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Growing Downward to Grow Up

The Life of Repentance

by J.I. Packer

The life of holiness is one of downward growth all the time. When Peter writes, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18), and when Paul speaks of growing into Christ (Ephesians 4:15) and rejoices that the Thessalonians' faith is growing (2 Thessalonians 1:3), what they have in view is a progress into personal smallness that allows the greatness of Christ's grace to appear. The sign of this sort of progress is that they increasingly feel and say that in themselves they are nothing and God in Christ has become everything for their ongoing life. It is into this framework, this continual shrinkage of carnal self, as we may call it, that the thesis of the present chapter fits.



A life of habitual repentance

What I intend to argue is that Christians are called to a life of habitual repentance, as a discipline integral to healthy holy living. The first of Luther's ninety-five theses, nailed to the Wittenberg church door in 1517, declared: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matthew 4:17], he willed that the whole life of believers should be one of repentance." Philip Henry, a Puritan who died in 1696, met the suggestion that he made too much of repentance by affirming that he hoped to carry his own repentance up to the gate of heaven itself. These two quotations indicate the wavelength we are now tuning into.

In my part of British Columbia, where rainfall is heavy, roads on which the drains fail soon, get flooded, and become unserviceable. Repentance, as we shall see, is the drainage routine on the highway of holiness on which God calls us all to travel. It is the way we get beyond what has proved to be dirt, rubbish, and stagnant floodwater in our lives. This routine is a vital need, for where real repentance fails, real spiritual advance ceases, and real spiritual growth stops short.

In speaking of habitual repentance, I do not mean to imply that repentance can ever become automatic and mechanical, as our table manners and our driving habits are. It cannot. Every act of repentance is a separate act and a distinct moral effort, perhaps a major and costly one. Repenting is never a pleasure. Always, in more senses than one, it is a pain, and will continue so as long as life lasts. No, when I speak of habitual repentance, I have in mind the forming and retaining of a conscious habit of repenting as often as we need to—though that, of course, means (let us face it) every day of our lives. It is the wisdom of churches that use liturgies to provide prayers of penitence for use at all services. Such prayers are always words in season. In our private devotions, daily penitential prayer will

always be needed too.

Little is said these days about the discipline of regular repentance. The writers on the spiritual disciplines have noticeably not dealt with it, and the standard Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, now published in the United States as the Westminster Dictionary, has no entry on the subject. Yet it is a basic lesson that has to be learned in Christ's school of holiness. The theme is a vital one for spiritual health, as has already been said. So let us try to understand it well.

What is repentance?

What does it mean to repent? The term is a personal and relational one. It signifies going back on what one was doing before, and renouncing the misbehavior by which one's life or one's relationship was being harmed. In the Bible, repentance is a theological term, pointing to an abandonment of those courses of action in which one defied God by embracing what he dislikes and forbids. The Hebrew word for repenting signifies turning, or returning. The corresponding Greek word carries the sense of changing one's mind so that one changes one's ways too. Repentance means altering one's habits of thought, one's attitudes, outlook, policy, direction, and behavior, just as fully as is needed to get one's life out of the wrong shape and into the right one. Repentance is in truth a spiritual revolution. This, now, and nothing less than this, is the human reality that we are to explore.

Repenting in the full sense of the word—actually changing in the way described—is only possible for Christians, believers who have been set free from sin's dominion and made alive to God. Repenting in this sense is a fruit of faith, and as such a gift of God (cf. Acts 11:18). The process can be alliteratively analyzed under the following headings:

1. Realistic recognition that one has disobeyed and failed God, doing wrong instead of doing right. This sounds easier than it actually is. T.S. Eliot spoke the truth when he observed: "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." There is nothing like a shadowy sense of guilt in the heart to make us passionately play the game of pretending something never happened or rationalizing to ourselves action that was morally flawed. So, after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and compounded it with murder, he evidently told himself that it was simply a matter of royal prerogative and, therefore nothing to do with his spiritual life. So he put it out of his mind, until Nathan's "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7) made him realize, at last, that he had offended God. This awareness was, and is, the seed bed where repentance grows. It does not grow elsewhere. True repentance only begins when one passes out of what the Bible sees as self-deception (cf. James 1:22, 26; 1John 1:8) and modern counselors call denial, into what the Bible calls conviction of sin (cf. John 16:8).

2. Regretful remorse at the dishonor one has done to the God one is learning to love and wanting to serve. This is the mark of the contrite heart (cf. Psalm 51:17; Isaiah 57:15). The Middle Ages drew a useful distinction between attrition and contrition (regret for sin prompted by fear for oneself and by love for God respectively; the latter leading to true repentance while the former fails to do so). The believer feels, not just attrition, but contrition, as did David (see Psalm 51:1-4, 15-17). Contrite remorse, springing from the sense of having outraged God's goodness and love, is pictured and modeled in Jesus' story of the prodigal's return to his father (Luke 15:17-20).

3. Reverent requesting of God's pardon, cleansing of conscience, and help to not lapse in the same way again. A classic example of such requesting appears in David's prayer of penitence (see Psalm 51:7-12). The repentance of believers always, and necessarily, includes the exercise of faith in God for these restorative blessings. Jesus himself teaches God's children to pray "forgive us our sins... and lead us not into temptation" (Luke 11:4).

4. Resolute renunciation of the sins in question, with deliberate thought as to how to keep clear of them and live right for the future. When John the Baptist told Israel's official religious elite: "Produce fruit in keeping with

repentance" (Matthew 3:8), he was calling on them to change direction in this way.

5. Requisite restitution to any who have suffered material loss through one's wrongdoing. Restitution in these circumstances was required by the Old Testament law. When Zacchaeus, the renegade Jewish taxman, became Jesus' disciple, he committed himself to make fourfold retribution for each act of extortion, apparently on the model of Moses' requirement of four sheep for everyone stolen and disposed of (Exodus 22:1; Exodus 22:2-14; Leviticus 6:4; Numbers 5:7). An alternative alliteration (as if one were not enough!) would be:

1. discerning the perversity, folly, and guilt of what one has done;
2. desiring to find forgiveness, abandon the sin, and live a God-pleasing life from now on;
3. deciding to ask for forgiveness and power to change;
4. dealing with God accordingly;
5. demonstrating, whether by testimony and confession or by changed behavior or by both together, that one has left one's sin behind.

Such is the repentance – not just the initial repentance of the adult convert, but the recurring repentance of the adult disciple – that is our present theme.

[excerpt from *Rediscovering Holiness (Revised and Updated) Know the Fullness of Life with God*, Chapter 5, by J. I. Packer, published by [Regal Books](#), 2009.]

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The Great Downfall – Part II

by Steve Clark

In Part I of The Great Downfall [see [February Issue](#)] we looked at the first human sin as the pattern or prototype of that problematic interaction with God that is at the root of human misfortune.

The Consequences

A recent newspaper article told of a little girl who had disregarded her mother's warning to stay away from the street. She had been hit by a car and ended up in the hospital with an injury that would cripple her for the rest of her life. Simply crossing the street seems trivial, certainly not intrinsically wrong. Yet that step involved rejecting the instructions given by her mother to protect her. Despite the warning, it also involved much greater consequences than the little girl ever imagined before she stepped off the curb or than we would have expected if we had only been told that a little girl crossed the street against her mother's orders.

In the previous section [see [Part I](#)], we looked at the first human sin as the pattern or prototype of that problematic interaction with God that is at the root of human misfortune. Now we will look at the way Genesis presents the first sin as affecting the subsequent state of the human race. The significance of sin begins to appear immediately after the first sinful act, but much of what happened in the fall becomes clear only in the light of the later course of the human race.

The Judgment. No sooner had Adam and Eve eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, than the consequences began to unfold.

The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the

garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him,
Where are you?
And he said,
I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

- Genesis 3:7-10

Once Adam and Eve had eaten of the fruit they immediately realized that something was wrong. Even more significantly, they realized that something was wrong with themselves. They experienced themselves as naked and ashamed. They were conscious that their actions had affected their relationship with God, and they began to be afraid of him.

The loss of glory

John Chrysostom described the result of the transgression of the first human beings by saying, “Through their guilt they consequently divested themselves of the glory surrounding them” (*Homilies on Genesis* 16,14). He first speaks of the guilt that came from having disobeyed God’s commandment. He then indicates the result, a loss of glory. In doing so, he sums up a truth that Genesis presents in narrative form: sin led to a change in the human race.

In the above quote Chrysostom, following a common Jewish and early Christian understanding, also indicates that the guilt of Adam and Eve resulted in the loss of their glory, by which he meant an exterior radiance that clothed them in a personal splendor. Their external glory, as we have seen, came from an inner glory or power that enabled Adam and Eve to rule themselves, to control their actions, to be people of good character. No longer in good relationship with God and no longer subject to him, they were no longer able to keep themselves in subjection and to direct their actions in consistently good ways. They had lost that interior excellence and moral greatness that comes from being in the image and likeness of God in an unmarred way. With it, they had lost a mastery of themselves and became subject to their own desires, prone to sin. That, Chrysostom tells us, was visible exteriorly in the loss of their glory.

God did not need to especially intervene to punish Adam and Eve. Punishment had already begun in the form of the evil consequences of their transgression. They experienced the change in their own persons. As a result their eyes were opened in a new way to the significance of moral matters in human life. Conscious of the shamefulness of their new state, they experienced for the first time the fear of God that arises from sinfulness. They had lost the garments of light that manifested their inner purity, and they experienced their nakedness.

Adam and Eve had previously feared God with the awe and respect due him as their Creator and Lord, their Father. Now they feared even to come into his presence. They knew they were unworthy to stand before God’s awesome holiness, his absolute moral perfection. Their sinfulness made them unseemly. To use the words of later Scriptures, they had become impure or unclean. Their sinfulness also made them afraid of what God would do with them.

God then summoned Adam and Eve and the serpent. He sat before them as judge, judge because he was ruler of the universe, but also judge because he was their Father. God began, as a good judge should, by questioning Adam and then Eve, probably giving them a chance to accept responsibility for their actions and to repent. There is, however, no indication of repentance in their responses, only a desire to avoid the unfortunate consequences of their actions.

Repairing wrongdoing through repentance

The rest of Scripture tells us that repentance is a way to repair wrongdoing. By how it describes the response of Adam and Eve, Genesis 3 probably indicates that it was not just the first sin that caused the fall of the human race, but also the unwillingness to take advantage of the opportunity for repentance. Had they repented, their sin may not

have changed the course of human history the way it did.

God then gave his sentences. They come in the form of “curses”. For us the word “curse” usually implies hostility and malice. The biblical words translated for “curse,” especially when used of God, do not imply either hostility or malice, but are the actions of the divine judge imposing a penalty that is deserved.⁽¹⁾ The term “curse” is probably too misleading to be a good translation now, but its use cannot always be avoided.

The sentences God pronounced contain a curse on the serpent and a curse on the ground from which the human race was taken. Since humans needed to work the ground to grow food, the curse on the ground was also a curse on the relationship of the human race to nature, the source of the materials human beings need to live. It was consequently a curse on human labor. Although the word “curse” is not used, there was probably a curse on childbirth as well. The natural function that should have been simple delight for the woman became one of pain mixed with joy. God’s pronouncements indicate the way in which the sin of the human race negatively affects the natural functions of human life. To sum up the sentences, as a result of sin ordinary human actions lose much of their delightfulness and become difficult and even onerous.

The last evil consequence of their sinful action that directly affected Adam and Eve is described at the end of Genesis 3:

Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” — therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

- Genesis 3:22-24

Adam and Eve were banished or exiled from paradise, and thus deprived of the tree of life and so of their expected immortality. Yet there was more to their exile than this loss. In an age of great mobility and modern communications, modern people have forgotten much of the significance of exile. Exile deprived people of their home, of their family and friends, and of the way of life they were raised to live. In short, exile deprived them of much of what made their life worth living. As a result, exile often was used as a punishment for wrongdoing.

The exile of Adam and Eve from paradise was itself one of the worst consequences of their sin. They had lost the garden of God: the place of God’s presence and human blessedness, the place filled with delight, the place for human life to be lived the way it was supposed to be lived. They had lost the true human home.

Yet there is even more to the loss of paradise than clearly appears in Genesis. Paradise was described as an earthly place and the tree of life as bearing fruit that would prolong earthly life. Teaching in later Scriptures makes clear that God created the human race for an even greater nearness to him than Adam and Eve seemed to have before the fall. With that nearness would come fuller blessedness. Christians have come to use the word “heaven” for the place where that state could be experienced, because “heaven” is the scriptural word for the place of God’s dwelling or presence.

There are differing views on the relationship of paradise and heaven. God may have intended the earthly paradise to develop to the point where by living in paradise human beings would be living “in heaven”, that is, heaven would come to earth (Rev 21). God may have intended at some point to change the mode of human existence more radically so that paradise would have been “swallowed up” in heaven (2 Corinthians 5:4). Perhaps these two understandings amount to much the same thing. But however the development is understood, the loss of paradise turns out to be more than just the loss of a good and prolonged earthly life. In Christian terms, it was the loss of

heaven as well. It was the loss of the full, blessed life that God had intended for the human race – which they had begun to experience in paradise, which would be completely given to them in heaven, and which they would be able to enjoy eternally.

There is at the same time more to the sentence of death than appears in Genesis. Death is the loss of life. But as Scripture uses “life” to mean a good, blessed human life and not just animate physical existence, so it uses “death” to mean a loss of good, blessed life. It can refer, in other words, to what Christians have called “spiritual death” (Ephesians 2:1-2), a state in which human beings live without much of the presence of God, without spiritual blessedness, unable to live as they were created to live. Genesis shows us that sin can produce spiritual death even before physical death occurs.

Furthermore, the Scriptures indicate that physical death does not mean that human beings simply go out of existence. Rather, they go down to the place of the dead, Sheol or Hades. Those who have not been rescued from the consequences of the fall live there without the presence of God and the blessedness that comes from being united to him. For those who “die in their sins”, the state of death involves unfortunate consequences resulting from their sinful actions.

Many questions surround the afterlife and the place or places of those who do not end up in heaven. For our purposes here, it is enough to note that the punishment of death referred to in Genesis involved more than a simple termination of earthly existence. It involved, first, a change in Adam and Eve so that earthly life itself became a kind of living death. Second, even after the termination of earthly life, death did not produce annihilation but a continued existence deprived of much of what makes human life worthwhile.

The Aftermath. The consequences of sin as described by Genesis were not restricted to the lives of Adam and Eve but extended to their descendants, whose lives are portrayed in Genesis 4–11. The sin of Adam and Eve was disobedience to God, motivated by pride and based on disbelief. It was a sin directly against God himself. This sin against God also seemed to characterize Cain, their first-born son. But he added a further sin – murder, brother killing brother.

In the story of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, we see how the state of sin produces hatred and envy between human beings. The subsequent narrative of the lives of his descendants shows an intensification of evil. By the time of the flood the earth was “filled with violence” (Genesis 6:11). Human beings, in short, inflict many of the most serious consequences of sin upon one another. The greatest danger to the human race is not what external forces will do, but what the race will do to itself. The first chapters of Genesis show us that disruption and disorder in the relationship with God leads to disruption and disorder in our relationships with one another.

But the story of the human race is not one of unmitigated evil. Adam and Eve themselves do not seem to have turned completely away from God after the fall. The Book of Wisdom seems to preserve the tradition that Adam repented because of the good influence of God’s instruction (Wisdom 10:1). Most Christian teachers have taken that same view.

Moreover, from Adam and Eve sprang two sons, the murderer Cain and the righteous Abel (Hebrews 11:4). With them came two ways of life – that of the sons of Cain and that of the sons of Seth, who replaced Abel (Genesis 4:25). The sons of Seth called upon the name of the Lord (Genesis 4:26), gave birth to Enoch who walked with God (Genesis 5:23), and gave birth to righteous Noah (Genesis 6:9). Noah in turn gave birth to Abraham. Sin predominates in human life, but there is also goodness and hope, something worth saving.

This goodness is related to another truth presented in Genesis: God did not abandon the human race. Punishment

does not necessarily mean total rejection. No sooner had he finished passing sentence, than with fatherly kindness he himself clothed Adam and Eve, because they did not know how to provide for themselves in their new circumstances. He then continued the human race through Adam and Eve by blessing them with children.

God also cared for the descendants of Adam and Eve. He accepted Abel's offering, allowing human beings to maintain a relationship with him. He then replaced the line of Abel after Abel's murder. He even protected Cain from the worst consequences of his sin. When God judged the race as a whole to be worthy of destruction as a result of human evil, he preserved it through Noah, and renewed his original commission. Moreover, he added a special pledge of protection that no matter how evil the human race would become, he would never let it be completely destroyed. The fall, in short, did not totally cut the human race off from God. He was constantly at work to preserve it and lead human beings to the point where they could once again fulfill the purpose for which the human race was created.

Some Christian teachers, primarily in the Western tradition, have called the state of sin that resulted from the first act of disobedience "original sin". "Original" means that the sin comes from the origin of the human race. "Sin" means sinful state rather than sinful actions. Original sin, then, is the sinful state that has resulted from the origins of the human race, the state of human estrangement from God with a related internal condition of sinfulness. This sinful state comes to all human beings through their membership in the race. It is the state of the race as a whole, but therefore a state that affects individual human beings as well.

Many questions have been raised about original sin through the centuries. Some of these center on the guilt that might be due to individuals because of it. Others center on how corrupt or depraved human nature has become as a result of the fall. Because of what could be called the "stronger" views of original sin, many Christians avoid the term because it seems to imply more than they can accept.

Nonetheless, a consensus exists among orthodox Christians that something is wrong with the human race. It is not in the relationship with God it was created for. Apart from the grace of God, the state of the race inevitably leads to sinful actions by most, if not all, who reach the age of being able to perform such actions. Moreover, on their own human beings seem unable to radically change the way they live. For the purposes of this book, such a consensus is enough.

Many people believe the scriptural teaching on original sin can be found in Genesis 3, but this chapter only tells of the first sin. Genesis 4–11 narrates the fact that the first sin was not an isolated event, soon reversed by the repentance of Adam and Eve or by a fresh start with the birth of righteous Abel. Rather, the first sin led to a history that illustrates the truth that the fall of the human race has made human beings prone to sinful actions.

[section on "Punishment and Justice" omitted here]

Hope and blessing for the human race

Genesis provides a basis for hope in a seemingly obscure but significant passage in the curse on the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

- Genesis 3:15

Some Christian writers, based on the New Testament (Romans 16:19–20), have seen this as the first proclamation of the gospel. If so, it is a prophetic one, and like most prophecy it is somewhat obscure before its fulfillment.

The words of this passage promise hostility between the serpent (Satan) and the woman, here representing the human race. There will be lasting conflict, but the conflict will involve the human race having the upper hand. The picture behind the prophecy is of a barefoot man being bitten as he crushes and destroys a snake. A human being will be victorious, although he will only be victorious with suffering.

According to many Christian teachers, that image has been fulfilled in the sufferings and death of Christ. The prophecy means that the enemy of the human race, the one who caused its downfall, will himself be defeated by a future representative of the human race. That representative in the traditional Christian understanding is Christ, who will be wounded in the process (have his heel “bruised”). He will not, however, be destroyed and will prove victorious in crushing Satan.

The first “curse”, then, is actually a promise of blessing for human beings. God’s words of punishment begin with a promise of deliverance for his sons and daughters. God’s full “justice”, his merciful willingness to help human beings even when they do not deserve it, and his just approach to rescuing them from the penalization they do deserve, can therefore only be understood in the light of his future plan.

Rescuing A Lost Race

There is a fairy tale about a baby found in the woods and raised by simple peasants. One day a knight comes to the family’s hut and sees the child. He looks and acts like a peasant child, uneducated, unable to speak his native language in a proper way, with simple, somewhat rude manners. But when the knight looks at him, he is struck by the child’s appearance. Despite his peasant-like and unpromising manner and behavior, the child looks like the king. The knight has discovered the lost son of the king who years before had been kidnapped by an enemy and left in the forest to die.

The human race is much like that child. As we consider human affairs, we see much evil – wars, murders, robberies, violence, and cruelty. We see senseless brutalities – sadism, torture, genocide. We even see human beings destroying themselves, giving themselves over to enslaving addictions, or letting themselves deteriorate to satiate some lust. We see noble empires fall into ruin; great endeavors wither. Futility, insecurity, and failure seem the constant accompaniment of human life.

Yet we also see a race that is capable of great kindness, heroic deeds, high successes, and vast accomplishments. We see individuals whose character we can admire, whose wisdom we can learn from. Even more, we see a race that seems capable of recognizing that much that it does is evil, that knows a great deal about how to distinguish good from evil, and that seems to want a society of peace and justice better than any it has so far produced.

We, in short, see a race that was made in the image of the King – the Lord of the universe, who made all things good – but a race that has fallen into great evil. The state of the human race as the Scriptures describe it does not have to be proven. It is all around us to see.

How can the son of the king be restored to his Father and his royal state? How can the image of the great King be recreated so that the likeness is recognizable in every respect? How can the human race become what most of us intuitively think it should be?

The answer of a Christian reflection on Genesis is that sin has to be taken away, removed from human life. Not only do human beings have to cease doing the things that cause evil and further ruin, the things that deserve penalization, but also the sinful state of the human race that causes those actions has to be changed. The disease that leads to death has to be healed. Sinfulness has to be eradicated; true health, true life, has to be given. Human beings need a

Redeemer, someone who can rescue them from the misfortune into which they have fallen and restore them to true life.

[The rest of this book (*Redeemer: Understanding the Meaning of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ*) will concern that Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and what he did to rescue human beings from the predicament in which they found themselves.]

See > [Part I](#) in the February Issue

Note: (1) “Curse”, like “blessing” is a special Hebrew word used only in reference to God. “Blessing” involves giving something desirable; “curse” involves giving something undesirable. When human beings “bless” they call upon God to act to give someone else something desirable. When God blesses, he simply acts to provide something desirable. When human beings “curse” they call upon God to give someone else something undesirable. When God curses, he simply acts to provide something that the human being in question regards as undesirable. In English now, however, the word “curse” seems to have taken on the meaning of an action of malevolence, seeking to harm another out of evil intent. It would no longer be used, for instance, of a human being rightly asking God to do justice by punishing a wrongdoer. Since both the scripture and much theology use the word “curse” in the older meaning, it is difficult to avoid using the word, especially when dealing with translations like the RSV which simply use the English word “curse” for the Biblical equivalents.

[Steve Clark](#) is former president of the [Sword of the Spirit](#). This article is excerpted from the first chapter of Steve Clark’s Book, *Redeemer: Understanding the Meaning of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, (c) 1992, 2009, [Tabor House](#). Used with permission.

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Jesus' Identity as Prophet, King, and Priest in the Gospel of Mark

by Dr. Mark F. Whitters



Questions regarding the identity of Jesus swirl throughout the Gospel of Mark. Readers pore over the details of his ministry and notice that no one around Jesus can figure out who he is. Adding to the mystery, Jesus generally resists the various identities foisted on him, be it from devotee or demon. That curious fact invites them to look to the narrative “corners” of the Gospel of Mark and to reconsider what came before and after his public ministry. Here I will focus on those literary fragments and suggest that the Gospel of Mark beckons the reader to a particular theological understanding, a Christology that later tradition call the *munus triplex* [Latin for “threefold office”]. That identity centers around three roles: prophet, king, and priest.

There are three events that inaugurate the public life of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: his baptism, his time in the wilderness under the power of the Spirit, and his emergence into the public eye with the announcement of the kingdom of God.⁽¹⁾ There are also three events that mark the end of his public life in the episode of the crucifixion (Mark 15:33-39): the crowd’s association of Jesus with Elijah the prophet, the tearing of the veil at his death, and the royal title given to him by the Roman centurion, “son of God.”

I will propose that what is otherwise unknown to the audience of Jesus [the people observing and listening to him as he was among them] can be known to careful readers of the Gospel of Mark. Readers are supposed to discover and uncover the identity of Jesus for themselves, based upon a thoughtful reconsideration of the aforementioned triads of events outside of the day-to-day ministry of Jesus. They point to a threefold identity of Jesus, the *munus triplex* of prophet, king, and priest. Similar “christologies” of late Second-Temple Jews and early Church Fathers point to a common messianic matrix⁽²⁾ that informed and shaped the theology (and literary strategy) of the Gospel of Mark.

In order to accomplish this goal, I will divide my topic into two basic questions. First, how do the three events at the beginning and the end show parallelism, and how should this parallelism be interpreted? Secondly, how do these triads of events at the beginning and the end show Jesus as prophet, priest, and king, respectively?

Parallelism in the Triads of Events

Below is a table that shows the parallelism that I am hypothesizing is found at the beginning and the end of the public life of Jesus. Included also are the munera [Latin for "offices"] that correspond to the events in the episodes. The task at hand is to show how each of these literary components actually does fit in with the Christological munus triplex. That is, does a careful reading of the beginning and the end of the public life of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark lead to the understanding of the threefold identity of Jesus?

Inauguration (Mark 1:9-15)	Death (Mark 15:34-39)	Munus ("office")
<p>9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; 11 and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."</p>	<p>37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last. 38 And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.</p>	<p>Priest</p>
<p>12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.</p>	<p>34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" 35 And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." 36 And one ran and, filling a sponge full of vinegar, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."</p>	<p>Prophet</p>
<p>14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."</p>	<p>39 And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"</p>	<p>King</p>

There are other literary correspondences that point to the parallels between the triad at the beginning and the triad at

the end of events. For example, in the introduction leading up to the baptism, there is a proliferation of titles climaxing in the voice from heaven that he is beloved Son: Christ, Son of God, one more powerful (than John the Baptist), one who is coming, baptizer with the Holy Spirit. A similar litany builds up to the death episode, climaxing in the centurion's statement that he is son of God: he is builder of the temple, Christ, Son of man, prophet, King of the Jews, and Elijah-like. Thus, "son" is repeated in the introduction (1:1, 11) and in the ending of the life of Jesus (14:60-61; 15:39).

The first collection of titles, however, provokes an immediate challenge to the reader to think deeply about the identity of Jesus, while the second collection is spoken mostly in mockery, and the readers know it. Note, however, that it is only the narrator and John the Baptist who articulate these titles in the beginning, and no one except the reader (and the author) has an inkling about the person they refer to. Even in the baptism and the wilderness, the supernatural events are reported to the reader only, that is, they are confined to experience of Jesus and not of the others. In contrast, fourteen chapters on the public life of Jesus later, the events of the crucifixion are seen by all, and the responses of the bystanders and the centurion give a response based on what they have seen. In some sense the characters now have had the chance to observe Jesus both in the passion narrative and, more broadly, in the public life of Jesus, and the question Mark 15 raises for the reader is whether their assessment of his identity is accurate.

Yet in terms of literary privilege, it is only the reader who can make an assessment of Jesus at the beginning and the end. No one in the story sees the supernatural events of the baptism and wilderness, and no one of his selected and trained disciples stands with Jesus at the cross. But the reader is present intimately at both events.

Nonetheless, I will argue that that the readers are not given a simple formula or black-and-white Christology about Jesus. Instead they are to work out the identity of Jesus over the course of the Gospel of Mark, building on the early clues that the narrator and John the Baptist give, evaluating the assessments of the others in the narrative, and understanding theological insights that come at the end. Although there is a wealth of material throughout the Gospel that would support my thesis, I will focus on the triads of events that open and close the public life of Jesus. I will argue that the Gospel of Mark presents a literary strategy of ambiguity or shrouded terminology that forces the reader to make a profoundly theological assessment about Jesus.

Jesus as Prophet

Inaugural scenes

The Spirit's control of a human being is often associated with the role of a prophet. When the Spirit comes upon a person—the likes of Gideon (Judges 6:34), Samson (13:25; 14:19), and Saul (1 Sam 10:5, 10-13; 19:18-24)—the hero or heroine does things quite outside their character or abilities. The Spirit's control often takes the prophet into a period of ecstasy, and also provokes erratic actions or journeys. The prophet Elijah was driven with such intensity that Obadiah says of him, "As soon as I have gone from you, the spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where" (1 Kings 18:12). Later Elijah is literally caught up and permanently removed, but his followers believe that his disappearance was nothing other than one of his routine flights in the Spirit. That the Spirit did these things to other Elijah-like holy men is a common understanding extending into New Testament times (2 Cor 12:2; Acts 8:39).

Jesus was such a prophet. R. E. Brown proposed that the Elijah-Elisha typology exerted a formative influence on all the gospel narratives⁽³⁾ and that Elijah and Elisha were heroic models for the Gospel writings about Jesus. For example, just as Elisha and Elijah roamed around in the Northern Kingdom, so Jesus did itinerant ministry in Galilee. The miracles of Elisha (and Elijah) often seem to be prototypes for Jesus' works. Such miracles include the cure of leprosy (2 Kings 5), the multiplication of loaves (1 Kings 17:8-16; 2 Kings 4:42-44), and the raising of the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37).

The Gospel of Mark alludes to the Elijah-Elisha story early on in the description of John the Baptist and in the reference to Jesus being controlled by the Spirit and driven into the wilderness. What is the literary connection between Jesus and prophets like Elijah? Like the prophets, Elijah and Moses, Jesus stays in the wilderness for 40 days. Moreover, the wilderness is a place of desolation where prophets must reckon with wild beasts and angels. No better example comes to mind than Elijah, who retreats into a lonely world and was fed by birds at the Wadi Cherith, then by angels under the broom tree.

With a little more of the readers' concentration, the narrative conjures up a hint of violence and death, for it reads that Jesus "was with the wild beasts" (1:13a). In the wilderness the prophet must do battle with Satan and with the beasts. The wilderness is a place where there is no human companionship and no cities to provide refuge against the harsh spiritual and physical elements. While there is no exact parallel in the lives of the canonical prophets, the Gospel of Matthew (4:6) hints that Psalm 91 is the background for this condition. Here, God promises angels for those who must struggle against the hostile spiritual forces, and that his protected ones will tread upon lions and vipers. This is the context for Mark 1:13a - the wilderness inhabited by Satan and wild beasts, as well as angels who visit and wait upon Jesus. An interpretive key for this ambiguous reference to satanic forces, wild beasts, and angels will appear in the final stages of Jesus' life.

The reader also can notice another ominous detail of violence in the form of a reference to John the Baptist's arrest (1:14a). The reader starts to sense that John's prophetic fate will be Jesus' fate, and this parallel becomes clear in Mark 6 when John's martyrdom is recapitulated. Prophets and violence often go hand-in-hand in the biblical literature, as any cursory sampling of the canonical and non-canonical writings will show. Prophets must pay dearly for their prophetic testimony,(4) and later scriptures explicitly link martyrs and prophets (Rev 11:18, 16:6, 17:20, 24). Thus, the reader's reflection about Jesus the prophet is partially fulfilled in the announcement that another "messenger" who had been sent into the wilderness had been imprisoned (Mark 1:14). The reader knows (or will soon know) that Jesus will be rejected and surrounded by animal-like tormentors before succumbing to a prophet's doom.

Death scene

The parallels between Jesus and John the Baptist drawn early in the narrative remind the reader that rejected prophets often end up as martyrs. This expectation is obviously fulfilled in the death of Jesus. But there is also the clue at the inauguration of his public life about Jesus being confronted by the wild beasts. When Jesus is in the wilderness, Psalm 91 probably is the background for the strange reference to "wild beasts" that surrounded him, as I suggest above. Yet this image also might foreshadow the end of the public life of Jesus, where the Gospel of Mark makes use of Psalm 22 as a midrashic meta-narrative on the death of Jesus. The reader understands that Jesus is surrounded by a group of tormentors, depicted in Psalm 22 as wild beasts (bulls, dogs, oxen). Jesus prays Psalm 22, the text of which describes a man who fears that he will be killed by these wild beasts and perhaps consumed as carrion. In Psalm 91,(5) the conclusion of the prayer brings a message of hope like it did for Jesus in the wilderness: the angels attend to the faithful warrior after the ordeal. For Jesus at the end of the Gospel of Mark (16:5-7), "a young man" (an angel?) appears announcing the resurrection of Jesus.

I have suggested elsewhere that the passion narrative deliberately raises the specter of Elijah as a strategy for identifying and clarifying Jesus' role as an eschatological prophet.(6) From beginning to end the prophet Elijah casts a broad shadow on the Gospel of Mark. Elijah is linked with John the Baptist from the opening lines of the Gospel. When Herod hears about Jesus, he concludes that John the Baptist has been raised from the dead (6:16). But some voices held that Jesus was Elias redivivus [Elijah come back to life], others that John the Baptist's powers were active in Jesus (6:14-15). The same opinions were voiced in a later discussion of Jesus with his disciples (8:27-30). (7) Many people in the narrative audience therefore believed that Jesus was some incarnation of Elias redivivus according to the Gospels.(8)

The Gospel of Mark, however, is quick to correct this misinterpretation. In fact, the opening scene of the preaching and lifestyle of John the Baptist present John, not Jesus, as the new Elijah. Later, in the part of the Gospel often thought to be an early “recognition and reversal” scene, Peter declares that Jesus is Messiah and not Elijah; then Jesus goes on to demonstrate the validity of Peter’s confession by being transfigured and holding audience with Elijah and Moses (9:2-8). The eschatologically subordinate role of Elijah is explained immediately after the Transfiguration (9:9-13).

The reader is to infer that John the Baptist has played the role of Elijah and that he has suffered the very fate awaiting Jesus (9:12-13). This is the background to the misinterpretation of Jesus’ cry on the cross before he died that “Jesus was calling on Elijah.” What plays out in the Gospel before the passion narrative is in part a debate between those who believed Jesus was Elijah and those who believed that John the Baptist was Elijah. The recurrent motif about Elijah suggests that there was a background debate about his role vis-à-vis Jesus. The stories of Elijah (1 Kgs 17:1-2; Kings 2:12) as a prophet who ascended into heaven without dying seem to have led to an expansion of his role as an eschatological intercessor before God. This late biblical image of Elijah portrays him as a messianic figure that mitigates divine wrath and prepares for the day of Lord. While I cannot go into the Elijah cult of the late Second-Temple period, J. J. Collins developed this idea in his book, The Scepter and the Star. (9) The narrative milieu of the Gospel of Mark and the historical milieu of late Second Temple Judaism are the contexts that give meaning to the bystanders’ misunderstanding about the final words of Jesus on the cross.

When it comes to the last articulate words of Jesus on the cross, the Gospel of Mark makes a negative statement about Jesus’ identity. Jesus is not to be identified as Elias redivivus. The reader’s attention is drawn to quotation of Psalm 22:1[2] by the fact that is not in Greek but apparently in Jesus’ own language. Scholarly interest has tended to focus on the confused transliteration, which reflects a quotation that is neither pure Aramaic nor pure Hebrew. But it is the misunderstanding of the crowd, not the accuracy of the transliteration, which rivets the reader’s attention. It may be presumed that the (Greek) reader of the Gospel of Mark simply regards the original language of Jesus’ quotation as a foreign (and inscrutable) tongue. If the narrative implies that the two words were confused, the reader is in no position to contradict the inference that that “my God” (Eloi) and Elijah (Elias) sound the same.

What can be deduced from the Gospel of Mark’s portrayal of the bystanders’ puzzlement about the last words of Jesus? The reader must keep in mind that the audience of bystanders within the narrative thought that Jesus was a prophet comparable to Elijah. The reader must also be aware that the Gospel of Mark promotes the understanding that John the Baptist carried out Elijah’s role as the precursor of a messianic or eschatological event. The bystanders, however, do not seem to have been persuaded that John the Baptist was Elijah and the precursor of Jesus. Instead of hearing Psalm 22’s drama about a man surrounded by persecutors and beasts, they think he is invoking the identity of Elijah. Unlike the reader, they do not know the earlier drama with Satan and wild animals. Nor do they have the literary privilege of witnessing the angels around Jesus in the wilderness and in the resurrection.

The public confusion about these last words of Jesus provokes a dramatic effect on the reader. Now the reader encounters for the last time in all clarity a question that has persisted throughout the crucifixion narrative. Is Jesus, even now on the cross, a prophet like Elijah? How does Jesus take on Elijah’s character while transcending him? How has his life fulfilled the shrouded clues given in Mark 1:12-14?

Jesus as King

By the end of the story in the Gospel of Mark, the reader has abundant opportunity to reflect on Jesus as a kingly figure. (10) Six times in Mark 15 (Mark 15:2, 9, 12-13, 18, 26) there are references to his royal status, abused and

mocked. The narrative sketches a mock coronation, foisted upon Jesus by his antagonists.**(11)** Yet the repetition and ferocity of their attack only rivets all the more the question of his royal status and amplifies the irony of their actions. Irony is a common literary device in the passion narrative of the Gospel of Mark. How does ambiguity contribute to the message of Jesus as king as it did for Jesus as prophet?

The final assessment of the life of Jesus comes when the centurion calls him “son of God.” But what does the centurion’s statement mean?**(12)** Does it relieve the irony of the narrative for the readers, or does it raise another ambiguity only the reader can resolve? A first-century Roman understanding of “son of God” would most likely reflect a background of the imperial cult, a claim to a divine identity thought to rest upon the Caesar.**(13)** The centurion may not be mocking Jesus as his comrades did in their mock coronation of him, but he also shows no recognition like the other supernatural voices earlier in the narrative (1:11, 3:11, 5:7, 9:7). There is no apparent conversion or discipleship. The ambiguity is only increased because of the (deliberate?) omission of the article before “son of God.” Whatever his intention, there is no reason to believe that the Roman escapes the irony that echoes throughout the passion narrative.**(14)**

What the reader encounters here is the same literary strategy that surrounded the identity of Jesus as prophet. The ambiguity of the centurion is meant to challenge the reader to think more deeply about what the characters think they see and know about Jesus. We are to take our cues from the words of the centurion in this case, but not be confined by them. Like the disciples (4:40, cf. 8:32) and like those who understood him as an Elijah-like prophet, even the centurion is not sure about what his words mean.

The attention given to this theme in the passion narrative also makes the reader re-evaluate the episodes that precede Jesus’ ministry. The literary seeds for the passion narrative’s irony and ambiguity come early. The earliest recognition of “son” comes in 1:11, an ambiguous cultic reference I will discuss below. In the context of Jesus as king, one strong signal is Jesus heralding the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). His first words speak of the need for the audience to rethink the current world order, for a new one is on the horizon. Obviously the proclamation carries with it news about another king and another reign, even if it is ambiguous about what role Jesus himself plays in its coming. The arrival of a new king is usually announced by an ambassador or a military legate who warns the city or nation that surrender is the best response to the oncoming king or general. The vocabulary plainly announces that Jesus “proclaims” “the kingdom,” and both of these words have long-standing royal connotations.**(15)** Perhaps the best late Second-Temple model for this dynamic can be found in the Qumran documents 4Q385 and 11QMelch, where a preacher comes in advance of Melchizedek, the angelic king of Genesis 12. For the Gospel of Mark, John the Baptist would be the preacher and Jesus would be King Melchizedek.**(16)** This pattern parallels John the Baptist as Elijah and Jesus as the eschatological prophet, as shown above in the section “Jesus as Prophet.”

Jesus as Priest

Many recent commentators have pointed to the scene of the baptism of Jesus as a parallel to the tearing of the temple curtain at Jesus’ death.**(17)** The table below shows some of the literary elements that connect the two events.

Element	Baptism	Death
Voice source	From heaven	From earth (centurion)
Words of voice	“You are my Son”	“This man was Son”

Spirit/breath image	Spirit like a dove	“He breathed out”
What is torn	The heavens	The temple curtain
Tearing verb	Passive [passivum divinum]	Passive [passivum divinum]
Direction of tearing	“descending like a dove”	“Torn from top to bottom”
Spectator	“he [Jesus] saw”	“the centurion saw”
Presence of prophetic figure	John the Baptizer	“He is calling Elijah”

The parallels seem to be present, but how both scenes portray Jesus as priest is harder to show. The stronger case for priestly theology is found in the tearing of the temple curtain, which serves as a synecdochical reference to the Jerusalem cult, temple, or priesthood. Once this curtain rending event is described at the end of the life of Jesus, it becomes more plausible to look for an antecedent clue in the ritual and divine action that begins his public life, the baptism in the Jordan River.

The report of the tearing of the temple curtain is so stark that the reader can only pause and wonder about its implications—and speculation has only multiplied over the centuries from Church Fathers to Scholastics to historical critical interpreters.⁽¹⁸⁾ Yet in spite of a myriad of possible meanings, it is safe to assume that the Jerusalem cult is at stake for two reasons. First, the signals are unmistakable to the first-century reader, who would be familiar with temples whether they were in Jerusalem or the agora of the polis. The Jewish or Greek temple precinct would have been divided into areas designated for the general public and the cultic officials, and thus the sanctity of the place depended on the separation between spaces. The curtaineering would have compromised the sacral quality, the prescribed order of the cult. Second, the sense of divine intervention is evident in the passage itself, where the curtain is supernaturally torn, signified by the divine passive and the direction of the tear from top to bottom.

The crucifixion of Jesus also connects with the profaning of the sacred temple space: he dies and the Gospel of Mark immediately reports that the curtain is torn. Though the passage does not specify how or if Jesus serves as new priest or new sacrifice or even new temple, there is clearly a nexus between the two. In addition the immediate context turns up several other cues for the discerning Jewish reader that Jesus and cult are tied together. Twice the Gospel of Mark says that the crucifixion is at the ninth hour, the same time as the priestly Tamid service (1 Kings 18:36; Dan 9:21; Jdt 9:1; Acts 3:1; A.J. 14.4.3 §65; 3.10.1 §237).⁽¹⁹⁾

Finally the death of Jesus comes at a key moment in the unfolding of the narrative. The reader already knows, for example, that the Jewish temple is under a cloud of judgment and awaiting radical reform or displacement.⁽²⁰⁾ The “cleansing” of the temple has already occurred (Mark 11:15-19) crystallizing a negative critique of its operation in the mind of the reader. The impression is driven home when the temple cleansing episode is framed by the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14) and its later interpretation (Mark 11:20-24).⁽²¹⁾

When the passion narrative begins, this message can be detected when Jesus is accused before the priests of threatening to destroy the temple (14:58), and it surfaces again in the crowd’s and priests’ mockery of Jesus on the cross (15:29-31). When the curtain is mentioned, Jews and Greeks have a synecdochical reference to the old institution of sacrifice, priest, and temple. When it is said to tear, it undoubtedly signifies change. Whatever the reader makes of the hermeneutics, the episode plays upon cultic imagination.

The wonder induced by this latter divine intervention, the tearing of the curtain, brings the reader back to the first divine intervention at the Jordan River because it resonates so well on a number of levels illustrated in the table above. Does the baptism episode correspond to the cultic allusions of the crucifixion passage? If the tearing of the curtain was synecdochical in its application and depends in part on a wider context, the reader must search for another synecdoche and be prepared for wider historical and literary context in which to interpret the baptism.

Here there is a singular candidate for the synecdoche in the descending dove. The evidence for its application to Jesus as a priestly figure is more tentative⁽²²⁾ and perhaps more anachronistically interpreted than the tearing of the temple curtain.⁽²³⁾ Casting a wider literary net, there are several other symbols in the baptism scene that present subtle but compelling evidence for a cultic milieu. For example, baptism itself and the words of the heavenly voice issue a shrouded reference to sacrifice and temple.

Baptism is almost associated in the Gospel of Mark (esp. 10:38) and in other New Testament documents (e.g., Luke 12:50; Rom 6:3) with suffering and death.⁽²⁴⁾ Combined with the passion narrative's allusion to cult, in other words, readers might envision the baptism as Jesus' participatory ritual in his own passion and voluntary sacrifice. Three other cues confirm this interpretive insight. First, just as the death of Jesus is connected with the tearing of the temple, here the baptism—if it is the prefigurative death of Jesus—is connected with the tearing of the heavens. In other words the divine presence is paying close attention to this symbolic performance. Second, there is a report of a voice that immediately assures Jesus (and the reader) of divine approval. If it is God who tears the heavens, and God who blesses Jesus vocally, the readers naturally assume that the baptism of Jesus causes this blessing. Third, for the reader familiar with Jewish traditions, the words uttered by God allusively (ambiguously?) paraphrase Gen 22:2, where the “beloved son” refers to Isaac, the aqedah offering associated with the foundation of the Jerusalem temple.⁽²⁵⁾

The overall message presented by the baptism and the tearing of the temple curtain is not meant to draw out a well-defined priestly Christology.⁽²⁶⁾ The events of the baptism in the Jordan River and the tearing of the temple curtain are shrouded in the same ambiguities that marked the identity of Jesus as prophet and Jesus as king. The Gospel of Mark does not speak conventionally about Jesus, as if he were simply another Jerusalem priest or sacrifice or temple replacement. The Gospel of Mark shows how all these conceptions of Jesus fall short, and the disciple and the reader are supposed to struggle to reconcile these conceptions with the events recorded in the narrative.

Conclusion

The early Church writer Papias once said that Mark lacked a conscious “order” to his account of the life of Jesus. This article suggests there is more theology in the order and literary devices than Papias supposed. The Gospel of Mark sets up a narrative world where no one is quite able to figure out who Jesus is. The readers however are given a privileged outlook on his life that no one else in the story has because they have been present before and after Jesus in this narrative world. The beginning and the end turn out to reveal a choreography of activities, one supportive of *munus triplex* (threefold office), a tradition venerable in the Church over the ages. Nevertheless, the Christology is one that transcends what the first-century would have associated with priest, prophet, and king. The Gospel of Mark employs a conscious strategy for its readers to think long and hard about who Jesus is. It turns out to be much more theologically nuanced than commentators often imagine.

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Notes:

- (1) I refrain from calling these events “the introduction” for literary reasons. Instead they form what Leander E. Keck (“The Introduction to Mark’s Gospel,” NTS 12 [1965-66] 352-70, esp. 367-68) considers the climax of the introduction (1:1-15). Keck specifically rejects a Christological interpretation for these three events (p. 364), and this theological presupposition prevents him from noticing the parallelism between the inauguration and denouement of Jesus’ public life, though he does strive to find a message that unites the introduction with passion narrative.
- (2) The Gospel of Mark so interprets this literary and theological topos, the *munus triplex*, as messianic, though the cognate literature may not necessarily have interpreted it in this way. Christians as early as the mid-second century found its concepts helpful for explaining how Jesus fulfilled his biblical destiny. Its importance is witnessed throughout Church history in the writings of John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Jean Calvin, J. H. Newman, Karl Barth, and various Catholic Church documents (e.g., Catechism of Trent, Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Lumen Gentium*). Outside Christian tradition, there are references to convergences of these offices in Josephus (B.J. 1.2.8 §68; A.J. 13.10.7 §299-300), T. Levi 8:11-17, Jub. 31:14-16, but only in Philo (*De vita Moysis*) and 1QS.ix.11 and 4Q175.i.1-8 is there possible messianic application. See Géza G. Xeravits, *King, Priest, Prophet—Positive Eschatological Protagonists of the Qumran Library* (STDJ 47; Leiden/Boston: 2003) 217-25.
- (3) R. E. Brown, “Jesus and Elijah,” *Perspective* 12 (1971) 85-104.
- (4) Isaiah and Jeremiah in later biblical (Heb 12:32-38) and extra-biblical writings (e.g., *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* and *The Lives of the Prophets*) serve as examples of the link between prophetic lives and martyrdom.
- (5) Ps 22 also concludes on a hopeful note in vv. 22-31: vindication and apparent rescue for the victim.
- (6) See Mark F. Whitters, “Why Did the Bystanders Think Jesus Called upon Elijah before He Died (Mark 15:34-36)? The Markan Position,” *HTR* 95 (2002) 119-24.
- (7) Evidence of this identification is found in the other Gospels. (See Matt 11:7-19; John 1:19-21.)
- (8) For the most recent treatment of Elijah in biblical literature, see M. Öhler, *Elia im Neuen Testament: Untersuchungen zur Bedeutung des alttestamentlichen Propheten im frühen Christentum* (BZNW 88; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1997). G. Dautzenberg (“Elija im Markusevangelium,” *The Four Gospels* 1992. *Festschrift Frans Neiryneck* [BETL c; F. van Segbroeck, C. M. Tuckett, G. van Belle, J. Verheyden, eds.; vol. 2; Leuven: University, 1992] 1088-91) speculates that the Hellenistic Jewish understanding of Elijah may possibly have imposed a “Glaubensmotiv” upon the crucifixion episode in Mark 15, that is, a need to clarify the identity of Jesus vis-à-vis Elijah.
- (9) J. J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (AB Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1995) 102-35. Collins reviews material from the Qumran and elsewhere and comes to this conclusion: “I suggest, then that the messiah, whom heaven and earth will obey, is an anointed eschatological prophet, either Elijah or a prophet like Elijah” (p. 120). For a discussion of Collins’ views on Elijah, see M. Becker, “4Q521 und die Gesalbten,” *RevQ* 18 (1997) 73-96, esp. 89 n. 79.

- (10) For the theme of royal Christology in the Gospel of Mark, see Frank S. Matera, *The Kingship of Jesus: Composition and Theology in Mark 15* (SBLDS66; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982); Martin Hengel, *The Son of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), esp. 21-56.
- (11) The narrative sketches a mock coronation, foisted upon Jesus by his antagonists. See Joel Marcus, "Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation," *JBL* 125 (2006) 73-87; Kelly R. Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark* (Library of NT Studies [JSNTSup] 339; London/New York: T & T Clark, 2007) 140.
- (12) For a list of the various recent interpretations of these cryptic words, see J. Bradley Chance, "The Cursing of the Temple and the Tearing of the Veil in the Gospel of Mark," *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007) 268-91, esp. 288; Iverson, *Gentiles*, 155 n. 115.
- (13) Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Harold W. Attridge, ed; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 769.
- (14) For a reader-response critique of the entire passage somewhat similar to the one above, see Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 203-209.
- (15) See Gerhard Friedrich, "kerux," *TDNT* 3.683-717; Karl Ludwig Schmitt, "basileia," *TDNT* 1.579-90.
- (16) Collins, *Mark*, 154-55.
- (17) For the many commentaries and articles that make this exegetically helpful observation, one can consult Daniel M. Gurtner's recent monograph *The Torn Veil: Matthew's Exposition of the Death of Jesus* (SNTS 134; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Though Gurtner addresses the Gospel of Matthew, his documentation readily applies to the Gospel of Mark. It is worth noting that none of the modern commentators draws out in much detail the cultic implications of the baptism in relation to Mark 15:38. Neither can one leave out mention of the magisterial commentary on the baptism of Jesus by Fritzleo Lentzen-Deis (*Die Taufe Jesu nach den Synoptikern* [Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1970] 281-82). He flatly rejects the idea that the baptism of Jesus imparts much understanding to his death—or vice-versa. The typology is "exhausted" (erschöpft), he says, because the implications are so unclear: no one enters, and no one exits, no Gentile accesses the Holy of Holies to worship. Or is this lack of clarity what I call a strategy of ambiguity? Furthermore, the only suggestion that the meaning of the one sheds light on the other appears in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, an anthology of "last words" put together far too late in history to reflect a conscious literary typology on the part of the Gospel of Mark (Lentzen-Deis, *Taufe*, 18, 125, 127). However, Lentzen-Deis did not have the benefit of such Dead Sea Scrolls as 4QApocLevib? ar 24 (4Q541).
- (18) For a brief survey of traditional interpretations, see Daniel M. Gurtner, "The Rending of the Veil (Matt 27:51a par): A Look Back and a Way Forward," *Themelios* 29 (2004) 4-14.
- (19) Dennis Hamm, "The Tamid Service in Luke-Acts: the Cultic Background behind Luke's Theology of Worship (Luke 1:5-25; 18:9-14; 24:50-53; Acts 3:1; 10:3, 30)," *CBQ* 65 (2003) 215-31. For a list of other references on the topic of the Tamid and the hour of Jesus' death see Gurtner, "Rending," 11 n. 59.
- (20) John P. Heil, "The Narrative Strategy and Pragmatics of the Temple Theme in Mark," *CBQ* 59

(1997) 76-100, esp. 76-82, 84-85.

(21) See John S. Kloppenborg, "Evocatio deorum and the Date of Mark," *JBL* 124 (2005) 419-50, esp. 428. Kloppenborg also sees the tearing of the heavens in the baptism as foreboding the tearing of the temple curtain, decorated as it was with representations of the heavens. Hence he sees in it the destruction of the temple.

(22) W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew [3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-97] 1.331-34) give 16 different interpretations for the dove!

(23) The dove's descent on Jesus may also have conjured up other synecdochical details, though the cultic vestiges of this interpretation are fainter for us today. The descent of the Spirit like a dove find echoes in later martyrologies (Mart. Pol. XVI.1; Eus.HE vi.29.2-4; cf. Lucian, *de Morte Peregr.* 39), where early Church saints are inaugurated into priestly ministry and taken into God's presence by birds. Perhaps the alighting or flight of a bird represents a similar cultic consecration of Jesus before his death. Or perhaps they reflect a more ancient tradition that the Romans adopted when they released birds upon the apotheosis of the Caesars (Herodian, 4.2; Dio Cassius 56.42; Suetonius Aug. 100; Seneca *Apocolocyntosis* 1; cf. Justin, *Apologia* 1.21). Such rituals, called *rogi consecrationis*, stem from Middle Eastern sources, according to Diodorus Siculus (17.114-15), and perhaps were familiar to the Roman or Palestinian audience of the first century. At any rate, the cremation of the emperor and the "miraculous" release of a bird would start a new imperial cult with new rites, altars, and priests recognized by the Senate. See Robert Turcan, "Le cult impérial au troisième siècle," in *ANRW*, 2.16.2, 996-98; Walter Altmann, *Die römischen Grabaltäre der Kaiserzeit* (New York: Arno, 1975; reprint 1905). Also in scriptural tradition, the Psalms play upon the image of the elect as a bird (e.g., 74:19; 124:7). The metaphor takes wing again in Odes Sol. 24:1-7, where a dove descends on "our Lord Messiah," followed by an epiphany (24:4, 5, 7). Though Odes shows Christian editorializing, the passage itself is evidence of a native and possibly more primitive perspective that connects the dove with divine visitation. See Stephen Gero, "The Spirit as a Dove at the Baptism of Jesus," *Nov T* 18 (1976) 17-35.

(24) See George Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1962) 72-77.

(25) Rabbinic sources frequently compare the *aqedah* to the Jerusalem cult, and sometimes go so far as to speak of Abraham and Isaac serving as archetypes for priest and victim, even representing the Tamid offerings and Passover. In many of the stories, the skies open up over Isaac and the Shekinah glory breaks out upon him when he encourages his father to carry out the sacrificial deed. The problem of course is that the provenience of these haggadic stories cannot be established. See examples of such stories in Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial on the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah* (tr. Judah Goldin; Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1950; repr. 1993) 31, 73, 137, 147 n. 41; Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of the Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) 174, 180-82, 245-46 n. 2; James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac* (*An Bib* 94; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981) 4-80; Alan F. Segal, "'He Who Did not Spare His Only Son...'" (Romans 8:32): Jesus, Paul, and the Sacrifice of Isaac," in *From Jesus to Paul* (ed. Peter Richardson and John C. Hurd; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier, 1984) 169-84; rpt. as "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Judaism and Christianity," in *The Other Judaism of Late Antiquity* (*BJS* 127; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987) 109-30.

(26) For references in the main body of the Gospel of Mark (outside of the introduction and the

passion narrative) to the Jerusalem cult, see Crispin H.T. Fletcher-Louis, "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 1," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 4 (2006) 155-7; *ibid.*, "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 5 (2007) 57-79.

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My Favorite Color is Pink

Called to be martyrs in our everyday lives

By Lynne May

I recently attended the [Kairos North American Winter Conference](#) held in Columbus, Ohio, USA. The theme was "Love for the World." We talked much about martyrdom. We talked about what it means to give a complete "Yes" to the Lord.

One of my favorite examples of someone who gave a definitive "Yes" to the Lord is Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of Luke, we see the angel Gabriel appear to her, exhort her not to be afraid, tell her that God favors her, and that he wants her to be the mother of God's Son, Jesus Christ. And in response to these revelations, Mary says "Yes." George Weigel, a Christian writer, has made four observations about Mary's "Yes" which I have considered and been challenged by:

1. She did not keep her options open
2. She did not negotiate
3. She did not have an 'exit' strategy
4. She did not ask for a contract.

And I am inspired when I see someone living them out. One such person is my friend Amanda, a young woman who once told me that her one dream was to be a "pink" martyr. When I first heard her say this, I was shocked and

confused. I was shocked because I had never heard of someone – in the twenty-first century, and certainly not someone I knew – wanting to be an actual martyr. I mean, using the word “martyr” seemed a little overly-dramatic to me. Weren’t martyrs a set of super-holy people who had died for the faith centuries ago in countries other than my own, whom we admire in hindsight but couldn’t hope to imitate? And I was confused. Was Amanda saying she wanted to be a pink martyr because pink is often labeled a feminine color? Amanda explained to me that she wanted to be both a “white” and a “red” martyr, to live her life fully for Christ and also to die as a martyr. White + red = pink. Amanda was, in essence, talking about radical discipleship and had caught the vision of what it means to truly be a witness, a “martyr,” to the Gospel.

This would-be pink martyr, Amanda, was a university student studying music performance. She thought for a long time that her vocation was to be a professional musician. But when she heard the Lord calling her deeper into life with him, she dropped out of school after her second year, and never looked back: her one desire was to seek God and give herself to him. Those closest to her were confused and upset by Amanda’s sudden loss of interest in music, and many didn’t understand her thirst for God. They thought she was confused and was wasting her God-given talent. But Amanda wasn’t confused. She just felt God was calling her to live single for him, and so after stopping her music studies she prayed throughout the next year about what faith community she was to join and how she was to express her call to celibacy. She has responded to God’s call to live single for the Lord and now lives in a cloistered monastery with other celibate women. Like the other sisters in her order, she has vowed that she will not go outside those walls and will spend her days and nights in service and in prayer for those around her life and those whom her faith community has agreed to pray for.

There was nothing fancy about Amanda’s everyday life. But the way in which she lived it was graceful, *grace-filled*. I knew Amanda for almost three years, but got to know her particularly well for two weeks while I was staying as a guest in a Christian discernment household. What she did were things such as: pray, laugh, speak of the Lord, read Scripture, serve her housemates, be my friend, babysit, sing, slide down banisters, and go for walks. She also loved to drink coffee, three cups in the morning, and three cups at night. Now I like to tell myself that you can be a martyr and drink your share of coffee too! During those two weeks, I observed Amanda’s everyday life carefully, and I continue to be inspired by what I saw: a simple, normal life lived in light of supernatural grace.

For me, Amanda is a martyr, what some of us might call a “walking saint.” Some wonder at the idea of living one’s life in a cloister, within walls, set apart from the world. Some people say, “What a waste! She just sits inside those walls praying, and she could be changing the world!” But Amanda knew well enough that even if she weren’t living in a cloister, if she were in the world, she would seek to live fully for Christ in whatever way he called her to serve him. Amanda knew that *she* couldn’t change the world – only *Jesus Christ* can change and love the world. She has chosen, as we all have a chance to do, whether in the world or in a monastery, to give her life to God and let herself be hidden in him. Amanda knew she had gifts –she didn’t go to a monastery because she thought she couldn’t do much else with her life. Amanda’s joyful confidence in God’s love for her was the foundation of her life and, having experienced God’s love for her, knew it was enough for her.

At the Kairos Winter Conference Women’s Session, we talked about how full confidence in and knowledge of God’s love for us are the keys to giving that love to others. We can become martyrs because we know that God’s love frees us to love the world. This is the core of John’s message in his First Letter, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). While I don’t think God is calling me to the cloistered life, I have already learned a lot about discipleship from the example of Amanda’s life and from the message I heard at the Kairos Winter Conference, which reminded me, once again, that we are all called to be martyrs in our everyday lives by dying to ourselves so that we can live for Christ, so that Christ can be fully alive in us and in the world! Perhaps, if God wills it, some of us may witness to Christ by shedding our blood for him as well, and thus become the kind of pink martyr Amanda yearns to be.

So: Is martyrdom hard, intense work? Is it nearly impossible to be a living martyr in the twenty-first century? I suppose it could feel so at times, and Satan would like us to think it really is. But my cloistered friend Amanda, my brothers and sisters in Kairos, and the Lord himself, who says "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light," all remind me that martyrdom is an expression of love – a response to and a reflection of Love Himself. And Love Himself says to us, just as he said through Gabriel to Mary, "Do not be afraid, for the favor of the Lord is upon you." We are God's children, and we need not be afraid, for his favor *is* upon us.

[Lynne May is from Jackson, Michigan, USA. She recently graduated from the University of Michigan with a B.A. in English and Medieval & Early Modern Studies. Having participated in [University Christian Outreach](#) (UCO) in Ann Arbor, Michigan for the past few years, she continues to serve in UCO as a Women's Mission Leader.]

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Wisdom From a Persecuted Monk

By John Karagoulis

This past October, I brought a group of Gappers (volunteer workers in our Kairos youth outreach programs) to visit an Orthodox Monastery in Michigan. This trip was inspired by our reading of “God's Smuggler” by Brother Andrew, a Protestant missionary to Eastern Bloc countries during the Communist era. In the book, Brother Andrew tells his story of smuggling Bibles to Christians living under regimes where outside books – particularly religious books – were not allowed to be brought into the country. The book has a lot to say about Christians living their faith courageously even when it may cost them their freedom and their lives.

Our purpose in visiting the monastery was to meet with one particular monk – Fr. Nektarios, a man who has experienced firsthand living as a persecuted Christian. A Theology professor by training, Fr. Nektarios went to prison on two separate occasions in Romania – once for five years, and another term for six. In these 11 years, two were spent in solitary confinement without even a pencil to write with. In between his two imprisonments, he became a monk in response to what the Lord was doing in him during this time, and indeed his life is a testament to God’s grace. Upon his final release from prison, he was expelled from Romania and came to live in the U.S. He spent some time as a parish priest, and eventually moved to a small monastery in Michigan where he lives today. What better way to learn about living as Christians in the midst of persecution than to meet one?

During our visit to Fr. Nektarios we sat with him for about an hour and a half and he talked to us on a whole range of Christian topics. I felt inspired to record some of the spiritual meat of our conversation because Fr. Nektarios has many good things to say about the spiritual life that we as charismatic Christians can take to heart. The two main

points I want to share are:

God lives in us

A key reason I love hearing Fr. Nektarios's story, and indeed one of the main reasons I bring the Gappers to the monastery, is that before he was imprisoned, he knew *about* God, but it was while he was in prison that he came to know God personally. Before his imprisonment he was a religious person who went to church, and knew the Bible, and taught theology. But it wasn't until he was stripped of all the dressings of conventional religious life – buildings, vestments, beautiful music, youth groups, retreats, even a Bible, that he could genuinely say that he got to know God in a personal way. He found God in the midst of his solitude because he realized that God dwells in us through his Holy Spirit. He quoted from the Apostle Paul, “...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” - Ephesians 3:19. Since we are temples of the Holy Spirit, God can never be far from us, even when we would seem to stray from living a Christian way of life.

Keep a constant dialogue with Jesus

Fr. Nektarios, quoting from Paul's advice to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), encouraged us to constantly keep a dialogue with God, talking to him in a familiar ongoing way just as we do with other people throughout the day. “Lord, I know you are with me here in the car, thank you for being with me.” It could seem very simplistic, even strange, but Fr. Nektarios reminded us that God cares for us even in the smallest details of our lives. If we have a problem with someone we love, tell Jesus straightforwardly. We don't need to rely on a prayer book to form the basis of our prayers. “The one who only prays when he prays, never prays” is what he said to us. Our lives are to be lived as a prayer. This is not to say that we need to cancel our prayer meetings and personal time of prayer, but is an encouragement to keep God at the center of our minds in all aspects of our lives. As charismatic Christians we might say “duh” but to hear these words from an Orthodox monk is remarkable! This served as a reminder to us to bring our whole lives to the Lord, to hold nothing back from our Father who loves us eternally, and who will withhold no spiritual blessing.

In our Gap program we have been blessed with this unique opportunity to learn from Fr. Nektarios, a living example of how all of us are to respond to persecution of our faith – to rely more on the Lord, not less. May we take his words to heart and strive to be more constantly aware of God's providence and presence with us at all times and places.



John Karagoulis is the administrator for [Kairos in North America](#). Kairos is an international federation of outreaches to high school, university and post university aged people.

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The Gift of Sisterhood

By Janice Finn

I've recently been thinking about what it means to be a sister, to relate to other Christian women as my sisters in Christ, and to express to them my love, esteem, and care for them as women of God. Why talk about sisterhood? I believe it's a gift which God wants his women to cherish and foster. My experience is that many young women today have not yet discovered what a great gift sisterhood is – how truly good it can be. A variety of circumstances make it difficult for Christian women to find priority time for developing strong supportive relationships among their sisters in the Lord. Many young women have lots of virtual friends through cyber-space, email, and cell phones. But these can't replace the personal dimension of being together to pray, love, support, encourage, and call one another on as women of God and sisters in Christ.

I believe that for women, sisterhood is crucial for living a vital and fruitful Christian life. One of the main ways women learn how to be godly women is from other godly women! I have learned so much about what it means from living in a single women's household during my four years of involvement in University Christian Outreach, the Summer Internship Program, and Detroit Summer Outreach. My current living situation with two other Christian women is another example of the benefits of sisterhood. We pray and share our faith openly. My ability to live out my own call to love others and to grow in holiness, is greatly enhanced because of their example and support.

Often in the area of sisterhood what we put into it is frequently what we get out of it. If I come distracted and preoccupied with my own needs, concerns, and preferences, it will be very difficult to focus my attention on the needs and concerns of my sisters. It's understandable that we may be tired from working all-day and have limited energy left for engaging in an in-depth relationship with others. But even with these limitations, I can choose to have an attitude that is other focused and willing to give what I have for the sake of my sisters. In reality, we receive sisterhood only by first being a sister to those around us.

Recipe for sisterhood

What inner characteristics or dispositions do we ourselves need in order to be good sisters to others? Here are a few. The first are faith and trust. These allow us to rely on God's promises and provision for us and therefore we are unafraid. When we lack faith and trust we become self-seeking, stingy, selfish, and grasping. We fail to love. Second we need love: The type of love that gives me the ability to serve outside of myself, place God and others first and myself third. We want to have the disposition of doing all the good to others that we can. This attitude of self-less service, kindness, and doing good deeds is unusual in today's world and has the power to transform those around us. Third we need quietness and strength, the inner attitude of calmness and peacefulness in our hearts. This disposition is born from faith and trust in God. It helps us to be open to learning, growing, and be persuaded towards holiness, service, and love. Our wish to learn and grow is driven by our desire to be acceptable to God rather than the world around us. Looking to God for acceptance frees us from competition and comparisons, thereby allowing us to more fully give of ourselves and love others.

Some examples of sisterhood

Sisterhood may come with a cost or inconvenience to one's self but the reward, the joy, that comes from giving of self far outweighs the cost. Luke chapter one, for example, recounts the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth. Immediately after the angel Gabriel left her, Mary "got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-40)." Mary stayed with Elizabeth for "about three months (Luke 1:56)." Making a journey, living in another town, and caring for her pregnant relative while being newly pregnant herself cannot have been easy. However, the joy Elizabeth and Mary find in supporting one another and being together is clear and reciprocal. Elizabeth is built up and inspired by Mary's faith in God's ability to do what he has promised. Mary likewise is built up and inspired by witnessing God's activity in Elizabeth's life. We all need to experience this type of sisterhood in order to remember and remind each other that our hope and our faith is in the Lord, "for nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37)."



Ruth and Naomi, painting by Sandy Freckleton Gagon

The story of Ruth and Naomi from the Old Testament *Book of Ruth*, is another example of two women who walked in obedience to God and supported each other in being faithful to God. In particular, Ruth supported Naomi by going to the fields and gleaning grain to provide food for Naomi. Naomi was not a young woman and could not do this for herself. Additionally, the *Book of Ruth* (Chapter 2, verse 11), explains how Ruth cared for her mother-in-law when her husband had passed away. Ruth left her father and mother and her homeland for Naomi's sake and came to live with Naomi's people, who were Israelites, a people she did not know before. There may be times when we might

find ourselves in Ruth's or Naomi's shoes. Like Naomi we sometimes find ourselves in situations where we cannot provide or care for ourselves. In such circumstances, we need to accept the service of others, whether that be requesting others to intercede on our behalf or requesting practical, tangible services. Like Ruth we may be in a position to offer some personal service for another person in need. Hopefully our service and expression of love will be visible to others and be a witness to the joy that comes from being obedient to God.

My own appreciation for sisterhood has developed over time. My first real opportunity for experiencing sisterhood was during a summer household I had in University Christian Outreach. I didn't initially like the experience of living so closely with a group of other single women. It was difficult to be intentionally vulnerable and to build relationships with women I might not have naturally been inclined towards. I soon discovered that I had the wrong attitude. I was surprised at how being willing to be vulnerable allowed others to be vulnerable in return. Once we were able to share honestly, trust was built. It allowed us to truly know one another and be loved as sisters. There was safety and freedom in that level of knowing another and being known in return. Today, I am still friends with these women, even though many of them live far away in other cities and countries. We still keep in contact and continue to support each other in our walks with the Lord, even though we are not able to see each other very often. At the beginning, sisterhood felt less like a gift and more like work. But the decision to pursue being a sister to my sisters has proved invaluable.

Sisterhood in practice

As women we are naturally inclined to be very sensitive and aware to spiritual things, and we can be quickly inspired. We read atmosphere, body language, and have a sense for emotions and the unspoken. We have unique gifts that are essential for building unity in the body (conversely we can also, if we choose, pull the body apart, make divisions, and cause disunity through bad speech, gossip, back-biting, etc.). We are naturally disposed to emphasize the personal dimensions of relationships, to reach out and make personal connections, and to form loyal friendships. As women we create a supportive environment that fosters growth, safety, and cares for the well-being of others.

Such an intentional approach can feel somewhat counter-intuitive, as though somehow by being intentional we are being disingenuous. I would argue, instead, that by being intentional we are showing how important this area really is to our Christian life. Furthermore, being intentional about this area allows us to develop habits of relating. Hopefully after *behaving* like a sister I will also start to *feel* more sisterly, and these behavior patterns will become much more my automatic response.



Janice Firn lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. She is a member of [Word of Life Community](#) and serves on [Kairos in North America](#), the international youth program of the Sword of the Spirit. She graduated from the University of Michigan in 2004 with a Master's of Social Work and currently works in hospital as a clinical supervisor in addition to providing counseling and support for cancer patients and their families.

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Illustration by Gerry Rauch

Thanks Be to God for Forty Years of Life in Covenant Community

An Announcement for Members of the Sword of the Spirit

Our community life began in 1970 when the Word of God was formed by the commitment of its original members to a solemn covenant, thus inaugurating a new form of renewal community in the church – covenant community. In the following years the Word of God was in ongoing close relationship with other covenant communities around the world until in 1982 the coordinators of the Word of God expanded the international work which the Lord began through them by organizing an international community called the [Sword of the Spirit](#). The members of other communities were invited to join with them. The first group of communities did so because of a recognition that we all shared a common call from God to live as part of a single international, ecumenical community of communities, now called the Sword of the Spirit.

Gathering to Give Thanks to God

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the inauguration of “Covenant Community” and it is fitting to celebrate that important event. The International Assembly of the Sword of the Spirit will be held in Ann Arbor from the 3rd through the 6th of May, and that provides us with an opportunity to commemorate the beginnings of covenant community, in the city where it began, with leaders representing many of our communities from around the world.

The Anniversary gathering will be held on Sunday 2 May at Knox Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor from 4:30pm. – 6:30pm, followed by a time of fellowship and light refreshments. We will hear testimonies to the blessing of covenant community from various locations around the world, and spend time worshipping God and giving thanks. *All members of the Sword of the Spirit are invited*, although we recognize that not many from outside of Michigan will be able to attend. **We will however video the event and make DVDs available to all member communities**

of The Sword of the Spirit.

Local Celebrations

We will designate the year from 1 May 2010 through 30 April 2011 as our fortieth anniversary year, and the International Executive Council of the Sword of the Spirit would like to encourage our member communities to celebrate this fortieth anniversary in your own locale community during that year. This could be an excellent opportunity to invite guests – church leaders and leaders of other movements and communities – to join with us and experience a taste of our community life.

Living Bulwark

During this year [Living Bulwark](#), the online magazine of the [Sword of the Spirit](#) will feature regular contributions highlighting the great blessings of life in covenant community or aspects of our history. We would like to encourage local leaders to send in contributions, including the text of talks given at your own local celebration of the anniversary, photos of those gatherings, and perhaps some of your own local history.

Guest Arrangements for those attending the gathering in Ann Arbor on 2 May

Because of limited capacity in Knox Presbyterian church, [Word of Life Community](#) asks that if you are from outside of Michigan and plan to attend the gathering, you contact the community office so that they can keep an eye on expected numbers.

Because of limited capacity in the local community (they will already be hosting the members of the International Assembly) Word of Life asks that if you plan to attend and need overnight accommodation, you arrange that accommodation yourself.

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Focus for Fasting

*Fasting helps remind us of our higher calling
to serve and worship Jesus Christ*

By Jerry Munk

I do not know about you, but I really dislike fasting. It is not that I start every day thinking how much I hate it, but about this time each year (several weeks into Great Lent for the Orthodox, a season for prayer and fasting) I find myself thinking, “Boy, I really don’t like this.” You see, I like to eat. I like good food and I like to feel full and content. The Orthodox Church, however, calls me to give up what I like for a few weeks every year. She asks that I give up food that I enjoy and suggests that I eat less of what I do not enjoy. With a wisdom that surpasses my own, she leads me to stop pleasing my own body long enough to notice the spiritual realities which I may have overlooked.

Ever since my childhood I have often gone to my grandfather’s cottage which is nestled among the trees on the shore of northern Lake Michigan. After a week or two I return to my home in Lansing and find myself bombarded with the noise of a good-sized city. Horns, sirens, trains, whistles and bells all fill the background. I did not notice them before I left, and after a few days back in town they again move out of my awareness. For those few days in between, however, I realize just how noisy my life really is.

In a sense, I think fasting is something like my time at the lake. For a few days we take a break from our regular routine. We stop giving in to the clamor of our physical bodies: “Feed me, entertain me, let me sleep, let me play, I want to feel full and satisfied.” For a while we are free from this clamor--free to spend a special time with our Lord and to examine our spiritual state. When the fast is over and we return to our regular routine, we may realize in a new way just how noisy our physical desires really are. We can begin to see that our bodies make a lot of demands

but not all those demands need to be met. Also, we have hopefully learned to listen to the still small voice of God, a voice that seems louder and clearer when not drowned out by the din of our physical appetites.

Thus, the Orthodox Christian begins forty days of fasting. It seems that all know what to fast from and when our fast begins and ends (any good Orthodox Church calendar will tell you that), but I have found that very few really know why we fast. Someone once said, "If you aim at nothing, you can be pretty sure to hit it." I think a lot of people take this approach when it comes to fasting. They do not know why they fast, but the Orthodox Church says that they should and so they do. While it is good to simply obey the authority of the Lord as exercised through his church even when we do not understand the whys and wherefores, it is much better to obey with understanding.

God has not been silent about his reasons for calling us to fast. Therefore, we can know why we fast and, using this knowledge, better cooperate with the Lord's work in our life. Let us examine a few of the more prominent reasons for fasting so we can begin to put more into our fast and thus get more out of it as well.

Preparation

First, and perhaps most obviously, we fast to prepare ourselves. During Great Lent we prepare to participate in the liturgical re-enactment and remembrance of Christ's suffering and death, followed by the celebration of his glorious resurrection. Fasting helps remind us that "our bodies were not made for the things of this world" (I Corinthians 6:13-20); rather, we have a higher calling to serve and worship Christ and build his body, the Church.

"Abstaining from worldly things," writes St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD), "presents the soul pure and nimble." It is this purity and spiritual nimbleness which we seek to gain in preparation for Holy Week and Easter. The apostle Paul elicits the image of an athlete in preparation for a race, "Every athlete in training submits to strict discipline ...I buffet my body and bring it under complete control" (I Corinthians 9: 25-27). Indeed, the word "asceticism" is derived from a Greek word meaning practice or training for the attainment of a goal. A very important goal for the Orthodox Christian throughout the observance of Great Lent is to more fully participate in and spiritually identify with Christ's suffering and death and to fully celebrate his resurrection.

Humility

Another reason we fast is to grow in humility. David said, "I humble myself with fasting" (Psalm 69:10). When we fast, we come to see more clearly just how dependent we are upon food. St. Clement reminds us, "It [fasting] declares that as the life of each one of us depends upon food, total abstention is the sign of death." Human beings have a great capacity for pride. We like to feel that we alone are in control, we make things happen, we are independent. How important and humbling it is to remember that without God's provision of something as basic as food we would quickly die.

I find it interesting that eating is so intricately bound up with pride in the very first sin, eating the forbidden fruit. By eating, Adam and Eve sought to become like God--a noble goal approached in the wrong way. By fasting we humble ourselves before our Creator and Sustainer and, in that humility, allow Him to make us partakers of his divine nature. Similarly, we should take note that the Prodigal Son did not even begin to think of reconciliation with his father until he had experienced the humiliation of hunger.

As we fast we can also grow in our appreciation of the humility of Jesus Christ. The eternal Son of God, the King of Creation, became man, experiencing the weakness of creation. He himself fasted for forty days and the Bread of Life hungered for want of food. We, as humans, will never really know that total humiliation which Jesus gladly accepted on our behalf, but through fasting we can begin to taste it and identify with it more and more.

Jesus, however, warns that fasting will not always produce humility. In fact, if approached in a wrong spirit, pride

can just as easily emerge. “And when you fast, do not put on a sad face as the hypocrites do. They neglect their appearance so that everyone will see that they are fasting. I assure you, they have already been paid in full. When you go without food, wash your face and comb your hair, so that others cannot know that you are fasting--only your Father, who is unseen, will know. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you” (Matthew 6:16-18).

The Orthodox Church looks to the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) as the way to approach spiritual asceticism. The Pharisee stood apart, praying with himself, extolling the virtue of his own deeds, while the tax collector did not even raise his head but only beat his breast, saying, “God, have pity on me a sinner!” “I tell you,” Jesus said, “the tax collector and not the Pharisee was in the right with God when he went home. For everyone who makes himself great will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be made great.”

Mourning

The death of Christ was the ultimate tragedy of history. We must never lose sight of the fact that our sin, our rebellion, required the penalty of death. Jesus Christ was murdered by human hands, not because of any wrong He committed, but because He willingly offered himself as payment for our sins. The absolute darkness which Christ endured, he endured for us and because of us.

The Orthodox Church will not allow us to push this event into the deep recesses of past history. Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, exists outside of time. His death and, indeed, his resurrection are not simply commemorated during Holy Week and Easter, but in a mystical sense they are relived. As we mourn the suffering and death of Christ in Holy Week services, we do not speak of Christ’s death as a past event. Rather, we proclaim it today! “Today, Judas forsakes the Master...Today, the Jews nailed to the cross the Lord.. .Today they pierced His side with a spear...Today is hung upon the Tree He who suspended the land in the midst of the waters.” It is also today that, “Every member of Thy Holy Body endured dishonor for us: Thy Head, the thorns; Thy Face, the spittings; Thy Mouth, the vinegar and gall; Thy Ears, the blasphemies; Thy Back, the lash; Thy Bands, the reed; Thy Body, extension upon the Cross; Thy Joints, the nails; and thy Side, the Spear” (from the vespers of Holy Thursday).

Great Lent allows us to express through fasting and prayer sorrow for the sins which required the suffering and death of Christ. During Bright Week and, indeed, each and every Sunday, we celebrate His resurrection, but now during Lent we set aside time to mourn. We should have genuine sorrow for our own sin and repent, repairing the wrongdoing we have committed.

We also sorrow over and seek mercy for the sins of our family, our fellow believers and those of our country. The prophet Daniel provides a tremendous example and inspiration for us in Lent, “I prayed earnestly to the Lord God, pleading with him, fasting, wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes [an Old Testament expression of severe sorrow]... and confessed the sins of my people...Lord, hear us and forgive us” (Daniel 9:3-19).

Viewing Great Lent as a time of preparation, humility and mourning will help us find more meaning in our fast. There are, of course, many other things which may provide a useful focus, but these three can serve as a place of beginning from which we can grow and develop a great appreciation of both the fast itself and the celebration we anticipate.

Fasting alone is not all that we are called to do during Great Lent. Prayer, reconciliation, attendance and participation at Lenten services, acts of mercy and charity and other spiritual labors must also be included to create a balanced and profitable Lenten experience. What is important is that we never become lethargic in our Christian walk, simply going through the motions of our spiritual obligations, void of understanding and appreciation of their challenge to us. The Pharisees during the time of Christ kept every minute law and tradition of the Jewish faith, yet

they did not profit from all their labor and failed to recognize their own Messiah when he stood before them. Throughout Great Lent may we seek to see with spiritual understanding the meaning of our fast, that we may more clearly discern the risen Christ when he is revealed in all his glory as we receive the Light.

[This article was first published in *Theosis, Newsletter for Orthodox Spiritual Renewal*, April, 1984. Reprinted with permission.]



Jerry Munk is a member of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church and a coordinator in the [Work of Christ Community](#), Lansing, Michigan, USA. He and his wife Jan have three grown children, all actively participating in the community.

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Your Word Beat Upon My Heart

by Augustine of Hippo

I love you, Lord, not doubtingly, but with absolute certainty. Your Word beat upon my heart until I fell in love with you, and now the universe and everything in it tells me to love you, and tells the same thing to us all, so that we are without excuse.

And what do I love when I love you? Not physical beauty, or the grandeur of our existence in time, or the radiance of light that pleases the eye, or the sweet melody of old familiar songs, or the fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices, or the taste of manna or honey, or the arms we like to use to clasp each other. None of these do I love when I love my God. Yet there is a kind of light, and a kind of melody, and a kind of fragrance, and a kind of food, and a kind of embracing, when I love my God. They are the kind of light and sound and odor and food and love that affect the senses of the inner man. There is another dimension of life in which my soul reflects a light that space itself cannot contain. It hears melodies that never fade with time. It inhales lovely scents that are not blown away by the wind. It eats without diminishing or consuming the supply. It never gets separated from the embrace of God and never gets tired of it. That is what I love when I love my God.

And what is my God? I asked the earth and it replied, "I am not he"; and everything in it said the same thing. I asked the sea ... I asked the

Brief Bio of Augustine

Aurelius Augustine was born in 345 in the town of Tagaste, in Roman North Africa, in what is today Algeria. His mother was Monica, a very devout Christian who had a significant influence on her son's life. His father, named Patricius, was a pagan of significant status in society. Patricius became a Christian shortly before his death.

Augustine was educated at Carthage where he enjoyed academic success. He also enjoyed the party life, and at the age of 17 fell in love with a woman whom he never named. They lived together unmarried for 13 years and had a son whom Augustine named Adeodatus, meaning "gift from God." His son died in his youth.

At the age of 19, after reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, Augustine fell in love with philosophy. He later wrote, "It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart." While he pursued Platonic philosophy and the theology of the Manichaens, a Christian heretical sect, he became restless for truth and virtue.

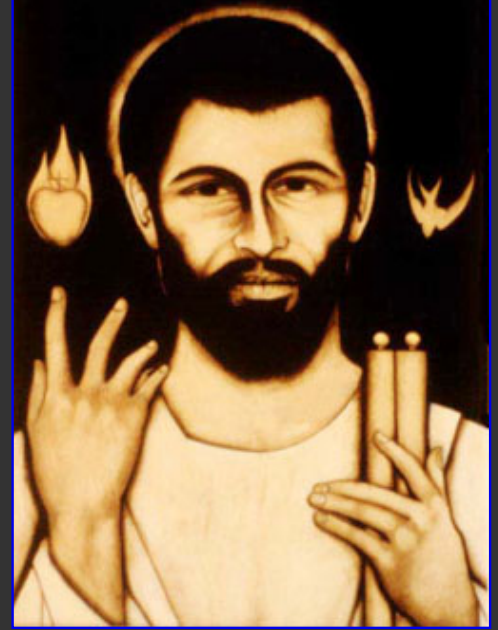
heavens, the sun, the moon and stars. They said to me, "Neither are we the God you seek." I said to all the sensory objects that cluster around my body and cause it to react, "You speak of God and say you are not he. Then tell me something about him." And they all cried out with a loud voice, "He made us!" I questioned them by fixing my attention on them, and their beauty was their answer.

Then I turned to myself and said, "Who are you?" And I replied, "A man." But in me are present both body and soul, one exterior, the other interior. Which should I impress to help me find my God? With my physical apparatus I had already searched for him from earth to sky, as far as the eye could see. But the interior equipment is better. The messengers of my body delivered to it the answer of heaven and earth and everything in them when they told me, "We are not God," and "He made us." The inner man knows these things by means of the ministering of the outer man. The inner "I" knows them; I, the soul, know them through the senses of the body. So I asked the whole frame of the universe about God and it answered back, "I am not he, but he made me."

The truth is, there is one mediator whom you in your hidden mercy have revealed to the meek and lowly, and have sent as an example of humility to be followed. That is the mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, who has appeared between mortal sinners and the immortal Just One. As men are, he was mortal; as God is, he was just. And because righteousness issues in life and peace, he, through his righteousness with God, nullified the death of justified sinners by sharing their lot with them....

How much you loved us, Good Father, who spared not your own Son but gave him up for us sinners! How much you loved us, since it was on our behalf that he, who thought it no robbery to be equal with you, submitted himself to the death of the cross. He alone was free among the dead because he was free to lay down his life to take it again. For us he was both victor and victim, or should I say, victor because victim.... By being born your Son, and then becoming a slave to serve us, he made us to become your sons. So I have good reason for my strong hope in him who sits at your right hand and makes intercession for us. If I didn't have that hope I would be desperate. But I believe that in him you heal all my weaknesses, and they are many and great ... but your medicine is even greater. It would be easy to think that your Word is too remote for any communication with man. It would be easy to despair, had not the Word become flesh to dwell in our midst.

[This excerpt from the *Confessions of Saint Augustine* was translated by Sherwood Eliot Wirth, *Love Song*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, p. 124-128]



Painting by Michael O'Brien

Shortly before his 30th birthday, Augustine encountered Ambrose, the saintly bishop of Milan. Augustine was moved by Ambrose's example and his inspired teaching and preaching of the gospel. At the age of 32 Augustine found peace with God and was baptized by Ambrose during the Easter liturgy in 387. Augustine returned to North Africa and formed a monastic community with a group of friends. He was ordained a priest in 391 and became a noted preacher. In 396 he reluctantly became a bishop and remained the bishop of Hippo until his death in 430. He left his monastic community, but continued to lead a monastic life with the parish priests of Hippo in his episcopal residence. Augustine died on August 28, 430, during the siege of Hippo by the Vandals.

Augustine was a prolific writer and original thinker. His numerous writings, including theological treatises, sermons, scripture commentaries, and philosophical dialogues, number into the hundreds. His autobiography, the *Confessions*, was considered the

first Western autobiography. It was highly read among his contemporaries and has continued as a classic throughout the ages.

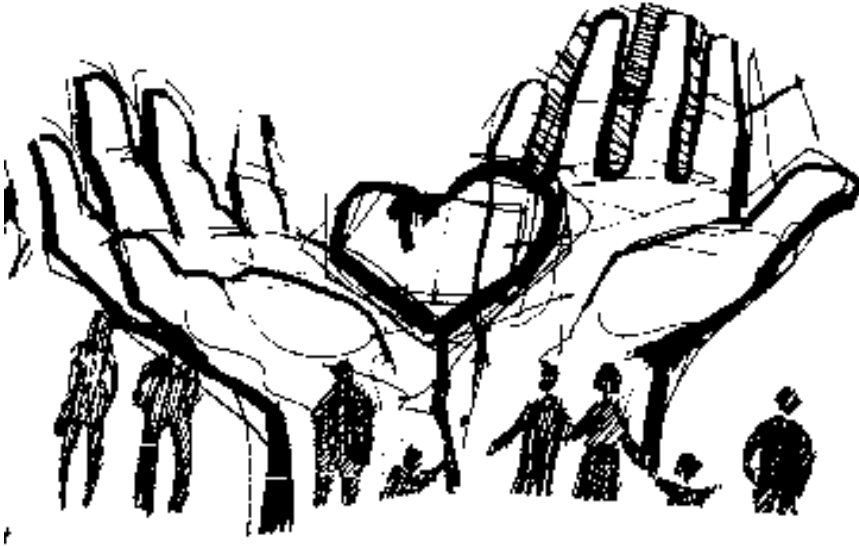
Augustine is one of the most important figures in the development of Western Christianity. He is esteemed as a great Latin church father and a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. Many Protestants consider him to be one of the theological fathers of Reformation teaching. Among Orthodox he is called St. Augustine the Blessed.

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Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing

by Søren Kierkegaard

Father in heaven, what is man without you! What is all that he knows, vast accumulation though it be, but a chipped fragment if he does not know you! What is all his striving, could it even encompass a world, but a half-finished work if he does not know you: you the One, who is one thing and who is all!

So may you give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills only one thing. In prosperity may you grant perseverance to will one thing; amid distractions, collectedness to will one thing; in suffering, patience to will one thing. O you who give both the beginning and the completion, may you early, at the dawn of day, give to the young person the resolution to will one thing. As the day wanes, may you give to the old person a renewed remembrance of their first resolution, that the first may be like the last, the last like the first, in possession of a life that has willed only one thing.

Alas, but this has indeed not come to pass. Something has come in between. The separation of sin lies in between. Each day, and day after day something is being placed in between: delay, blockage, interruption, delusion, corruption. So in this time of repentance may you give the courage once again to will one thing. True, it is an

Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher and theologian. He is considered one of the towering Christian existential thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century. He was born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1813 and died in 1855 at the age of 42.

Among his many books are *Training in Christianity*, *Sickness unto Death*, and *Fear and Trembling*. In 1846 he wrote *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* as a meditation on repentance and preparing oneself for confession of sin.

A Selection of Quotes

God creates out of nothing. Wonderful you say. Yes, to be sure, but he does what is still more wonderful: he makes saints out of sinners. - *Journals* entry, March, 1836

What the age needs is not a genius — it has had geniuses enough, but a martyr, who in order to teach men to obey would himself be obedient unto death. What the age needs is awakening. ...I never forget how God helps me and it is therefore my last wish that everything may be to his honor. - *Journals* entry, 1847

interruption of our ordinary tasks; we do lay down our work as though it were a day of rest, when the penitent (and it is only in a time of repentance that the heavy-laden worker may be quiet in the confession of sin) is alone before you in self-accusation. This is indeed an interruption. But it is an interruption that searches back into its very beginnings that it might bind up anew that which sin has separated, that in its grief it might atone for lost time, that in its anxiety it might bring to completion that which lies before it. O you who give both the beginning and the completion, give victory in the day of need so that what neither a person's burning wish nor their determined resolution may attain to, may be granted in the sorrowing of repentance: to will only one thing.

...So let us, then, speak about this sentence: "Purity of heart is to will one thing" as we base our meditation on the Apostle James' words in his Epistle, Chapter 4, verse 8:

"Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts you double-minded."

For only the pure in heart can see God, and therefore, draw near to him; and only by God's drawing near to them can they maintain this purity. And he who in truth wills only one thing can will only the Good, and he who only wills one thing when he wills the Good can only will the Good in truth.

I. IF IT WILL BE POSSIBLE, THAT A MAN CAN WILL ONLY ONE THING, THEN HE MUST WILL THE GOOD.

To will only one thing: but will this not inevitably become a long-drawn-out talk? If one should consider this matter properly must he not first consider, one by one, each goal in life that a man could conceivably set up for himself, mentioning separately all of the many things that a man might will? and not only this; since each of these considerations readily becomes too abstract in character, is he not obliged as the next step to attempt to will, one after the other, each of these goals in order to find out what is the single thing he is to will, if it is a matter of willing only one thing? Yes, if someone should begin in this fashion, then he would never come to an end. Or more accurately, how could he ever arrive at the end since at the outset he took the wrong way and then continued to go on further and further along this false way?

It is only by a painful route that this way leads to the Good, namely, when the wanderer turns around and goes back. For as the Good is only a single thing, so all ways lead to the Good, even the false ones: when the repentant one follows the same way back. O you the



Sin is in itself separation from the good, but despair over sin is separation a second time - *The Sickness unto Death*, 1849

Out of love, God becomes man. He says: "See, here is what it is to be a human being." - *The Sickness unto Death*, 1849

A person in despair wants despairingly to be himself. But surely if he wants despairingly to be himself, he cannot want to be rid of himself. Yes, or so it seems. But closer observation reveals the contradiction to be still the same. The self which, in his despair, he wants to be, is a self he is not (indeed, to want to be the self he truly is, is the very opposite of despair). - *The Sickness unto Death*, 1849

unfathomable trust-worthiness of the Good! Wherever a man may be in the world, whichever road he travels, when he wills one thing, he is on a road that leads him to you! Here such a far-flung enumeration would only work harm. Instead of wasting many moments on naming the vast multitude of goals or squandering life's costly years in personal experiments upon them, can the talk do as life ought to do - with a commendable brevity stick to the point?

In a certain sense nothing can be spoken of so briefly as the Good, when it is well described. For the Good without condition and without qualification, without preface and without compromise is, absolutely the only thing that a man may and should will, and is only one thing. O blessed brevity, o blessed simplicity, that seizes swiftly what cleverness tired out in the service of vanity, may grasp but slowly! That which a simple soul, in the happy impulse of a pious heart, feels no need of understanding in an elaborate way, since he simply seizes the Good immediately, is grasped by the clever one only at the cost of much time and much grief. The way this one thing is willed, he wills is not the Good; another wills one thing nor is what he wills the Good; a third wills one thing and what he wills is the Good. No, it is not done in that way. The person who wills one thing that is not the Good, he does not truly will one thing. It is a delusion, an illusion, a deception, a self-deception that he wills only one thing. For in his innermost being he is, he is bound to be, double-minded. Therefore the Apostle says, "Purify your hearts you double-minded," that is, purify your hearts of double-mindedness; in other words, let your hearts in truth will only one thing, for therein is the heart's purity.

[This extract, taken from the introduction to the book, *Purity of the Heart Is to Will One Thing*, is slightly adapted from the English translation by Douglas V. Steere, first published by Harper in 1938.]



sketch of Kierkegaard in a coffee-house

Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when every one has to throw off his mask? Do you believe that life will always let itself be mocked? Do you think you can slip away a little before midnight in order to avoid this? Or are you not terrified by it? I have seen men in real life who so long deceived others that at last their true nature could not reveal itself... In every man there is something which to a certain degree prevents him from becoming perfectly transparent to himself; and this may be the case in so high a degree, he may be so inexplicably woven into relationships of life which extend far beyond himself that he almost cannot reveal himself. But he who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the most unhappy man of all.

God Has Reigned from a Tree

Meditations on the Cross of Jesus Christ



*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that
we might die to sin and live for righteousness;
by his wounds you have been healed.*

- 1 Peter 2:24

The Cross - the Tree of Life

by Hippolytus (c.170-236)

The tree is my everlasting salvation. It is my food, a shared banquet. Its roots and the spread of its branches are my own roots and extension... Its shade I take for my resting place; in my flight from oppressive heat it is the source of refreshing dew for me... Food for my hunger and wellspring for my thirst, it is also covering for my nakedness, with the spirit of life as its leaves... Fearful of God, I find in it a place of safety; when unsteady a source of stability. In the face of a struggle, I look to it as a prize; in victory my trophy.

It is Jacob's ladder, the passage of angels, at whose summit the Lord is affixed. This tree, the plant of immortality, rears from earth to reach as high as heaven, fixing the Lord between heaven and earth. It is the foundation and stabilizer of the universe, undergirding the world that we inhabit. It is the binding force of the world... It is riveted into a unity by the invisible bonds of the Spirit, so that its connection with God can never be severed. Brushing heaven with its uppermost branches, it remains fixed in the earth, and between the two points, its huge hands completely enfold the stirring of the air. A single whole, it penetrates all things and all places.

What We Behold on the Cross

by Augustine of Hippo (c.354-430)

As they were *looking on*, so we too gaze on his wounds as he hangs. We see his blood as he dies. We see the price offered by the redeemer, touch the scars of his resurrection. He bows his head, as if to kiss you. His heart is made bare open, as it were, in love to you. His arms are extended that he may embrace you. His whole body is displayed for your redemption. Ponder how great these things are. Let all this be rightly weighed in your mind: as he was once fixed to the cross in every part of his body for you, so he may now be fixed in every part of your soul. [GMI 248]

God Has Reigned from a Tree

a hymn for Passiontide by Venantius Fortunatus (c.530-610)

The standards of the King appear,
the mystery of the cross shines out in glory,
the cross on which life suffered death
and by that death gave back life to us.

His side, wounded by the spear's cruel point,
poured out water and blood
to wash away the stains of our sins.

The words of David's true prophetic song were fulfilled,
in which he announced to the nations:
"God has reigned from a tree."

Tree of dazzling beauty,
adorned with the purple of the King's blood,
and chosen from a stock
worthy to bear limbs so sacred.

How favoured the tree
on whose branches hung the ransom of the world;
it was made a balance on which his body was weighed,
and bore away the prey that hell had claimed.

Hail, cross, our only hope!
In this season of passiontide
give an increase of grace to the good
and wipe out the sins of the guilty.

Let every spirit praise you,
fount of salvation, Holy Trinity.
On those to whom you have generously given the
victory of the cross,
bestow the reward also. Amen.

The Throne of Love

by Rupert, Abbot of Deutz (c.1075-1129)

We venerate the cross as a safeguard of faith, as the strengthening of hope and the throne of love. It is the sign of mercy, the proof of forgiveness, the vehicle of grace and the banner of peace. We venerate the cross, because it has

broken down our pride, shattered our envy, redeemed our sin and atoned for our punishment.

The cross of Christ is the door to heaven, the key to paradise, the downfall of the devil, the uplifting of mankind, the consolation of our imprisonment, the prize for our freedom. The cross was the hope of the patriarchs, the promise of the prophets, the triumph of kings and the ministry of priests. Tyrants are convicted by the cross and the mighty ones defeated, it lifts up the miserable and honors the poor. The cross is the end of darkness, the spreading of light, the flight of death, the ship of life and the kingdom of salvation.

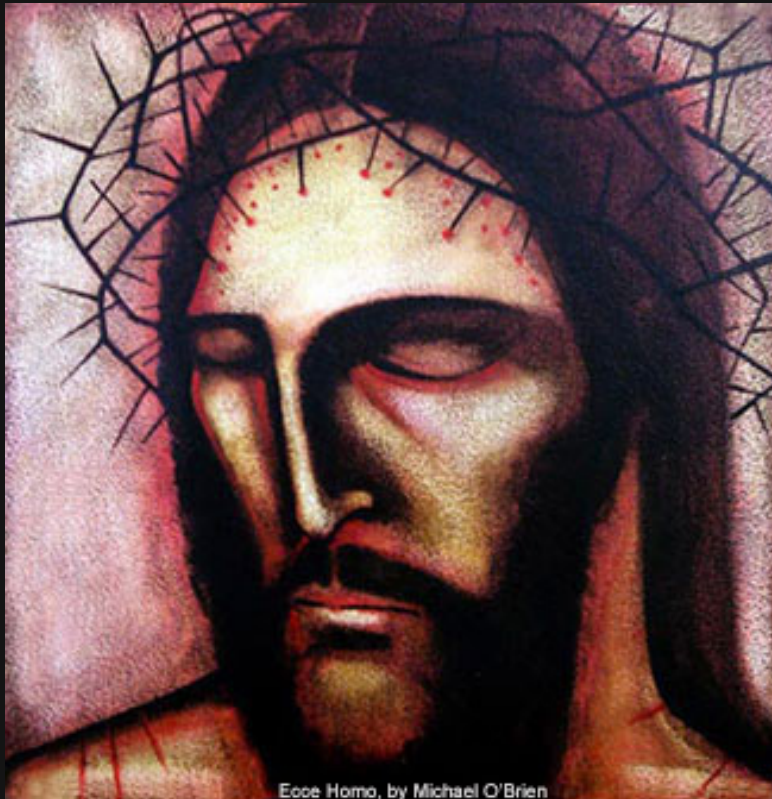
Whatever we accomplish for God, whatever we succeed and hope for, is the fruit of our veneration of the cross. By the cross Christ draws everything to him. It is the kingdom of the Father, the scepter of the Son and the seal of the Holy Spirit, a witness to the total Trinity.

The answer of a Christian reflection on Genesis is that sin has to be taken away, removed from human life. Not only do human beings have to cease doing the things that cause evil and further ruin, the things that deserve penalization, but also the sinful state of the human race that causes those actions has to be changed. The disease that leads to death has to be healed. Sinfulness has to be eradicated; true health, true life, has to be given. Human beings need a Redeemer, someone who can rescue them from the misfortune into which they have fallen and restore them to true life.

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Pain's Conundrum

by Sean O'Neill

You died for all men's sins, so why do I die too?
Or is it not for sins I die? Is it that you
Contrive some more ignoble travesty or trick?
Does bating bears or training dogs to fight seem sick?
Do angels wager on my grimaces and cheer
When I begin to flag or witless fill with fear?

What marvels of logic you do make. But say this:
Was it I whose weakness bartered the traitor's kiss?
And did I, feckless, hide away when you were scourged
Or stand and jeer you at your death when I was urged?
Is one death not enough that you will ask for mine?

Enough? Your death exceeded by this doleful sign:
Two bloody blocks of wood, the standing lonely cross.
You turned despair and longing into hope; you spanned

The chasms in our virtue with a bridge and unmanned
These sins, incinerating with them all my guilt,
Demolishing the awful totems I had built?

So whence the great conundrum of my living pain
If ransoms in your blood remove my sinful stain?
Perhaps the blessing in the often threshing hand
Is not the punishment I try to understand.
Instead the truly wildest thought I can conceive
Is that you let me feel your mortal pain and leave
My senses to the miseries you did endure,
When in the garden even God was so unsure.

So in the traitor's kiss I do betray my sin
And castigate my scourging and I will begin
To see that all the loud protesting that I do
Is drowning in the mercies that have come from you.
When you allow participation in your grief
The lesson will endure, while yet the pain is brief.

Sean O'Neill is originally from Glasgow, Scotland, and currently lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA. His poems range from the sacred to the mundane and sometimes, inadvertently, both at the same time.

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I Have Graven You upon My Palms a poem by Jeanne Kun

I have graven you upon my palms.

- Isaiah 49:16

Long ago your hands clung 'round Mary's neck,
tiny fingers twining her hair about them
while she hugged you to her breast.
Later Joseph held your boy-hand secure within his firm grasp
as you walked the road together on your first pilgrimage to Jerusalem
and taught those hands to handle lathe
and plane rough wood beams to smooth usefulness.

Your hands blessed and healed,
tousled the curly heads of the children who flocked around you,
and wrote in the dust as the elders looked on,
hoping to ensnare you, too, in the trap laid for the adulteress.

Raised in thanksgiving,
your hands
multiplied the loaves and fishes
and broke bread
to feed your disciples' hunger with much more than crushed wheat.

Then those same hands
that washed soiled feet
(and stained, sin-encrusted souls)
were wrenched and held fast,
forced to the crossbeam as the executioner plied open your fingers
and drove iron through your palms,
inscribing my name upon them.

Tendons mangled and severed,
nerves vibrating in agony,
muscles contorted in tight spasms—
those hands were made useless
except to hold you pinioned to the cross
as your body sagged,
its weight straining and pressing raw against the nails.

Your hands, once so wounded and so bloodied,
still bear the hard-won battle scars—
now a sign of victory and glory
and record of the price you paid for me.

These wounds indelibly written upon your flesh
plead on my behalf before the throne of God
where you stand and never cease to intercede as the Lamb slain for me.

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