

simply by defecting. But again and again they bore it all.”<sup>134</sup> These martyrs “make sense only in light of the Resurrection.”<sup>135</sup>

## THE ETHICS OF MARTYRDOM

G.K. Chesterton examines the strange connection between Christianity and martyrdom:

Christianity has shown a wild encouragement of the martyr. Historic Christianity was accused, not entirely without reason, of carrying martyrdom and asceticism to a point, desolate and pessimistic. The early Christian martyrs talked of death with a horrible happiness. They blasphemed the beautiful duties of the body: they smelt the grave afar off like a field of flowers. All this has seemed to many the very poetry of pessimism.<sup>136</sup>

The very strangeness of this relationship has proven both fascinating and revolting to non-believers.

Some have tried to write off the sacrifice of believing martyrs as the product of mental disorder or religious fanaticism. To be sure, there have been some unhealthy ideas about martyrdom that “did in some cases lead to excesses: confessors receiving an exalted, priestly type status; lapsed Christians seeking forgiveness through voluntary martyrdom; and the rise of a cult of martyrs.”<sup>137</sup> These are distortions of genuine martyrdom.

Edward Smither explains:

The word *martyr* (*martus*) literally means ‘a witness’ while the verbal form (*martureō*) refers to the action of witnessing. In much of the New Testament, the term is used to describe eyewitnesses of Christ;

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<sup>134</sup> Stark, 147.

<sup>135</sup> Barron, 13.

<sup>136</sup> Chesterton, 55.

<sup>137</sup> Edward L. Smither, "Suffering," in *Mission in the Early Church*, Themes and Reflections (James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2014), 50-1.

however, in Revelation 2:13, John begins to use it to distinguish those that have witnessed unto Christ by giving their lives...this was how the word was commonly used by the church before the end of the second century.<sup>138</sup>

Martyrdom is best understood as witnessing, or showing what one believes to be true regardless of the circumstances. In no way is it the intention of martyrs, or witnesses, to add to or take away from the message of Christ, but simply to endorse that message in spite of opposition to it.

The tendency to whitewash martyrs as innately brave or exceptionally pure is harmful. It distracts from the reality that these were unremarkable, imperfect men and women who had all of the same flaws that the rest of us do, but because of their hope of reunion with Christ they did “not find it hard to die for the true God.”<sup>139</sup> They themselves explained as much. They recorded each other’s deeds “not because they wanted the glory of their martyr’s crown to be arrogantly broadcast, but rather that the ordinary men who constituted God’s people might be given strength in the test of their faith by the sufferings of those who had gone before.”<sup>140</sup> Augustine taught, “It’s easy enough to celebrate in honor of a martyr; the great thing is to imitate the martyr’s faith and patience.”<sup>141</sup>

Martyrs do not do what they do because they are exceptionally courageous. They do it because they realize their insufficiencies, leading them to embrace their need for a savior. They do it because they are convinced of the truth of what the apostles saw and reported. Their

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>139</sup> Apollonius, quoted in *ibid.*, 57.

<sup>140</sup> Martyrdom of Marian and James, quoted in *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>141</sup> Augustine Sermon 311, quoted in *ibid.*, 71.

reliance on Christ, not innate perfection, is what sets them apart.

Another charge levied against martyrs is that they are suicidal. Chesterton explains, “Obviously a suicide is the opposite of a martyr. A martyr is a man who cares so much for something outside him, that he forgets his own personal life. A suicide is a man who cares so little for anything outside him, that he wants to see the last of everything.” The martyr “is noble” because “he confesses this ultimate link with life; he sets his heart outside himself: he dies that something may live.”<sup>142</sup>

He further explains, “The Christian feeling evidently was not merely that the suicide was carrying martyrdom too far. The Christian feeling was furiously for one and furiously against the other.” Although they “looked so much alike,” they “were at opposite ends of heaven and hell.”<sup>143</sup>

John Behr explains that the believer does not embrace death “as an act of desperation, bringing about the end, or as passive submission to victimization, resigning oneself to one’s fate, but rather as the beginning of new life.”<sup>144</sup> Martyrdom is not the rejection of life, and it is not to be actively sought after. Martyrdom is simply, “having done all, to stand firm.”<sup>145</sup>

## FAITH AND REASON

The witness of the first and subsequent generations of Christians and martyrs ensured the transmission of the message of Jesus’ resurrection to us today. Some of us have a problem believing that

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<sup>142</sup> Chesterton, 55.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 88.

<sup>145</sup> Ephesians 6:13.

message because it cannot be scientifically or mathematically proven beyond all doubt. But almost everything we know and believe to be true is based on somebody else's word. Any time we ask for directions, use the internet for research, or take someone's advice we are putting faith in their word. We tend to believe what people tell us even though we do not expect them to die for what they think is true. How much more can we believe those who are?

Few truths can be proven by a mathematical formula. There is a limit to what science can guarantee as true. Science is not a belief system. It is “a *method* utilized in *organized efforts* to formulate *explanations of nature*,”<sup>146</sup> and in its proper role does not propose to answer questions of meaning, value, and significance.

The aspects of reality that mean the most to us, such as the loyalty of a spouse, the fairness of an employer, or even the belief that living is better than not, are not grounded in science because they are far higher and more transcendental than what science can observe. Instead, we use the two criteria we discussed at the end of Chapter 1 to determine the answers to the most significant questions of life: reputation, or credibility, and first-hand knowledge.

Even the assumption that our reason allows us to understand reality accurately is based on presuppositions that cannot be proven. Chesterton points out, “It is idle to talk always of the alternative of reason and faith. Reason itself is a matter of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relations to reality at all.”<sup>147</sup>

It takes some humility to recognize the role that the word of others

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<sup>146</sup> Stark, 275.

<sup>147</sup> Chesterton, 21.

plays in shaping our beliefs, but once we embrace it we can start to determine what constitutes a credible source, moving us closer to an accurate view of reality. Chesterton quips, “Thinking in isolation and with pride ends in being an idiot. Every man who will not have softening of the heart must at last have softening of the brain.”<sup>148</sup>

For example, we start our lives, rightly, by assuming the veracity of the tradition we are brought up in. Children are designed to take their parents at their word because parents are supposed to be trustworthy. But as the child transitions to adulthood he or she assumes the responsibility of reasoning for him or herself. His or her increasing ability to reason corresponds with the responsibility to do so.

Tradition is not a guarantee for truth, but it is the best starting point we as finite beings have. Tradition “is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record.”<sup>149</sup> It “means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about” and it “objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death.”<sup>150</sup>

We take our traditions at face value at the beginning, but as we grow we compare those traditions to our experiences to see if those traditions correspond with reality. If not, we look at other traditions to see if they explain the human experience better. Whatever tradition or philosophy we adopt determines what we are able to believe about the nature of

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 33-4.



reality. For instance, “If a man believes in unalterable natural law, he cannot believe in any miracle in any age. If a man believes in a will behind a law, he can believe in any miracle in any age.”<sup>151</sup>

The great thing about the Christian tradition is that it can be traced back to its very inception. Its transmission involves an unbroken chain of witnesses who, while differing on many of the particulars, maintain the Resurrection Creed with unprecedented unity and consistency. Traced all the way back, this tradition originates from a single event in history, the resurrection of Jesus. The truth of this tradition is based on the verifiable accounts of witnesses to that event and its transmission guarded through the sacrifice of believers so we could benefit from the knowledge of that event and its implications.

Reason is a tool we can, and should, use to pursue truth and “seek God, and perhaps feel” our “way toward him and find him.”<sup>152</sup> Reason can remove the barriers to belief, but intellectual assent is not faith. Faith is relational. If reason is like carefully packing a parachute, making as certain as humanly possible that it will open and catch us when we need it, faith is jumping out of the airplane. At that point the previously intellectual process becomes experiential because we put ourselves in a state of complete reliance on the parachute.

In the same way, faith in Christ involves moving beyond the intellectual into the relational. This is not a one-sided relationship because when we trust in Christ his Spirit “bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”<sup>153</sup> Dr. Habermas explains, “The Holy

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>152</sup> Acts 17:27.

<sup>153</sup> Romans 8:16.

Spirit stands alongside the believer, going beyond the subject of evidences and providing direct testimony to Christians of their salvation.” While “the evidence shows that Christianity is true,” the “witness of the Holy Spirit marks those who belong to the truth.”<sup>154</sup> It is through him that, whenever we have a desire to know and live in accordance with the truth but are plagued by doubt, we can cry: “I believe; help my unbelief!”<sup>155</sup>

### LIFE OR DEATH: A CHOICE

The concept of death features prominently in the story of Christianity, which begins with the death of mankind through Adam and Eve, finds its culmination in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and sees his message spread through the deaths of believers. There is no denying the central role that death has to play. Even the Resurrection Creed begins with “Christ died.”

The reason is that death is the overarching problem, not only in the story of Christianity, but in the story of humanity. The authors of “The Christian Way” affirm, “In the affairs of men, death claims final authority. It lords over every magistrate and worldly power, over every culture and civilization...Viewed from a worldly perspective, the annihilating nothingness of death seems all-powerful.”<sup>156</sup>

This problem is intensified in that none of us gets a choice in whether or not to exist, but are “thrown into an existence in which,

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<sup>154</sup> Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 209.

<sup>155</sup> Mark 9:24

<sup>156</sup> (EATC) Evangelicals and Catholics Together, “The Christian Way,” *First Things*, no. 278 (December 2017): 3, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/12/the-christian-way>.

whatever we do, we will die. Mortality, in fact, is the only thing that is common to life on earth; and the ability to contemplate and to use our mortality is that which is distinctively human.”<sup>157</sup>

For the first generations of believers, death was especially imminent. Smither observes that “the Christian movement was founded upon and birthed through suffering and persecution.”<sup>158</sup> They were forced by their circumstances to come to grips with the role death plays in God’s overall plan for the resurrection of humanity. They could not afford to trade the historical truth of Jesus’ resurrection for a metaphorical one because death is not metaphorical. Self-help books and inspirational catchphrases do not do any good when you are dead.

Of course, just as death is a universal problem so have been attempts to come to terms with it, or even solve it. Behr observes, “Despite our knowledge of our mortality, however, or rather because of it, we are tempted to hold on to this ‘life’ as we know it, to do whatever we can to secure it, to live it as mine for as long as I can perpetuate it.”<sup>159</sup> In any case, whether attempts to solve it be scientific or superstitious, death is the ultimate problem.

The central claim of Christianity is that this problem has been solved in the divine person of Jesus through his death and resurrection. The apostle Peter reminds believers that they have been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from” their “forefathers.”<sup>160</sup> They been given the solution in the person of Jesus.

For Peter, this solution was not a reaction to the problem of death

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<sup>157</sup> Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 87-8.

<sup>158</sup> Smither, in *Mission in the Early Church*, 50.

<sup>159</sup> Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 87-8.

<sup>160</sup> I Peter 1:18.

introduced by Adam and Eve, but “was foreknown before the foundation of the world.”<sup>161</sup> He explains that “God’s redemption of sinners through the precious blood of His Son was always part of the divine plan of salvation” and “seeks to comfort them with the knowledge that Christ’s sacrifice unfolded as part of God’s eternal plan.”<sup>162</sup> Likewise, Paul asserts that God “chose us” in Christ “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love.”<sup>163</sup>

It would seem, then, that the introduction of death into the equation did not take God by surprise, and in fact was a key element in his plan of salvation even before creation. But why would death be necessary? The first reason we have already seen: God wanted man to be a voluntary participant in his plan. For man to have a choice in whether to live in harmony with the life of God he must also have the choice to reject that life and embrace death. Man chose death, which necessitated the death and resurrection of God in the person of Jesus to restore man to life, which was a restoration of man to himself.

Just as in the beginning, man is now free to embrace or reject God’s life by embracing or rejecting Jesus, who is not only “the way,” but also “the truth” and “the life” personified.<sup>164</sup> Dr. Habermas explains that one of the central claims Jesus made, and confirmed by his resurrection, was that “persons could enter the kingdom of God if they responded properly to Jesus and his message.” The single “requirement is dependence on Jesus Christ, who is himself the way to such life. Only by

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<sup>161</sup> I Peter 1:20.

<sup>162</sup> Barry et al., 1 Pe 1:20.

<sup>163</sup> Ephesians 1:4.

<sup>164</sup> John 14:6.

such action can persons be properly related to God and others.”<sup>165</sup>

This is the first answer to the question of death in God’s plan. Knowing that man would choose death instead of life, God already had a plan in place to restore humanity to his family even before he created them. But, in addition to this, some of the early church fathers ventured a second reason.

## THE UTILITY OF DEATH

In “Life and Death in the Age of Martyrdom,”<sup>166</sup> John Behr examines the teachings of some of the earliest believers and their understanding of the role of death in God’s plan of salvation. Their hostile circumstances forced them to come to terms with the fact that physical death still had a part to play in the life of the believer, despite their belief in the resurrection. They believed death was necessary for man to fully appreciate the life that is made available through reliance on Christ.

Behr begins with a study of Ignatius, a church leader who taught and was martyred within “living memory of Christ and the apostles.”<sup>167</sup> Ignatius, while being taken to Rome to be killed, wrote to his fellow believers, “It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for our sake. I desire him who rose for us. Birth-pangs are upon me. Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die.”<sup>168</sup>

Behr shows that for Ignatius death was “a defining moment: not the

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<sup>165</sup> Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” 105.

<sup>166</sup> Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>168</sup> Ignatius, quoted in *ibid.*, 80.

end, but the beginning; not disappearance, but revelation.”<sup>169</sup> Death for Ignatius was the way a believer is born into true life. He grasped Jesus’ teaching that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”<sup>170</sup>

Behr examines another early teacher, Irenaeus, who explains that the spirit of a man is infused with the life of Christ when he believes, but his body is still subject to death. But when a believer’s body dies because it is weak, the life of the spirit takes control and subsumes the flesh into itself. The weakness of the flesh is traded for the strength of the spirit, and only in this way does man become fully alive. Man becomes alive “because of the participation of the Spirit,” but remains also “human, because of the substance of the flesh.”<sup>171</sup> For him, it is this integration of the flesh of man and the life of God that produces a complete human being.

For both Ignatius and Irenaeus, death is necessary for the believer to complete this process. The death of the flesh relinquishes control to the life of the spirit, which is the life of Christ’s resurrection. Behr calls the martyr the “paradigm of the living human being—flesh vivified by the Spirit.”<sup>172</sup>

Behr also explains that the life of God and the death of man, which had never before mixed, were so combined in the person of Jesus. He was the life of God incarnate but also experienced the death of man, and

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> John 12:24-25.

<sup>171</sup> Irenaeus, quoted in Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 82.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

having done so he can bring us through the process in reverse. We experience death, but death itself facilitates our passage into the life of God, “a life which can no longer be touched by death.”<sup>173</sup>

In doing so, “Christ has changed the ‘use’ of death for all men and women throughout time.”<sup>174</sup> Instead of experiencing death as separation from God, which is the definition of death in its truest sense, Christ converted death into the tool for reunion with God. Behr observes that “mortality is not a property of God, creating life is not a property of humans, but Christ has brought both together, conquering death by his death and in this very act conferring life.”<sup>175</sup>

For these early believers, death was not only essential to rebirth into the life of God as a complete human being, but is also instructive about the need for a source external to ourselves for life:

[Irenaeus] suggests it is only by our mortality, by the experience of death in our separation—apostasy—from God, that we come to value life, knowing that in ourselves we do not have life, but depend for it upon God. Our experience of death drives home this point in a way that we will never otherwise fully know. We need to know experientially what it is to be weak, if we are to know the strength of God, for as Christ both exemplified and affirms: “my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).<sup>176</sup>

Dr. Kreeft summarizes, “God lets man fall from Eden so that an even more glorious unity can be attained through Christ.”<sup>177</sup>

Just as our ability to appreciate the presence of God is also what enables us to dread his absence, so the gut-wrenching experience of

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>177</sup> Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, 84.

death enables us to appreciate his life in a way that Adam and Eve were unable to do before the Fall. Having never experienced death, they could not contrast it with life. But the human race, having wallowed for millennia in an endless cycle that always culminates in death, is now able to fully realize how superior life in God really is. There is a point of comparison now.

As mentioned before, we cannot choose not to exist. We are born into this world without being consulted. It is involuntary. As a result, we cannot choose not to die. It is also involuntary. But because of Christ's resurrection we do not have to remain "passive and frustrated victims of death and of the givenness of our mortality."<sup>178</sup> We can choose to die "to our involuntary created existence."<sup>179</sup> We can begin to live the life of the Spirit of Christ, with whom he seals every believer as a "guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it"<sup>180</sup> through the death that facilitates our passage into limitless life.

In this process God takes "dust from the earth which I now am and" mixes "in his power, he now, finally, fashions a true, living, human being—the glory of God."<sup>181</sup> Even though death is still a reality, the "final say is that of God who uses our mortality to educate us of our finitude, our embodiedness, and our earthiness, and so enables us, finally, to receive that which we don't have in or from ourselves, that is, life."<sup>182</sup> Behr concludes, "Christ is not Plan B, but rather the realization of God's intention, stated at the beginning, and brought to completion

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<sup>178</sup> Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 88.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>180</sup> Ephesians 1:14.

<sup>181</sup> Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 91.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 95.



by the arc that leads from Adam to Christ. The work of Christ in the passion is not simply a remedy, but the expression of the life, love, and being of God, which encompasses and transforms human deviation and death itself.”<sup>183</sup>

Far from being a historical curiosity, Christ’s “resurrection is the prototype for our own. He blazed the trail through death to eternal life, and he tells us that we can follow in his footsteps with his hand leading us the entire way.”<sup>184</sup> Even now, when we only have the “down payment”<sup>185</sup> of being made completely alive, we can begin the process of dying to the mortality that temporarily enslaves us and, in gratitude to God and care for others, live as conduits of the life that we still have yet to fully experience.

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 93-4.

<sup>184</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 13.

<sup>185</sup> Barry et al., Eph 1:14.

### CHAPTER 3 – THE CYCLE OF FAITH

*That man is perfect in faith who can come to God in the utter dearth of his feelings and his desires, without a glow or an aspiration, with the weight of low thoughts, failures, neglects, and wandering forgetfulness, and say to him, “Thou art my refuge, because thou art my home.” – George Macdonald<sup>186</sup>*

*But we know that all that God bestows needs time to become fully our own; it must be held fast, and appropriated, and assimilated into our inmost being; without this not even Christ’s giving can make it our very own, in full experience and enjoyment. – Andrew Murray<sup>187</sup>*

The journey of faith is one that takes us through many phases of development, but simple reliance on Christ is always cornerstone of what we do. The processes involved are simply different stages in the growth and solidifying of that reliance as we move towards spiritual resiliency and maturity. To live in the “divine manner” requires this.<sup>188</sup>

The apostle Peter gives us a roadmap of what growing in faith looks like. God “has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of<sup>9</sup> Christ:

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<sup>186</sup> George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons, Series I., Ii., and Iii.* (2005), accessed October 10, 2019, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9057>.

<sup>187</sup> Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ*, Kindle ed. (New York: Scriptura Press, 1882; repr., 2015), 20.

<sup>188</sup> Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 89.

...who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature...make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.<sup>189</sup>

These qualities (virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love) are not independent from each other. They are steps in the development of our faith in Christ “in which each virtue leads to the next one.”<sup>190</sup>

This cycle is a strengthening of faith, making us more capable and durable as agents of Christ and more effective in conveying his life and love to the world. It is this process that takes us from being like Faninus the first time he was imprisoned and let go of his faith to the second, at which point he was strong enough to go through even death with his faith intact. We mature like Peter, who in the early stages of faith denied Jesus in his time of need but went on to become one of the leading witnesses of his resurrection. He met death with all of the courage that naturally comes with a resilient faith.

What Peter describes in the passage above is the process that the Holy Spirit guides us through as we learn to depend on Christ. In this chapter we will explore these steps and learn how to recognize them in ourselves. The most important thing to remember, however, is that faith, reliance upon Christ, is at the root of this process. To worry about godliness before determining that Jesus is reliable as savior is nonsensical and will only lead to frustration. Put another way, “*Faith*

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<sup>189</sup> II Peter 1:5-7.

<sup>190</sup> Barry et al., 2 Pe 1:5-7.

leads the band,” the other virtues follow, and “*love* brings up the rear.”<sup>191</sup>

## VIRTUE

Virtue is “moral excellency; manly, strenuous energy, answering to the *virtue* (energetic excellency) of God.”<sup>192</sup> The first change we start to see when we choose to rely on Christ is a shift in the way that we approach life. Faith in the love of Jesus gives us purpose, so instead of living a lazy, self-serving, and impotent lifestyle we begin to act with more tenacity, focused aggression, and determination.

If you have ever seen anyone sincerely embrace faith in Jesus for the first time, or remember when you did so yourself, you probably noticed an initial surge of passion, a drive to do something of worth for him. The reality is that this is sometimes only temporary and if there is no development of faith after that initial decision any newfound sense of purpose will wither away.

In a letter to a woman who had recently decided to become a Christian and was experiencing these passionate feelings, C.S. Lewis advised:

Don’t imagine it is all ‘going to be an exciting adventure from now on’. It won’t. Excitement of whatever sort, never lasts. This is the push to start you off on your first bicycle: you’ll be left to [do] lots of dogged pedaling later on. And no need to feel depressed about it either. It will be good for your spiritual leg muscles. So enjoy the push while it lasts, but enjoy it as a treat, not as something normal.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 517.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 540.

The essence of virtue is not in the feeling, but in the resolution and growing awareness of Christ's reliability.

As faith ceases in its growth so does virtue, but if we become deliberate about growing in our reliance upon Christ we will never be without a clear sense of purpose and destiny. This produces the resolution to embrace whatever next step God has for us. The apostle Paul wrote concerning Jesus, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."<sup>194</sup> Paul's faith was invigorated by a Christ-centered energy, or virtue, because he fully embraced the purpose for which God had created him.

We should not worry if we are not sure of the specifics of God's plan for our lives. We are simply to do what he wants us to do now, in the present. He will let us know what we need to know when it is time for us to know it. He is never late but he is never early either. Yet another one of the great aspects of faith is that we can always be growing, no matter where we are or what we are doing. Spiritual growth, like that of a tree, happens in two directions. The trunk and branches of a tree grow up to the sky, but only in proportion to how deep into the ground its roots grow:

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.  
He is like a tree planted by water,  
that sends out its roots by the stream,  
and does not fear when heat comes,  
for its leaves remain green,

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<sup>194</sup> Colossians 1:28, 29.

and is not anxious in the year of drought,  
for it does not cease to bear fruit.<sup>195</sup>

We cannot be at our absolute most productive all the time, just as a tree only bears fruit in the right season, but we can always be deepening our roots through learning to rest and trust in Christ.

The actions we take for Christ, the fruit, are not faith. The faith is the root and the fruit is the outgrowth of that faith. The quality of fruit that is produced is in proportion to the depth of faith, so the deeper the faith the greater the fruit. When it seems like we are going through a dry and dull season of life it is not necessarily because we are doing something wrong. It may simply be an opportunity to refocus, to learn to trust Jesus more fully and completely, and to grow our roots deeper into him so that when the time comes to bear fruit we are that much stronger, more capable, and more durable.

The book of Numbers gives us an example of what this reliance-driven virtue looks like in action. The nation of Israel was about to enter the land that was promised to them by God. They sent out an advance party of twelve spies to determine and report on the state of the land and of the enemy forces that occupied it. These were not ordinary Israelites being sent out, but chiefs from each of the twelve tribes.

They scouted the land for forty days and brought back valuable intelligence as well as samples of the fruit of the land. They verified that the land was green, lush, and prosperous. They also reported that the people were strong and vicious. They reported seeing giants among the inhabitants of the land. Caleb, one of the spies, advocated for a full-scale assault.

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<sup>195</sup> Jeremiah 17:7, 8.

Ten of the other spies failed to share his confidence. They came up with a myriad of excuses as to why they could not take the land that God had promised them. They somehow got the idea that God either could or would not accomplish what he said he would. They may have started their journey in faith but they lacked what Caleb and another spy, Joshua, had: resiliency of faith, or virtue.

The people of Israel sided with the timid spies. They rejected God's promise and would have stoned Joshua and Caleb if not for the supernatural intervention of God himself. Joshua and Caleb were distraught at Israel's refusal to trust God. They knew that if the Creator of the universe promised something he would make good on that promise. They also realized the danger that lay in the rejection of that promise.

Seeing the cowardice and unbelief of the people, God promised that their "dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb...and Joshua."<sup>196</sup> After wandering the desert for forty more years, Joshua and Caleb were the only adults in the nation still alive to return to the Promised Land.

It would be easy to understand if at the end of these forty years Joshua and Caleb had lost the zeal and resiliency that characterized their younger years. But their attitude was the same as it had been four decades earlier, as Caleb announced:

Now, as you can see, the Lord has kept me alive and well as he promised for all these forty-five years since Moses made this

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<sup>196</sup> Numbers 14:29-30.

promise—even while Israel wandered in the wilderness. Today I am eighty-five years old. I am as strong now as I was when Moses sent me on that journey, and I can still travel and fight as well as I could then. So give me the hill country that the Lord promised me. You will remember that as scouts we found the descendants of Anak living there in great, walled towns. But if the Lord is with me, I will drive them out of the land, just as the Lord said.<sup>197</sup>

Some seem to think that passivity and cowardice please God. On the contrary, there is nothing more disappointing to God than one who will not trust him because without faith it is impossible to please him.<sup>198</sup> There is nothing that pleases him more than one who will rely on him completely and without apology, even when they do not feel like it.

Virtue is the point in the development of faith that it begins to solidify. It is integrity. Without virtue, faith would not have the vitality to make it through the following steps in its development. It would wither prematurely. Virtue is the strengthening of our faith to be able to continue its growth and is manifested in the way we conduct ourselves, in “excellence of character.”<sup>199</sup>

## KNOWLEDGE

If faith is confidence that Christ will come through, knowledge is understanding what part he wants us to play. And if virtue is supernatural energy and tenacity, then knowledge is what provides direction for that energy. After our initial decision to rely on Christ our faith must be cultivated by an increase in knowledge regarding who he is, what he has said, and what he wants us to do. This results in a greater

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<sup>197</sup> Joshua 14:10-12 [New Living Translation].

<sup>198</sup> Hebrews 11:6.

<sup>199</sup> Barry et al., 2 Pe 1:5.



sensitivity to his leading.

An increase of knowledge should not promote pride but provoke us to depend on Jesus even more. It makes us more aware of our insufficiencies and our need for a savior. Through knowledge we come to more deeply realize our need for him, increasingly understanding him as the fulfillment of our deepest desires. The more we realize this fact the more we are willing to surrender our wills to his. The more we surrender to him the more we are eager to obey him, knowing that his is the only long-term plan worth following.

Josiah, a descendent of King David, was king of the nation of Judah for thirty-one years. After the death of his father at the hands of his own servants, Josiah began his reign as an eight-year old boy. Eight was also the age “he began to seek the God of David his father.”<sup>200</sup> This was a very practical choice for the young king to make.

Look at the situation from Josiah’s standpoint. He is eight years old and is put in charge of running a nation. Naturally he wants to be a great king, a great warrior, and a great man. He does not want mediocrity. He wants to be the best, so he looks for the best example to emulate. His father is the polar opposite of greatness and nobility, so he digs back even further into his family history, eventually coming to the records that chronicle the reign of King David.

David was the ultimate warrior-king. He was good to his friends and a terror to his enemies. He was feared and respected by all who knew his name. He brought down giants, killed lions and bears with his bare hands, wed princesses, and defeated army after army on the field of

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<sup>200</sup> II Chronicles 34:3.

battle. He was anything but a push-over, but he was loved for his commitment to justice, as well as his generosity to those less fortunate.

David was everything Josiah wanted to be, so Josiah sought to unlock the secret to David's success. He realized that David could not have done what he did but for the favor of his God. But the Book of the Law, which recorded God's covenant with the Israelites and what he expected of them, was lost.

Eventually, a priest rediscovered this book and read it to Josiah. Rather than take pride in the discovery, Josiah's reaction was one of complete humility. He tore his clothes and swore to God that he would follow the Book word for word. He tore down all idols and monuments in the nation because they dishonored the true God and he slaughtered the priests that attended them. He reinstated the laws and rituals that had been abandoned and brought all of his people back into an attitude of humility before God. As a result, it was said, "Before him there was no king like him...nor did any like him arise after him."<sup>201</sup> Not only did he have the zeal, he gained the knowledge with which to direct it.

For many people an increase in knowledge means an increase in their pride, but the knowledge of God produces humility. The gospel "exposes us, demanding naked humility. It insists the focus be entirely on God and Jesus," and it "doesn't let us take any credit."<sup>202</sup> The more we learn, the more we realize that there is much we do not know, and the more we are okay with that fact. We start to realize that God has us well-taken care of regardless of how ignorant we can be, as long as we are committed to trusting him.

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Heiser, 61.

Growing in knowledge is not just an intellectual exercise. Knowledge is the realization of our deep need for a savior and, as a result, increased understanding of Christ as he shows himself to be that for us. It is not just intellectual ascendance but an internal knowing. It is the difference between reading about Rome and actually standing in the Coliseum, or reading a book about combat and getting into a firefight. It is not coming up with big words to describe God, but it is developing an appreciation for even the subtlest aspects of his being as we depend on him.

We are not supposed to live out our lives on this earth as ignorant children. We all know that growing up makes life more difficult and complicated, but also more interesting. There are new questions and issues to be confronted but, because we are more willing to rely on Christ, the scope of the adventures we are willing to undertake broadens.

The end result is a greater awareness of our union with Christ:

...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.<sup>203</sup>

The purpose of faith is intimacy with God and this intimacy comes through Christ because he is the image of God. The more we come to know Jesus internally, meaning not only with our heads but also with

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<sup>203</sup> II Corinthians 4:4-6.

our hearts and through our actions, the more accurately we know God and are able to enjoy him as the fulfillment of our core desire.

While knowledge is a vital step in the development of faith, we should not be discouraged when we fail to understand something. Dr. Heiser explains, “We may not completely understand things like God becoming a man in Jesus, or how the resurrection could happen. That’s okay. God doesn’t demand we figure it all out and then get back to him to take a final exam. He wants belief. Understanding why these things are rational can wait.”<sup>204</sup>

## SELF-CONTROL

Self-control is the ability to do what is necessary to achieve true fulfillment rather than temporary comfort or satisfaction. What we really want, the core desire, is often different than what we feel like we want at the time, the temporary desire of the flesh. Self-control is the ability to see through these feelings and emotions, pinpoint our long-term and God-given desires, and refuse to be distracted from that goal. It is not the denial of our wants and desires, but the realization we find their fulfillment only in Christ.

Self-control is not passivity or lack of aggression. It is focused aggression. It is the ability to kick the intensity into high gear when you need to while at the same time knowing when it is time to throttle back and let God work.

During his time on earth Jesus was the perfect example of controlled aggression:

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<sup>204</sup> Heiser, 58.

[H]e was not the meek, mild pacifist so popular with some modern writers, who place all their stress on Jesus's admonition to "turn the other cheek." They never mention, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). And all sayings aside, the image of meekness is entirely incompatible with the Jesus who is reported to have "looked around at them with anger" (Mark 3:5), who often verbally skewered Pharisees, and who drove money-changers out of the Temple.<sup>205</sup>

When the temple at Jerusalem was being defiled, Jesus hand-fashioned a whip and drove those who were there for the wrong reasons out of the complex.<sup>206</sup> This was a very violent, aggressive move on his part, but once he accomplished what he set out to do he returned to teaching, healing, and loving. He was protective when it came to ensuring that the "house of prayer" be honored. He wanted nothing to interrupt the true worshippers in their prayers to his Father, but he also had the self-control to know when to adopt a compassionate tone.

Self-control is also a prominent characteristic in those believers who give their lives for the sake of the message of Jesus. No one ever feels like enduring torture and death, but the long-term desire of martyrs, reunion with their savior, is more important to them than their temporary, physical wants.

One of these was named Polycarp. Polycarp was a student of the apostle John and head of the group of Christians at Smyrna. He was captured and condemned to be burned at the stake unless he would give up his faith in Christ. His answer to this was, "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never once wronged me. How then shall I blaspheme my king who has saved me?" Polycarp's captors sentenced

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<sup>205</sup> Stark, 50.

<sup>206</sup> John 2:13-17.

him to be nailed to a stake and burned, but he assured his persecutors that he would not try to escape, so he was tied with ropes instead. The wood upon which he stood was lit but, true to his word, he did not try to escape.<sup>207</sup>

The greatest act of self-control that has ever been committed was that of Jesus' sacrifice of himself. Not only did he endure physical and emotional torment at the hands of the religious and political elite, but all of the forces of hell also massed together to drive Jesus to his breaking point. It was too late before they discovered that they had made a fatal mistake, and "for the joy that was set before him," Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."<sup>208</sup>

## STEADFASTNESS

James gives what may be the best explanation of steadfastness and its benefits. He writes, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."<sup>209</sup>

Steadfastness, or patience, is endurance. It is the point in the development of faith when it is tested in the heat of life's difficulties and purified of its defects. The purer a substance is, the stronger, more durable, and more valuable it is. Our faith is no different. The more intense the pressure that it stands up under, the purer it becomes. It is

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<sup>207</sup> Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, 13.

<sup>208</sup> Hebrews 12:2.

<sup>209</sup> James 1:2-4.

this purity that defines its quality. But the patience that James calls for “is not to be mere stoical endurance, but united to [and flowing from] *God-trusting*.”<sup>210</sup>

We have to remember the centrality of desire if we are to see the benefits of enduring hardship. We have already established that faith in Christ is the only way to him, the fulfillment of our core desires, the desires of the heart. If building endurance through hardship and trials purifies and solidifies our faith then every trial can be embraced as another step in our journey towards realizing the desires of our heart, because the stronger our faith is the closer we are to those desires becoming reality.

Consequently, there is no such thing as the perfecting of faith behind closed doors. In fact, the principles of faith are more applicable to day-to-day relationships, the workplace, or the battlefield than even the church auditorium. It takes no faith to sit in a pew. Faith becomes much more real and necessary when you are dealing with difficult people, assaulted by a shower of bullets, or fired from your job.

A positive effect of experiencing difficult or dangerous situations is that they reveal the sincerity of your faith, both to yourself and to others. There is no pretending in a high-risk situation. Many people do everything they can to avoid risk, but for the individual who sincerely wants to reach perfection of faith there is no getting around the need for some. While the risk may be emotional, and not necessarily physical, it is still very real; not simulated risk where you will probably be fine if it does not work out, but real risk where if God fails you fail.

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<sup>210</sup> Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, 517.

Fortunately, the greater the risk, the greater the payoff at the end and God never fails to reward those who trust him. David, a man with considerable experience and combat-hardened faith wrote, “Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.”<sup>211</sup> There is no better place to be than within the protective and nourishing shield of the love of God, even if on the outside it is the most dangerous environment imaginable.

The apostle Paul wrote, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”<sup>212</sup> He wrote this to the believers at Philippi to encourage them in their faith, assuring them that no matter what kind of rut they were in if they would only be patient and endure in their faith Jesus would never cease to develop them until the day he returns.

Paul would know. As he wrote these words, he was likely near the end of a two-year sentence in a Roman prison.<sup>213</sup> Even in the midst of such uncomfortable and inhospitable conditions he was able to encourage others because he himself was encouraged by the promise of being reunited with Christ.

Later in the letter he writes that “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”<sup>214</sup> Paul discovered that the secret to contented endurance is simple: aggressive, constant reliance upon Jesus.

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<sup>211</sup> Psalm 32:10.

<sup>212</sup> Philippians 1:6.

<sup>213</sup> Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Baker Academic, 2008), 258.

<sup>214</sup> Philippians 4:11-13.



He is a great example of what even an ordinary man is capable of when he chooses to depend on Christ to be his strength and comfort, regardless of the circumstances.

## GODLINESS

Godliness, or reverence, is the point in the development of faith that comes when we have so much appreciation for Christ that we begin acting like him. It is not something that comes simply through intellectual assent, but by the development of honest faith to the point where you have practiced it so much that you adopt a Christ-like way of thinking. It is sort of a faith-driven morality. We begin to hate what he hates and love what he loves, not because society says we should but because our likes and dislikes are so linked to those of Christ that if it hurts him it hurts us and if it pleases him it pleases us. It is sensitivity to his will.

Reverence is the stage in faith development that the writer of Hebrews describes: “But solid food is for full-grown men, for those whose senses and mental faculties are trained by practice to discriminate and distinguish between what is morally good and noble and what is evil and contrary either to divine or human law.”<sup>215</sup> We no longer need to be told what to do and not do in every situation. We begin to simply know because we have started to think like Jesus thinks.

That is not to say that we should not rely on him for guidance. That should be an all day, every day attitude. It means that it becomes easier to be led by him because we are starting to see reality in the same way he

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<sup>215</sup> Hebrews 5:14 [The Amplified Bible].

does, for what it really is.

Reverence, or intense respect, is not something we can just conjure up on our own. We need a reason to have this level of respect for someone. They must have earned it. As we learn to trust God and take risks with and for him our respect for him grows with each trial he sees us through.

Of course, we are reverent towards him because he is God, Creator and King, but that respect becomes intensely personal when we experience him in our own lives. It is like the difference between a gun enthusiast, who collects weapons as a hobby, and a soldier or law enforcement officer, whose very life could depend upon that weapon. There is a different kind of reverence when you actually have to rely upon something rather than just compliment or criticize it. This personal and empirical appreciation of Christ, the kind that comes only after experiencing life with him, is reverence.

The writer of Hebrews describes reverence as the result of God's having revealed and proven himself to the world in the person of Jesus: "And, beyond all question, the secret of reverence is great – who was revealed in the flesh, declared right in Spirit, was seen by messengers, was proclaimed among nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in esteem."<sup>216</sup> Reverence springs out knowing Jesus as Christ.

This is why morality is bankrupt in the long run apart from faith. Without faith in the love of Christ, what good is morality? If this life is all that we have to look forward to, and God's goodness is not a factor, then why not live it up while we are here? If God is not interested in me

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<sup>216</sup> I Timothy 3:16.

then I need to take care of my own temporary desires as best I can before I inevitably die.

We saw in Chapter 2 that Paul had no appreciation for resurrection-less morality: “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”<sup>217</sup> If the gospel is true, and God is interested not only in my life here but also into eternity, then it is only logical that I choose to live in a way that is pleasing to him.

An accurate picture of Jesus makes us more willing to depend upon him. If our image of him is still that of him hanging naked upon a cross it is going to be difficult to accept that he is able to take care of us. But when we begin to see him as he is now, resurrected, all-powerful, all-loving, and as the Warrior-King described in the book of Revelation then there is no limit to how much we are willing to rely upon him. On the contrary, not relying upon him begins to look stupid:

Then I turned to see...one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.<sup>218</sup>

The strongest, most powerful, and most loving Being in existence wants to see to the eternal fulfillment of our desires. Who are we to deny him? Even now, he “stands before God and ‘the congregation,’ the heavenly sons of God. He confesses boldly that he feels no shame in having us as

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<sup>217</sup> I Corinthians 15:19, 20.

<sup>218</sup> Revelation 1:12-16.

siblings in the family.”<sup>219</sup> It is by realizing this truth, the truth of the omnipotence and infinite love of Christ, that we come to revere him.

## BROTHERLY AFFECTION

Real affection for a brother or sister, whether we are related physically or through our common faith, is partly a result of our own confidence in Christ. If we are insecure and timid there can never be any real depth of companionship. If we are not secure in who we are in Christ then we either take our need for validation and approval to that other person or we are too embarrassed to open up at all emotionally.

This is a self-centered approach to a relationship because we are seeing that person only in light of our needs rather than what is good for him or her. The best and most fruitful relationships are those in which both parties are confident and do not feel the need to compare themselves with each other. They play to their own strengths, are fine with not always being the center attention, and elevate the needs of the other above their own.

The connection between brotherly affection and faith is this: realistic confidence comes only through the development of faith. Faith is, at bottom, confidence in Christ. The greater the confidence, the greater the relationship potential. So the ability to treat those close to us with care and consideration, without being insecure about our own identity, is a direct result of faith. When we start to realize our own value in Christ we position ourselves to give rather than always being the one to receive. We also realize that we have something God-given to offer and become

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<sup>219</sup> Heiser, 47.

willing to do our part to help others as much as possible.

On the flip side, some people have issues receiving from others due to a lack of confidence. They will give and give until there is nothing left but refuse to be given anything because it makes them feel weak and dependent. Faith solves this problem as well.

Because of our reliance upon Jesus we can see the generosity of others as an avenue for his provision. It is no longer about feeling inferior to any man or woman because our faith is not in them. It is in Jesus. If he chooses to use them as the means by which he takes care of us that is his prerogative as God. We are then able to appreciate the person rather than feeling indebted and obligated to them. We do what we can to care for them just as they did for us, but our confidence is not in the person doing the giving. It is in Christ himself.

David and Jonathan are prime examples of faith-driven brotherly affection. Because they found their security and identity in God they were free to care for each other without any self-centered reservation. Both of these men had a faith that determined their sense of identity and purpose, so when they met there was an immediate bond that can only take place through likeminded confidence in God. The “soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.”<sup>220</sup> Jonathan knew this affection resulted from shared confidence in God, saying, “The LORD is between you and me forever.”<sup>221</sup> Given their acts of extreme courage and outrageous military exploits these men would be the last anyone would accuse of being soft or weak, yet amidst their heroics they were also able to remain sensitive

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<sup>220</sup> I Samuel 18:1.

<sup>221</sup> I Samuel 20:22.

to each other's needs.

Jonathan, the son of King Saul, was heir to the throne of Israel. When Saul observed that as long as David lived he was a threat to Jonathan's kingly inheritance, Jonathan did not mind in the least. His confidence in the will of God was such that he did not need to become king to validate himself, and if God had chosen David to become king then that was Jonathan's wish as well. Instead of trying to have David killed, Jonathan saved his life. David, years after Jonathan's death, returned the favor by receiving one of his descendants as a member of his own household. The strength of their brotherly affection outlasted even death.

## LOVE

The difference between brotherly affection and love is that brotherly affection concerns how you interact with those close to you, those you depend on and interact with regularly. Love concerns how you interact with everyone, including those who have nothing to offer you. But the same principle of faith applies. Confidence in the love of Christ frees us to love others without hesitation or fear for our own well-being. Faith turns us into men and women who have nothing to lose and everything to give: nothing to lose because our dreams and desires are secure in Christ and everything to give because we are representatives of the King of the universe.

Paul explains how we can live unencumbered by fear, writing, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died,

and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”<sup>222</sup>

He then goes on to explain how this faith is played out in our day-to-day lives. He identifies love as the product of this mentality: “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”<sup>223</sup> So faith in Christ is what binds us to God. Love is what binds us to each other. When it is embraced, true faith, that connection with Love himself, naturally resolves itself into love for others.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector during the time of Jesus and was probably insecure both due to his small stature and the stigma attached to his profession. Tax collectors were known as cheaters and manipulators. When Zacchaeus heard about Jesus, he went to see what all the talk was about. He climbed up into a tree to get a better view, which caught Jesus’ attention. Jesus told him to come down and, disregarding the self-righteous grumblings of the crowd, invited himself to stay at Zacchaeus’ house. Zacchaeus “received him joyfully.”<sup>224</sup> After his encounter with Jesus he immediately resolved to give half of what he owned to the poor and to pay back anyone he had cheated four times what he owed.

The key element in this story is Jesus’ acceptance of Zacchaeus even before he had done anything to earn it. Before this meeting, Zacchaeus had put his faith in his own cunning and had perhaps begun to see himself as the religious crowd saw him: nothing more than a legally-sanctioned thief. Once he put his faith in the approval of Jesus,

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<sup>222</sup> Colossians 3:1-4.

<sup>223</sup> Colossians 3:14.

<sup>224</sup> Luke 19:6.

however, things changed instantly. His faith in the approval of Christ immediately resulted in the ability to love others, as well as forgive himself, as he had not been able to before.

## REPEATING THE CYCLE

As we press on towards a deeper intimacy with Christ our outlook on life begins to mature as our faith deepens. No matter who we are, if we have put our faith in Jesus we have initially done so for a completely self-serving reason: we want to be sure of where we want to go when we die; we do not want to be lonely and depressed anymore; we want the sense of purpose, identity and peace that only he can give; and so on.

Whatever the reason, it was a completely self-interested one, and there is nothing wrong with that. That is the way God designed it to work. That is faith: taking your needs, wants, and desires to Christ instead of trying to find a cheap substitute.

But that is the beginning, not the end. Love is the natural end-state of mature faith. This is especially true of love for Christ himself. The more we depend on him the more we have cause to appreciate him. It is also true that the more we love him, the more we are willing to depend on him and convey his love to others. This appreciation for God takes us right back to the beginning, where the process of spiritual development started in the first place: simple reliance. And so, the cycle of faith begins again.

Faith is not a destination but a process. It is not about being perfect, but being perfected. Just like a tree starts out as a seed and then spends some time as a sapling, God does not expect us to begin our spiritual journey with the faith of an apostle. All he expects is that we are



constantly willing to grow and he himself will provide the growth. This is how we are able to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and...run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.”<sup>225</sup>

If we dig our roots deeper, he will provide the increase up top. Paul explained to the Corinthians, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”<sup>226</sup> So if there is any rule that we should live by it is this: Always be learning to rely on Christ more. The harder we lean into him the less power other imperfect supports have over us. This assures that we will always be growing in faith, and since faith comes by increased intimacy with Christ then we can always be growing regardless of environment or circumstance. All it takes is a conscious decision to rely on Christ and a willingness to be shaped and strengthened by him.

We all mess up. The thing that separates those who succeed from those who fail is the willingness to ask forgiveness and get back in the fight. “*No amount* of falls will really undo us if we keep on picking ourselves up each time.”<sup>227</sup>

Jesus’ disciple Judas was not the only one who betrayed Jesus on the night that he was crucified. Peter denied him three times. Judas ended his own life by hanging himself. Peter became one of the leaders of the early church. The difference was in Peter’s willingness to ask forgiveness and get back up versus Judas’ failure to do so.

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<sup>225</sup> Hebrews 12:1, 2.

<sup>226</sup> I Corinthians 3:6, 7.

<sup>227</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 470.

Peter learned “that if God forgives us we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him.”<sup>228</sup> Even after that incident Peter made mistakes, but they became less frequent as his reliance on Jesus grew and became stronger. He died a very strong and fulfilled champion of unapologetic reliance.

Faith is almost too simple for some people to accept. Dr. Heiser has noticed that “a lot of people who attend church don’t really understand the gospel. Some can’t articulate it. Others who *can* express it coherently often struggle with truly surrendering to its simplicity. They suffer inside over truly believing that the gospel is all that’s necessary for everlasting life.”<sup>229</sup>

But it is usually the simple truths that have the biggest impact. Simple, but not always easy. Sometimes the hardest thing in the world to do is simply trust Jesus but it is always the best course of action in the long run, because we can be “sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 523.

<sup>229</sup> Heiser, 55.

<sup>230</sup> Philippians 1:6.

## CHAPTER 4 – CONFIDENT HUMILITY

*The whole secret of the practical success of Christendom lies in the Christian humility, however imperfectly fulfilled. For with the removal of all question of merit or payment, the soul is suddenly released for incredible voyages. – G.K. Chesterton<sup>231</sup>*

*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. – The Apostle James<sup>232</sup>*

When David stood before King Saul requesting permission to fight the giant Goliath no one would have accused him of being too humble. His first response to the threats of the Philistine giant was, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?”<sup>233</sup> Most people wrote off this young shepherd as naïve and arrogant. Even his own brother thought him immature. God, on the other hand, liked what he heard.

Saul, at first, reacted to David’s attitude the same way as everyone else. But he quickly realized that he was running out of options. This giant had issued an ultimatum that he could not ignore, and yet neither he nor any of his battle-hardened soldiers were willing to accept it. And

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<sup>231</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, Kindle ed. (New York: John Lane Company, 1919; repr., 2008), Loc. 528-9, Project Gutenberg, accessed September 14, 2019, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/470>.

<sup>232</sup> James 4:6.

<sup>233</sup> I Samuel 17:26.

now this young shepherd was giving him reason after reason why he, a veteran of no war but a conqueror of lions and bears, would be able to succeed where every other warrior was too afraid to even try.

David realized that physical strength would not be the deciding factor in this contest. The real issue was endurance of faith. He did not try to convince Saul by giving him a resumé full of exploits that he could have accomplished on his own. Instead he picked out those incidents that were obvious examples of the providence of God. He did not argue that he could win because he was especially qualified. He told Saul, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.”<sup>234</sup> He gave God the credit and Saul, having no other option, agreed to let him fight.

Saul proceeded to tell David how to do what he himself was unwilling to try. David, after indulging the king for a while, realized that God gave him certain skills for a reason and to try to fight in any way other than that which God had already trained him would be impractical. Again, David might have been accused of arrogance at rejecting the experienced king’s advice. No one said anything about his insubordination, however, because no one wanted to take his place.

Malcolm Gladwell notes that, in reality, David had the advantage from the start. He chose to use a ranged weapon that he had spent his whole life mastering against Goliath’s close-ranged armament. He argues that Saul’s misapprehension was misplaced because he did not “appreciate that power can come in other forms as well – in breaking

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<sup>234</sup> I Samuel 17:37.

rules, in substituting speed and surprise for strength.”<sup>235</sup> This is indicative of the state of paralysis King Saul and his men were in. Their fear prevented them from conducting a tactical analysis of the situation and deciding on the most sensible course of action. David, seeing things from a standpoint of faith rather than fear, was able to make this practical assessment and act on it.

The exchange between David and Goliath was one of insults, but the substance of their threats differed. Goliath emphasized his own martial prowess in every threat: “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field.”<sup>236</sup> David, on the other hand, did not focus on himself at all:

You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand.<sup>237</sup>

One can only imagine the pleasure that God feels when a person boasts in him like David did. He hovers on the edge of every moment of our lives just waiting for the opportunity to prove our professions of faith to be well-placed. This is the highest form of worship: simple trust and complete reliance. Every time Goliath said ‘I’ David said ‘he’. Goliath beat his chest but David’s focus was on his mission and his God.

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<sup>235</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 2013), 13.

<sup>236</sup> I Samuel 17:44.

<sup>237</sup> I Samuel 17:45-47.

Everyone knows what followed. David killed Goliath with a sling and a stone. I wonder if the Israelite soldiers looked at each other confused and thought, “No one said we could just shoot the guy.” Sometimes some creativity and a little bit of unconventional thinking is just what God uses to accomplish his will. David, in the process, won the hand of a princess and the manliest job in the nation, being made commander of all of Israel’s men of war.

David may have been viewed as cocky but, in reality, he was the humblest man in the nation of Israel because humility “involves having a realistic assessment of ourselves—our weaknesses *and* strengths.”<sup>238</sup> Every other Israelite saw the giant in light of their own inabilities and shortcomings, but did not consider the advantage of having God on their side. David accepted the challenge because he had complete confidence that God had prepared him for this moment.

David knew his “proper place before God—with all of” his “strengths and weaknesses.”<sup>239</sup> If God had not come through then David would have been humiliated, and likely killed. But his lack of emphasis on self-preservation and willingness to stake all on the providence of God gives us an accurate picture of true humility.

## CHRIST-CONFIDENCE

Confidence, like faith, requires an object. There is a difference between self-confidence and Christ-confidence. Self-confidence can only take us so far because we are, in and of ourselves, limited beings. Because of this, “Complete self-confidence is not merely a sin; complete

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<sup>238</sup> Copan, 28.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

self-confidence is a weakness.”<sup>240</sup>

But there is no limit to how far Christ-confidence can take us because he, having conquered all that there is to conquer, is all-powerful. Christ-confidence is the true definition of humility. As John G. Lake explained, faith in Christ “was designed to bring forth a race of men who were bold and strong and pure and good...The greatest and the strongest and the noblest is always the humblest.”<sup>241</sup> The “noble race” that Lake refers to is nothing like the facist “uberman,” nor does it have anything to do with ethnicity. He echoes Paul’s assertion, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>242</sup>

Christ-confidence sometimes looks like self-confidence because he is not outside of the believer, floating in some ethereal realm, having left us to our own devices. He is within us, actively leading, guiding, and strengthening us. Paul refers to this truth as the divine secret and “the mystery hidden for ages and generations...which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”<sup>243</sup> Because we as believers are united with Christ we cannot become more confident in him without seeming to become more confident in ourselves. We are one with him, so anything we invest into him (time, energy, and resources) is, in the long run, an investment into ourselves.

Pride is a result of our becoming confident in ourselves apart from Jesus. It is “an inflated view of ourselves—a false advertising campaign

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<sup>240</sup> Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 5.

<sup>241</sup> John G. Lake, *John G. Lake: His Life, His Sermons, His Boldness of Faith* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1994), 47.

<sup>242</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>243</sup> Colossians 1:25-27.

promoting ourselves because we suspect that others won't accept who we really are. Pride is actually a lie about our own identity or achievements. To be proud is to live in a world propped up with falsehoods about ourselves, taking credit where credit isn't due."<sup>244</sup>

Pride is what caused the fall of mankind and every act of disobedience since. It is pretending we can do for ourselves what we are inherently incapable of. There is no challenge involved when it comes to sin. We can do that very proficiently on our own. It is living a life worth living that takes more strength than we inherently have. So sin and pride are allies, as are faith and humility.

King Saul's inability to trust God did not begin with the fight against Goliath. He started down the slippery slope of self-reliance long before that and he paid the price for it. He began his reign with much promise, at least outwardly, for there "was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people."<sup>245</sup> He should have been the ideal leader – strong, handsome and charismatic. Yet Saul did not have the endurance of faith and humility that made David successful.

While waging a war against the Philistines prior to the battle between David and Goliath, Saul found himself and his army surrounded and outnumbered by the Philistine army. The Israelites fled and hid themselves in caves and tombs. Saul started to panic, fearing that the overwhelming enemy force would destroy his army.

In his state of fear, Saul made an unlawful sacrifice to God in an attempt to buy his favor. What he forgot was that God favors trust and

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<sup>244</sup> Copan, 27-8.

<sup>245</sup> I Samuel 9:2.



obedience, not bribery. When the man who was supposed to make the sacrifice arrived, the prophet Samuel, Saul told him that he had been afraid of a Philistine attack and already made the sacrifice. Samuel informed Saul that he had just inadvertently lost his throne and that God had chosen someone else to rule, someone who would trust him wholly and completely.<sup>246</sup>

Fear is a precursor to sin. It is a product of pride because it removes God from the equation and only focuses on the self. By allowing himself to be controlled by his fear rather than patient trust, Saul cut himself off from the provision and protection of God. By making a sacrifice out of fear for his life and his kingdom, he approached God as if he could be bought.

But God wants to be relied upon, not bargained with. It may seem harsh that Saul lost the nation as a result of a mishandled sacrifice but God would not, at this critical juncture in history, allow his nation to be led by a man who was unwilling to trust in his timing. Instead he chose David, a man who had plenty of faults but who never stopped depending on him, even amidst tremendous mistakes and shortcomings.

## HEROES OF THE FAITH

When God made mankind, he designed us to boast and be proud. Whether boasting is right or wrong depends on its object. Our strength, peace and fulfillment are to be found in Jesus alone and not in anything or anyone else.

If we are not actively boasting in Jesus it will be easy to fall into self-

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<sup>246</sup> I Samuel 13.

centered pride, in which case we focus on our own achievements and failures. Idleness gives self-centeredness room to work. That is why Paul in his writings can always be seen boasting in the love and power of God. He writes, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord,”<sup>247</sup> and, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”<sup>248</sup>

Active boasting in Jesus prevents self-centered pride. This is one of the many benefits of sincere worship, through which we permit ourselves to remember where our confidence should be placed. Worship to God as the one who deserves it is simply “spiritual creatures getting in touch with reality. Just as genuine humility is rooted in reality, so is worship.”<sup>249</sup>

This is hard for those who do not share this same confidence in Jesus to understand. Sometimes it makes them uncomfortable. This discomfort is often channeled into ridicule. When the Israelites heard David brag on God when he decided to face the giant, they were not able to see the God in whom he boasted. As sure as he was of God's promises and protection, others probably assumed that he was either arrogant or insane.

When we live with confidence in Christ, whom others cannot see, our words and acts of faith may be misconstrued as self-righteous or egotistical. When we start living with strength and compassion that others cannot comprehend, taking risks that others are unwilling to take, they will often write us off as being ambitious, self-centered, or just crazy. Fortunately, that is not our problem.

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<sup>247</sup> II Corinthians 10:17.

<sup>248</sup> II Corinthians 11:30.

<sup>249</sup> Copan, 30.

We should be willing to become insignificant in the eyes of men if only to bring delight to our Father. Our part is to be sure that they are not correct about our own talents and capabilities being the source of our confidence. We must be willing to be honest with ourselves as to whether our confidence comes from our own abilities or from Christ, who gives and guides those abilities.

It is for this reason, the assurance of the inward leading of Christ, that there is a special bond among those who are actively living by faith. We can try to explain how we sense his leading in the core of our being and we can try to relate the experience of trusting him and seeing him work in our lives, but it is when we come into contact with others who have lived out faith for themselves that we experience true brotherhood and companionship. For further proof, just contrast the difference between the bored monotony of discussing God as abstract theory and the overwhelming excitement of those who relate to each other personal stories of his love and providence.

The apostle Paul, a professional endurance athlete in the faith, compared faith to running a race or training for a fight.<sup>250</sup> Because he was able to rely on Christ and persevere despite intense opposition he developed a confidence that, although seen by some as superiority, was simply a result of his confidence in the love of God.<sup>251</sup> Stephen, the first martyr for Jesus, also had such confidence that even at the moment of his execution he glowed with an otherworldly radiance his accusers could not ignore: “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that

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<sup>250</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:24, 27; Hebrews 12:1.

<sup>251</sup> II Corinthians 11:16-33.

his face was like the face of an angel.”<sup>252</sup>

The reason that these men and women were able to endure intense opposition with such tenacity and confidence was not because of a high pain threshold or some gross inclination towards masochism. The reason that they performed such amazing feats was because the love of Christ had become more real to them than any physical or emotional pain. The writer of Hebrews gives examples of Old Testament heroes who embraced the love of God as their ultimate reality rather than subjecting themselves to the world's standard of what matters:

For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.<sup>253</sup>

True faith brings supernatural results, even if subtle in appearance. The more we learn to rely on Christ the more evident this will become in our lives.

When it comes to relating to others, we must never let the unfaithfulness of man become more real to us than the love of God. If we place all of our trust and confidence in a human being we will always end up being disappointed at some point. No human is equipped to see

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<sup>252</sup> Acts 6:15.

<sup>253</sup> Hebrews 11:32-38.

to our entire well-being, no matter how loyal and loving they are. But as long as our confidence is in the love of God in Christ, which never fails, we are never without hope and a reason to press on through the present trial. We are also never without reason to forgive the one who has wronged us, because they are not the source of our confidence. Jesus is.

Jonathan was an Israelite prince and the son of Saul, the first king of Israel. During his lifetime the Philistines were constantly harassing the nation of Israel. On one occasion the Israelite army of 600 men was preparing to fight a Philistine army that was encamped on the opposite side of a gorge. Jonathan, in what from the outside looks like a brash decision, decided to take on the Philistines by himself, with only his armor bearer beside him. His mindset was that “nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few.” Not only was Jonathan a man of intense faith, he was also a good judge of character. The armor bearer he chose to accompany him responded to his outrageous plan by saying, “Do all that is in your heart...I am with you heart and soul.”

Jonathan decided that if the Philistines said, “Wait up, we'll come to you,” he would wait. If they said, “Bring it on,” Jonathan and his armor bearer would do that. The Philistines chose the latter.

Jonathan and his companion climbed down one side of the jagged, rocky, steep pass and right back up the other. At the top, driven by their faith, they pushed back the entire formation and killed twenty warriors, after which the entire Philistine army dissolved into chaos. They began to panic, ran around aimlessly, and even started attacking each other in the confusion. The rest of the Israelite army finally caught on and joined

in the assault.<sup>254</sup>

Many Israelites came out to fight when the battle was going well for them, but there were only two men in the entire nation who were willing take on the entire opposing army when there was no tangible assurance of victory. Instead of trying to strengthen his odds of success Jonathan minimized his assets, taking with him only his weapon, his friend and his faith. The faith of two men won the battle. It is this attitude of courageous and righteous aggression that is our heritage as those who rely on Christ.

## BOASTING IN WEAKNESS

God often chooses the least competent and least likely individuals to accomplish the greatest works of faith. Paul writes, “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”<sup>255</sup> God wants nothing less than our complete fulfillment but he will not share the credit for getting us there. We, as his sons and daughters, are meant to be examples of his goodness to those we live among, but if it looks like we are accomplishing everything in our own strengths and abilities then how will they see the need for Christ?

When a Hebrew man named Gideon led an army of Israelites against the Midianites, who had occupied their land and were terrorizing them, God did not tell him that he had too few men to accomplish the

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<sup>254</sup> I Samuel 14:1-15.

<sup>255</sup> I Corinthians 1:27-29.

mission. He told Gideon that he had too many, explaining, “The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me...’”<sup>256</sup> God had Gideon cut his fighting force down from 32,000 men to just 300. In yet another example of his supreme creativity God used Gideon, 300 men, and some torches and trumpets to drive out the Midianites and reclaim the land for Israel.

The man or woman of faith is never unwilling to at least try. What do we have to lose? Even if we fail God always has a plan for us, regardless of our failures. In fact, he is more than able and willing to turn our supposed failures into our greatest successes. The only failure is when we quit relying on him. Our faith does not keep us from making mistakes, but it does prevent our being crushed by them.

As long as we continue to take risks and step out of our comfort zone God will, when it is time, open the right doors. The worst thing we can do is cover up or deny our failures. It is in being honest and open about our shortcomings that we find freedom from them. It is when we hit rock bottom and quit trying to look capable, instead choosing to be completely transparent with Christ, that we open ourselves up to receive his help.

For these reasons, the most important attribute for one to have who wants to experience close intimacy with God is sincere humility. How can you rely on someone if you are not willing to be transparent with them? Honesty with God is about being willing to admit where you are lacking and acknowledge his willingness to help and develop you. John

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<sup>256</sup> Judges 7:2.

wrote, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”<sup>257</sup> Honesty should be easy for us. If God is all-knowing then what is the point of trying to hide our weaknesses and insufficiencies from him?

Yet we constantly find ourselves trying to impress God with impersonal prayer and forced worship, almost like we are doing some sort of rain dance so that he will think we are as good as we wish we were. But religious show is not what leads to intimacy with God: “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”<sup>258</sup> The willingness to simply be honest with God means so much more to him than any attempt at self-righteousness. If we will only be sincere with him, letting him in on even the nastiest aspects of our personalities, he will give us the strength and capability to grow into true righteousness.

It is no wonder why Jesus spent much of his time with social outcasts. He “clearly had no respect for the prevailing social distinctions, being quite willing to associate with stigmatized outsiders such as Samaritans, publicans, ‘fallen’ women, beggars, and various other outcasts.”<sup>259</sup> It is sometimes astounding the kind of personal baggage he is willing to dig through just to find a kernel of humble, honest faith. Jesus knew that the development of faith would lead to moral development, and instead of focusing on the behavioral aspect he focused on the root cause. He criticized the religious leaders of the day

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<sup>257</sup> I John 1:8.

<sup>258</sup> Psalm 51:16, 17,

<sup>259</sup> Stark, 50.



because he knew that even though they put on a good show many of them were lacking in honest humility before God.

Not long before Jesus' crucifixion he was eating at the home of a Pharisee when a woman entered. This woman was possibly a prostitute, but was at least "a sinner" like the rest of us. She brought with her "an alabaster flask of ointment," which cost "roughly a year's wages for a laborer."<sup>260</sup> She knelt down in front of Jesus and washed his feet with her tears. Then she dried them with her hair, which is how slaves would dry the feet of their masters.<sup>261</sup> Finally, she poured the expensive ointment over them.

Jesus' host thought, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." Jesus, knowing his attitude, told him a story about two debtors who had their debts forgiven by the same creditor. One owed substantially more than the other, so Jesus asked which of the debtors would love the creditor more as a result of his forgiveness. The host replied that the one who had owed more would love the lender more. Jesus said he was right.

Then, comparing the woman's treatment of him with that of the host, Jesus said that "her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little loves little." Finally, Jesus told the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."<sup>262</sup> Her humility, a product not of guilt but simply of her honest appreciation of Jesus' forgiveness, was directly related to her faith in him. That faith and

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<sup>260</sup> Barry et al., Lk 7:36-50.

<sup>261</sup> Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, 105.

<sup>262</sup> Luke 7:36-50.

appreciation produced love and an eagerness to show that love in a tangible way.

Jesus paints a picture of the ideal believer in the beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.<sup>263</sup>

The reason those whom Jesus refers to in this passage are “blessed” is that they, having nothing of consequence to offer of their own, are in the perfect position to rely upon him to be their provider. They cannot get what they need on their own so they are forced to rely on him. This is the real beginning of faith: the realization of a deep-seated need that nothing else in this world can satisfy.

This is why the poor and demoralized were so attracted to him while he was on earth, while the religiously inclined, in large part, rejected him. The rich and religious denied their need for him because, for the moment, they could live life comfortably without him. But the prostitutes and thieves could not deny their need for a Savior. This is why “when they encounter Jesus, they are eager to trade their broken lives and shattered dreams for the grace God offers them.”<sup>264</sup> Jesus told as much to the Pharisees, asserting, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and

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<sup>263</sup> Matthew 5:3-6.

<sup>264</sup> Markos, 158.

believe him.”<sup>265</sup>

A Christ-driven change in lifestyle does not happen outside of reliance upon him. The behavioral change is not a cause of faith, but the result. Jesus taught that the change in lifestyle comes after being made right with God, which is by faith and faith alone. So, faith both precedes and produces change. The result of the indwelling life of Christ through reliance upon him, the internal transformation, is the beginning of the external transformation.

## STRONG IN HUMILITY

Dennis Rogers is on record as pound-for-pound the strongest man in the world. Despite being scrawny and weak in high school he trained his way out of weakness into the arena of superhuman strength. Among other extreme feats he has held back two T-34 Air Force propeller-driven planes from taking off. He bends nails, horseshoes, and iron bars. He has one-armed curled 98 pounds for ten reps at a body weight of 148 pounds.<sup>266</sup> And he gives Christ all of the credit.

When asked what the greatest moment of his life was, Dennis replied, “When I made Jesus Lord of my life. Nothing can compare to the moment that I decided I was going to live for Jesus and walk in faith, depending on him for everything.”<sup>267</sup> What makes this man great is that, despite his success, he is still able to recognize the favor of God in all of his trials and victories. He has committed his life to helping others realize their God-given potential, break through their weaknesses, and

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<sup>265</sup> Matthew 21: 31, 32.

<sup>266</sup> See *DennisRogers.net*

<sup>267</sup> "The Bold and the Beautiful," *WestForkPresbyterian.com*, December 19, 2010. "The Bold and the Beautiful," (accessed December 19, 2010), *westforkpresbyterian.com*.

live the life of strength and courage which God has called us to.<sup>268</sup>

A favorite verse of people like Dennis is Proverbs 24:5: “A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might.” Reverence and humility to Christ, or the “fear of the LORD,”<sup>269</sup> produces wisdom, which results in unprecedented growth of strength and the ability to help and defend others. This humility produces the kind of strength that does not consume the one who wields it, but rather provides direction for that strength and a reason to use it positively.

Speaking through the apostle Peter, God shows us that the goal of humility is not our degradation, but our exaltation: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”<sup>270</sup> God, being the loving Father that he is, wants to see to nothing less than our full and complete success, even our exaltation. He just does not want us trying to accomplish this on our own. He knows how badly we will screw it up. God is the only Being in the universe who is able to exalt us to the heights that he wants us to be exalted. No man can do it for himself, so it is useless and self-destructive to try. Paul wrote that “it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.”<sup>271</sup>

The believer who takes his faith seriously does not only humble himself before God, but also puts aside his pride to be honest and ask for help from those God puts in his life for that very reason. “The truth

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<sup>268</sup> See [dennisrogers.net](http://dennisrogers.net).

<sup>269</sup> Psalm 111:10.

<sup>270</sup> I Peter 5:6, 7.

<sup>271</sup> II Corinthians 10:18.

will set you free,”<sup>272</sup> and God rarely works apart from people. To truly rely on him is to rely on those he works through. That means we cannot only be honest with him. We must be transparent and vulnerable with those we can trust. Stated another way, “As much of the truth as I admit to God, myself, and those who can help me will set me free.” Many a committed believer has sought counseling, advice, and other forms of help and been better able to live out the life of faith because of it.

It is also important that we humble ourselves to those who God places in our lives to mentor and lead us. God has entrusted us to them for our own good, for the development of our faith “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”<sup>273</sup> These spiritual leaders contribute to the strengthening of the body of Christ so we can be more productive, effective, and aggressive in revealing his love to the world.

At the same time, it is equally important that we be aware of those who masquerade themselves as spiritual authorities but are in their line of work purely out of selfish ambition, only desiring to strip us of our freedom in Christ and return us to a state of bondage. Paul, after revealing the mystery of the gospel to the church at Colossae, which is “Christ in you”, writes, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in

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<sup>272</sup> John 8:32.

<sup>273</sup> Ephesians 4:13.

him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”<sup>274</sup>

In other words, every genuine spiritual leader keeps Christ central. One who claims to be but focuses on everything but Christ is putting up a smokescreen. The writers of *The Torah's Goal?* explain that Christ should take precedence even over traditions: “Identity should not be based on deeds or traditions. Our identity as believers (Jews or Gentiles) must be rooted in [Jesus] Himself...We are not saying that tradition is evil or undesirable, just that it must not become the primary focus or a stumbling block. Tradition can be wonderful as an added spice, but should never dominate our walk with the Lord.”<sup>275</sup>

## RELIANCE AS RESTING

The author of Hebrews writes, “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience...Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”<sup>276</sup> To enter God’s rest is to enter a state of complete reliance on Christ.

This being the case, the first thing we should do every morning is give the rest of the day up to God. We should recognize that it is not all up to us, that we are responsible only to do our part and rely on Christ for the infinite number of things we cannot control. We go into the day determined to do our best, but in the end all that really matters that we rely on Christ and do what we can to serve others. The rest is for him to take care of.

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<sup>274</sup> Colossians 2:8-10.

<sup>275</sup> Seth D. Postell, Eitan Bar, and Erez Soref, *The Torah's Goal?*, Kindle ed. (Israel College of the Bible (One For Israel Ministry), 2015), Loc. 916.

<sup>276</sup> Hebrews 4:11, 14.

That is the power of humility. That is what Jesus meant when he told us to approach the kingdom of God as children. He said, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>277</sup> Again, Jesus equates sin to self-sufficiency without him.

During his final journey to Jerusalem to be crucified, Jesus sent out seventy-two followers to spread the message of the invasion of God’s kingdom that he was facilitating. They returned to him thrilled that “even the demons” were “subject” to them in Jesus’ name. Jesus affirmed their authority in him, but cautioned them not to “rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”<sup>278</sup>

Jesus recognized that the messengers could be easily distracted by what they were able to accomplish, opening the door for pride and a kind of self-centered, temporary satisfaction. He redirected their focus from what they were doing for him to what he was doing for them, restoring them to their hearts’ desire, reunion with the Father.

“In that same hour” Jesus excitedly expressed his gratitude to his Father “that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”<sup>279</sup> Even Jesus, God-incarnate, was overwhelmed with appreciation for God’s paternal nature in that he does not expect those who come to him to be extraordinary in any way, but only humbly

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<sup>277</sup> Matthew 18:3, 4 NLT.

<sup>278</sup> Luke 10:17-20.

<sup>279</sup> Luke 10:21.

reliant upon him.

It is easy to become so efficient and self-reliant, or ‘mature’, that we lose the ability to simply rest and trust in Christ. Our faith in him, however, is the single most important aspect of our lives. “The heavenly secret of self-forgetfulness is the secret of joy on earth as well as in heaven.”<sup>280</sup> All other aspects of healthy spirituality spring from this act of humility, which is simply being willing to let him take care of and lead us. It should be so easy and yet we find ourselves in a constant battle to assure ourselves of the reality of God’s provision.

This fight of faith is nothing new. The writer of Hebrews refers to entering into God's rest as labor, or hard work.<sup>281</sup> Every unseen force that is not on the side of God, and every person who is influenced by these forces, is actively engaged in trying to break our confidence in Christ. They know as long as our faith is intact we will never cease to experience the fullness of the love of God, and they loathe this fact.

For example, a woman whose husband had openly taken a mistress wrote to C.S. Lewis asking for his advice. Lewis counseled, among other things, that “the thing is to rely only on God. The time will come when you will regard all this misery as a small price to pay for having been brought to the dependence. Meanwhile (don’t I know) the trouble is that relying on God has to begin all over again every day as if nothing had yet been done.”<sup>282</sup> Our battle is not just one of morality, as that is secondary. It is one of trust.

Contrary to how it may sound, a state of reliance upon Jesus is not

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<sup>280</sup> Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*, 153.

<sup>281</sup> Hebrews 4:11.

<sup>282</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 507.



stagnant. Our flesh, inherently selfish and negatively influenced by external forces, is adamant about having its own way. We can intellectually grasp that a perfect state of reliance upon Jesus brings peace and wholeness, however it is not a state that is easily developed or maintained.

This is why the apostle Paul refers to our lives as believers as a fight of faith: “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”<sup>283</sup> In a perfect state with a perfect environment and a perfect mind and body this act of resting in Christ would seem only natural. But we in our current condition possess none of those. We exist at the center of a conflict, a war waged against our confession of faith. Once we adopt this confession as our own and allow God to adopt us into his family, we become targets on a hit list. The only goal of the opposition is to make us forget and abandon the object of that confession and the resting place of our faith, Jesus.

In my own experience, it is when I start to rest on my laurels that this opposition is most effective. When I am feeling accomplished, that I have made something of myself, that I have succeeded based upon my own merit and not Christ’s favor and that of others around me, that is when my faith relaxes and I begin to rest upon those things that are in my power to control. This pride is, I think, universal in this effect. We have already seen its destructive effect in Adam and Eve’s fall. They rested on the word of the serpent and on the empowering effects of knowledge. It seems that every single example of sin in Scripture echoes

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<sup>283</sup> I Timothy 6:12.

this: David and Bathsheba;<sup>284</sup> Samson and Delilah;<sup>285</sup> Ananias and Sapphira;<sup>286</sup> Lucifer himself,<sup>287</sup> whose “arrogance was incompatible with the bliss of heaven.”<sup>288</sup>

When we find our ‘rest’ in objects of our own control rather than Christ we give ourselves room to slacken our commitment to him. We take liberties we otherwise would not because they do not apparently affect those objects we deem as necessary for ‘rest.’ We allow ourselves to deviate from the guidance of the Father because we do not see it as immediately necessary.

A good litmus test of the current state of our faith is the question, “Where do I find my rest?” In the approval of others? Physical fitness? Financial security? Professional achievements? Food? Coffee? Tea? Beer? Or in Christ, in his will, in knowing him and being known by him? This test, when honestly applied, leaves no room for doubt as to where our faith lies and, while none of those other things are inherently wrong, when they become the basis of our ‘rest’ there is really no rest at all. There is only coping.

## DO I MATTER?

No matter how much we work, how hard we try, or how extreme the measures that we take, we can never find fulfillment on our own. Just as life is a gift and we did nothing to deserve it, so is finding our

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<sup>284</sup> II Samuel 11.

<sup>285</sup> Judges 16.

<sup>286</sup> Acts 5.

<sup>287</sup> Isaiah 14:12.

<sup>288</sup> P. H. Brazier, "C. S. Lewis on Atonement: A Unified Model and Event, the Drama of Redemption-Understanding and Rationalizing the Tradition," *Heythrop Journal* 56, no. 2 (2015): 289, accessed April 27, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12146>.

purpose for existing. There is no way for us to earn it. It can only be given by the source of life, by Life himself. It is through reliance upon Christ, from whom all life flows, that we connect to the force by which everything has its existence. The very force that created and sustains the galaxies resides in us by faith.

The life of God is to be received freely, not worked for. The life that Christ has to offer us he wants to convey to us without having to be bought. Any attempt to earn this gift is an act of pride and self-reliance on our part. On the other hand, it is impossible to receive such a gift without being changed by it. The most barren wasteland of a soul can be revived into a lush, fruit-bearing garden when flooded with the life of Christ. Our obedience grows not out of hope of acceptance but appreciation for forgiveness.

At the end of the day, both pride and insecurity are products of our innate desire to matter. We want to know that we are missed when we are not around and appreciated when we are. We want to be seen as special and unique. This, like so many others, is a good desire that can easily be misplaced.

When we base our self-worth on the opinions of mortal, finite people we set ourselves up for disappointment. We put ourselves in a position of perpetual competition because we feel that if someone else matters then that makes me matter less. But that assumes that there is no divine love that can at once infinitely care for the whole of humanity and me as an individual all at once. If there were not, then where did the desire to matter in such a way come from in the first place?

More directly, why would the restoration of humanity to God's family through Christ, the only mattering that matters, even be

necessary? We have already seen how, barring the unfounded presupposition that miracles are impossible, Jesus' death and resurrection is the best explanation for the events surrounding the rise of Christianity. Why should we then doubt that our desire to matter was given to us by the same one who gave us Christ as its solution?

To truly experience how much we matter to God, we have to be willing to give him everything we are. It is an all or nothing deal. He does not appreciate half-hearted shows of piety, and nowhere in Scripture does he employ sentimental cop-outs like, "You're perfect just the way you are." He, more than anyone, knows we are not. Dr. Metzger explains:

Far from tolerating and enduring us, far from telling us what we want to hear, he told us what we need to hear: we are deeply loved, we are deeply messed up, and he has gone to the greatest lengths imaginable to win our hearts. He is interested not simply in our minds, obedience, and pocketbooks but in every part of us, just as he has given all of his triune self to us, as Jesus and the Spirit are poured out into the world.<sup>289</sup>

God, who "is infinite generosity,"<sup>290</sup> gave us everything when he gave us Christ. There is no good reason not to give him everything we have and everything we are in return.

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<sup>289</sup> Metzger, 11.

<sup>290</sup> Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, 91.

## CHAPTER 5 – YOUR WILL BE DONE

*There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened. – C.S. Lewis<sup>291</sup>*

*“The greatness of a man’s power is the measure of his surrender.” – William Booth<sup>292</sup>*

Being alive on this earth is, first and foremost, the power to choose who and what to trust. When Joshua commissioned the people of Israel to settle in their newly-acquired homeland he gave them the option to “choose this day whom you will serve.” He then stated unequivocally that “as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”<sup>293</sup> Joshua grasped the gravity of choosing who to put his faith in. For those of us living today, the choice of whether or not to rely on Christ is the most important one we will ever make because it is either the thing we are going to do forever or the thing we will explicitly not do forever.

But as powerful as well-placed faith is it can be difficult to know

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<sup>291</sup> Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 506.

<sup>292</sup> William Booth, quoted in Michael Brown, "10 Quotes to Rock Your World," (November 8, 2017), accessed September 30, 2019, <https://stream.org/10-quotes-to-rock-your-world/>.

<sup>293</sup> Joshua 24:15.

how to live it out day-to-day and moment-by-moment. Amidst the chaos of life, how do we really put faith into practice? There is only one example we need to consider to know this, and it applies to every situation or circumstance that we will ever face, be it chaotic or mundane.

After the last supper with his disciples, Jesus took them out to the Mount of Olives to prepare for the suffering he was about to face on our behalf. He went off by himself a short distance to pray. Keep in mind, this was no ordinary trial. God-Incarnate felt extreme anxiety and the words he chose to address to the Father in this moment would define his actions for the remainder of his mortal life: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”<sup>294</sup> He taught his disciples earlier to pray these same words: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>295</sup> Now he practiced what he preached.

Your will be done. That phrase took Christ through torture, to the cross, into the depths of hell and back from it. The very fate of creation itself, of all that ever was and ever will be, of every human soul that ever existed or would exist, hinged upon those powerfully submissive words. He had known the Father’s plan before. He made it clear to his disciples that this was to be the culminating event of history. In his moment of weakness there is only one other phrase he could have spoken: “My will be done.” But he did not. He declared, “Your will be done.” And so, it was.

At the end of the day those are our only two options. Despite all the

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<sup>294</sup> Matthew 26:42; Luke 22:42.

<sup>295</sup> Matthew 6:10.

complexities living a human life entails, those really are the only two roads one can choose to travel down. One leads to eternal peace, joy, and fulfilment, and the other the loss of those for fleeting satisfaction. One leads to life unrestricted, the other to the absence of life. One leads to purpose, the other to self-indulgence. One leads to love himself, the other leads to love of self.

In this scene at the Mount of Olives we see in Jesus the image of faith perfected. Though He seemingly had everything to lose, he did not weigh his options and he did not compile a pros and cons list. He knew he had not been sent to execute his own agenda. Just as he had throughout his life, he simply told the Father, “Your will be done.” That is perfect faith.

It may be difficult at first to comprehend how such a simple choice can wield so much power, however it is often the simplest principles that have the greatest effectiveness. Martial arts legend Bruce Lee discovered this principle as it relates to hand-to-hand combat, saying that to become an expert fighter “one does not accumulate but eliminate. It is not daily increase but daily decrease. The height of cultivation always runs to simplicity...hack away the unessential.”<sup>296</sup> It is in mastering the simplest and most profound truths that leads to greatness. Mastering faith is no different.

David did nothing throughout his life if not continually strive to master, albeit imperfectly, “your will be done.” He “was a moral mess,” but he “never showed disloyalty or lack of love for God. He broke a number of God’s moral laws, but he repented and never worshipped

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<sup>296</sup> "Bruce Lee's Most Famous Quotes," (accessed December 19, 2010), <http://www.fightingmaster.com/masters/brucelee/quotes.htm>.

another god. For that reason, God made a covenant promise with David that said only his sons could be legitimate rulers of Israel.”<sup>297</sup>

Before he became king David, with his men and their families, lived in a city given to him by the Philistines. After he returned from an excursion with his men he found the town in ruins. Their families had been kidnapped and their houses burned. David and his men wept “until they had no more strength to weep.”<sup>298</sup> Then the men started to blame their leader, David, and threatened to stone him. Self-reliant men would have broken, but David “strengthened himself in the LORD his God.”<sup>299</sup>

The Psalms that David authored chronicle his journey of faith. He writes in times of ecstasy and in what he feels to be the depths of hell. He praises God for his goodness but also asks “why me?” Through all the praise and the questioning, his foundational approach is always the same: regardless of my circumstances, God’s will be done. His constant touchpoint was, “I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.”<sup>300</sup> David realized that when he aligned himself with the will of the Father nothing could stand against him because nothing can successfully oppose God’s will.

After he reestablished his trust in God’s will, David sought his direction. God promised that if David pursued the enemy he would win

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<sup>297</sup> Heiser, 27.

<sup>298</sup> I Samuel 30:4.

<sup>299</sup> I Samuel 30:6.

<sup>300</sup> Psalm 18:1-3.



the fight and get his family back. He and his men chased after the enemy and eventually caught up to them. The bandits were dancing and getting drunk in celebration of their successful raid.

David did not give them any warning. He and his men slaughtered the kidnappers for almost twenty-four hours straight. “David recovered all that the Amalekites had taken, and David rescued his two wives. Nothing was missing, whether small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything that had been taken. David brought back all. David also captured all the flocks and herds, and the people drove the livestock before him, and said, ‘This is David’s spoil.’”<sup>301</sup>

David, just like any other great man or woman of faith, possessed the only attributes that matter: dependence upon God and aggressive obedience to his will. And, just as with these heroes of faith, there is no denying the vast scope of adventures and feats of daring courage that await the one who simply tells Christ, “Your will be done.”

## KNOW WHO YOU TRUST

Submission to God’s will becomes easier as we come to know that his will is to see our deepest desires fulfilled, in his time and his way. It is vital that we get to know Christ for ourselves. Unity among believers in Christ is crucial, and spiritual camaraderie and companionship are essential to the life of faith. Spiritual mentorship is critical in being properly established in our beliefs. However, if we do not get to know him in whom we have believed for ourselves then it is all for nothing. Paul was not ashamed of the humiliation he experienced for the sake of

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<sup>301</sup> I Samuel 30:18-20.

Christ because, according to him, “I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.”<sup>302</sup>

Paul explains that if all of the imprisonments, beatings, and abuse that he had suffered were for the sake of a philosophy or a religious experience then he would have felt shame at being so gullible. No mere intangible idea is worth that kind of sacrifice. Paul writes that his confidence comes from the fact that he has come to know a divine man who is so strong, noble, and loving that he is worth losing everything else for. Paul also knew that ideas and philosophies do not reward this kind of selfless sacrifice, but Christ does.

An image of the divine man whose will must eventually be submitted to, whether willingly or not, can be found in the book of Revelation:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.<sup>303</sup>

Sometimes it is difficult to imagine submitting to the will of an itinerant preacher-carpenter, but this description of Jesus the Christ in his full and

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<sup>302</sup> II Timothy 1:11-12.

<sup>303</sup> Revelation 19:11-16.

cosmic glory should give us the incentive to commit ourselves wholly to his cause. It is this same Christ who now dwells within us by faith, who guides, directs, and empowers us to live with unprecedented courage and compassion. Him we serve, and there is no higher honor than to be one who executes his will.

In the time of the Old Testament prophet Elisha, the king of Syria was warring against the nation of Israel. He was unsuccessful, however, because Elisha knew when and where he would attack and reported this news to the king of Israel. The king of Syria heard of this and decided to kill the prophet before he ruined any more of his plans. He amassed a huge army and surrounded the city that Elisha was staying in. When Elisha's servant saw there was no way out he started to panic, asking Elisha what they could do to save themselves. Elisha's answer was one of simple trust in the will of God. "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."<sup>304</sup>

Realizing that his servant lacked confidence in the goodness of God, Elisha prayed and asked that the eyes of his servant be opened to see what was happening in the unseen realm.<sup>305</sup> "So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."<sup>306</sup> Elisha did not ask that his own eyes be opened. He was confident in the will of God regardless of what he saw or felt. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Blessed and happy and to be envied are those who have

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<sup>304</sup> II Kings 6:16.

<sup>305</sup> For an excellent discussion of the unseen realm, see Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

<sup>306</sup> I Kings 6:17.

never seen Me and yet have believed and adhered to and trusted and relied on Me.”<sup>307</sup>

To realize the greatness of the one in whom we put our trust we only need to look around. As Paul explains in Romans 1, all of Creation expresses God’s power and creativity. If at any time we begin to doubt his capabilities all we need to do is look outside.

## ALIGNING OUR WILL WITH HIS

Joshua was getting ready to take over the leadership of an entire nation. Moses’ time was up and Joshua had been hand-picked by God to lead the people of Israel on their first full-scale military invasion. God, all-knowing as he is, gave Joshua the most important piece of advice that he needed to know to successfully lead his people in a time of war:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.<sup>308</sup>

The principle was simply this: “align your will to mine and you cannot fail.”

Solomon wrote that as a man “thinks in his heart, so is he.”<sup>309</sup> Our attitude, our mentality, is determined by what we spend our time thinking about. That is why worry is such a huge enemy to the follower of Christ. Worry is thinking about what could go wrong. It gives our

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<sup>307</sup> John 20:29 AMP.

<sup>308</sup> Joshua 1:8, 9.

<sup>309</sup> Proverbs 23:7.

circumstances power over our decisions rather than subjecting them to the will of Jesus.

The biggest reason that some believers live unfulfilling lives is that much of the time we approach situations focusing more on how we could fail than on God's ability execute his will regardless of our success or failure. It is an approach characterized by the question, "What if God doesn't come through?" As Dr. Habermas explains, "what if" is a statement with no content.<sup>310</sup>

Even if it does not work out the way we want it to right away, endurance of faith, the faith to tell God "your will be done," always produces results. It is the "one prayer He always answers,"<sup>311</sup> and our only part is to be committed to doing what God wants us to be doing, which is "the heart of morality, of goodness, of sanctity."<sup>312</sup> Dr. Heiser observes, "Jesus said God would indeed answer in the wider context of his wise will. In other words, God's answers may not always be what we want, but God knows everything else that's going on in the course of all human experience and behavior, and is working his greater plan."<sup>313</sup>

Thinking this way is what separates those who do great things for God from those who merely live to survive. A missionary named Jim Elliot (along with his partners Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully and Roger Youderian) was killed in his late twenties. He had considerably less time during his life to make an impact on the world than many people do. Yet his simple, faith-filled words and actions have inspired

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<sup>310</sup> Gary R. Habermas, "Dealing with Doubt," (accessed December 20, 2016), [http://www.garyhabermas.com/books/dealing\\_with\\_doubt/dealing\\_with\\_doubt.htm](http://www.garyhabermas.com/books/dealing_with_doubt/dealing_with_doubt.htm).

<sup>311</sup> Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, 104.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>313</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 81-2.

many believers around the world.

Elliot and his four partners were serving as missionaries to the indigenous tribes of Ecuador. They met the Waodani in 1956 and, despite encouraging initial radio contact, were brutally murdered by the tribesmen.<sup>314</sup> Faith, however, never disappoints.

After their deaths, two of the wives and one of the sisters of the fallen missionaries followed in their footsteps and were eventually accepted by the tribe, giving them the opportunity to share the truth of Christ. The Waodani had been “on the verge of cultural extinction,”<sup>315</sup> but the deaths of the five men, along with the courage of the women, resulted in their salvation, both as a tribe and as individuals.

Although the missionaries had firearms on them on that bloody day in 1956 they chose not to use them. They had developed such a trusting attitude in the will of God that their focus was no longer on their own safety. Their only desire was that the people of the tribe have the opportunity to experience the love of Christ as they themselves had. Through their sacrifice this is exactly what happened, and at this very moment they are with the Father, enjoying the reward of their faith. This reward was so much more precious to them than their lives.

Faith should always be the determining factor in the decisions we make. We sell ourselves short and miss out on God-sent opportunities every time we give in to fear and doubt. He will never fail to come through if we will only endure in our trust for him, even if that means

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<sup>314</sup> Elisabeth Eliot, *Through Gates of Splendor* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 1981).

<sup>315</sup> "Film Tells Missionaries' Story of Martyrdom, Forgiveness," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2006, accessed December 15, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/20/AR2006012001696.html>

enduring pain and death along the way. It is always worth the sacrifice of temporary comfort to find our security in Christ. At the end of the day only his will has any enduring value.

## THE POWER OF SAYING

The things we say determine what we do and become, because our words always take priority over our thoughts. James explains, “Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.”<sup>316</sup>

It is almost impossible to successfully fight thoughts with other thoughts, but speaking changes the direction of your thoughts, forcing them to come in line with the things that are coming out of your mouth. A change in our thoughts eventually produces change in our emotions. This is confirmed by the cognitive approach to psychotherapy, in which “the main idea is that how we think governs how we feel and act.”<sup>317</sup>

The things we say consistently are the things that we think about, and what we think consistently determines our actions. So to live by faith in Christ is to constantly tell him we are submitted to his will. As we affirm our trust with our words we reestablish the strength of faith necessary to endure until God fulfills his promises.

This is yet another reason to appreciate the simplicity of faith. We do not need to memorize hundred-word prayers or whole books of the

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<sup>316</sup> James 3:4, 5.

<sup>317</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *An Evidentialist's Response to Reformed Epistemology Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Kindle ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000; repr., 2010), 298.

Bible to be effective. We need those simple words to redirect the course of our entire lives: “Jesus, your will be done.” Scripture and prayer reinforce, inform and direct those words, but the intent carried by those words is at the core of our behavioral alignment with Christ.

Alignment to the will of God is the genesis of our salvation, meaning that if it were not his will that we be saved and reunited with him it would never be possible. His will that we enjoy his presence again, and Jesus’ submission to that will through his sacrifice and resurrection, is the only reason there is any such thing as grace. Paul writes that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”<sup>318</sup> To confess Jesus as Lord is to tell him “your will be done,” for it is Jesus’ will that we be reconciled to the Father. To call him Lord is to entrust everything we are to his care. It is the submission of our entire being to what he wants for us.

A very practical reason for submitting to his will rather our own can be seen in contrasting them. The human will is finite and imperfect, so any happiness or fulfillment it achieves can only be finite and imperfect. In contrast, God’s will is infinite and perfect, so happiness and fulfillment found therein is also infinite and perfect.

While we are on this earth we are free to align to the Father’s will or not, however in eternity his will rules and the only way to remain unsubmitive to it is to be separated from him. In this light it is easy to see why pride is the most self-destructive trait. Humble submission to the will of Christ, however, provides whoever wants it access to the

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<sup>318</sup> Romans 10:9.



Father and all of the pure joy that comes from being joined to love himself.

As we grow in faith we begin to exude his love and hope everywhere we go. As we grow in our trust in Christ his life is free to flow through us and to be conveyed to others in the form of love. The love that we have to offer is not our own, but it is the love of God that we connect to by faith: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>319</sup>

We are no longer limited in our capacity to serve. Through trust in Christ and our union with him we are empowered to accurately convey the goodness and glory of God to the world: “For God, who said, ‘Let there be light in the darkness,’ has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.”<sup>320</sup>

God’s will for our lives is not that we try to get through it as comfortably as possible. He wants us to be agents of his goodness and love. It is not by our own force of will, but only through reliance upon Christ that we are able to execute his will. There is no human being alive who is not capable of trusting him to the extent that it shows in practical and tangible ways.

During Jesus’ earthly ministry someone who was not among his followers was casting out demons in his name. His disciples panicked

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<sup>319</sup> John 15:5.

<sup>320</sup> II Corinthians 4:6, 7 [New Living Translation].

because this individual was not a part of their group. Jesus, however, gave a different criterion for who is qualified to love in his name, that “the one who is not against us is for us.”<sup>321</sup> The simple fact that this person trusted in his name was enough for Jesus to consider him qualified to serve. His message, in part, is this: Do not write yourself off due to lack of experience or because you do not feel qualified. Consider it a greater opportunity for Christ to show himself reliable.

One of the difficulties in learning to tell Jesus “your will be done” is the vast disagreement between believers on what that specifically means. There have been many attempts over the centuries to codify exactly what it is we should believe about certain aspects of the faith, each meeting with varying degrees of success. The interesting thing is, when the luxury of a safe and secure place in society has been ripped away from believers there is little disagreement as to the essentials of the faith.

Author and social commentator John Zmirak writes, “What does bring Christians together? Persecution. Blows and spitting. You won’t see Christians in Egypt or Syria arguing over the Council of Chalcedon. They’re united in affirming Jesus’ divinity in the face of Islamic terror. They work together and help each other — the same groups that were raiding each other’s monasteries back in the fifth century.” When persecution arises, believers find it much easier to stick “to the basics. Maybe that’s God’s way of calling us together again.”<sup>322</sup>

Zmirak observes that “confrontation with primal evil” tends to provide perspective on those essentials of the faith (i.e. the death,

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<sup>321</sup> Mark 9:40.

<sup>322</sup> John Zmirak, “Christian Unity? Look in the Trenches,” (October 26, 2017), accessed October 12, 2019, <https://stream.org/christian-unity-look-in-the-trenches>.

divinity, and resurrection of Jesus) versus those points where there is room for disagreement.<sup>323</sup> In the Middle East, when jihadists “come to kill our Christian brothers and sisters, they do not first ask, are you Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox, Christians? They seem to know what we must learn; they are all CHRISTIANS.”<sup>324</sup> The authors of *Persecuted* affirm that among the persecuted church, “Christian worship services vary, and traditions are stunningly different, but our churches are united in belief in the same Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.”<sup>325</sup>

Those of us who live in more peaceful and tolerant societies, such as the West, need to realize that although the opposition we face may be less overt, it is no less real. Embarrassment, social pressure, or (perhaps most nefariously) guilt over not perfectly living up to the faith we profess all conspire to suppress the truth of Christ. But that just means we need to be more intentional about unifying with one another, reminding each other both of the reality of what we believe and the grace that comes with humility before Christ. “Speaking the truth in love” is the key to harmony among believers.<sup>326</sup>

Deacon Keith Fournier recognizes that “we have important differences in doctrine and practice.” These are not trivial, but they involve in-house conversations, not slugfests for everyone’s entertainment. It is about reliance on and love for the person of Jesus. We “stand in different ecclesial communities...But, there is a center that

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Keith Fournier, "In the Face of Terror, Let's Help Restore the Body of Christ," (October 30, 2017), accessed October 12, 2019, <https://stream.org/in-the-face-of-terror-lets-help-restore-the-body-of-christ>.

<sup>325</sup> Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Nina Shea, *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 4-5.

<sup>326</sup> Ephesians 4:15.

holds us together. That center is not something — but Some One — Jesus Christ.”<sup>327</sup> When we keep this fact foremost in our minds we realize that “what unites us is massively more than what divides us.”<sup>328</sup>

## TRUST AND LOVE

It is easy to tell someone “I love you.” It is much more difficult to tell them “I trust you.” Loving is giving, and giving does not require any vulnerability on the part of the one who is doing the giving. Trust, however, involves allowing ourselves to receive from someone else. We become dependent on their strengths or resources, even if only temporarily. This is when we have the greatest opportunity to be hurt. It is also how we develop our most meaningful and fulfilling relationships.

Jesus commands that we love everyone, regardless of who they are or what they have done, but we are to be very selective about who we trust. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, stresses this principle:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”<sup>329</sup>

The reason that Paul is so adamant concerning the character of those who call themselves followers of Jesus is that we, as sons and daughters

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<sup>327</sup> Fournier.

<sup>328</sup> Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, 108.

<sup>329</sup> I Corinthians 5:9-12.

of God, should not have to put up our guard against each other as we often find ourselves having to do with some outside the community of believers. The love of God should be able to flow freely between us, without worry of backstabbing or malice.

The entrance of habitual sin into the equation forces us to put up our guard and, in turn, limits how much we allow ourselves to receive from others within the community of Christ-followers. All of the things Paul lists (sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, etc.) are a result of failure to trust God to meet certain underlying needs. If a person is failing to trust in the love of God for himself then he is limited in what he can offer others. Without trust in Christ a person really has nothing of substance to give within the community of believers. Habitual sin is a telling indicator of such unbelief, because true faith naturally produces a Christ-pleasing lifestyle, as true faith is commitment to seeing his will done.

This is not to say every believer who makes a mistake is to be kicked out of the community. If this were the case then there would be none of us left. It is not those who make mistakes who are the danger, but those who habitually and consistently give themselves to these things that take the place of God, who constantly exalt their own wills above his.

When Jesus spoke to the church at Thyatira in his Revelation to the apostle John, he did not concern himself with all of the acts of blatant immorality that occurred in the region. He selected those which the body of believers tolerated within its own community: "I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual

immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.”<sup>330</sup> The true, accurate message of Christ is too essential to the good of mankind to allow to be watered down by false teachings and cheap imitations. If we cannot trust fully and completely in this gospel then there is no point in pretending.

Christ does not just want us to tell him “I love You.” Those words he is eager to hear but they are not the most essential. To tell him “I trust You,” however, is to take our relationship to an entirely different level. It is to tell him, “Your will be done.” Dr. Kreeft asks, “Is there anything to fear from infinite divine love? No. Therefore, just say, ‘Jesus, I trust You.’ Those words please Him immensely.”<sup>331</sup> To trust him is to give him exactly what he wants, which is the opportunity to show us the depths of his love. The essence of obedience is sincerely telling Christ, “Your will be done,” and then taking part in seeing his will done.

This trust is what produces authentic love on our part, not the other way around. When I first started to understand love as the very reason we exist on this earth I tried to conjure it up on my own, to no avail. It is only as I learn to rely on Christ to be my purpose and source that my capacity to love others grows.

Dr. Kreeft compares the apostle Paul’s triad of “theological virtues,” which are faith, hope, and love,<sup>332</sup> to three parts of a plant: “the root (faith), the stem (hope), and the fruit (love). Faith, hope, and charity are not three things but three stages or aspects of the same thing—not three plants but three components of the one plant.”<sup>333</sup> He explains, “Faith is its stuck-in-the-mud, conservative root, its anchor. Hope is its liberal,

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<sup>330</sup> Revelations 2:20.

<sup>331</sup> Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, 55.

<sup>332</sup> I Corinthians 13:13.

<sup>333</sup> Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, 81.

optimistic, creative, growing stem. Love is its product, its ‘bottom line’, its proof, its point, its fruit and flower. Love *shows* faith and hope. No one can see your faith and hope except by your love.”<sup>334</sup> One Bible commentary explains, “*Faith* is towards God. *Hope* is in behalf of ourselves.” And “love to God” creates “in us love towards our neighbor.”<sup>335</sup>

## INVEST EARLY

The worst time to start training for a fight is the day of the match. The worst time to fix a roof is when it starts to rain. And the worst time to start caring about our faith is when our life starts caving in around us.

Jesus equates the growth of faith to planting and harvesting crops: “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”<sup>336</sup>

It is never too late to start, but reliance on Christ is not developed overnight. “It is only by frequent repetition that a child learns its lessons. It is only by continuously fixing the mind for a time on some one of the lessons of faith, that the believer is gradually helped to take and thoroughly assimilate them.”<sup>337</sup> Faith is cultivated over time, nurtured, and then “harvested.” No farmer waits until he gets hungry to plant his crops. He already did that months ago.

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, 289.

<sup>336</sup> Mark 4:26-29

<sup>337</sup> Murray, 8.

The more we learn to rely on Christ before the challenge comes, the more we benefit and are able to learn from it. If we go into an experience having spent considerable time with him, getting to know him and seeing that he, in fact, can be trusted, we are much more likely to have a faith that endures through the trial rather than being broken by it. The person who spends little to no time exercising their faith before the real challenge comes is inherently weaker and will not have as much strength to offer to others who may be experiencing trials as well. Time and effort spent learning to trust him is the most valuable way to spend our energy because it affects every other area of our lives. Faith is the one aspect of our personal development where we can invest and always expect an invaluable return.

The development of our faith is crucial to fulfilling our role as Christ's agents, because the most important thing that we can do for other believers is to be examples of his goodness. When others see the result of our trusting Christ with our lives and how those things that once looked impossible are now happening they will be more willing to trust him for themselves. Anytime we doubt Christ and refuse to trust him with a situation we short-change others who could have received encouragement from it. When we do choose to trust him, we become living examples of the strength that he provides to those who rely on him for it.

When King Darius conquered the kingdom of Babylon in the book of Daniel he hand-picked three executives to rule over the rest of the public officials. Daniel was one of these men. Because of "the excellent spirit" within him, Daniel became the most distinguished official recognized by the king. Darius even planned to entrust the entire



kingdom to Daniel's leadership.

The other officials heard this and became jealous. They decided to get rid of Daniel. After all, he was making them look bad. They soon found that the only way to bring him down was to attack the most essential element of his character: his faith. They convinced the King to sign a law stating that, for a month, no man or god may be prayed to except Darius himself.

Giving up trust in his God was not an option that Daniel even considered. In fact, instead of praying in secret he prayed in front of an open window for all to see. The other officials had counted on this and immediately reported it to Darius. Darius, though distressed at losing his most qualified subordinate leader, was forced to keep his own law.

Daniel was thrown into a pit to be eaten by lions, but because of his trust in the true God they did not touch him. The king, being moved by this practical display of God's power on behalf of a faithful believer, had those who plotted against Daniel thrown to the lions instead. He then issued this decree: "[I]n all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions."<sup>338</sup>

Through his practical and unshakeable faith, Daniel caused the king to move an entire kingdom to submission to the true God. Simply allowing others to witness that his faith was well placed was much more

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<sup>338</sup> Daniel 6:26, 27.

effective than if Daniel had stood screaming at them from a street corner. We never know who is watching us and we never know who may be impacted by our personal stories of faith. To trust God with our own situation is to allow him to show his credibility to others through our example.

There is no nobler profession than to be a living example of the infinite love of God, and it will pay dividends at the conclusion of this chapter in the story of eternity:

So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.<sup>339</sup>

And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book...Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done.<sup>340</sup>

We are to make these words of I Peter and Revelation a priority because it is vital that we keep alive the hope that we have, the hope of reconciliation with the Love of our eternal souls for whom we long.

We are to remember why, deep down, we do not feel at home on this earth in its current state, and to realize that it does not last forever. We are to remember that home is with Christ and in his will. We are to remember that someday we will experience a new phase of life, and the deepest desire in every one who relies on Christ will at last be overwhelmingly fulfilled.

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<sup>339</sup> I Peter 1:7 NLT.

<sup>340</sup> Revelation 22:7, 11.

## CHAPTER 6 – AGGRESSIVE LOVE

*For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." – The Apostle Paul<sup>341</sup>*

*Persons are ends, absolutes. That is what love recognizes: love treats other persons as ends, as absolute goods. – Dr. Peter Kreeft<sup>342</sup>*

On Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017, two Coptic Christian churches in Egypt were bombed, killing at least 45 people and injuring more than 100. The attacks, which were claimed by Islamic State, triggered a three-month state-of-emergency in Egypt. After the attack the Islamic State released a statement, promising that the Coptic Christian “apostates” would pay for their failure to submit to the Islamic State “with rivers of blood from their children.”<sup>343</sup> The day after the attacks, Father Boules George gave the Copts’ response in a sermon entitled “A Message to Those Who Kill Us.”

From the Church of St. Mark in Cairo, Egypt, Father George begins

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<sup>341</sup> Galatians 5:13, 14

<sup>342</sup> Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, 70.

<sup>343</sup> Arwa Gaballa and Ahmed Tolba, "Palm Sunday Bombing of Egyptian Coptic Churches Kill 44," *Reuters*, April 9, 2017, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-violence-idUSKBN17B06U>.

his message in a tone, not of grief or condemnation, but gratitude. To those who pledged to draw rivers of blood from Coptic children, “The first thing we will say is “Thank you very, very much.” Why “thank you”?

Father George explains, “You gave us to die the same death as Christ—and this is the biggest honor we could have.” He thanks their killers also because they “shortened for us the journey.” He elaborates that, instead of having to wait years to have what they longed for, those who were murdered found themselves “in an instant” with Christ, in the place they been journeying toward all along. He thanks them also for the opportunity to use the only weapons they have: “our faith and the church we pray in.”

Father George also thanks their killers because, “You’re helping us...you’re bringing to church the people who never come...You’re filling up our churches!” He explains that when violent men carry out these attacks they “irritate the soul of the person who was lazy before.” They “wake his conscience and the love of God within him prods him to come to church.”

Father George does not only thank their killers. He wants to make sure they know that “we love you.” He explains, “The Christian doesn’t make enemies because we are commanded to love every one. And so, we love you because this is the teaching of our God—that I’m to love you—no matter what you do to me.”

Finally, Father George tells the killers of the Christians “we’re praying for you.” He calls upon the church to “make a commitment to pray for them,” that they would “know” and “experience the love of God.” He reasons that “if they knew that God is love and experienced

His love, they could not do these things.” He takes pity on the killers: “We need to pray for them so they can sleep at night. A person who has all this inside them, how can he sleep comfortably?” He contrasts them with believers in Christ: “We are being slaughtered and the King of Peace gives us peace to sleep.”

In closing, Father George says that though the Church “is in pain,” she “rejoices because today” the 45 believers who died “are rejoicing with God. And they will attend the Resurrection up there.” Of these, he sighs, “O, you lucky, lucky, lucky ones! And until it is our turn.”<sup>344</sup>

As we believers begin to grasp the reality of Christ’s love for us, our fear of death is replaced by a joyful longing to be with our savior. Difficulties such as what the Coptic Church experienced contribute to this because they force “us to think of life as something to go *through*” rather than something to become attached to.<sup>345</sup> We join Paul in seeing the purpose of “the sentence of death” as “to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”<sup>346</sup>

It was this same eternal perspective that drove Jesus when he was on the earth. He endured the cross and disregarded shame “for the joy that was set before him.”<sup>347</sup> Dr. Heiser insists, “We must have the same eternal perspective. The world isn’t our real home. It’s temporary. The next one is permanent. Because of what Jesus did we will inherit everlasting life in that world, leaving this one behind.”<sup>348</sup>

The adoption of an eternal perspective leads to self-sacrificial love.

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<sup>344</sup> Fr. Boules George, “A Message to Those Who Kill Us,” accessed February 27, 2019. <http://www.copticdadandmom.com/fr-boules-george/>.

<sup>345</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 519.

<sup>346</sup> II Corinthians 1:9.

<sup>347</sup> Hebrews 12:2.

<sup>348</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 69.

Dr. Heiser continues, “The goal of our lives should be to show our loyalty and gratitude to the one who saved us, and help others enter God’s family.”<sup>349</sup> Father George and his church did not react to the murder of their loved ones out of hatred and self-pity, which no one in their right mind would blame them for. Instead, they committed themselves to praying for the peace of the killers. They pray that these would find their way to reliance on Christ, allowing them to forgive themselves and ensure their transformation into sons of God, adopted into his family.

The authors of “The Christian Way” recognize, “Many Christians today face martyrdom in the Middle East and elsewhere,” but those of us “in the West are not subject to this mortal threat.” But even for us “heroic witness is always within reach.” It does not “take extraordinary intellectual gifts or wealth to follow Christ with self-sacrificial love. One need not come from an advantaged background.” Nor does it require, as some faiths do, “traveling to visit remote gurus or making long, arduous preparations.”<sup>350</sup>

The call to self-sacrificial love as the outward sign of our hope of reunion with Christ is simple. Jesus assures us that what we do “to the least of these” we do to him. This includes such basic and, seemingly, insignificant acts as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. Although none of these acts will win us widespread recognition, Jesus promises that those who do them will “inherit the kingdom prepared” for them “from the foundation of the

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Evangelicals and Catholics Together, 10-1.

world.”<sup>351</sup>

The apostle James echoes the practical nature of transcendental love. He calls Jesus’ directive to “love your neighbor as yourself” the royal law, and says if you are doing that “you are doing well.”<sup>352</sup> He shows that this is not sentimental but requires action. According to James, the purest expression of faith is “to visit the orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”<sup>353</sup>

## LEVERAGING FAITH

If faith in God is reliance upon him for the ultimate fulfillment of our eternal core desires, then love is the leveraging of our position within God’s favor to help others find their fulfillment in him. Sometimes it is easy to think of our desires as more deep-seated and real than the desires of others but this is not the case. Even the core desires of the most naïve among us mean the world to God and they should mean just as much to us.

Love is an adventure. Whether it be the missionary who takes care of orphans in the middle of a war-torn country or the soldier who “fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him,”<sup>354</sup> love is the noblest and most dangerous profession one can be called to. It is the profession of the follower of Christ and everyone who takes that title is called to live with this aggressive love.

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<sup>351</sup> Matthew 25:34-40.

<sup>352</sup> James 2:8.

<sup>353</sup> James 1:27.

<sup>354</sup> G.K. Chesterton, "Quotations of G.K. Chesterton," accessed October 12, 2019. <https://www.chesterton.org/quotations-of-g-k-chesterton/>.

The authors of the Christian Way explain:

This is the great gift that Christianity brings to the world—to be the voice of God calling those whom he has created in his own image to enter into the fullness of life he has prepared for them. The Christian way is universal. In love and service, as well as proclamation, Christian mission seeks to prepare the entire world for the return of Christ when he will fully manifest his lordship over all creation.<sup>355</sup>

The role of believers on this earth is that of a cosmic search-and-rescue team. We are to plug others into the life of freedom that comes by faith in Christ. We are to emulate Jesus, who said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.”<sup>356</sup>

The most effective tool that we have in showing others the truth about Christ is the selfless love we exhibit. Love reveals and confirms the faith we profess. Dr. Metzger explains that “no matter how good the argument or how contextual, winsome, and striking the message, nothing replaces sacrificial love for others; this is how trust is built. The community of faith must become the apologetic for the faith: a holistic rationale for faith in Christ involving interpersonal and life-on-life encounters.”<sup>357</sup>

John Frame agrees that “Christianity is not just an intellectual system, but a comprehensive way of life. Nothing is more persuasive than a concrete, consistent example of that way of life, and nothing is

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<sup>355</sup> Evangelicals and Catholics Together, 12.

<sup>356</sup> Luke 4: 18, 19 NLT.

<sup>357</sup> Metzger, Loc. 253.



more detrimental to our witness than when our life betrays our message by our failing to show the gentleness and love of Jesus.”<sup>358</sup> If we claim the name of Jesus and yet never lift a finger to serve someone else then we show we have not really grasped what he has done for us. His purpose is to transform us from the inside out, to fill us with his peace and comfort and free us from anything that would prevent us from experiencing the fullness of his love.

Dr. Markos observes, “Though love has been defined in many ways, perhaps the best way to define it is as the movement out of narcissism.”<sup>359</sup> Love is the movement from self-absorption to genuine care for others. As we have seen, this depends on our confidence in Jesus’ care for us. It is only when we are able to rely on him that we become free from the need to prioritize ourselves above others.

As we learn to trust Jesus we experience more and more of this love, but it should not stop there. Our faith in his love should increase until we reach the point where we cannot help but pass that love on to others. It is an overflow of compassion to those around us because we cannot keep it to ourselves. We then begin to love others as Christ loves us. We give to the poor, free the oppressed, and help to heal the wounds of the broken. We are to be a source of encouragement to all who are searching for peace and a source of extreme opposition to those who would harm the innocent and oppress the weak. Living like this “not only reflects Jesus, but leads to personal fulfillment. Your life matters

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<sup>358</sup> John M. Frame, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Kindle ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000; repr., 2010), 220.

<sup>359</sup> Markos, 159.

when it's lived in service to others."<sup>360</sup>

As we begin to live with this kind of selfless service people will inevitably ask, "Why?" It is then, and only then, that most people care to know about our faith. As John Maxwell writes, "People don't care what you know until they know that you care."<sup>361</sup>

When Jesus lived on this earth he was one divine man in one body and was constrained to one geographical region. Now, by faith, Christ dwells within every believer so his potential to do good in this world is exponentially what it was when he was physically confined to one place. We, as his terrestrial representatives, have inherited the same mission that he had while he was here, when he "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."<sup>362</sup>

When we receive Christ we do not only receive him for ourselves. We inherit the responsibility to love others just as he did. We take upon ourselves his same calling of providing for the well-being of those he puts in our lives. Everything we do now revolves around the command to love. Dr. Heiser notes, "Loving each other—loving people—is the central point of orientation for the other things disciples do (pray, fast, give, fellowship, etc.). All these other things are expressions of this fundamental command."<sup>363</sup>

Sometimes it seems like it would be so much better for us if we immediately went to be with Christ the moment we receive him, but we are left on this earth temporarily the sake of the rest of the world. Dr.

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<sup>360</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 70.

<sup>361</sup> John Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader: Becoming the Person That People Will Want to Follow* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 103.

<sup>362</sup> Acts 10:38.

<sup>363</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 76.

Craig explains, “According to Christianity, this life is but the cramped and narrow foyer opening up into the great hall of God’s eternity. God promises eternal life to all who place their trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. When God asks His children to bear horrible suffering in this life, it is only with the prospect of a heavenly joy and recompense that is beyond all comprehension.”<sup>364</sup> Death for the believer is a reward for a job well done.

Some tend to think that because followers of Jesus take this view of death and believe that he will return to set right what has gone wrong in creation that we have nothing to do but wait. They view faith as the avoidance of taking responsibility for one’s actions, since it is “by grace you have been saved through faith” and “not a result of works.”<sup>365</sup> But nothing could be further from the truth.

Faith is not the avoidance of responsibility, passing the buck to an all-powerful being, but the assumption of responsibility within the context of Christ’s lordship. When we choose to rely on Christ for our salvation we are swearing our allegiance to him, which means we are now committed to him and his way of doing things. We have chosen to live according to his kingdom, his way of ordering reality. We accept the responsibility of caring about what he cares about.

This is reflective of the order of things in the Garden of Eden: God takes care of and provides for man, and man in turn takes responsibility for the care of creation. This hierarchy of responsibility has not changed. Those who ask the question, “If God exists, and if he is all-good and all-powerful, then how can there be evil and suffering in the world?” fail to

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<sup>364</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 166.

<sup>365</sup> Ephesians 2:8.

appreciate the degree to which we humans have a say in what happens in the world. They fail to appreciate just how much responsibility man has been given and that our actions really do have dire consequences.

The McDowells explain, “In spite of the Fall, we still have the responsibility we were given at creation to be his regents on the earth and to do our part in achieving the restoration his resurrection made possible. Therefore, he allows the world to remain in its present fallen condition in order for us to participate with him in bringing about the restoration of all things.”<sup>366</sup> Rather than sit around and wait for God’s plan to be fulfilled, Jesus wants us to be active participants and partners with him as we live our lives. We love people because he empowers us to take responsibility for what happens in this world, starting with what and how we think as we “take every thought captive to obey Christ...”<sup>367</sup>

In doing so we emulate Jesus’ taking responsibility for us. The McDowells go on to write, “God did not author evil, the Fall. But God did author the nature of creation, the laws it is governed by, and the creature, which had the free will to choose. God also authors the way out of condemnation, the way out of hell, by taking the responsibility onto God’s self on the Cross.”<sup>368</sup> Since Christ has taken responsibility for us, we are now free to take responsibility for that which lies within our sphere of influence, to do our part for the ultimate good of those around us. The result is not disregard for responsibility. The result is engagement in the world around us as agents of Christ.

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<sup>366</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 82.

<sup>367</sup> II Corinthians 10:4-6.

<sup>368</sup> Brazier, 302.

## LOVE ENDURES

The command to love is not a burden. It provides us with direction and purpose. The more we trust Christ the less we fear everything else. Fearless people get bored easily. This law of love allows us to live with all the aggression and intensity that God made us to live with. That aggression is focused into loving others rather than promoting ourselves. Our advancement is God's business, our only role being that of obedience and gratitude.

During my first few years in the military I had a hard time reconciling the kind of aggression that was required of me to do my job well with my commitment to serve Christ. I wanted to love him but I had seen people use religion as an excuse for laziness. That was the last thing I wanted.

My fears of being forever stuck in this conflict of commitments were quelled on a combat deployment. I came across the classic I Corinthians 13 "love" passage, one that I had read many times before. But this time I noticed something different about the tone of the message: "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."<sup>369</sup>

I came to this realization: only the strong in spirit are capable of self-sacrificial love. Look at the words that Paul uses to describe it: love "bears all things" and "endures all things." It is so much harder to

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<sup>369</sup> I Corinthians 13:4-8.

embrace humility and give credit to others than to fall prey to arrogance and self-glorification. It is difficult not to find fault in a lot of the people we come across. But for the strength of Christ, it would be impossible to consider the well-being of some people at all.

Think about the ideal man or woman of strength. They do not quit, they do not give in to external pressures, and they do not compromise for anyone but are willing to sacrifice their safety, security, and comfort for the good of others. Love is not weak. It is an impossible mission made possible through faith in Christ. Love produces the most generous givers and capable defenders. That is why Paul can say, in one breath, “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”<sup>370</sup>

The easy, comfortable, and impotent way to live life is to make people feel like you care for them, but do nothing of real sacrifice for them. This is how the world works but it is not the way of the believer. Jesus was not always polite and courteous but he always loved courageously. He gave the people whatever they needed at the time whether it was encouragement or correction, provision or discipline. He was always willing to sacrifice of himself for others, whether they liked and appreciated him or not.

Most of those steeped in religious showmanship, as opposed to courage-producing faith, only use it as an excuse to secure a life of comfort. They will “fight” in the current culture war, but refuse to sacrifice on a personal level. They condemn drunkenness but say nothing of their own Sunday afternoon gluttony. They speak against sin

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<sup>370</sup> I Corinthians 16:13, 14.

but treat others as servants rather than becoming so themselves. The life of faith and love does not afford us that superficiality. The mission of love is only for the courageous, only for the strong, only for the faithful, and only for the sincere. These traits are developed in proportion to reliance upon Christ.

We are never more fulfilled than when we are giving. When we spend our time thinking about ourselves we usually end up focusing on what we do not have. But when we focus our energy on the needs of others we appreciate what we have and are less aware of what is presumably lacking.

Any skill that is not practiced is lost and any muscle that is not exercised becomes weak. Any gift that God has given you, if not actively used for the good of others, is wasted. To embrace these strengths and develop them to the point where the good things that we can do for each other become tangible is to embrace our very purpose for living. Just as God created us to love and be loved by him, we are also created to love each other and do what we can to see to each other's needs.

Paul explained to the church at Ephesus, "In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"<sup>371</sup> We live transcendentally when we give tangibly. Like faith, the giving of our time, energy, and resources to others is an investment that never fails to produce a return.

I have two sisters and both are examples of courageous love, but in very different ways. One is reserved but possesses strength of loyalty

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<sup>371</sup> Acts 20:35.

that is unmatched. It is difficult to earn her trust but once you do she would die before she let you down. The other sister is very outgoing, compassionate, and sensitive to the needs of others. She will make you feel good about yourself even if you do not want to. In fact, it was in a conversation with her that I was convinced to finally write this book. She embodies the word ‘encouragement.’

Both of these brands of love are necessary and good. God made us with different strengths so that we can love in different ways that complement each other. I used to think that as believers we were all expected to be peppy, bubbly, outgoing sanguine types. Of course, we need those, but we also need those who are quiet and consistent, who are okay with not being out in front but are dependable nonetheless. C.S. Lewis writes that “the church is not a human society of people united by their natural affinities but the Body of Christ, in which all members, however different (and He rejoices in their differences and by no means wishes to iron them out) must share the common life, complementing and helping one another precisely by their differences.”<sup>372</sup>

Dr. Heiser also cautions us against confusing “unity” with “uniformity.” He advises, “A better way to understand ‘being of one mind’ is that every member of the community is pursuing the same goal: to be like Jesus. The goal is harmony, not unanimity, in pursuing Christ-likeness and living in community together as believers.”<sup>373</sup>

The point is, love is not trying to be something you are not. Love is being who you are for the good of others. If that consists of being

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<sup>372</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 515.

<sup>373</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 80.



friendly and outgoing, do so with all of the care and compassion that you were given by God to use. Your brand of love may be serving as a solid rock during the storm, and you are not necessarily out to make a bunch of friends but are willing to endure the hardest of circumstances for those who need you. We need all kinds in the community of believers. Play to your strengths. Do what you are good at and enjoy, and do it for others.

Just as we do not need to be someone else to love effectively, we do not have to be somewhere else to do so either. I have often found myself falling into the trap of thinking that once I reached a certain financial, relational, or professional goal I would start giving but there are so many opportunities to offer our strength and compassion to others right where we are. Rodney Stark observes that “the church spread as ordinary people accepted it and then shared it with their families and friends, and the faith was carried from one community to another in this same way...”<sup>374</sup> Whether or not everyone knows about our actions is not the point. The point is loving God and others wherever he puts us.

A U.S. Navy Chaplain once explained to me that when Jesus in the Great Commission tells his followers, “Go therefore and make disciples,” he puts the emphasis on the “making disciples” part, not the “going” part.<sup>375</sup> He explained it could be translated, “As you are going, make disciples.” Jesus is not saying that everyone is called to leave their homes and become missionaries (though some are) but that we are to live our faith wherever we are.

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<sup>374</sup> Stark, 69.

<sup>375</sup> Matthew 28:19.

Love is about starting with those closest to you and working your way out. If we cannot love those we live with how will we be able to truly love those who we barely know? This is where the difference between love and politeness comes into clear view. It is easy to be polite to those we rarely see but there is no depth of love for them. Love is developed not when we feel like being polite but when we learn to focus on the needs of the other person rather than solely on our own emotions. Even the story of Christ's salvation of humanity revolves around the brutal fact of "the Cross," and, as such, is "not necessarily defined by polite and respectable pietistic religion."<sup>376</sup>

Because we have to deal with them so often, if we can learn to love those we see all the time we can learn to love anyone. This goes for family, friends, coworkers, teammates, etc. Bill Hull asks:

'How do I get Christ into my office?' The answer? 'Go in and sit down.'...Some direct efforts have their place, but what is really needed is the transformed life of Christ present in that space. Enter into the community at work, social clubs, and other associations as a person willing to take actions for the benefit of others. Begin to train to live as Jesus lived, with humility, with others in mind.<sup>377</sup>

If we can build the faith in Christ necessary to imitate him in loving those closest to us it is not so much of a stretch to care for people we do not even know.

As we learn to love where we are God may choose to send us somewhere else. The location, the people, even the job may be change

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<sup>376</sup> Brazier, 288.

<sup>377</sup> Bill Hull, "A Reluctant Prophet: How Does Professor Willard Propose to Take over the World?," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 293, accessed May 12, 2018, [http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/apps/doc/A256280581/AONE?u=vic\\_liberty&sid=AONE&xid=e400c636](http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/apps/doc/A256280581/AONE?u=vic_liberty&sid=AONE&xid=e400c636).

but the command to love is always constant and should always be foremost in our minds. As we grow and become stronger our aim should be to use our increasing capabilities to serve. In this way we embrace our purpose and can live a fulfilled and complete life. And then the real adventure begins.

## FEAR AND SELFISHNESS

Just as faith naturally leads to a lifestyle of love, fear takes us down a path of self-absorption. The most fearful also tend to be some of the least generous. Anytime I have refused to give of myself for another has been because I was not trusting Christ to take care me.

We do not need to worry about being taken care of when we find our provision in Christ. He promises that “there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”<sup>378</sup> This is because when we choose to rely on Christ we become part of a much larger family than our biological one, the members of which have also left their old lives to follow him.

Yes, we will encounter opposition to our faith but this opposition has to compete with the provision of the King of creation. Our assurance of success in the long-term is definite. For this reason, we have absolutely no excuse for hesitation to love. There is no reason to be selfish when we are looked after by the Creator himself, and the more

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<sup>378</sup> Mark 10:29, 30.

we learn to adopt a mindset of giving the more we find that we have to give.

Those who profess to be followers of Jesus have been the objects of intense criticism, and sometimes for valid reasons. However, no community has done so much throughout history to ease the pain and suffering of others. Stark vividly shows how the early church approached the commandment to love:

[I]n the pagan world, and especially among the philosophers, mercy was regarded as a character defect and pity as a pathological emotion: because mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it is contrary to justice...This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful. Moreover, the corollary that *because* God loves humanity, Christians may not please God until they *love one another* was even more incompatible with pagan convictions. But the truly revolutionary principle was that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and even those of faith, to all in need.<sup>379</sup>

This way of living laid the foundation for future generations of believers, resulting in “the profound, well-documented positive influence of Christian faith in the world. This list of contributions includes preserving literature, advancing education, laying the foundations of modern science, cultivating art and music, promoting human rights and providing better working conditions for persons, and overthrowing slavery.”<sup>380</sup> Whether by establishing hospitals and orphanages, bringing aid and education to dangerous areas of the world, or working to end human trafficking, there is no shortage of examples of true followers of

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<sup>379</sup> Stark, 112.

<sup>380</sup> Copan, 18.

Christ devoting themselves to loving others in practical, tangible ways. “These contributions are acknowledged by atheists and theists alike.”<sup>381</sup>

Here is the issue: it is not enough for only some of those who call themselves believers to be examples of the love of Christ. Everyone who claims to be a follower of Christ takes upon him or herself the responsibility of learning to represent him accurately. Every one of us is under an obligation to convey the love that we have received to a hurting world. Our “heavenly citizenship must be of earthly good.”<sup>382</sup>

This does not necessarily mean that we have to pick up and move our families to a foreign mission field, nor does it mean we need to quit our jobs and go to seminary. It simply means loving where we are now until God directs us to go somewhere or do something else. It is just as vital to have servants of Christ in business, government, the arts, the military, academia, etc., as in ministry. If everyone who called him or herself a believer would begin serving with the love of Christ right where they are, there would be an explosion of compassion that would sweep the world and no one would be able to deny the reality of the influence of Christ.

Believers are to be the funnel of God’s love and goodness into whatever part of the world and society he put them in. Jesus explains the kingdom of God “is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 14.

shade.”<sup>383</sup>

When a tree produces fruit, it does not throw that fruit at passersby. It makes its fruit available until they come to it and then gives of itself freely. Similarly, as others begin to see divine influence in our lives as a result of our faith in Christ they will come to us to see what it is all about. It is not about shoving a message down their throats. It is about having something real and tangible to offer when they finally realize that they need him.

Jesus went about “doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”<sup>384</sup> Our approach is to be the same. As we live this way people will show interest in the way we live. That interest in us results in interest in Christ.

Constant giving can get tiring and even downright painful at times. That is why we must be sure that we are always receiving as well as giving, both from Christ and through other believers. We should receive the peace, assurance, and comfort that only Christ can offer us. Any time we try to love without relying on him for the strength to do it we are bound for failure because we are finite and only have so much to give. But as, by faith, we learn to rest in the assurance of his care we grow in the ability to give without running out of the strength and incentive to love.

It is also important to learn to give ourselves time to relax. Even Jesus took time off to spend time with his Father and recharge: “And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by

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<sup>383</sup> Mark 4:30-32.

<sup>384</sup> Acts 10:38.

himself to pray.”<sup>385</sup> “And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.”<sup>386</sup> Time spent with the Father is vital to our being able to love others effectively because we cannot give if we have not first received. The best way to avoid having to work our way back to a state of reliance is to stay there.

## THE ONLY REASON WE ARE HERE

Seen from an eternal perspective, death is the best thing that we as children of God have to look forward to. Imagine in a heartbeat being transferred to a state of being where there is absolutely nothing between you and true ecstasy, to be in the immediate presence of Love himself. Now, come back to the here and now. Such a shift can be a little depressing, like imagining the beaches of Cancun while stuck in the middle of a sleet-storm.

So why are we stuck here? Why does God not take us away immediately after we receive Christ? Paul summed up our purpose for staying on this earth for a while when he wrote of himself:

For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better. I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live. Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Matthew 14:23.

<sup>386</sup> Mark 1:35.

<sup>387</sup> Philippians 1:21-25 [New Living Translation].

This is our sole purpose: to help others discover the joy of faith that we have come to know. In doing so we help “God recruit as many people as possible back into his family.”<sup>388</sup>

Obviously, we have to discover the joy of our own faith before we can even think about helping others do so. If living for Christ is just a duty and an obligation then there is no joy to offer others. If faith is more restriction than freedom then it is counterproductive, but it is when we discover the joy of fearlessly fulfilled living as a result of trusting Christ that others will be attracted to our faith. When they see that ours is a faith defined by courage, selflessness, and compassion then there will be no excuse for rejecting Jesus, in whom that faith is placed.

If love is the only reason that we have to remain here, then what is the point of doing anything else? The love that we give and the faith in Christ that we display are the only things that will carry over to the other side when our lives come to an end. Not only does a life of love give us purpose for the here and now, when we are at the end we will not have to look back on a wasted life. It will have been a life well spent in service to others, just as Jesus’ was.

The apostle John wrote that “as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world. Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.”<sup>389</sup>

The more we come to know God the more we realize his absolute

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<sup>388</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 36.

<sup>389</sup> I John 4:17, 18 NLT.



and perfect love for us. This totally nullifies any reason we ever had to fear anything. This frees us to live a life of complete abandonment to love, because at the end of the day we have nothing to lose and everything to look forward to.

It also relieves us of any excuses. We are commanded, quite explicitly, to live as Jesus lived, with all of the confidence and compassion that he showed. We have Christ's own Spirit within us. There should be no timidity on our part to love with abandon.

The entire moral law is fulfilled in doing all that we do for the good of others: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."<sup>390</sup> As long as we live by this law the growth of our intimacy with Christ will never be hindered, and since that is the entire purpose for our existence, love-producing faith should be our highest priority. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."<sup>391</sup> Any man-made law that is worth keeping will be fulfilled by living love-oriented lives, for it is the higher law of God that gives any credibility to temporal laws.

The aggressive breaking of laws contrary to the freedom Jesus offers is how many Christians in persecuted countries make the biggest impact in displaying the courageous compassion of Christ. Choi Young Hun, a Chinese missionary to North Korea, declared, "The most evil feeling in the world is hatred. It is very easy for people to harbor resentment in their hearts, allowing hatred to grow. For those who have been imprisoned, it is especially easy to give in to feelings of self-pity and hatred. Christ alone can help us overcome these feelings. With his help,

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<sup>390</sup> Galatians 6:2.

<sup>391</sup> Galatians 5:6.

we are able to forgive and love.”

Choi was arrested on January 18, 2003, by police for providing aid to North Korean believers. He was imprisoned for five years, during which time he was drugged, tortured, and compelled to let go of his faith. He never did, and at the end of his five-year sentence he was released back to his family. He made a full recovery and continued to help others grow in their faith in Christ.

Speaking of those who treated him so cruelly for five years, Choi said, “I pray for those people who persecuted me because I believe that one day they will meet God and become my brothers and sisters in Christ. I believe that God always knows what we need; he will prepare us for these moments in his time. He always stays before us and with us in the face of persecution.”<sup>392</sup>

Despite such ruthless persecution, and despite sometimes having to break those man-made laws that are contrary to the law of Christ, believers such as Choi have learned to love regardless of such vicious opposition. This is what distinguishes followers of Christ. The ability of the Christ-reliant believer to love his or her persecutor even in the midst of this kind of hatred is an indisputable testament to the truth of Christ and the reality of the strength and comfort that he is able to provide. Many adherents of different faiths have been the objects of oppression, but Christ provides the strength to respond with undeniable and unfailing love to the one who truly trusts in him.

The author of I John gives us our entire purpose as believers: “And this is his commandment: We must believe in the name of his Son, Jesus

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<sup>392</sup> Steven Lear, “Christ Suffers with Me,” *The Voice of the Martyrs*, 2010, 4-5.

Christ, and love one another, just as he commanded us. Those who obey God's commandments remain in fellowship with him, and he with them. And we know he lives in us because the Spirit he gave us lives in us.<sup>393</sup>

Come to more fully realize the love of Christ for yourself, then turn around and pass it on to others. Come to know the joy of your faith, then show others how to make that joy their own. Live a life worth imitating. Lean on Christ and let others lean on you. Do the right thing, not for the sake of appearances or reputation but simply out of gratitude, because, "Our motive for imitating Jesus is...not to keep God loving us so we'll be saved in the end. That which cannot be achieved by performance cannot be lost by performance."<sup>394</sup> Become an obvious example of the joy that comes from faith in Christ. Rely on him. Love others.

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<sup>393</sup> I John 3:23, 24 [New Living Translation].

<sup>394</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 67.

## CHAPTER 7 – THIS ONE THING

*God is the final answer to the problem of suffering, for He redeems us from evil and takes us into the everlasting joy of an incommensurable good: fellowship with Himself.*  
– Dr. William Lane Craig<sup>395</sup>

*This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* – The Apostle Paul<sup>396</sup>

“Set the conditions” is a phrase used in the military that refers to the process of taking preparatory measures to ensure a successful operation before it ever kicks off. Whether it be an attack, a defensive fight or any other activity, success is very often determined by the commander’s ability to set the conditions. For instance, when planning a defensive operation, the commander will dig in fighting positions, emplace obstacles to force the enemy into the “kill zone,” deploy scouts to observation posts forward of the main force, and conduct other preparations. At various points in this process, and even during the operation itself, he will do a “conditions check” to ensure every possible advantage has been exploited. His primary objective is to out-prepare his enemy to ensure the most favorable fighting conditions possible. The

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<sup>395</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 173.

<sup>396</sup> Philippians 3:13, 14.

goal is to avoid a fair fight.

In the same way, our success or failure to live out our faith is largely based on whether we set the conditions. “We are walking battlefields in which the sinful nature and God’s holy spirit do battle for control of our lives.”<sup>397</sup> This is why Paul instructed believers to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”<sup>398</sup> By setting, or failing to set, the conditions we can tip the balance in one direction or the other. If what we consume through our eyes and ears and the company we keep are Christ-focused, our thoughts and actions will develop accordingly. If they are not, the opposite will occur.

John James is the co-founder and former front man for the Emmy-nominated and highly successful rock band, the Newsboys. The band came to America from Australia with the goal of spreading the message of Christ through their music, and they became extremely popular in the early and mid-1990s. Along with this success came material wealth and social status. As a result, James started to lose his focus. He eventually became a womanizer, alcoholic, and drug-addict.

James was forced to leave the band so he could get some help, but instead he sank deeper into his addictions. His wife left him and took his kids back to Australia. Left to his own devices in his mansion in Nashville, Tennessee, he sunk so deeply into depression that he came to the brink of suicide. Seconds away from ending his own life, James recounts praying one last prayer: “God, please help me...” Right at that moment, James heard his wife’s voice on the answering machine,

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<sup>397</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 83.

<sup>398</sup> Romans 13:14.

begging him to return to Australia to get healthy again. This he did, and today he is a “missionary to America” spreading the news of who he calls “the God of the second chance.”<sup>399</sup>

James credits his decline into addiction to letting go of what he refers to as the three anchors that kept him stable and growing in his faith: daily devotions with God, listening to his wife, and being connected to a local community of believers. Once he neglected to set the conditions, the result was vulnerability to temptation and corresponding personal chaos. Conversely, since these conditions have been restored he has been given the opportunity to use his story to encourage others and has enjoyed restoration in his most important relationships.

The point is that no matter how much of a tactical expert a commander is he will eventually fail if he does not set the conditions for success. Similarly, a committed believer, regardless of his loyalty to Christ, exposes himself to potential catastrophe when he fails to make time with Christ and connection to fellow believers his top priority. When these conditions are set, however, our faith is resilient. “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.”<sup>400</sup>

We should never think, however, that we should act a certain way to make God love us or, when we inevitably mess it up, that he no longer loves us because of it. Dr. Heiser explains, “God never learns anything new about you when you fail. He’s known you all along and still loved

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<sup>399</sup> John James, “John James,” (accessed November 18, 2016), <http://www.fgbt.org/Testimonies/john-james.html>.

<sup>400</sup> Psalm 119:9.

you right where you were and are...God is never disappointed with you, because He never has false expectations of your behavior. God has loved you all along.”<sup>401</sup>

As far as earning our place in God’s family, “It’s insane to think our imperfect behavior could ever be adequate. The coming, death, and resurrection of Christ would never have been necessary if we could earn salvation.”<sup>402</sup> For the sake of our sanity it is important to remember our motivation to live the way God wants us to is not guilt, but gratitude.

## PRAYER AND COMMUNITY

James mentioned daily devotion, including prayer, as one of the essential anchors to a life of faith. Prayer is not a complicated concept, but it is essential to the life of faith. Dr. Heiser explains, “Prayer is a way we can show God (and others) that we depend on God. It is a way to express that we want God to act, that we aren’t relying on ourselves, or that we cannot find a solution ourselves. Prayer fosters our own sense of dependence on, and security in, God alone. In that sense, prayer is worship. The same is true for prayer in groups.”<sup>403</sup>

In short, “Prayer is something that is designed to align our hearts with God’s lordship of our lives and build an attitude of dependence on him.”<sup>404</sup> The church I attend defines prayer “as our humble dependence upon God.”<sup>405</sup> Many books have been written on prayer and there are many different opinions on how and why to pray, but the central and

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<sup>401</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 64.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>405</sup> See [www.cccpinehurst.org/about](http://www.cccpinehurst.org/about).

essential component is, like everything else in the life of faith, reasserting our reliance on Christ.

Another of James' anchors is being connected to a community of believers, which is "a divine company" led by "a divine captain."<sup>406</sup> The McDowells explain that for believers:

...to survive in their faith, they must not only be equipped with a biblical worldview, they must also sense that they are part of a loving community of believers who support each other and have a common mission in life. The God of restoration gave us exactly that: his unified body (a community of believers) to be there for each other and engage in his mission to reach a lost world and bring them to know the power through the resurrection, to restore life as God intended it to be.<sup>407</sup>

Dr. Heiser explains that disciples and believers in Christ "nurture community. They love one another and support one another like a family would do. That means sharing resources. For some believers that may mean money; for others it may mean time, or a service, or a skill. Basically, community does what needs to be done for those in the community."<sup>408</sup>

This willingness to sacrifice both materially and intangibly for each other was evident in the early church, even to the extent of allowing for differences of opinion on doctrine as long as the essentials were maintained. Sinischalchi points out, "The four-fold collection of the Gospels exemplifies what was so characteristic in early Christian devotion in the second half of the first century: 'a certain readiness to

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<sup>406</sup> Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 58.

<sup>407</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 83.

<sup>408</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 78.



find unity of what they deemed essentials beneath obvious diversity’.”<sup>409</sup>

C.S. Lewis supposes that this focus on the common essentials of the faith is the key to unity among believers. He writes that he is “inclined to think that the immediate task is vigorous co-operations on the basis of what even now is common—combined, of course, with a full admission of the differences. An experienced unity on some things might then prove the prelude to a confessional unity on all things.”<sup>410</sup> He also asserts that personal taste is no excuse for strife among believers. He admits, although “I naturally loathe all hymns, the face and life of the” housemaid “in the next pew who revels in them teach me that good taste in poetry or music are *not* necessary to salvation.”<sup>411</sup>

## FAITH AND EMOTION

Personal tastes are tied to emotions. Emotions change constantly and are unpredictable. Therefore, they should only be used as an indicator, not as a decision-maker. Even “religious emotion is only a servant.”<sup>412</sup> Rather, our decisions should be based on Christ’s guidance: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”<sup>413</sup>

C.S. Lewis explains, “Obedience is the key to all doors: feelings come (or don’t come) and go as God pleases.”<sup>414</sup> He further counsels us not to “bother much about your feelings. When they are humble, loving, brave, give thanks for them: when they are conceited, selfish, cowardly, ask to have them altered. In neither case are they you, but only a thing

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<sup>409</sup> Siniscalchi, 727.

<sup>410</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 409.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

<sup>413</sup> John 10:27, 28.

<sup>414</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 516.

that happens to you. What matters is your intentions and your behavior.”<sup>415</sup>

Unlike our emotions, the leading of Christ is not affected by our circumstances or physical senses. It is a constant whisper that we can direct our lives by. It is how we are able to hear him consistently and how we ensure we are walking with him closely. We should also remember “that the Holy Spirit guides your decisions from within when you make them with the intention of pleasing God,” but it is an error “to think that He speaks *only* within, whereas in reality He speaks also through Scripture, the Church, Christian friends, books etc.”<sup>416</sup>

Growing up in church, I went to all of the youth camps and conventions that my church made available. After the first few times I became very confused as to why we would spend the entire trip having a great time and getting emotionally wound-up, and then come back and lose our newfound ‘spirituality’ within a week. I started to realize that many of us treated it as an emotional experience rather than a faith-building event. This was not the fault of the speakers or staff, but our own. Many of us let our beliefs become tied up in our emotions. Once we left the sterile environment of the camp or convention and were reintroduced to the real world with all of its pressures and temptations we lost all of the emotional passion and had nothing of substance, no real ability to rely on Christ day-to-day.

Emotions are not wrong, and God gave them to us for a reason. Our faith, however, should not be dependent upon our emotions, “but

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 528.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 542.

on the truth.”<sup>417</sup> We should not deny our emotions, but faith based on truth should always take precedence. We are not to “be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”<sup>418</sup> The less we depend upon our emotions the more useful they are.

A good way to gauge whether or not we have set the conditions for our faith is whether or not we are at peace. When we truly rely on Christ we possess an unchanging peace of mind and heart as long as we remain in obedience to him. It becomes easier and easier to know when we are out of line as we mature in faith. The peace of Christ becomes such a constant companion that when it is not present we know that something is wrong. All it takes to get back into his will is to listen for his direction concerning what we need to do, do it, and again enjoy his peace, always mindful of our need for him.

Paul writes, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.”<sup>419</sup> The peace that he refers to is relational peace,<sup>420</sup> as in a perfect and uninterrupted relationship with Christ. This relational peace should not be confused with emotional peace. Emotional peace can come and go. Relational peace is constant as long as Christ is the object of our dependence. If we rely upon Christ that relational peace will eventually spill over into our emotions.

But regardless of our emotional state, we can rest assured that Christ

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<sup>417</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 21.

<sup>418</sup> Philippians 4:6, 7.

<sup>419</sup> Colossians 3:15.

<sup>420</sup> Barry et al., Col 3:15.

has our eternal well-being taken care of, and as long as that is our focus then there is nothing that can cause us to lose hope. Our hope is an eternal one, and death is simply the door by which we get there. So for us to be anxious or stressed about anything temporal is pointless in the long run. Our only concern should be giving as much as we can until we finally leave this world.

When three Hebrew captives were to be thrown into a giant oven for refusing to worship anyone or anything but the one true God they had no idea what he had planned, but knew that whatever it was, it was for their ultimate good. They told the king who held them, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power...But even if he doesn’t, we want to make it clear to you...that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.”<sup>421</sup>

They did not know if it was their time to die or if God would rescue them from the flames, but the fact that they did not know did not affect their faith. They were completely surrendered to the will of God either way. This, in turn, produced the courage necessary to stand up to the idolatrous and tyrannical king. Because they had already set the conditions for their faith, they remained confident despite uncertainty.

God is not required to run his plan by us for approval. Our part is to learn to be completely content in the knowledge that he is Love and he has us well taken care of. He will let us know what we need to know, when we need to know it. In Dr. Craig’s experience “the Lord usually

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<sup>421</sup> Daniel 3:16-18 [New Living Translation].

shows us only enough light along the path to take the next step without knowing what lies further down the trail.”<sup>422</sup>

We should always listen for his guidance, but trusting him enough to know that we do not need to know everything takes a lot of the stress out of life. It is also a good indicator of our maturity of faith. The more we can be comfortable living in the present and giving the future to God to do what he will, leaving it up to him to decide when it is best for us to know, the more mature our faith is.

## LOVING LEADERSHIP

God calls men and women of faith to be in positions of influence in order to convey his love to more people through them. They get “involved in public life not just to protect their religious interests as Christians, but for the sake of the common good.”<sup>423</sup> He raises believers into leadership roles to be conduits of that love.

We should not shy away from such opportunities, nor should we forget our purpose for being put there in the first place. Many avoid such positions for fear of failure, however we are not told we have to lead perfectly. Rather we are to see that as much good is done for as many people as possible in order to be examples of the love of Christ.

Leadership consists, broadly speaking, of three elements:

1. Confidence – Looking like you know what you are doing.
2. Competence – Actually knowing what you are doing.
3. Compassion – Doing what you do to benefit those whom you influence.

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<sup>422</sup> Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 69.

<sup>423</sup> Evangelicals and Catholics Together, 6.

We may feel that we lack one or more of these qualities and are unqualified for positions of leadership. Fortunately, growth of faith, which is our point of connection with God himself, results in growth in all three of these areas of leadership. Focus on building faith in Christ, and the leadership ability will follow.

People are attracted to confidence. Nothing puts them at ease faster than following someone who looks like he or she knows what he or she is doing. Nothing instills doubt faster than having a timid leader. The confidence of the leader sets the tone for the rest of the organization. John Maxwell writes, “A show of courage by any person encourages others. But a show of courage by a leader inspires.”<sup>424</sup> If the leader is confident and courageous it will reflect in the performance of the organization.

Confidence is a byproduct of increasing faith. Once you realize that it is not all up to you, that you only have to do your part and Christ will do his, you will have all of the confidence that you need to be effective in whatever venture he leads you to pursue. You begin to understand that he can use even failures for your ultimate good, so you can embrace every challenge with confidence. You know that, at the end of the day, all that matters is that your faith grows stronger and that others benefit from it.

Being a leader is a great catalyst for faith-building because the more others rely on you to make the right decisions, the more you are forced to rely on Christ for guidance and strength. Increased reliance upon Christ results in increased confidence. Failure to lean on him can result

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<sup>424</sup> Maxwell, 41.

in your becoming overwhelmed and confused. Either way, being a leader forces you to either improve or break down. It is difficult to remain stagnant in a position of influence. This is why it is important to learn how to trust him in times of relatively low stress and responsibility. Just as Jesus explained in the parable of the talents,<sup>425</sup> the more we are able to apply faith when we have less responsibility, the more able we will be to do the same with more difficult challenges.

God uses this principle of increasing pressure to build our confidence in him and to strengthen our ability to maintain that confidence through trials. After the death of Joshua, while Israel was still in the early phases of settling the newly-acquired land of Canaan, God left certain rival nations unconquered in order to teach Israel to trust him and to test their resolve to obey him:

Now these are the nations that the LORD left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before...They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.<sup>426</sup>

As those whom you lead begin to see that your confidence is not in yourself but in Christ, their confidence in him may increase as well. They will see your selfless attitude, coupled with your ability to remain calm and in control of your emotions, and when they find out that it is because of faith they will be more apt to embrace it for themselves.

Love, which grows out of faith, also plays a vital role in our ability to lead confidently. The more we become concerned with the good of

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<sup>425</sup> Matthew 25:14-30.

<sup>426</sup> Judges 3:1-2, 4.

those whom we influence and less concerned about our own promotion, the more we are free to take risks that benefit others. We do not have to worry about our personal success. That is a role that God reserves for himself. Our job is to concern ourselves with the good of others.

Confidence only goes so far unless there is some actual skill and ability to back it up. We can only act like we know what we are doing for so long before people learn whether or not that is actually the case. Fortunately, God will never call us to do something without giving us the tools to do it. He will not set us up to fail in the long run if we stay tucked into him.

Endurance of faith is critical to developing competency. Even Jesus did not begin his ministry until he was thirty years old.<sup>427</sup> If he had given up at age twenty then we would all still be stuck in eternal separation from God. Jesus had the patience necessary to allow the Father to teach him what he needed to know. Give God time to develop your abilities. Do not cut him short by giving into fear and unbelief. Give him time to finish what he started. Just because you are less than capable now does not mean that you always will be.

One of the most important aspects of competency is simply realizing where you are not competent. It is the ability to realize when someone else is better at something than you are, and having the confidence necessary to let them help without feeling like your toes are being stepped on. If you are not able to do something, someone else probably is. People are often more than willing to help where they are needed if the leader is someone they respect. A good leader realizes that it is not

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<sup>427</sup> Luke 3:23.



his job to be good at everything. It is his job to see the skill and potential of his subordinates and match those individuals with their strengths.

Jesus established compassion and humility as the core qualities of all great leadership, asserting that “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,” even as he “came not to be served but to serve.”<sup>428</sup> Compassion is the sole reason for any believer to be placed in a position of influence. Any time serving others is not our focus then we are no longer fulfilling our purpose as representatives of Christ. We are simply filling a position.

Being compassionate does not mean being weak. It means being what others need us to be, whether it be relaxed or aggressive, tender or firm. Growing in faith, and thus growing in love, leads to a growth in sensitivity to the needs of others. Learning how to provide for the welfare of those under our influence results in the organization becoming more effective and productive. So, Jesus’ command to serve others does not just have spiritual impact. It makes great business sense.

We often get the idea that to be humble is to give up influence. In reality humility is using our influence to help others, not promote ourselves. If we choose to give up our position of influence to someone who is less interested in the good of others than we are we have done harm to those whom we could have served from a place of leadership.

Fear is the bitter enemy of faith. It handicaps our ability to lead effectively. Fear is idolatry. It is faith in the ability of someone or something to overcome the love of God. To be an effective leader we

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<sup>428</sup> Matthew 20:26-28.

should submit ourselves to Christ and those whom he places over us. No one and nothing else, including fear, should command our allegiance.

That is not to say that we will never feel nervous or incompetent. It is not the feeling that matters, but what we do with it. We can either give into that feeling of timidity and merely survive for the rest of our lives, or we can abandon everything to the love of Christ and embrace life for all that it is, for “God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.”<sup>429</sup> The choice that we make between these two options determines our leadership potential.

## REALITY

Faith in Christ is our solitary path into the depths of God’s love. Everything good, desirable, and lasting that we will ever have is gained through reliance on Christ. It is the only avenue by which the Father can fully reveal to us just how truly, deeply, and intensely he cares for us. His every interaction with us is for the purpose of building our reliance upon Jesus so that he is less and less restricted as to how much he can show his love.

This truth is not just religion. It is reality. We can deny it as much as we want, but we are only hurting ourselves if we do. The entire being of God is characterized by his desire to show us how much he loves us, because he is Love. To deny him that is the ultimate sin. Most of us have experienced what it is like to love someone and not have that love returned. Imagine being Love personified and being denied the

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<sup>429</sup> II Timothy 1:7.

opportunity to show it. Everything he does is to show us how much he loves us. The best thing we can do, for him and ourselves, is accept it.

God did not create us to know him simply on an intellectual or emotional level, or to know only a part of him. He created us with the capability to know him on a level of intimacy that dwarfs our intellectual and emotional comprehension. He wants us to taste every ounce of the love that he has for us. He wants us to be filled with his fullness, to know him as well as he knows us.

That was the whole point of Christ coming to earth in the first place—to reestablish us as being worthy of being brought into the secret places of the heart of God, and to be seated “with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”<sup>430</sup> The whole point of this thing called life is God’s love for us. We only need to receive it, appreciate it, and then convey it.

Reliance on Jesus produces strength and peace in proportion to that reliance. However much we depend upon him is how much we allow him to impact our lives. Regardless of the degree, faith in him always strengthens and never weakens.<sup>431</sup> Any image or idea of Christ as weak and fragile is a twisted lie. The all-powerful ruler of the universe has given us his name. We have no excuse to be weak and no reason to wallow in self-pity. There are too many hurting people in this world for us not to embrace our God-given identities and convey the love of God through reliance upon Christ to everyone we can, everywhere we can. We have nothing to lose and everything to give. We only need to realize

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<sup>430</sup> Ephesians 2:6, 7.

<sup>431</sup> Acts 3:15, 16.

it.

All of the faith and trust in the world, all of the love that one can muster, means nothing unless that faith is founded in Christ. He is the reason that we are free to become the glorious beings that God created us to be rather than remain diminishing, decrepit caricatures of his image. Because of him we hold within ourselves the potential for acts of such courageous compassion that the world has never experienced. It has yet to see everything that the believer is capable of, if only that believer will aim to do nothing else but rely upon Jesus.

During the apostle Paul's time there were some exorcists who saw the great miracles God was accomplishing through him, including casting demons out of hurting people. Seven brothers decided to try the same thing, and they attempted to cast a demon out of someone using the name of Jesus "whom Paul proclaims."<sup>432</sup>

Instead of relying upon Christ for the authority to cast out the evil spirit they tried to use his name like a magic talisman. The demon responded to them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"<sup>433</sup> The possessed man then beat them all into submission, stripped them completely naked, and wounded them before they finally escaped. The demon recognized that they had no real reliance upon Jesus, and therefore had no real connection him. The demon was under no obligation to submit to the exorcists.

Trying to take and use the faith of someone else as your own does not work. There is no power in it, and to think that following a certain religious teacher makes us spiritually mature is a mistake. Our faith in

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<sup>432</sup> Acts 19:13.

<sup>433</sup> Acts 19:15.

Christ must be our own, without any intermediary in between. Teachers of faith are put in place to augment and enhance our faith, not to be the objects of it. Even getting caught up in the use of crosses and religious symbols, if they ever start to become the objects of our faith rather than representative of it, is the same as idolatry. The name and person of Jesus should be the only place in which the fullness of our reliance rests.

Much of the pressure is taken off when we realize that it is not our job to make faith work. Our only job is to rely on Christ. He will ensure that his part of the faith-relationship is upheld. We can drive ourselves crazy trying to get the right combination of worship songs and devotionals to make us feel like our faith is working. But it is not about what we feel. It is about what actually works. Faith works, so long as it is in Christ and it endures until it is completed.

Faith determines everything else. “If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”<sup>434</sup> How we treat the person of Jesus will reflect in every other area of life. If we embrace him courageously and zealously then it will show in everything else we do. There is nothing that will not be positively impacted by the strength that comes by that faith. If we are spineless, weak, and unwilling to risk in the area of trusting Christ we will be equally as weak, ineffective, and selfish in the way we do everything else. How we treat our faith decides everything, from the most important issues to the least significant.

## FOCUS

The difference between fear and fearlessness, after the decision to

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<sup>434</sup> Isaiah 7:9.

learn to rely on Jesus, is a matter of focus. If our focus is on the temporary pains and pleasures of this world then there will still be still an element of timidity in our way of thinking. We will still be somewhat unwilling to take certain risks. This means that we are not yet completely capable of selfless love. As Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>435</sup> It is only when we are completely willing to sacrifice ourselves for him, and each other by extension, that we reach perfection in love. We reach this place of perfect love when we perfectly rely upon him and his will.

If our focus is on the other side of death and the eternal ecstasy that awaits us who are faithful to the end then there is no reason to fear anything. Again, this is not a suicidal inclination but a determination to make the most of this life in preparation for the next. C.S. Lewis observes, “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next...It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”<sup>436</sup>

This is the answer to Chesterton’s paradoxical definition of courage, which he describes as “almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die.”<sup>437</sup> For the believer this desire for life includes, but is not limited to or dependent upon, biological life. It is the longing for the divine life, promised to all who rely on Christ, which no human language can effectively describe. It

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<sup>435</sup> John 15:13.

<sup>436</sup> Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 112.

<sup>437</sup> Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 72.

is only glimpsed in our deepest longings.

The McDowells explain, “The resurrection of Jesus provides the believer with a heavenly perspective in the present and the promise of eternal life in the future.”<sup>438</sup> What is there to be feared if not death? Maybe pain, but that is only temporary. “Pain, like death, holds no power over those who pass through it and emerge safely on the other side.”<sup>439</sup> And one who is truly focused on eternity is more interested in what happens on the other side of death, not death itself. Who, then, is more able to live a generous, adventurous, and fulfilled life than one who does not fear death?

This is not to say that the joys and positive emotions and events that we experience here on earth mean nothing. These are to give us hope, as well as to remind us this world is not our home. They are a taste of the goodness of God that awaits us. The trials are to show us how to rely on Christ. The joys are to show us why.

Of these joyful experiences, C.S. Lewis writes, “One ought not to need the gloomy moments of life for beginning detachment, nor be re-entangled by the bright ones. One ought to be able to enjoy the bright ones to the full and at that very moment have the perfect readiness to leave them, confident that what calls one away is better.”<sup>440</sup>

## LOVE STORY

In the course of studying the life of faith it can be easy to lose sight of the whole purpose of it all: ever-increasing intimacy with our Father

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<sup>438</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 64.

<sup>439</sup> Markos, 105.

<sup>440</sup> Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 511.

through Christ. If we lose sight of this then the entire story of reality caves in on itself, like a house without a cornerstone. The key is to keep in mind that the very essence of our deepest desire finds its full completion in Christ. With him as our focal point we are never without cause to fight to protect that intimacy.

This being the case, life is really at its core an epic love story. Any good romance revolves around two lovers battling against opposition to be with each other. The joy that they find in being with each other is worth the temporary pain that must be endured to be reunited. That is the heart of our faith.

Dr. Heiser summarizes, “What does God want? He wants you. And he sent his unique Son to earth as Jesus to fix the problem of death and sin, to fulfill his covenants with humanity, so he could bring you home forever. God joined the human family.”<sup>441</sup> He who holds the key to unlocking the deepest desires of our heart urges us only to endure until we are fully reunited. It is then that every trial that we have ever faced will have been worth the effort.

Real, self-sacrificial love is not developed overnight. The way we can be sure that Christ is worth fighting for is to get to know him. There will never be a time when you open your heart to Christ and come away disappointed or unsure of whether or not your relationship is going to work out. The more of him you get the more you want, plain and simple.

You cannot depend on a religious organization or another person to give you a complete and accurate image of the person of Christ. Some

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<sup>441</sup> Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, 35.



are more accurate than others, and they can encourage you and point you in the right direction, but to really know who he is you have to meet with him yourself.

People everywhere, whether they recognize it or not, are looking for a real solution to the problem of realizing the desires of the heart. We have the answer: reliance upon Christ, to experience the love of God and to convey that love to others. But the world will never know what is available to them if we do not embrace this reliance upon Christ for ourselves. No one is going to be convinced by a dead faith, neither should they be. It is pointless.

We owe it to the world to be shining examples of the life that awaits the one who will simply abandon him or herself to Christ. The results will speak for themselves. Our part is to be willing to risk everything we are and everything we have, staking it all on the love and lordship of Jesus.

Let us be done with monotonous religiosity that has nothing to do with reliance upon Christ. Let us care about gaining only that which we cannot lose. Let us live a faith so pure and a love so intense that there is no denying the very power of God inherent within the good news that we profess. Let us, by our unbreakable faith and courageous compassion, leave the world no choice but to believe that Jesus the Christ is the risen King of our deepest desires, and be ready for that day when we “shall see him as he is.”<sup>442</sup>

The problem of suffering, in the meantime, remains relevant. But C.S. Lewis anticipates the answer to this question when we finally find

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<sup>442</sup> I John 3:2.

ourselves in the presence of the one worth suffering for: “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away.”<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Quoted in Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams*, First ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 450, Kindle eBook.

## EPILOGUE

In January of 2011, I published an early version of this book in which I tried to capture and organize what I believe and why, as well as to make these thoughts available to anyone who might find them helpful. I wrestled with the ideas in this book at the same time I was writing the music that would eventually become the Crosstree album *Thrill of the Fall*. This book and that album are two sides of the same coin. They came to define one another in my mind and I saw both as together providing the avenue by which I could ask questions, seek answers, and solidify in my thinking about what I found to be true.

Both the book and the album grew out of a struggle to understand and take ownership of my faith after I left home to join the military. In the midst of those challenges I was encouraged by *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and other accounts of the endurance of believers who, in the face of overwhelming suffering, chose unconditional allegiance to Christ instead of immediate relief from their sufferings. It was through their example that I began to understand the true nature of faith. For them, it was more than a commitment to a religious system. It was reliance upon the person of Christ to be the ultimate satisfaction of their deepest desires.

Since then, I have discovered a few areas where my thinking was

either misguided or just incomplete. For the most part, though, I hold to the main points that I proposed in that first version. More surprising (and disturbing) than any conceptual or grammatical errors has been the realization of how often I violate the principles I wrote that I unapologetically believe in. The difference between “knowing” and “doing” is more tangible than it was then, as I have so often “known” one thing to be right and true and then “done” the exact opposite. I have become very familiar with the apostle Paul’s anguished cry, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”<sup>444</sup>

This state of helplessness is not unique to me or Paul. It afflicts all of humanity: both the unbeliever who denies it and the pious clergyman who hides it. It especially affects those of us who have chosen to pledge our allegiance to Christ but constantly fail to live up to that commitment. Likewise, the language Paul uses “is not that of a sinner newly awakened to the sight of his lost state; it is the cry of a living but agonized believer, weighed down under a burden which is not himself, but which he longs to shake off from his renewed self.”<sup>445</sup>

But Paul does not stop there, and neither should we. His question of, “Who will deliver me?” was “designed only to prepare the way for that outburst of thankfulness for the divinely provided remedy which immediately follows.”<sup>446</sup> Paul sinks deep into his realization of the depravity of his daily existence, only to be catapulted into overwhelming gratitude to the one who, even now, embodies the ultimate solution:

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<sup>444</sup> Romans 7:24.

<sup>445</sup> Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, 238.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”<sup>447</sup>

Paul then explains the nature of this tension, one that I fully identify with: “I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”<sup>448</sup> It is against this backdrop that he asserts the truth through which so many have found the answer to the problem of human existence, which is impossible apart from divine compassion and sacrifice: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”<sup>449</sup> This passage is often used to explain the Christian message to unbelievers, which is an absolutely valid application, however it is clear that the promise is the same for those who have already put their faith in Christ and still find themselves in need of divine help and forgiveness.

Put another way:

If the first sight of the Cross by the eye of faith kindles feelings never to be forgotten, and in one sense never to be repeated—like the first view of an enchanting landscape—the experimental discovery, in the latter stages of the Christian life, of its power to beat down and mortify inveterate corruption, to cleanse and heal from long-continued backslidings and frightful inconsistencies, and so to triumph over all that threatens to destroy those for whom Christ died, as to bring them safe over the tempestuous seas of this life into the haven of eternal rest—is attended with yet more heart—affecting wonder draws forth deeper thankfulness, and issues in more exalted adoration of him whose work Salvation is from first to last.<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Romans 7:25.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> Romans 8:1, 2.

<sup>450</sup> Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, 239.

Suffice it to say, the journey of reliance is one that involves a lot of falling and getting back up. But the key is in the getting back up and remembering that as unreliable as we can be, Jesus never is.

I admit to being only a student of the faith, being ever mindful of James' warning to "let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment."<sup>451</sup> At the same time, Christ's parable of the talents warns against burying one's gifts for fear of failure rather than using them to serve him and benefit others.<sup>452</sup> For this reason, I have chosen to give my layman's take on the only subject I believe I have anything to add to the conversation: realizing and embracing our inescapable need for a savior.

While I use quite a few sources by various scholars and authors in this book, I have tried to use them to clarify my own convictions rather than propose ideas of which I am not convinced. This is not a work of propaganda, but an honest expression of what I believe to be real. I think it is this difference that makes engaging works like C.S. Lewis' writings, Abraham Lincoln's speeches, or Bob Dylan's lyrics so superior to others that read more like advertisements than an honest and thoughtful exploration of the subject matter. I do not know if I accomplished this, but that was the intent.

The more I learn, the more I realize I do not know. The same conviction that brought me into the faith, however, still carries me through this learning process and, I have no doubt, will continue to do so unto the end. That conviction, supported by experience and evidence, is that the key to a living a life of true satisfaction and meaning is

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<sup>451</sup> James 3:1 [New King James Version].

<sup>452</sup> Matthew 25.

deliberate and constant reliance upon Christ and his guidance. The rest is simply the process of allowing him to refine that faith into something unshakeable and beautiful.

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