What Makes Us Strong?

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“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood” (Hebrews 12:4).

No one likes to be told that their hard time, whatever it might be, is not as bad as it seems to be. I cannot but think that my toothache is worse than someone else’s broken leg. Our personal struggles weigh heavily on us, and it is not without difficulty that we empathize with others who are making heavy weather of it. That is why Jesus’ precept: “treat others as you would like to be treated by them,” is so searching. We are thoroughly vigilant over our own welfare. So when the Pastor to the Hebrews reminds his battle-wearied flock that their journey is not as exacting as was Christ’s, it may have been a little hard to swallow.

The New Testament says that Jesus endured a trial of a magnitude that made it utterly unique. He resisted “unto blood.” This means more than the fact that He expired in His struggle. Many of the Hebrews had been killed on account of their faith in Christ (see Hebrews chapter 11). Jesus’ gruelling ordeal was directly linked to His “striving against sin.” This involved for Him, a presentation of His life to God in which He came up against the full strength of sin’s malignant opposition to God. The building standing tallest in the gale is the one which most truly tests its power. Only one who could be called “holy, harmless, undefiled; separate from sinners (Hebrews 7:26), could exhaustively measure evil’s horror and shame. There is a dimension to the sufferings of Jesus that cannot be explained in human categories alone. They were too vast; too awesome. That which distinguishes Jesus’ toils from our own, is a distinction on which the gospel stands.

The Hebrew Pastor enjoined his people to “fix their eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of their faith” (Hebrews 11:2). As such, Jesus is the Christian’s stalwart example of strength in the face of opposition. But, if that was all He was, there would be no Gospel. Jesus is the author of their faith—the source. This is true because His travail culminated in His elevation to God. “He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence” (Hebrews 9:24). His place in God’s presence has meaning for us. It is the pledge, and guarantees that all who trust in Him will join Him there.

Christ has gone to God before us. His victory over sin is so large that it reaches to us; taking us into it. Those who keep their eyes on Jesus will never have a valid reason to give up the fight against evil. Yes, they may face tough times, but Christ has suffered; heaven is won.

Christ has suffered; heaven is won. The Baptism and Temptation of Christ. French Psalter of Ingeburg 1210.
Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for your hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered for us outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore (Hebrews 13:7-13).

**Lighting Bolts and Ladders**

Long before the scientific age, people thought that lighting bolts were instruments of the devil. To thwart the danger during thunderstorms, they would ring the church bells. Despite this precaution, some church bell towers were struck by lightning. After Ben Franklin had demonstrated that lightning was not the devil but electricity, church folk were skeptical; refusing to fit lightning rods to their bell towers; choosing rather to go on ringing the bells.

There are superstitions ancient and modern. Some folk will avoid walking under a ladder at all costs. They believe doing so may invite bad things to happen. This comes from the old notion that a ladder leaning on a wall helped form a triangle with the ground; the wall describing two sides thereof. To walk through a triangle was a violation of the Holy Trinity. A similar irrational fear encouraged people to place their hand over their mouth when they yawned—in case the devil hopped in.

Those who peruse astrological columns, believing themselves to be subjects of a destiny determined by stellar movements, might be seen as further examples of people who permit themselves to be influenced by folklores and urban myths which really have no bearing at all upon their success or failure, their well-being now, tomorrow or in the hereafter.

**Religion and Superstition**

The Pastor to the Hebrews talks about “strange ideas.” The New English translation of verse 9 calls them “outlandish teachings.” He was addressing Christians whose whole existence had been shaped by an attachment to the Jewish temple, and to its altar in particular. When animals were sacrificed on that altar, not all of the flesh was burned. Some was eaten by the priest and some by the one who brought the offering. Eating such food that had had contact with the altar was seen as a sacred privilege. It signified participation in a relationship with God. Not to be able to eat it—to be cut off from the altar—meant something like the refusal of the sacrament to some contemporary Christians.

The Hebrew Christians could not easily let go of their belief that spiritual power was to be had through a connection to the temple altar and its sacrifices, including the accompanying stipulations about foods which could be eaten there from.

To these people, the Pastor has this to say: “It is good to be strengthened by grace and not by ceremonial foods, which have no value to those who eat them.” He is asking them to consider that the altar and sacrifices, its priests, its hallowed routines and material objects—are all religiously indifferent. They do not impart a relationship with God. They are not the means of spiritual power. They do not get to the heart of things. They do not reach into the deep soil roots of personality where faith, hope, and love take root and grow. If these do not work, what does fortify the heart? “It is good for your hearts to

**And so Jesus also suffered for us outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.**

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be strengthened by grace” (verse 9). The word grace occurs just a few times in Hebrews; enough for us to know what the writer means by it.

**What Grace Means in the Letter to the Hebrews**

According to 2:9, Jesus was “crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that he by the grace of God might taste death for everyone.” God chose to ‘speak’ (1:2) to the world ‘by his Son’ (1:2). He designated him a ‘priest forever in the order of Melchizedek’ (5:6). As God’s priestly Son, he offered not an animal sacrifice, but himself, ‘entering the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood’ (9:12). By this self-sacrifice the Son ‘learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (5:8).

After ‘providing purification for sins’ (1:3), God installed his Son on his own throne; he ‘sat down at the right hand of God’ (10:12). He ‘passed through the heavens’ (4:14). He was given unimpeded access to God; honored by God in his very presence.

What does all this mean? It means that what the temple rituals pointed to; what was hinted at by priest and sacrifice; what altar, foods, and all manner of temple ceremonies tried to picture—was made real and complete by Jesus. As high priest of the human race, Jesus concluded the religious quest. In so doing, he became a one-stop religious center for all people, for all time. All the aspirations of faith, hope, worship and moral sensibility are satisfied in Jesus.

When all is said and done, what men and women hope to gain from religion is a meeting with God that is conclusive. Devotees in their spiritual exercises in every age have always sought an encounter with the divine, assuring them that they were not cast off; that they were accepted; that the threat signalled by their troubled conscience was not without a solution; that God did not harbor a secret grudge against them, which might cause him to play some punitive trick on them; that their worst fears were without basis, and that their future would be safe, certain and joyous.

All of these things and more are said to have been effected by Jesus Christ. And it has all come about by grace. Jesus tasted death for everyone by the grace of God. His position of glory and favor in God’s presence means that the throne of God is a throne of grace (4:16), which all may now approach with confidence.

**A Lesson by Contrasts**

Scattered throughout Hebrews are sentences and phrases that articulate the profound limitations of temple, and altar, with regulations regarding washings and eating. In short, they state what none of these could achieve. For example:

*The law made nothing perfect* (7:19).

*The law appoints as high priests, men who are weak* (7:28).

*The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper* (9:9).

*The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never; by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship* (10:1-4).

When these negative appraisals are compared with other statements in the same letter, it can be seen that what they deny for Judaism, they implicitly affirm for Christ. For example: *Unlike the other priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day.... He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself* (7:27).

*Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him* (7:25).

*He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption* (9:12).

*...We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus once for all* (10:10).

Taken together, all of these statements by the Pastor to the Hebrews—and many more—indicate what he is thinking of when he encourages his people to be “strengthened by grace” and not by following “strange teachings.” Grace is God’s Son in whom our longing for God has been answered effectively and totally. Grace is not the religious activity of humanity; it is the redemptive action of God. Grace is not the human approach to God; it is the divine approach to humanity. Grace is not the human search for God through ritual, but God’s ‘finding’ of man through Christ.

**Grace Must Get Our Attention**

Grace has fortifying powers that outstrip the activities of mankind, religious or otherwise, because it is about the comprehensive achievement of God through his Son. Compared to what God has done, rites, ceremonies and superstitions are null and void. Instead of fixing the worshiper’s attentions on the execution of reverent practices, grace diverts the soul’s attention to that which alone is pleasing to God—his Son. In this way grace strengthens the ‘heart’ because it gives the seeker what his own piety practice could never give—a sound basis for trust, hope and love.

It has been well said that humans are ‘incurably religious.’ We cannot suppress our need for something greater than ourselves to trust in; high ideals to admire. But many balk at the path of spiritual commitment because they know that such a pursuit may lead to guilt and despair. Instinct suggests that if they join the pilgrims, they may learn much about what they ought to do, and more about what they ought not to do. The enlightened conscience is a heavy load to bear when you know you can never measure up. This is why grace is necessary.
Grace alone guarantees the triumph of the spiritual because grace is about what God gives to us, not what we give to him. Grace makes the religious pilgrimage worthwhile. Grace means the believer’s arrival in the Promised Land is certain.

No Grace—No Hope!

A man wrote to me describing his spiritual odyssey. “For me,” he said, “religion was like New Year’s resolutions. I placed myself under many regimes, which I applied to myself in the most stringent ways. If there was a Christian duty that I did not enjoy, I took that for a sign to do it all the more. I had seasons of spiritual ecstasy, but they were always followed by deeps of black despair. Everything changed though when I learned the gospel; when I learned about grace.”

Leo Tolstoy tried to manage his spiritual affairs similarly. As a young army officer he collected a string of mistresses, and contracted venereal diseases several times as a result. He recorded these misadventures in his diary. Later, when he was about to marry the beautiful Sonya, he was remorseful and undertook a course of honesty and reform. Four days before their wedding Tolstoy insisted that Sonya read his diary. She never got over it.

Into the marriage, he embarked on further spiritual moral improvements which made life a living hell for Sonya. Once he gave away all their furniture to the poor. Several times he publicly avowed chastity and asked Sonya for separate bedrooms. Her sixteen pregnancies declared his utter failure.

How can anyone practice religion with a ‘straight face?’ How can a man or women pursue the higher values while they continue to fall short of them? The answer is: because there is grace. Grace makes a person strong by providing them with a reason not to distance themself from God who is their salvation and the true source of moral inspiration.

In contrast to the encouraging and revitalizing power of grace, ‘strange ideas’ and ‘outlandish teachings’ about reliance ceremonies (such as the eating or not eating of certain foods) has no value for the eater or the abstainer (see 1 Corinthians 8:8; Colossians 2:21-23).

The sovereign powers directing human life are spiritual. A religious outlook that deals mainly in the observance of taboos is too superficial. It keeps the individual away from the ‘deep things of God’; from the ‘springs of living water’—the infinite kindness and goodness of God. Rites and forms can play a part in aiding spirituality, but since the spiritual requires more attention and effort than the material, men and women display a lazy preference for the material and are apt to substitute it for the spiritual altogether.

A Different Altar for Worship

This was the problem for the Hebrews. Their pastor wants them to see that they have chosen the lesser over the greater. In their attachment to the Temple altar and its regulations they have made the shadow greater than the substance. They have cut themselves off from the real source of blessing—the grace of God. To drive home his warning he says:

*We (Christians) have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat (13:10).*

In Judaism, the high priest was not permitted to eat from the sacrifices offered on the altar on the Day of Atonement. The Pastor’s point is that Jesus Christ—the Christian’s high priest—is the antitype of those sacrifices that were off-limits for the Hebrew priesthood. ‘Those priests have no right to eat from our altar.’ He means to say that the right to partake in God’s great sacrifice—the offering of his Son—is in no way conditioned by regulations concerning the Jewish temple and its altar. He is underlining the fundamental difference between symbol and substance; between sign and reality. Grace lives in this distinction. Grace is what God does. All else is shadow and token; lacking the power to make us strong to do God’s will.

William Cowper penned some of the Church’s best loved hymns. By any measure his life was disastrous. He was plagued by the thought that he might have committed the unpardonable sin. Persecuted by false rumors that he was having an illicit affair, he suffered a nervous breakdown and tried several times to take his own life. He was put in a straight-jacket and committed to an asylum for the insane. What sustained such a broken and afflicted soul? The grace of God! It was that wrote:

> “There is a fountain filled with blood,  
> Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins.  
> And sinners plunged beneath that flood,  
> Lose all their guilty stains.”

The true pulse-beat of a sustaining religious outlook is found in the kind, forgiving, merciful love of God. This love is so great that it can accomplish that which is beyond our power to achieve. It can overwhelm guilt, doubt, distress and disappointment, and establish us safely in everlasting fellowship with him who is our maker. It is good for your hearts to be strengthened by grace!

William Cowper (pronounced Cooper) (November 26, 1731 – April 25, 1800) was an English poet and hymnodist. One of the most popular poets of his time, Cowper changed the direction of 18th century nature poetry by writing of everyday life and scenes of the English countryside.

He suffered from periods of severe depression, and although he found refuge in a fervent evangelical Christianity, the source of his much-loved hymns, he often experienced doubt and fears that he was doomed to eternal damnation. However, his religious motivations and association with John Newton (who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace”) led to much of the poetry for which he is best remembered in the popular mind.

*Source: Good News Unlimited*
There are precipices, minefields and pit-falls in every Christian Pilgrim’s Progress. One of the most common mistakes I find myself prone to make repeatedly is of looking to myself for that which is only to be found in Christ—strength, wisdom, courage and righteousness. We are unceasingly reluctant to believe the axiomatic truth of Christian experience: that with Christ “we can do nothing.”

A Christian who has perhaps influenced more people toward Christianity than any other in the last century and a half was Hudson Taylor. His is the most prominent name in the annals of Christian missions in China. A large proportion of the fifty million or so in China professing Christ are the fruitage of the China Inland Mission founded by Taylor.

But despite dedication, enthusiasm, energy, probity and many other virtues, Hudson Taylor was dissatisfied with his Christian experience for many years. At a time when he had been forced to return to England as a convalescent, his spiritual trials reached a crisis.

John 15, with its tenfold emphasis on “abide”, certainly teaches that only as the believer recognizes her oneness with Christ, and dependence upon him, can her joy be full and fruitfulness guaranteed.

But, the same truth is implicit in the Scriptural teaching regarding man’s fallen nature. Paul could say that “I know that in me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing” (Romans 7:18). By ‘flesh’ Paul means all that we are apart from Christ and the influence of his Spirit. The fact that the holy fruit of a true Christian life is called the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ repeats the lesson. Love, joy, and peace are not the fruit of our wills, hearts, or minds. They come from the Spirit as we look to Christ. Hebrews 11 with its repeated ‘by faith’ verse after verse, is also sounding forth the same truth. ‘By faith’ means looking to Christ, trusting him, abiding in him, depending on him. In this way, men in their weakness were made strong and made able to endure as seeing him who is invisible. This is how mighty deeds were wrought and great victories gained.

Our treacherous old nature clings to us like a garment so that we are continually tempted to look to ourselves for that which can only be found in Christ. Many times in a crisis I have found myself bankrupt of what was urgently needed. I do not have the patience, the longsuffering, the temperance, self-control, meekness, or goodness that life demands. What I do have is the potential for all their opposites.

Consider also the clear teaching of Romans 6, which exhorts us to reckon our old nature dead and to yield ourselves to Christ who is our life. Notice Romans 6:11-14 in the Living Bible. Such expressions as “Christ our life,” “Christ our righteousness,” and “Christ who is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption” assume new significance when read in this light.

This is likewise true of the repeated admonition in the New Testament to “look unto Jesus.” We are advised to “consider Him,” to behold “as in a mirror the glory of the Lord,” that we might be transformed into the same likeness.

After the glory of the ‘transfiguration’ had passed, the disciples “saw no man but Jesus only.” If only we could be like them. When Peter declared, “I know not the man,” he uttered words that would have been best said about himself, not Jesus. We must refuse to depend on our own wisdom or strength or righteousness because we only know it poorly. We are quite unsuspecting regarding its liability to deceive us. No one person knows the depth of wickedness of his own heart. One of heaven’s indispensable gifts to mature believers is the awareness of their spiritual bankruptcy. It is this that in every crisis sends us as beggars—optimistic beggars—to the “unsearchable riches of Christ.” Then we learn by experience the meaning of the words: “as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

James Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) was an English missionary to China. He founded the China Inland Mission, which at his death, included 205 mission stations with over 800 missionaries and 125,000 Chinese Christians.

None other of the great religions offer this atoning sacrifice of an incarnate God. All the rest appear to think that the condition of sincere repentance and amendment is enough…. It might be if sin were merely a kind of error which could be retrieved by second thoughts, or a passing infection which our essentially healthy system could throw off.

It is thus that most of the great religions regard it; they dare not do otherwise or they would find the problem insoluble. But Christianity takes a graver view… For our deliverance we need the injection into our lives of a new power, a power not native to us, but capable of remaking us; a power which Christ alone could and did supply; and he supplied it by his passion and death.

-H.A. Hodges. DEATH AND LIFE HAVE CONTENDED, p. 66.
STRENGTH FROM BEING FULLY KNOWN AND FULLY LOVED

“She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’” (John 20:16).

I am always wondering if people who know every part of me, including my deepest, most hidden thoughts and feelings, really do love me. I am often tempted to think that I am loved only as I remain partially unknown. I fear that the love I receive is conditional and then say to myself, “If they really knew me, they would not love me.” But when Jesus calls Mary by name he speaks to her entire being. She realizes that the one who knows her most deeply is not moving away from her, but is coming to her, offering her his unconditional love.

Her response is “Rabboni,” “Master.” I hear her response as her desire to have Jesus truly be her master, the master of her whole being: her thoughts and feelings, her passion and hope, even her most hidden emotions. I hear her say, “You who know me so fully, come and be my master. I do not want to keep you away from any part of myself. I want you to touch the deepest places of my heart so that I won’t belong to anyone but you.”

I can see what a healing moment this encounter must have been. Mary feels at once fully known and fully loved. The division between what she feels safe to show and what she does not dare to reveal no longer exists. She is fully seen and she knows that the eyes that see her are the eyes of forgiveness, mercy, love, and unconditional acceptance.

What a joy to be fully known and fully loved at the same time! It is the joy of belonging through Jesus to God, and being there, fully safe and fully free.

Henri J. M. Nouwen. THE ROAD TO DAYBREAK, p. 165.

VITALITY THROUGH KNOWING GOD

The Christian life is meant to have a certain quality or temperment inherent within it. The Christian disciple should bear certain marks that witness to the fact that he is indeed a man of God. J. B. Philips remarks, in his preface to the Acts of the Apostles, which one fact stood out in his mind in the course of his translation: there is vitality about New Testament Christian living, and an amazing contrast between it and that of much modern Christian discipleship. The church in the New Testament throbs with vitality in spite of many faults and failures, in spite of human imperfections and sins. Here is enthusiasm, initiative, drive, and creativity. It is indeed a new phenomenon in human history. G. K. Chesterton notes the same fact. He describes the New Testament Christian as “carrying about a key to life”, and the Christian Church as “a winged thunderbolt of everlasting enthusiasm, as new as it is old.”

The whole climate of New Testament Christianity religion is that of certainty—of certainty about God and a personal experience of Him. Paul summarizes this beautifully in that grand passage in Philippians: “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord… that I may gain Christ, and be found in him… that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:8-10).

Bryan Green. SAINTS ALIVE, pp. 15, 16.

The Christian life is meant to have a certain quality or temper inherent within it.
WHICH GOD?
By Edmund Rogol

Introduction:
What follows began as a note of appreciation to a much loved daughter for an act of kindness. Then the note was lengthened to letter-size to commend her for her general buoyant optimism on one hand, but also to question an unqualified optimism on world views on the other.

As the letter expanded into broader areas it seemed good to me to include also her two siblings who are also kind, bright, and much loved thinking individuals. Then, wanting to include all members of their families, the letter became a little book.

Finally, because our brotherhood should embrace all of humankind, to be loved and cherished alike, it was my wish to include even those outside my family circle. Therefore, to you who might chance to read this, the message of my book goes out to you with a desire that you also may gain a new and brighter view of life’s purpose through a fresh realization that God’s goodness and love is indeed reaching out to you regardless of who you are.

Please give God a chance to better reveal himself to you as he is, so that love may be, in some measure, reciprocal. He longs to give you ground for sure optimism, real hope, and true pleasure in endless life with enduring love. It should not be hard to love a God like that!

-Author.

Dear Vivy,
This is a much belated letter of appreciation. It started out months ago after a pleasant visit with you at your home after picking up your Aunt Carol at the airport. Your home was such a pleasant stop; especially appreciated considering you had such a full day at work.

I meant to tell you about an old recording of you and Becky which I discovered as I was sorting through some old possessions to throw away. Remind me of this some time so we can hear it together.

Please let me add a bit more to that little banter we had at the front of your house as we were leaving. Your enthusiasm for life is wonderful, as is your optimism. Sometimes, however, when life is going exceptionally well and all things seem to favor us, optimism can go beyond reality. Please let me explain.

Regardless of how well things right around us may seem at the moment, we do live in a deeply troubled world; a world not meant to be. This world was made to be one peaceful happy brotherhood; without estrangement, suspicion, hostility, danger or fear anywhere. Without it being so, unguarded optimism and untrammelled happiness is impossible.

Because the real world around us is as is it, I cannot be content with my personal comfort in my own little sphere as long as there are fellow brothers suffering discomfort in their sphere. In a spirit of brotherhood I must share my brother’s sorrows and let his discomfort be also my discomfort. Sorrow and fear are never far from any of us, and the wall of comfort, optimism and happiness that may surround me now, is vulnerably thin.

I admire those like you who can be more optimistic than I in this deeply troubled world. It is good to be optimistic; to be hopeful and always cheerful—but not due to any great prospects this world offers. They are too vaporous in the face of reality.

Ordinary observation tells us that there is something hopelessly wrong with this world. Its promising outlooks are too unreliable to offer trustworthy optimism. As long as we have to look over our shoulder in unfriendly places, there is something wrong. As long as we have to use locks because there are some that we cannot trust, there is something wrong.

If there were only one war, only one cyclone or hurricane, one flood, one famine, one disease only once in a lifetime, that would be terrible, and cause for disquiet. If there were need for just one hospital and one prison, that would still be terrible. But such things are multiplied many times over. Because we do see much exquisite order and perfection around us, the slightest trace of imperfection or disorder is a reminder that something is terribly wrong. What is it?

“This world has forgotten its God,” said Solzhenitsyn. Since God is the central reference point for this universe, a slight...
focus shift from that center disrupts everything. There is a designated orbit for everything in space, and there is a designated orbit for your heart. Where God the center is lost or ignored, that part of his creation goes astray.

Many concede that there may be some kind of god or gods out there, but do not carefully ascertain whether it is a real God, the living God, the proven God, the God who visited us here on earth in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. They do not ask whether that God is he who was foretold for many centuries before he came; who then came precisely on time, in the right place and manner as foretold, to fulfill all the promises he had made. These are the credentials and evidences of the true God. Then, as he lived among us, he verified his divine state with mighty miracles. He also restated for us the right definitions of love, and acted them out far above the accustomed standards of this world.

Moreover, many who concede that there might be a God out there somewhere, do not ask whether he is the God who, according to predetermined plan, was put to death in atonement for the sins of all; who rose from the dead in three days as he said he would, and was then seen by hundreds as proof of his special mission to the world.

The bottom line of the God issue is Jesus Christ. Is the God you look to the God of the Lord Jesus Christ; sent to this world to be mankind’s only link to God? Or is there latitude for other gods according to preference or culture as conceived in someone’s imagination?

To make his indispensable centrality plain to us, Jesus made enormous claims about himself. “Before me no God was formed, nor will there be one after me…. apart from me there is no Savior” (Isaiah 43:10, 11). He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me” (John 14:6). He said, “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son does not have life” (1 John 5:12). He said, “Whoever rejects the Son will not see life for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36). He claimed he was the light of the world, and that without him we walk in darkness. He claimed he was the true bread from heaven who alone sustains all things with life. And he made many other similar claims.

Such enormous claims make no exception for any other god. If Jesus was not who he claimed to be, he was a demented, colossal liar and fraud unworthy of respect and devotion. If his claims are true, then we are demented if we do not seek him with all our hearts and strength; making him our first priority in life. This matter is—as one host introducing a Christian missionary in India said—“If what this man is about to say is not true, it does not matter. However, if what he says is true, nothing else matters!”

It does not matter who we are, what we have accumulated or what we have accomplished; if we do not have Christ, we are destitute and without life. This brief, often miserable mortal existence we have now is only a temporary probationary life to determine what we do with Christ.

Unless we have that one and only God as our one center and one point of authority, this world has no common fatherhood. Without that ‘one common heavenly fatherhood’ there is no earthly brotherhood. The earthly mass of humanity is only a crowd of alienated, discordant and suspecting strangers; often hostile and even violent to each other. Is this what is rending the world apart?

Those who deny God created this world and its inhabitants to manage it under his rule and authority; to love one another as he loved us, do the greatest harm to this world. They deprive themselves and others whom they influence from the highest potentials designed for the world and its occupants. Without God this world is a wandering planet. Without him who is our life, we may burn brightly for a short time, but with no lasting, satisfying purpose or aim. We bloom for a little while like a cut flower which soon withers and dies.

Without hope in God, our only reality is mortality, with oblivion its only destiny. For future-oriented creatures, which we are, such a gloomy destiny provides no meaning to life except a momentary flash. Without Christ through whom alone we are assured of a bright future, the world is like the invincible Titanic, on a cold, dark ocean with proud passengers on board, absorbed only in how to satisfy themselves with pleasures. A life with no meaning or future is a cheapened, empty life; driving many to premature death by suicide, or to the murder of others.

So who is this God called Jesus Christ? And who is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ? Who is this Christ who could say that ‘all power in heaven and earth is given to me;’ who said, ‘all the angels are mine;’ who claimed that he alone could deal with guilt and forgive sin? On what authority did he claim to be judge of all? And how could he say that when he comes, he will gather all the nations together for judgment?

Who else but Christ could foresee the future and then have the future verify exactly what was foreseen? Who was he that could confidently say, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will never pass away?” Who could say with surety that his church would endure forever, and that the gates of hell would never prevail against it—and have it so happen? Who could say of himself that he would die at the hands of sinful men and then be raised to life again after three days? How ludicrous it would be for you or me or anyone else to make such claims. Yet it seemed appropriate coming from the mouth of Jesus Christ. Could mortals invent such a Christ?

To be continued...

Could mortals invent such a Christ? The Twelve Year Old Jesus in the Temple by the Second Master of Aranyakosmarot 1460.
I grew up being taught that the Bible should be taken literally. Dorothy Day is one of the few people I’ve ever met who actually did. She took the gospel at face value and based her life on it.

Dorothy did what Jesus said to do. She was the most thoroughly evangelical Christian of our time, though the movement by that name never claimed her as its own.

It was in the depression year of 1933 that she and Peter Maurin founded The Catholic Worker. They sold the first copies of the newspaper on May Day for a penny each. “Read the Daily Worker,” shouted the Communists selling their paper to the unemployed in Washington Square. “Read the Catholic Worker daily,” answered back a little band of Catholics who said their faith had made them radicals.

For half a century their paper has been the voice of a movement that has always concentrated on the basics of the gospel. Dorothy’s grasp of her times was profound, but it was the simple things that captured her imagination and commitment—like the gospel being good news to the poor, and the children of God living as peacemakers.

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She always spoke of the “works of mercy” as the center of it all: feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, comforting the lonely, sick, and imprisoned. For the cause of Christ she literally spent her life on the side of the suffering and the afflicted, while relentlessly attacking institutions and systems that lead to oppression and war.

In doing so she became an institution herself, and the Catholic Worker movement has served for fifty years as the heart and conscience of the American Catholic church and, for that matter, of American Christianity. Dorothy helped to found more than forty houses of hospitality and a dozen farms which became rare places that the poor could call home.

The poorest of the poor were Dorothy’s constituency. Shunned by everyone else, they knew they could trust this woman. Streams of poor people from her Bowery neighborhood showed up at her funeral, mingling with the famous and powerful, but knowing that Dorothy belonged to them.

The voluntary poverty, service to the poor, and radical pacifism of the Catholic Worker kept the movement small, but it influenced many over the years. For most of the volunteers, life at the Catholic Worker became a kind of school, and intense training ground in compassion that would shape the rest of their lives…

Time spent with Dorothy Day was for me a deep reminder of the simple things. It was a confirmation of the fact that love and compassion are the strongest things, the truest things, the most powerful things, the most revolutionary things.

The testimony of Dorothy Day reminds me that the Christian life begins with love, that there is nothing we can do as Christians, nothing that we must become, that is prior to love. As we come to faith, we begin to love…

In Scripture, love has nothing to do with mere feeling, sentiment or opinion. On the contrary it consists of relationship and action. It is shaped by the quality of God’s love for us. Dorothy seemed to understand that love is merely a reflection, a response to the way we are loved by Christ. To forget that is to fall victim to some idea about love in general, to some human emotion, and thus to derive our definition of love from a false source.

The mark of God’s love in us is the humility that comes from being crushed by the world’s great need of love. The fact that we are overwhelmed by that continual claim upon our lives is a sign that the love of God is present within and among us.


Some interesting facts about Dorothy Day’s life, many commonly known and others less so.

- Born in 1897, she was raised in a nominally Protestant family and became a Roman Catholic in 1928.
- One of her early memories was the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and how her mother offered help to quake victims.
- Her father was a sportswriter who covered racetrack news.
- She rejected organized religion in college because she didn’t see so-called “religious people” helping the poor.
- In the World War I period she was part of a circle of social radicals and literary types like Eugene O’Neill.
- She first went to jail with a group of suffragists in 1917 who were demonstrating at the White House in favor of giving women voting rights.
- The birth of her daughter Tamar in 1927, within a common-law marriage, brought her great joy and happiness, and led to her final embrace of the Catholic faith.

- She was a single parent who supported herself as a free-lance journalist.

- She met Peter Maurin in 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression.

- The first House of Hospitality opened in 1933. Today over 130 Catholic Worker communities exist in thirty-two states and eight foreign countries.

- She maintained throughout her life that Peter Maurin, not she, started the Catholic Worker Movement. She called him a modern St. Francis who was responsible for completing her Catholic education.

- Her written work includes eight books, 350 plus articles for journals and magazines, and over 1,000 articles for *The Catholic Worker* newspaper.

- A heavy smoker for years, she finally gave up the habit “cold turkey” after praying for several years for help in quitting.

- She went to daily Mass and weekly confession, and regularly went on religious retreats.

- She travelled long distances by bus. She carried a Bible, a missal, the Divine Office, and a jar of instant coffee on her hundreds of trips.

- She went to jail four times from 1955 to 1959 for acts of civil disobedience. She with others refused to take shelter during civil defense drills that simulated a nuclear attack on New York City.

- In 1955 she became a professed secular oblate of the Benedictine Abbey of St. Procopius.

- She and a group of women fasted for ten days in 1963 in Rome, at Vatican Council II, wanting the bishops to condemn all war. They did condemn nuclear war.

- She was instrumental in founding Pax Christi USA.

- She was a prolific letter writer, including many years of correspondence with the monk Thomas Merton.

- She was a grandmother nine times, with one grandson going to Vietnam with the U.S. military during the war.

- She was a friend to bishops and cardinals, while being critical of the Church’s wealth and support for war and war preparations.

- She went to India to speak to Mother Teresa’s novices and received a cross from Mother Teresa worn by the Missionaries of Charity.

- Her last jailing was in 1969 at the age of 76 while protesting with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in California.

- She loved the beauty of the natural world and would seek out the quiet of a small beach cottage she owned on the shore of Staten Island.

- Her gravestone has engraved on it a design of loaves and fishes and the words “Deo Gratias” (“thanks be to God”).

*From Union Square To Rome*, an autobiography written in 1938.
Introduction:
As the letter to the Hebrews draws to a close, its author invites his readers to remember those Christian leaders of theirs whose example of faith is not so far removed from them in time as to have lost poignancy. He calls on them to consider the ‘outcome of their lives’ (Hebrews 13:7). This is very likely a reference to their courageous following of Christ—for some, even to martyrdom. It is this faith that stayed strong under the fiercest opposition that the Hebrew believers are being asked to imitate.

Read: Hebrews 13:7, 8.

- How does Jesus, and his unchanging nature, fit the argument that began in verse 7?

- Compare Hebrews 1:11, 12; 7:25; Matthew 28:19, 20.

Note: The leaders have gone, but Jesus is always the Christian’s contemporary. He who yesterday was the source of faith and hope for the leaders of the Hebrew church will be the all-sufficient Lord and helper of the church of today.

Read: Hebrews 13:9, 10.

Note: The writer clearly means to say that a person experiences strengthening by the reception of grace, and not by the reception of foods. The foods in this reference bear some connection to an altar. It is reasonable to think that he means the altar most familiar to Jews—the altar of the Jewish temple. Laws that involved distinctions in foods—foods that could be eaten or foods that were not to be eaten—arose from the altar itself and the rituals attendant upon it. Some Hebrew Christians mistakenly imagined that spiritual strength could be sustained by obedience to these rules involving food.


- How would you explain the distinction Jesus makes between heart and stomach?

- Does ‘heart’ in Mark 7 equate with ‘conscience’ in Hebrews 9:14?

Compare Hebrews 9:9.

Read: Hebrews 13:11-13

- What did “outside the camp” mean to a devout Hebrew? Leviticus 16:26-28.

- Note how shocking it must have seemed that Jesus suffered ‘outside the gate.’

Note: The location of the cross was one of defilement. But the sacrifice of God’s Son outside the camp made holy what had previously been unholy. Hebrews 7:26; Acts 2:27.

By suffering outside the boundaries and the reach of Judaism’s traditions and laws, Jesus positions Himself amid the uncleanness and defilement of the world—where He is accessible to us. By ‘going to Him’ outside the confines of all that is lauded and revered by men, the Christian identifies with Christ alone. He ‘bears His shame’ and thereby genuinely enters upon the ‘fellowship of His sufferings’ (Philippians 3:10). In doing so, he makes Christ his altar; Christ his sacrifice; Christ his temple, priest and sanctuary. He is joined to the only true source of power. He has passed from death unto life.
Question:
How far should we go in using Paul the apostle as a model for Christian behavior? S.M.

Answer:
Although Paul had many admirable qualities that can serve to instruct and inspire us, Jesus, not Paul, is the perfect Christian role model. In the New Testament Christian community, apostles were the highest ranking officials. Apostle means “messenger” with particular authorization from his sender. In the church, the apostles were at first understood as the original twelve who were with Jesus and who became witnesses of his resurrection from the dead. (Paul came to be acknowledged as one of these because he also had seen the risen Lord. See 1 Corinthians 9:1.) With the passing of time, however, other persons took up the responsibilities of apostleship (see Acts 13:2; 2 Corinthians 1:19).

An equivalent office in the church of today might be filled by an individual with recognized gifts of teaching, preaching and leadership; someone with an authoritative unction from God to guard and defend the gospel. Such persons are, like Paul, men with authority—under Christ. The community must remember that they are gifted—not to attract people to themselves—but to point them to the infallible standard of Christ.

Question:
The New Testament teaches that we enter the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus. How were people saved before the time of Jesus? J.K.

Answer:
They were saved by the grace of God. The God of the Old Testament is the ‘God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ What God is to us in and through Jesus, he was to Old Testament saints, even though they had not yet seen the Christ as we have. They “saw him from a distance” (Hebrews 11:13).

According to Hebrews 4:2, the Hebrew people who followed Moses in the Exodus movement had the gospel preached to them. The gracious love of God that became so precious to Christians was taught the saints of old through types and symbols. Jesus told his disciples that he would be lifted up from the earth in a way similar to the snake that Moses raised on a pole in the desert (John 3:14; John 12:32). The people who were perishing from snake-bite were told to look toward the elevated snake and live. Those who obeyed this advice were healed. This act primitive act of faith foreshadowed the crucifixion of Christ and the healing that it would provide.

According to 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, Christ himself accompanied the children of Israel on their desert pilgrimage. Jesus was active in the world long before his incarnation and death. Note this from 1 Peter 1:10, 11:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

The Scripture clearly asserts that Christ spoke to people in ancient times by his Spirit through the prophets. The prophets delivered more truth than they understood, so they searched diligently. The point is that God has always been God; always been himself, and always dealt with humanity through his Son. People could respond to him as best they could given the information they had. The revealing of God through the death and resurrection of Christ has brought increased privilege — and responsibility—to humankind. But it is the same God to whom we are responsible, and the same Christ. “Jesus, the same yesterday, today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Famous Jesus Movies (3)

Jesus
(Made for T.V. 1999)

While there are some small inaccuracies, this is at last an attempt to portray a Jesus who was both human, but also the Son of God. The scene in the Garden of Gethsemane is wonderful; Satan shows Jesus all the wars and bloodshed that will follow, much in the name of “Jesus”, but Jesus declares that His Father is not a dictator, but a God who gives people a choice to love Him. This is the essence of the gospel; God wooed the human race by sending His son, who died, whether we were willing to acknowledge His sacrifice or not, and the fact that one person turns to Him and recognizes what He has done, thus falling in love with Him, was enough to make it all worthwhile. Caution: This movie hints at the possibility that Jesus and Mary Magdalene may have had a romantic relationship, although it never addresses it directly.

Goof: When the officials are talking about taking the adulteress before Jesus to trap him, her eye makeup is all smeared. Yet, when they are talking to Jesus, it’s been cleaned up.

Available at Amazon.com

Jeremy Sisto as Jesus. This movie probably has the best portrayal of the 40 day wilderness temptation of Jesus (right).
AN ESTABLISHED HEART

By Alexander Maclaren

“It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace” (Hebrews 13:9).

To begin with, the root meaning of the word grace, which runs through the New Testament, is simply favor, kindness, or to put all into a better form, the active love of God. If we look at the various uses of the expression, we find that it is contrasted with a number of other things. Sometimes it is set in opposition to sin—sin reigns in death, grace reigns through righteousness unto life. Sometimes it is contrasted with ‘debt’ and sometimes put in opposition to ‘works’, as when Paul says, “If it be of works, then it is no more grace” (Romans 11:6). Sometimes it is opposed to law as in “You are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14).

If we keep these various uses and contrasts in view we come to this thought: that the active love of God is conditioned, not by any merit on our part. It bubbles up from the depths of His heart. Because of what He is, it transcends all the rigid retributions of law, is not turned away by any sin, but continues to flood the world simply because it wells up from the changeless fountain of love in God’s heart…

We men are like the island in the Eastern tropics; fertile and luxuriant, but subject to be swept away by typhoons, to be shaken by earthquakes, to be devastated by volcanoes. Around us gather external foes assailing our steadfastness. Within us lie even more formidable enemies to an established, settled peace. We are like men carrying gunpowder through a conflagration; bearing a whole magazine of combustibles within us, upon which at any moment a spark may alight. My text tells us by drawing into themselves the love of God; and in consciousness of that love, there will be found the secret of tranquillity for the most storm-ridden life.

One aspect of the tranquillity and establishment that comes from the giving love of God is in how it delivers men from ‘strange doctrines.’ I do not care much what a man believes or how he may occupy himself with the philosophical aspects of Christianity. The question is: how much of it has filtered from his brain into his heart and become part of himself…?

That sturdy blind man in the gospels had gotten hold of the true principle when he said: “You may talk as long as you like about whether this man is a sinner or not. One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see!”(John 9).

If I know that Jesus died for me, and that my soul is saved because he did, it does not matter very much to me who wrote the Pentateuch, or whether the book of Jonah is a parable of history. I can let all such questions be settled by the experts without putting myself in a fluster, and can say, “I am not going to be carried away. My heart is established in grace.” Alexander Maclaren.

G.N.U. Better Living

Watermelon

Watermelon has always been a good source of vitamins A and C, and provides potassium and fiber. Now consumers have even more reasons to enjoy the sweet fruit. Scientists indicate that watermelon contains high levels of lycopene, which is an antioxidant that may help the body fight cancer and prevent disease. Found only in select fruits and vegetables, lycopene is very effective at trapping cancer-promoting agents called free-oxygen radicals.

A study conducted by Harvard University found that men who ate lycopene-rich diets of tomatoes and tomato products had a much lower risk of developing certain cancers, especially prostate cancer. Lycopene is found only in red watermelon varieties. In fact, it gives watermelon its red color, thus, the redder the watermelon, the more lycopene it contains. In addition to lycopene, watermelon offers a host of other health benefits. It is fat-free, yet delivers 100 percent on the critical energy component found in functional foods.

For more information log onto www.wikipedia.org

Watermelon Salad with Feta and Basil

Ingredients

Serves 4

• 3 1/2 pounds seedless watermelon, (rind removed), cut into 1-inch cubes (6 cups)
• 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
• 1/2 cup fresh basil leaves, cut into thin strips (see note, below)
• Coarse salt and ground pepper
• 4 ounces feta cheese, broken into large pieces (about 1 cup)

Directions

In a large bowl, combine watermelon, lime juice, and half the basil; season with salt and pepper. Toss to combine. Divide among four plates; scatter cheese and remaining basil on top.

Taken from www.marthastewart.com.
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**Did You Know?**

You probably have a Tyndale Bible in your home. 90% of the King James Version of the Bible and 75% of the Revised Standard Version are from the translation of the Bible into English made by William Tyndale. Although seen today as probably one of the greatest contributors to the development of the Bible as we know it, he was burned at the stake on October 6th, 1536 for this very work of translating the Bible, and for wanting every common man to have one.

For more log onto chi.gospelcom.net and type in Tyndale.

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Share the gospel with others! Tell your friends about GNU radio programs.
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And then it happens. Out of the deep of the night a stranger leaps. He hurls himself at Jacob and they fall to the ground, their bodies lashing through the darkness. It is terrible enough not to see the attacker’s face, and his strength is more terrible still, the strength of more than a man. All the night through they struggle in silence until just before morning when it looks as though a miracle might happen. Jacob is winning. The stranger cries out to be set free before the sun rises. Then, suddenly, all is reversed.

He merely touches the hollow of Jacob’s thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had, that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were enough to get this. Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is not a grip of violence, but of need. Like the grip of a drowning man.

The darkness has faded just enough so that for the first time he can dimly see his opponent’s face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death—the face of love. It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at last he cries out, “I will not let you go unless you bless me!” Not a blessing that he can have now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing he can have only as a gift.

Frederick Buechner. THE MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT, pp. 17, 18.

It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy...