



ASCENDING THE HEIGHTS

ENCOUNTERING THE LIVING GOD

Studies by
PAUL H. WILSON

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INTRODUCTION

When invited to lead WORD 2021, the Bible teaching day hosted by The Kings Cross Church in Hexthorpe in partnership with Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET), I chose the theme 'Ascending the Heights'. The study follows Peter on his roller-coaster experience of being Jesus' disciple.

I assume the traditional view that Mark's Gospel is Peter's account of his three years with Jesus, as told to and recorded by Mark. During the studies, Bible quotations will be taken from the New International Version (Anglicised, Zondervan, 2011), unless otherwise stated. When taking quotations from Mark's Gospel, I will use the format (chapter:verse) only. When quoting from other books of the Bible, I will use the format (title chapter:verse).

The three mountains I have chosen to focus on in these studies are the Mounts of Prayer, Transfiguration and Crucifixion. We explore Jesus' life of prayer, holiness, death and resurrection. With Peter, we learn the value of intimacy with God, his lifelong desire for holiness (1 Peter 1:16), and the forgiveness he receives, even when he has denied Jesus.

I invite you to use these studies in your devotions or as part of a house group. My prayer is that with Peter, you may believe '*the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God*' (Mark 1:1), grow as life-long disciples of Jesus, commissioned and anointed to share Jesus with others.

I thank the Revd Derek Balsdon, Development Worker for MET, for adding questions at the end of each study, Karen Wilson, the Revd Janet Knowles-Berry and MOORLEYS for helping to prepare the text for publishing, and Daniel Watson for the cover.

Paul Wilson

August 2021

1. THE MOUNT OF PRAYER

‘After leaving them, he (Jesus) went up on the mountainside to pray’ (Mark 6:46).

Mark’s gospel is a fast-paced, page-turning, roller-coaster ride of Peter’s experience as Jesus’ disciple. The aim of the gospel is that the reader might know the *‘good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God’* (1:1). It is a 16-chapter gospel tract, revealing to the reader who Jesus is. The hope is that we too might become disciples of Jesus. The phrases *‘at once’* (1:12,18), *‘without delay’* (1:20), *‘as soon as’* (1:29), *‘immediately’* (1:30) are all found in the first 34 verses.

This first chapter contains Jesus’ baptism, testing in the wilderness, preaching a message of repentance and the immediacy of the Kingdom of God, calling the disciples, driving out impure spirits, healing Peter’s mother-in-law, and the crowds gathered at Peter’s house for healing. It is a round of fruitful ministry and mission, at a pace which Peter expected Jesus to continue. And the first shock for Peter was that the morning after the night before, when crowds were again gathering, *‘looking for Jesus’* (1:37), Jesus was nowhere to be found. Eventually, Peter found Jesus in a solitary place, *‘where he (Jesus) prayed’* (1:35) and was guided by the Father to the next stage of ministry, travelling *‘through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons’* (1:39).

We see the cycle repeated in Mark 6. The people of Nazareth rejected Jesus because his teaching offended them (6:3). Jesus left them, *‘amazed at their lack of faith’* (6:6). Jesus’ ministry continued *‘from village to village’* and was then multiplied by sending out his disciples, two by two, with his authority to preach, anoint the sick and drive out demons (6:12). Later Jesus tried to escape the crowds to grieve the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. When his disciples returned from a fruitful mission trip, Jesus said, *‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest’* (6:31). However, the crowds did not give them the time they needed to recover. Five thousand men plus women and children arrived, and Jesus had compassion on them or as the Message says, *‘his heart broke’* because they were like sheep without a shepherd (6:34). Jesus met their spiritual needs, teaching them about the

Kingdom of God. He met their physical needs, with five loaves and two fish and all were satisfied with 12 baskets of broken pieces left over (6:39-43). Another busy time of ministry, capped not by the sharing of picnic lunches, but a divine miracle which John's gospel sees as on a par with manna in the wilderness (John 6:32). What happened next? Jesus dismissed the crowds, sent the disciples off in the boat, and '*went up on a mountainside to pray*' (6:46).

Even reading those two paragraphs, makes you want a rest! Jesus' ministry was one of rushing and resting, activity and prayer. I am sure that during those busy times, Jesus prayed. Jesus was modelling the Sabbath principle. Ruth Haley Barton says that keeping the Sabbath '*honours the body's need for rest, the spirit's need for replenishment and the soul's need to delight itself for God's sake.*' (The Road We Must Travel, 2004). These passages come at a very appropriate time for each of us. We have been through 18 months of pandemic, and it isn't over yet, even though things will change. We are tired, grieving, in need of a holiday or meeting friends and family.

At one level, the Sabbath principle is weekly and is a time of rest, replenishment, and time with God, but it is also daily and part of the rhythm of life. You cannot live at 100mph all the time. You cannot ignore the needs of heart, soul, mind, and strength. The God you love, loves all of you. He created you to be a human being, not a human doing. Food, rest, family friends and creation, provide rest and replenishment.

Don't forget the other part of the Sabbath; you need God. The disciples had a busy time of ministry and came back to Jesus, on fire but tired. Jesus says, '*Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest*' (6:31). Jesus modelled the principle of prayer as time alone with God. He encourages us to do the same. Seven days without spending time with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, makes one weak. I know, I've tried it. Yet, when I've made time for God, he has made time for me. It is true. '*Come near to God and he will come near to you*' (James 4:8).

I grew up in a family where my mum and sister modelled the daily quiet time. (My dad died when I was seven, but he modelled it too.) I had various age-related Bible notes. Each night, I prayed with my mum, until I had additional personal prayer times. It is a principle,

Karen and I modelled for our children. In ministry, I have had to guard that time. Throughout my ministry, prayer was introduced and guarded as a key part of church life. We need to spend time being quiet, listening for God speaking to us. We need to admit we can't do everything, and ask for his guidance, help and strength. We need the filling of the Holy Spirit, the same power which raised Jesus from the dead, to raise us to life in all its fullness (Ephesians 1:19). *'Now then, my children listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways'* (Proverbs 8:32).

If we want to progress in prayer, we might as well make our first prayer request to be that of the disciples, *'Lord teach us how to pray'* (Luke 11:1).

We go to the Sermon on the Mount for Matthew's version of Jesus' teaching on prayer.

⁹ *"This, then, is how you should pray:*

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹Give us today our daily bread.
¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one". (Matthew 6:9-13).*

In the 1990s, during a precious time of renewal in our lives and churches, we were asked, 'Do you seek God's hand or God's face?' It was a question examining our motives for seeking God. Do we seek God to receive from him, or do we seek God to delight in his presence?

In his chapter on the Lord's Prayer in 'Simply Good News' (SPCK, 2015), Tom Wright takes us through the back door of the Lord's Prayer, exploring the requests for help, before a time of worship. He argues that most people start their prayer life with the cry, 'Help!' The jobless family need food on the table and electricity in the home. The person cries out for forgiveness and a new start as their life falls apart. People facing the hospital test or, even worse,

the result, pray not to go through the time of pain and suffering, asking that God will lead them another way.

The good news is, God answers those prayers for help. In Exodus 2:23-24, we read, *'During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.'* Moses and the Exodus was God's answer. When we are too depressed, worried, scared, confused and unable to pray, *'The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us, through wordless groans'* (Romans 8:26). Yes, God often responds to our groans and tears, without us ever expressing it as prayer. This is not only for us, but it also happens to people who know nothing of God, except in their darkest moment, they cry out and God responds. God's response, maybe prompting you to be at God's place, for that person, at God's time. Prayer is a mystery, yet a gift we should never take for granted. God is able, *'to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us'* (Ephesians 3:20). Amen! Amen!

With those words of encouragement, that prayer is beyond methods and even words, I want to take us through the Lord's Prayer by the front door. As we do so, we are sharing in the inner life and spirituality of Jesus (R.E. Clements, *The Prayers of the Bible*, SCM, 1985, p.237). The Lord's Prayer is both a prayer for liturgical use in worship and a model for the prayer life of 21st century disciples providing a framework that guides us into a balanced prayer life. We are praying the very words of Jesus.

Our Father in Heaven

In this opening phrase, Jesus invites us into the relationship he has with Abba, with God the Father. Abba is the intimate term, which we could translate as Daddy. However, the word is in a setting which balances intimacy with both community and reverence.

Intimacy with God is the object of prayer. Oswald Chambers stated that there is no other motive for prayer than getting to know our heavenly Father. We are invited into a relationship which is not a biological

relationship, but one based upon our adoption as God's children through new birth. We approach God with confidence because we have gained access through Jesus into his presence (Hebrews 4:14-16). When we pray, we are entering the holy presence of God. As Joseph Medlicott Scriven wrote, 'What a privilege to carry, Everything to God in prayer.'

Commentators interpret the prayer in eschatological terms, concerned with the coming and consummation of the Kingdom of God. NT Wright describes the Lord's Prayer as 'the true exodus prayer'. For example, the term 'Father' poses pastoral difficulties for many people. However, the intimate relationship into which we are called by God can be a liberating healing experience leading us out from the slavery of abuse, negative experiences of parenting, absence of affection or dominance, into a relationship of care, protection, and intimacy. The bonds which enslave us differ from person to person and from group to group. The Exodus begins by experiencing the depth of God's love in that place of slavery and answering his call to place our hope in him for the future. The journey towards healing and wholeness begins in communion with God, the atmosphere into which we can move towards true shalom; peace with God, ourselves, others, and creation. Intimacy with God is a healing experience which allows us to move forward from communion to commission as we seek the will of God in our lives.

Community is the context of the prayer. We receive the invitation to share in the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father and discipleship within the community of faith. The Didache (an early church teaching manual) indicates that initially, the Lord's Prayer was prayed three times a day by those who had been baptised. Today it is in the public domain. It is a prayer many people have heard even if they are not able to recite. For Christians, it is a model to be used by this and future generations.

Private devotions and corporate prayer are equally important. The discipline of keeping an appointment to pray with others ensures that we keep an appointment with God. Jesus also encourages us to agree in prayer (Matthew 18:19). The twelve-noon alarm on many phones, during a prayer initiative such as Thy Kingdom Come, acts as a reminder to pray the Lord's Prayer collectively.

There is of course the danger of becoming ‘matey’ with God and forgetting to whom we are praying. Having prayed with prisoners, where an expletive button was necessary, or prayed with a child, with such simplicity and friendship, my own prayers are very informal, when I tell God exactly how it is. Sometimes I agree with the saying, ‘If this is how you treat your friends, I am glad I am not your enemy!’ We can be real, honest, and even shout at God, but let us remember who God is.

Reverence prevents us from down-sizing God. We are reminded of the sovereignty of God, who holds the future in his hands and calls us into that future. We respond with awe and wonder as we are reminded of his power and mystery. Yet God does not remain hidden in heaven. His character has been revealed to us in nature, scripture and supremely in Jesus. He encourages us to seek his face (Psalm 27:8) with the promise that this will not be a fruitless search, for God longs to be found (Matthew 7:7).

Hallowed Be Your Name

This is an expression of longing to see God honoured in the world today and the hope that many will enter a personal relationship with him. The reputation of God is in the hands of each of us as we represent him amongst our relatives, friends, and acquaintances. This phrase should provoke an examination of our walk with God.

The evening prayer of Examen, enables us to reflect upon each day. Where did I experience God’s goodness and hear God speak? Where have I sinned today in thought, in word, or in deed? Where did I bring honour or dishonour to God by my life and witness?

There are certainly times, when our action and reactions, both as individuals and as the Church, does not bring honour to God. For this we must have personal and corporate times of repentance.

Your Kingdom Come

This statement looks to the consummation of the Kingdom when Jesus returns in glory. It also raises the priority of praying for the growth of the Kingdom in our generation as people respond to the gospel through the witness of the Church. Such kingdom building

should be at the heart of the Church, which must be underpinned by our daily prayer.

Your Will Be Done on Earth

The true response to intimacy with God is obedience. *'If you love me, keep my commands'* (John 14:15). An encounter with God's holiness evoked a response of repentance and commissioning to service in Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8). In seeking God's face, we will also seek God's purpose.

Continual communion with God will change the direction of both our lives and that of the Church. Renewed by the Holy Spirit our minds will be able to discern what is God's will (Romans 12:2). If we truly love God, we will be led through repentance into renewed living.

Summer 2021 has been a festival of Sport. Owing to the pandemic in 2021, we have enjoyed or endured, Euro 2020, Tokyo Olympics 2020, Tokyo Paralympics 2020 and Wimbledon 2021, to name a few. We became a nation of enthusiasts of the various sports and disciplines. We became experts at picking the right team, making substitutions, and taking a penalty. We questioned whether a serve was in or out. We learnt the rules of sports we only ever watch every four years. We realised that within the playing area, rules govern how the game is played. The referee's whistle is the authority, backed up by the mysterious VAR, where TV pictures are examined to ensure the right decisions are made. Of course, we have our opinions too.

Life is like that. God, the maker and sustainer of life in all its fullness, has set boundaries within which we are to live. These are life-enhancing rules which were, quite literally, set in stone in the 10 commandments. There are commandments on worship, family life, rest, murder, sexual ethics, telling lies, stealing, coveting. There is a popular myth that Jesus laid these aside with a general principle of 'love your neighbour.' He didn't! In the Sermon on Mount and throughout his ministry, he took the 10 Commandments deeper. He looked not only at actions but the thoughts and motives behind them.

As it is in Heaven

God's commandments are to enable us to live life in all its fullness. As individuals, we are created in God's image and for his purpose.

To attune our wills to that of God, will bring healing, wholeness and fruitfulness into our lives creating a ripple effect into the world as God's rule touches others through us. When we submit to the rule of God, the resultant blessing is not only for us but also for God's world.

Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

Christians are often reticent about praying for themselves. We feel 'unworthy' because our needs are 'nothing' when compared to the needs of others. The Lord's Prayer corrects such thinking. The model of the Lord's Prayer guides us not only to 'Seek God's Face' (Matthew 6:9-10) but also to 'Seek God's Grace' (Matthew 6:11-13). It contains four petitions requesting things for ourselves. Having drawn into the presence of God and sought his kingdom, we realise that he is concerned about every aspect of our lives (Matthew 6:33). God's love and favour towards us encourages us not to be anxious but to bring our prayer requests to him (Matthew 6:34).

'Give us today our daily bread' (v.11) has been interpreted in various ways. The Church, in the first thousand years, struggled with the concept of God being concerned with the mundane things of life, and allegorised this petition to mean the provision of Holy Communion and the Word of God. The Reformers removed this spiritualisation and took bread to be a symbol of everything we need.

These interpretations when taken together encourage us to have a day-to-day dependence upon God for all our spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional needs. The faithfulness of God ensures that we have 'Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside' (Thomas O Chisholm). We commit our needs to God knowing that he cares for us (Matthew 6:31-32) and can meet all our needs in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

The inclusion of 'our' prevents us from being purely selfish in our prayers. We are encouraged to pray for social justice and the needs of the disadvantaged. We are not praying as isolated individuals but within a global community of faith. The Methodist Prayer Handbook and various prayer letters can resource us in praying for others.

The petition does not exclude us from working to meet our needs. The provision of a job, the strength to work in difficult situations or

guidance in the day's decisions may be the very petition we need to make. The workplace, the place where we serve God, should be a focal point for our prayers.

And Forgive Us Our Debts, As We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors

This should not be interpreted as making God's forgiveness conditional upon our forgiving others. When interpreted in the light of verses 14 and 15 and the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35), we realise that we must not only receive forgiveness from God but also forgive others. God's forgiveness is a sign of his grace, something we cannot earn. However, the gift of forgiveness brings the responsibility to forgive others. We are praying that God will make us merciful.

This petition concerns our relationship with God and with others. Our relationship with God is impaired if we are holding bitterness and resentment towards someone. In the same way that oppressing the poor prevented God hearing the prayers of the Israelites (Isaiah 1 and 58), an unforgiving spirit may prevent our prayers being heard. As we come before God, we must be intent to make right any wrong. In seeking peace with God, through the forgiveness of our sins, we must be willing to seek peace and restored relationships with others.

And Lead Us Not into Temptation

Each time we pray, Jesus is encouraging us to pray for protection from times of testing. Whilst God does not tempt people to do evil (James 1:13), he does allow us to go through times of testing. Such testing may be allowed to develop us until we reflect the character of Christ in our lives (1 Peter 1:3-9).

Recognising our weakness, we should '*watch and pray so that we do not fall into temptation*' (Matthew 26:41). This petition should restrain us from rushing into circumstances that expose us to temptation and instead alert us to the tricks of the devil. It is only when we are alert that we take the way of escape when it is offered to us.

The temptation may be to turn away from God when his teaching challenges our present lifestyle (John 6:60ff) or when life itself is

difficult (2 Timothy 4:10). The prayer of confession in the Covenant Service exposes those areas in which we frequently fail.

God of mercy, hear us as we confess our sins.

For the sin that has made us slow to learn from Christ, reluctant to follow him and afraid to bear the cross:

For the sin that has caused the poverty of our worship, the formality and selfishness of our prayers, our neglect of fellowship and the means of grace, and our hesitant witness for Christ:

For the sin that has led to the misuse of your gifts, evade our responsibilities, and fail to be good stewards of your creation:

For the sin that has made us unwilling to overcome evil with good, tolerant of injustice, quick to condemn, and selfish in sharing your love with others:

Lord have mercy, Lord Forgive.

(Methodist Worship Book, pp285-6)

The neglect of personal devotions and corporate worship all too readily cause us to fall into temptation (Hebrews 10:25). Equally persecution or ridicule can prevent us from standing firm in our evangelistic and prophetic witness. We are at a point, where we must recognise that God calls us to stand firm against the pressure to conform to the world's standards.

But Deliver Us from the Evil One

This calls us to recognise our weakness in facing Satan. *'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm'* (Ephesians 6:12). What a struggle it is! Compared with our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, we are very fortunate. However, the devil, has long since worked out that in this country, sexual sin, will bring the Church down, as our past case review, disciplinary cases and revising our sexual ethic has and will do.

Our deliverance is only through Jesus who was handed over to Satan, triumphed over him on the cross and rose victorious on Easter Day. By calling upon God for help we will be delivered.

Every prayer a powerful weapon,
Strongholds come tumbling down
And down, and down, and down.

We're gonna see, we're gonna see,
We're gonna see Jesus lifted high.

(Doug Horley)

Praying the Lord's Prayer coupled with putting on the whole armour of God will help us to resist the devil and see him flee from us (Ephesians 6:10-18). It is the power of God that gives us strength during times of temptation and oppression.

Peter would have been present as Jesus gave this prayer, which became a liturgical prayer, widely used in the Church, and a model for a disciple's prayers. Peter recognised that he was not simply a human doing, rushing around doing the work of the Kingdom, but a human being, whom God delights to be with.

Take time out to be with God, whether on a walk, on the bus or in the car, doing the ironing, or wherever. Jesus died on the cross because God wants you to be with him for eternity. How about praying and bringing that heavenly relationship down to earth!

'After leaving the disciples, he (Jesus) went up the mountainside to pray' (6:46).

*

Questions for Reflection...

1. Many Christians are aware that there is room for improvement within their prayer life. After studying this chapter; realistically what one thing can you aim to do, to enrich your prayer life?
2. When you pray, 'Do you seek God's hand or God's face? Do you seek God to receive from him, or do you seek God to delight in his presence?'

3. Whilst recognising that the term 'Father' poses pastoral difficulties for many people, in what ways are you experiencing the 'liberating healing experience' of being a child of your heavenly Father?
4. When you pray to Abba Father, how balanced is intimacy with reverence?
5. In what ways does the Lord's Prayer challenge you to pray for others both near and far?
6. Slowly pray through the prayer of confession from the Covenant Service (just a few pages back), and ask "of which sins do I need to repent?"
7. Who does Jesus want to help you to forgive?
8. In what areas of your life do you need to seek God's help in resisting temptations?
9. How could using the framework of The Lord's Prayer enrich your personal prayer life and/or that of your house group or church?

2. THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION

‘After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone’ (Mark 9:2).

Early in our ministry, Karen and I took our youth group to Blackpool Pleasure Beach shortly after the ‘Big One’ opened. I suddenly was escorted by two young leaders onto what was then the largest rollercoaster in the country. The fear grew as we edged towards the front of the queue. Sitting at the front of the first carriage, I comforted myself in the fact that everyone on the last ride had come off alive, despite their screams. After we reached the highest point, it was a series of high-speed peaks and troughs, which did wonders for my prayer life and little for my life expectancy. All I can say is that the ride was less of a thrill and more a longing for it to be over.

Mark’s gospel records Peter’s rollercoaster ride as Jesus’ disciple. In Mark 1:1 to 9:1, we find out who Jesus is. We meet Jesus, the teacher, preacher, pray-er, healer and deliverer. Finally, Peter has a high moment at Caesarea Philippi, when he announces that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29), a revelation given by God. However, at that moment, Peter could not grasp what that meant. Peter refused to accept that Jesus would be handed over to the scribes and the Pharisees, be killed and rise again after three days (8:31). Peter’s high moment of revelation plummeted to the severe rebuke of Jesus, *‘Get behind me, Satan!’* (8:33).

From Mark 9:2 to the end, we journey between two mountains, the Mount of Transfiguration and the Mount of Crucifixion.

Six days after Peter’s confession and Jesus’ teaching about his death and resurrection, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up, what was probably Mount Hermon. Carla Harding, in her devotional on Luke’s account of the Transfiguration, writes,

‘The Gospels tell us that Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray (Mark 1:35). Maybe the disciples expected the mountain trek to be like other prayer retreats they’d taken with him. Little did they know they were about to

witness a spectacular event, rich with echoes of Israel's past' (Lectio 365, 6 August 2021).

In the last chapter, we were encouraged to make prayer a regular daily part of our rhythm of life. Perhaps on occasions, as Carla suggests, we go into prayer times with low expectations. We do not expect an encounter with God. We may be sleepy, like the disciples at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:32) and in Gethsemane (Mark 14:37). We may be going through the motions, ticking the box on our daily routine. How different our prayer times will be if we expect God to draw close to us as we draw near to him. How different our prayer times will be if we remember that God is listening with eagerness to our prayers (Psalm 34:15). We should come to prayer alert and expectant; lest we miss God's presence and God's voice.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John experienced God's presence and voice, the whole experience echoing Israel's past.

There He (Jesus) Was Transfigured Before Them (9:2)

What did Peter, James and John experience? What did they see? Mark's Gospel is Peter's attempt at putting the 'Transfiguration' into words. *'His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them'* (9:3). Peter was describing the indescribable. He used the everyday language of newly washed and bleached clothes to describe something whiter than white. Peter, James and John saw the holiness of God, the radiance of God's glory, shining from the very heart and being of Jesus. He didn't merely reflect God's holiness, like Moses coming out of the presence of God in the tabernacle. Jesus radiated God's holiness. Jesus' very being is holy. Six days earlier, Peter had experienced a revelation of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, now he experienced a revelation of Jesus' holiness.

In *Holiness, Evangelism and the Digital Age* (MET Digging for Treasure 2017), the Revd Dr Calvin Samuel writes,

Holiness is the shining dazzle of the glory of God. And the glory of God may be best understood as divine love exchanged continually within the Trinity and poured out

for creation for our deepest and most joyful good. Holiness is the shining glory of the love of God.

Again, Calvin is seeking to describe the indescribable. I edited the book and read this several times. Initially, I could not grasp what Calvin was saying. However, the next time I preached on Peter's account of the Transfiguration in Mark's gospel, it made sense. Peter, James and John, saw Jesus' holiness, 'the shining dazzle of the glory of God.' They experienced the 'shining glory of the love of God.' Isaiah encountered the holiness of God in the temple, Peter, James and John encountered that same holiness on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Jesus instructed them, even commanded them, not to talk about what they had seen until after the resurrection (9:9). Why? At that moment, they did not comprehend what they had seen. However, it would become apparent after the resurrection. Seeing the holiness of Jesus was essential to understanding one aspect of the atonement.

Peter may have heard John the Baptist describe Jesus as, '*The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*' (John 1:29). John is using the language of Jesus being the Passover Lamb. Exodus 12 recounts the Passover, when a lamb, a year-old male without defect, was slaughtered at twilight. Placing the lamb's blood on the sides and tops of the doorframes of their houses was an act of faith in the promise of God to save them. That night, as promised, God passed through Egypt and struck down the firstborn of both people and animals. However, when God saw the blood on the doorposts of the Hebrews, he passed over the house, and the people inside were safe. By faith, in the promise of God, by the means God had provided, God saved the Hebrew firstborn.

Jesus died on the cross as the holy, sinless, righteous Lamb of God. By the shedding of his blood, he takes away the sin of the world. He leads us through death to eternal life. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the holiness of Jesus dazzled the disciples. They saw the sinless Lamb of God.

In Romans 1:1-4, we read, Jesus is '*the gospel he (God) promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding*

his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed Son of God in power, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.'

The Transfiguration was a revelation of the holiness of Jesus. The cross and resurrection proved that Jesus was the perfect Lamb of God, who has taken away the sin of the world. We need to appropriate that for ourselves by repenting of our sinfulness, Jesus exchanges our sin for his holiness.

And There Appeared Before Them Elijah and Moses, Who Were Talking With Jesus (9:4)

Jesus is joined on the Mountain by Elijah and Moses, two important figures in Israel's past. Why these two? Moses was the great lawgiver who received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Moses now, for the first time, stood in the Promised Land beside Jesus, the prophet he had spoken about (Deuteronomy 18:15). Elijah was the great prophet of righteousness who called the Northern Tribes back to God (1 Kings 17:1 to 19:21). On Mount Sinai, Elijah had experienced the presence of God in the still small voice. Later a chariot of fire took Elijah into heaven (2 Kings 2:11).

The law and the prophets reveal the righteous requirements of a holy God. The only way that God could save us is through the righteousness we obtain by faith. We receive the holiness and righteousness of Jesus when we come to the cross and ask for forgiveness. At that moment, we can say, *'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'* (Galatians 2:20).

In the Old Testament, Moses gave the law, which included the sacrificial system in Leviticus. In one conference, the speaker said, "If you want to know the seriousness to God of our sin, then read Leviticus." Leviticus emphasises the need to sacrifice perfect animals to bring forgiveness for sin.

Elijah represented the prophets, who called people back to sacrificial worship and faithful obedience to God. Isaiah had a vision of the cross, the means of the suffering Messiah, dying and rising to

deal with our sin (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12). The sacrifice of the Old Testament was a foreshadow of Jesus' death for our sins. The prophetic line finished with John the Baptist pointing to Jesus and saying, '*Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*' (John 1:29). Jesus' journey would take him from the Mount of Transfiguration to the Mount of Crucifixion, where the holiness of Jesus would pay the price for our sin.

There on the mountain was the one who fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law and the prophets. Jesus was perfect in holiness, 100% divine and 100% human. He was the only one who could accomplish our salvation, and his presence between Moses and Elijah was God's way of declaring this to Peter, James and John, and us.

Let Us Put Up Three Shelters - One for You, One for Moses, and One for Elijah (9:5)

Peter had mixed emotions as he saw the Transfiguration. Peter was pleased to be there, but he was also terrified; he was in the presence of God's holiness. He wanted to do the right thing and build three shelters to commemorate the event. That was not to be. God revealed more.

The Revd Graham Slater told a story to ministerial students going on preaching trips to various circuits in the North West. There was a man who, after lunch, would say to his wife, 'Go upstairs and bring down the experience.' His wife dutifully went upstairs and brought down a folded piece of paper. The man handed the paper and invited the unsuspecting student to open and read it. It was the man's testimony of how he had come to faith many years ago. The point of the story was not only to prepare us if we went to that particular house but to remind us that ours is a living faith, which is ongoing rather than simply in the past. When we give our testimony, do we only recall events many years in the past, or is it the account of a daily walk with God?

Jesus, Peter, James and John could not stay on the mountain. There was another mountain to which they had to travel.

Then a Cloud Appeared and Covered Them (9:7)

The Transfiguration is full of images from the Old Testament, the Bible Jesus used. A cloud came down from heaven and covered them. A cloud was the visible sign of God's presence in the Old Testament. God came down on Mount Sinai in a cloud (Exodus 19:9), he took possession of the tabernacle in a cloud (Exodus 40:34) and later filled the temple in a cloud (1 Kings 8:10, 2 Chronicles 7:1-2). Peter, James and John were enveloped by the presence of God.

The disciples then heard the voice of God audibly. *'A voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"'* (9:7).

Many people want what Jesus had at this moment, affirmation from his Father. There are two occasions in Mark when God the Father affirms Jesus the Son.

The first was at Jesus' baptism when the Trinity celebrates the commencement of Jesus' ministry. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus the Son, *'And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"'* (1:11). You will recall that those words were followed by the Holy Spirit sending him into the desert to be tempted by Satan. The affirmation must have sustained him during those long forty days in the wilderness.

At the Transfiguration, Jesus is again assured of God's love as he continues the journey to the cross. God the Father speaks his word of affirmation and love when Jesus needs it the most.

Are we able to capture the importance of these words for Jesus? Imagine you are facing the biggest test of your life. What do you need most of all? Affirmation that you are loved! If that is true for Jesus, we must affirm others as they face a test, trial or the final journey. God the Father sets us the example of confirming and assuring people that God loves them and will be present with them. The ministry of encouragement is a vital ministry for the church and community today.

God also speaks to the disciples and tells them to *'listen to him!'* (9:7) Why? In the days and weeks to come, Jesus is going to teach them in parables about the Kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit and prepare them for his death and resurrection. Post-resurrection,

Jesus will open the scriptures to the two on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27) and the disciples (Luke 24:44). Jesus opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:46).

At Chester College of Liverpool University, we had a course in Peshier Exegesis: Jesus in all the Scriptures. The lecturer, the Revd Robert Wayrider, was also my Local Preacher tutor. In my first preaching class, he took me to a chapel and showed me the pulpit Bible. He asked what I observed. Looking closely, I could see that Genesis 1-11, the Psalms and the New Testament were all well-thumbed, some sections more than others. He pointed out whole sections of the Bible were pristine. Robert's words stick in my mind, 'Preach from the whole of Scripture. Do not sell them short!' His lectures reminded me to look for Jesus in the whole of Scripture.

To understand the New Testament, we need to read the Old Testament. If Jesus took valuable time before and after his death and resurrection to teach the disciples from the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets, we would do well to read them too!

Peter could not stay on the Mount of Transfiguration. He has work to do, listening and sharing the teaching of Jesus. Peter does not realise that he will reach his lowest point in the High Priests courtyard when he denies Jesus. However, the high will come on Easter Day, when he is forgiven and can tell people about this encounter with the holiness of Jesus.

What About Us?

Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET) is a prayer movement, and we have ascended the Mount of Prayer and been encouraged to spend time in prayer. In this chapter, we have ascended the Mount of Transfiguration, and we are encouraged as MET to spread scriptural holiness. Indeed, we are more than a prayer meeting or becoming a holy huddle, preserving our holiness, separate from a world with very different morals and cultural norms than we uphold. Our calling is to live under the kingship of Christ and bring his kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. The doctrinal statement of the Methodist Church talks of our calling to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.

First, we affirm that holiness is something we receive rather than achieve. Holiness is the gift of Jesus' holiness to us. As we live in him and he lives in us, his holiness dwells within us. When God looks upon us when we are in Christ, he doesn't see our sinfulness but the holiness of Jesus. For our part, we need to grow into the holiness that is ours. We do so by the means of grace, prayer, Bible reading, meditation, Holy Communion, fasting, solitude and fellowship. We grow in the Fruit of the Spirit, the very character of God. The Holy Spirit lives in us and imparts and imprints the nature of Jesus' holiness upon our lives.

We spread scriptural holiness in our daily living. Paul describes the Corinthian church as a letter read by everyone (2 Corinthians 3:2). Living Christ-like holiness will be at variance with the lifestyle and culture of many around us. We will stand out. Many aspects will comfort those around us, acts of kindness, compassion, acceptance and love. Other elements will challenge business practice, honesty and sexual ethics. Paul writes in Romans 12:2, *'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.'* Are we prepared to be different? Dare we make a stand for Christian principles simply by living out our faith to our family, neighbours and friends, let alone strangers and the community? That is the challenge we face, even within the church today.

The spread of holiness is through evangelism. The disciples spread the message of Jesus, *"The time is fulfilled," He said, "and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the gospel!"* (1:15). Holiness comes from God creating in us a clean heart. *'And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart'* (Ezekiel 36:26, NLT). It is an act of re-creation into the image of God. We begin to respond to the grace and direction of God. We die to our selfish desires and become alive to God and his will for us. We change direction and live under the rule of God in his kingdom.

A friend used the illustration of being told off by his parents when he did something wrong. They said, 'What has got into you?' It was a negative phrase. Imagine someone asking the new Christian, 'What has got into you?' Such is the difference in perspective and lifestyle

that people notice. It is Jesus, living in you and living through you, by his Holy Spirit. As Christ lives in the church, it is known as the body of Christ. Paul used that phrase because, on the road to Damascus, Paul encountered the risen Christ, who challenged his programme of church persecution with the words, '*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*' (Acts 9:4). At that moment, Jesus identifies with the church as his own body. The church must not lock out Jesus (Revelation 3:20) but open the door and let him live in them and through them.

John Wesley said, 'There is no holiness but social holiness.' It is a call to challenge injustice, prejudice, defend the vulnerable and speak out for the voiceless. We see this holiness worked out in the great evangelical reformers. We see it in local churches engaging in social action providing generous hospitality to the refugee, vulnerable, abused, unloved and disadvantaged. We face the challenge of climate change, where our lifestyle affects the safety of people around the world. We need to make radical changes to be good stewards of God's gift of creation. Such action flows from God's love compelling us to share that love with those around us.

Peter, James, and John could not build three tabernacles for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, and stay on the Mount of Transfiguration. Neither can we remain in our prayer meetings or worship times. As we said earlier, 'Holiness is the shining glory of the love of God.' In our daily living, as we share the love of God, we spread the holiness of God. That is our historic calling. Let us fulfil that calling day by day.

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Questions for Reflection...

1. How could expecting to encounter God enrich your personal prayer life and that of your house group and/or congregation?
2. In what ways have you experienced the 'shining dazzle of the glory of God'?
3. What do you make of the phrase; 'If you want to know the seriousness to God of our sin, then read Leviticus'?
4. How does your testimony include your daily walk with God?

5. In what ways do affirming words from God encourage you and commission you?
6. To whom does God want you to speak words of encouragement and affirmation to over the coming week?
7. Where do you find Jesus within the Old Testament?
8. What can help you to grow into the holiness that is yours?
9. How can you spread scriptural holiness through your daily life?
10. How can Jesus, living in you and living through you, by his Holy Spirit, make you sufficiently holy for someone to ask, 'What has got into you?'

3. THE MOUNT OF CRUCIFIXION

‘It was nine in the morning when they crucified Jesus’ (Mark 15:25).

As a child and teenager, I remember Roy Hession visiting my home church and, on one occasion, joining us for Sunday tea before the evening service. God called Roy to a ministry to bring renewal and revival around the world. Sadly, I had not read *The Calvary Road* and *My Calvary Road*, both by Roy Hession, until early 2021. I never realised what I had missed. God used those two books to take me on my journey to Calvary. No wonder, whenever Roy preached at our church, many responded to his call for renewed commitment. He continually preached the cross, calling people to repentance, renewal, and revival.

We now journey to the cross with Peter, hear news of the resurrection and commission to share the gospel around the world. It is my prayer that you too will realise that God is more ready to forgive than we are to repent, that he is faithful even when we are faithless, and that he restores us in our calling and equips us with the Holy Spirit.

In *The Calvary Road*, there is the account of a pastor ministering during the East African revival walking on his way to a meeting. On the way, he had a vision of Jesus. Jesus was following him, stooping under the heavy load on his back. The minister said to Jesus, “Are you carrying the sin of the world?” “No,” replied Jesus, “I am carrying your sin.” The minister was stunned. He recognised his need to stop, allow the Holy Spirit to examine him, and repent and ask for forgiveness.

In *My Calvary Road*, Roy recalled a group of African ministers rebuking him for how he spoke to his wife. They had observed him speaking sharply to a lady and were surprised to discover later that the lady was Roy’s wife. The rebuke caused Roy to seek his wife’s forgiveness and watch his tongue.

Two godly men recognised their need for forgiveness.

I wonder, who has been the main character on your journey through these studies? Peter, Jesus, or you?

We often think of ourselves as far holier than we actually are. We can see the splinter in everyone else's eyes but not the log in our own eye. We may do that as we read Mark's Gospel. Why did Peter have such high moments and make such huge mistakes? Like us, Peter was human, but his humanity has spoken through the last 2000 years of the patience, challenge, rebuke, and forgiveness of Jesus, in fashioning the man who would lead the early church. At the cross, God offers us forgiveness and renewal. God changes us into the likeness of Jesus.

Let us look together at the lowest point in Peter's journey.

Jesus Predicts Peter's Denial (14:27-31)

Over the previous three years, the disciples had travelled with Jesus, listened to his ministry, seen miracles and saw the intimacy Jesus had with the Father. They were growing in their knowledge of him. However, they did not have self-awareness of how they would react under pressure. They were unaware of the stress they would be under over the next few days. Jesus understood the character of the disciples who were with him in that upper room. In preparing them for what was to come, Jesus told them, *'You will all fall away,'* Jesus told them, *'For it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered"'* (14:27).

I remember a comment I received at the close of my first service in my first appointment. The steward greeted me at the door, saying, *'There are people here who needed to hear that.'* It is funny how we can always hear or read what God is saying to someone else and find it harder to hear or read what God is saying to us.

Peter had that experience. Rather than listening to Jesus and accepting the truth of the prophecy as Jesus quoted Zechariah 13:7, *'Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'*, Peter thought it referred to everyone but him. He quickly responded, *'Even if all fall away, I will not'* (Mark 14:29). Peter meant it. He was full of good intentions. He followed Jesus further than everyone except John, right into the High Priest's courtyard (14:54). However, before the interrogation of a

servant girl, Jesus' following prophecy was fulfilled, *“Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today - yes, tonight - before the cock crows twice you yourself will disown me three times”* (14:30). Even then, *‘Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you”* (14:31). While we focus on Peter, we may forget, *‘And all the others said the same’* (14:31).

I wonder, how many times Jesus has gently prompted you and me to be aware of our weaknesses and his protection? Jesus was aware of what would happen to his disciples. However, he was telling them in advance, what would happen, to prepare and protect them. Jesus understood their humanity. They would be scared as their lives came under threat. They would be down-hearted, feeling that all their hopes and dreams had come to an end. Jesus also gave another prophecy, *‘But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee’* (14:28). Their failure to stay with him was not the end of their discipleship but the beginning. Jesus' death was not the end. Jesus would be raised from the dead, and their relationship would be renewed and deepened.

There is No Such Thing as Cheap Grace

In 2000, I had the privilege of visiting Perry and Ann Dalton in Florida and visit Brownsville in Pensacola. It was the fifth anniversary of the revival, which the Brownsville Assembly of God and Pine Forest Methodist Church were experiencing. On the night we visited Brownsville, the evangelist Steve Hill once again told his testimony of how he had been a drug addict, but his mother never gave up on him and prayed for his release from addiction. One night, Steve was very ill and close to death. Fearing he would die, his mother called her pastor, who prayed for Steve and his healing. Steve received healing and recommitted his life to Christ and is being used mightily by God to bring many to faith, particularly those with addictions. On my visit, Steve prayed for me. The impartation of the Holy Spirit was very powerful and humbling. Perry, Ann and I returned to his church in Panama City, Florida, and I experienced a time of fruitful ministry, leading people to faith.

What struck me in the writing and preaching of Steve Hill was the recognition of how much it had cost God to forgive him. So often,

we forget this. Even in churches that rarely preach the gospel, the liturgy of Holy Communion ensures that *‘whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’* (1 Corinthians 11:26). The body of Christ broken and his shed blood brings us wholeness through the forgiveness of our sin. The cross and resurrection are central to our preaching and living witness in our communities. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,

‘Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.’

At a meal he hosted, Simon the Pharisee rebuked Jesus for allowing his feet to be anointed with expensive perfume by a sinful woman. Jesus responded, *‘Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little’* (Luke 7:47). We so easily forget that God has forgiven our many sins. It cost Jesus everything. We fail to anoint Jesus with the oil of worship, limiting our time with God to one hour and not a second longer. We fail to anoint Jesus with the oil of mission and evangelism, motivated by the broken heart for those who have not yet experienced Jesus’ love, compassion and forgiveness. We fail to kneel at the foot of the cross and pour out our prayers of repentance. We wonder why we don’t see renewal or revival. Are we willing to pay the cost for renewal and revival in our lives and churches?

The Cost of Applying the Teaching of Jesus

Firstly, we fail to see that the teaching of Jesus applies to me as much as to anyone else. We have the teachings of Jesus in red print, acknowledging that these are the reported words of Jesus, as prompted by the Holy Spirit, to be remembered and recorded for us. Yet even these words we fail to obey.

Peter was offended by Jesus’ proclamation that he would scatter, like everyone else. He emphatically insisted that he would not leave Jesus. Early in his ministry, the people of Nazareth took offence at Jesus and his teaching (6:3). They failed to accept his teaching.

Jesus left them and went on his way to villages and towns that would receive the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' teaching has always been counter-cultural and offensive to many. Jesus' teaching is outlawed in many countries and challenged in our own country and churches. Jesus' teaching is personal. The Holy Spirit is very good at hitting the target with a word of teaching, rebuke, challenge, correction and training in righteousness. Perhaps we have offended Jesus because we decided that we do not want to offend the prevailing culture of the day. In Nazareth, Jesus walked away, and his disciples went with him and were sent out in twos to preach in towns and villages where people were not offended and followed Jesus. Dare we risk Jesus walking away from us because we are unwilling to hear his voice, open the door, and allow him to be number one in our lives?

In John 6, what began with a crowd of 5000 plus women and children, became the small dedicated group of disciples. Why? *'On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"'* (John 6:60) *'From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him'* (John 6:66). The teaching was about Jesus being the bread of life. He was preaching about intimacy and being one with us, and we are one with him. Do we desire this intimacy, naming Jesus as number one in our lives and following him?

The Cost of Repentance

Secondly, we fail to respond with repentance. As Peter denied Jesus three times in the High Priest's courtyard, Jesus' prophetic word was fulfilled (14:67-72). A servant girl challenged Peter that he had been with Jesus, was one of his disciples, which prompted those near him to point out that Peter was a Galilean. The denials became more emphatic, as eventually Peter *'called down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about"'* (14:71). On hearing the rooster crow twice, Peter remembered Jesus' warning and *'he broke down and cried'* (14:72). Luke's account includes, *'The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter'* (Luke 22:61).

How often do we avoid the piercing look of Jesus when we have failed him? How often have you and I stopped reading the Bible, praying or attending worship rather than come under the examination of the Holy

Spirit? Like Peter, I have denied Jesus but more than three times. On holiday, or on meeting new people, I avoid saying what my job is! More seriously, I often ask God's forgiveness for the number of times I have failed to take the opportunity to speak up for Jesus or been less than bold in my preaching, teaching and pastoral conversations. Jesus' piercing look has broken me and called me to repentance.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus prophetic word about Peter's future denial includes a message of grace for Peter. *'Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers'* (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus, who knew Peter would deny him, also knew Peter would turn back to him. We thank God that Jesus is our great High Priest who understands our weakness and intercedes for us (Hebrews 4:14-16). Peter turned back. We can turn back. Turning back to God is repentance. Peter broke down and wept. Perhaps we have done the same. When we have turned back to God, we have found he is ready to forgive us, renew us and restore us in our relationship as a child of God.

The Cost of Kneeling at the Cross

Thirdly, we have failed to spend time kneeling at the cross, rushing quickly to the resurrection. Mark mentions that Jesus was crucified between two rebels (15:27). I heard the following illustration in a sermon on Isaiah 1:18, *'Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool.'*

On the hill of Calvary, there were three crosses. Two were red, and one was white. Two were red, with the sins of the two criminals. One was white with the holiness of Jesus. When the crowd were jeering at Jesus, one criminal joined in, saying that if Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus should get himself down from the cross and get him down too. The other criminal rebuked the criminal, pointing out that they deserved crucifixion, but Jesus had done nothing wrong. That criminal then turned to Jesus and asked that Jesus remember him when he came into his kingdom. Jesus replied, *'Today, you will be with me in paradise.'* At that moment, there were

still two red crosses and one white one on Calvary. The two red crosses were the jeering criminal and Jesus, who had taken the other criminal's sin upon himself. That criminal's cross was now white, his sin forgiven.

Do we jeer at the cross or plead for forgiveness? Do we readily acknowledge that we have fallen short of God's standards, or do we say those standards don't apply to us anymore? Do we have a revisionist view of scripture, making it say what we want it to say, or do we accept scripture as the authoritative word of God?

As Jesus took on himself the sin of the world, he experienced something we can never imagine or put into words. We hear the cry of Jesus after three hours of darkness, "*Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani?*" - which means "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (15:34). Our response is one of praise and thanksgiving. Jesus loved us so much that he experienced the separation our sin deserves so that we can enjoy fellowship with God for eternity.

The Gift of Living in Christ

Fourthly, we have failed to live in all that Christ has won for us. '*With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom*' (15:37-38). Can you imagine the furore this caused in the temple? The curtain, separating the Holy place from the Holy of Holies, was torn in two. The High Priest sent an urgent message to the Monday afternoon sewing circle to repair it, sewing it back together from bottom to top!

Jesus' death gives us direct access to the Father. All the spiritual blessings are ours in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). Not only the criminal, but we are also made holy through the death of Jesus as we recognise our need for his forgiveness and ask to be part of his kingdom. At that moment, we have eternal life, life in all its fullness, available only through Jesus, beginning now and for eternity. Let us not compromise this fact for fear of offending other religions. Jesus is the only way to the fullness of life and a personal relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If I find that offensive to other religions, I am in danger of offending my brothers and sisters, who are persecuted for their faith because they hold to that truth in their countries. I also insult those Christian martyrs,

including the Methodist missionaries who went to Africa with their coffins. We have access to the Father. We sell people short if we do not tell them that there is a Father in heaven who loves them so much that Jesus died for them on the cross.

Peter discovered that his denial was not the end of his calling to be the rock on which God would build his church. Jesus rose again on the third day. Hallelujah! The Angels gave the women who found the empty tomb the following message, *‘But go, tell his disciples and Peter, “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you”’* (16:7). The disciples did not believe what the women told them. You gain the impression that Jesus could not wait until Galilee to put the disciples’ minds at rest. The appendix to Mark’s gospel adds, *‘Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen’* (16:14). It is important to note, Peter had returned and was with the other ten disciples.

Peter saw the risen Christ. He believed what he had been unable to accept at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus, *‘must be killed and after three days rise again’* (8:31).

Peter received the gift of peace, which he and the disciples must have feared they would never experience again after all the events of the last few days. *‘Peace be with you’* (John 20:19). Shalom has the fourfold meaning of peace with God, peace with others, peace with yourself and peace with creation. Peace is the fruit of the cross, where the vertical beam offers peace with God and the horizontal beam with others. The cross is in the earth. At the joint of both beams, we have peace within ourselves when all the other dimensions of peace are in place. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, offers peace to each of us. The gift precedes the commission to, *‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation’* (16:15).

Peter received the gift of the Holy Spirit. When the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom, this not only announced that we have access into the presence of God but also that God is ready to live in us.

The crowd mocked and jeered as Jesus hung on the cross. *‘Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying,*

“So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” (15:29-30). While the people mocked, Jesus was removing the need for the Holy of Holies, as he laid down his life in love for the world. He paid the price as the Lamb of God for our sin. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice made once and for all for the forgiveness of our sin. In his death, he made atonement for us entering the Holy of Holies as both the sacrifice and our High Priest. God no longer needed the curtain of division. In Jesus, we are saved from the condemnation for our sin and receive the commendation as children of God, able to approach God as holy and blameless in God’s sight.

The temple was no longer needed. God’s temple is no longer made with stones but with flesh and blood. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. God lives in you and me through confessing our need for forgiveness, turning to God and receiving forgiveness for our sin.

Peter was in the Upper Room on Easter Day evening when Jesus breathed upon them and said, *‘Receive the Holy Spirit’* (John 20:22). Peter was in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-5). Anointed with the power and authority of God, Peter preached the great unfinished sermon. He preached Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Peter never reached his conclusion because the people were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the apostles, *“What shall we do?”* Peter replied, *“Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 2:37-38). In response, about 3000 were added to their number that day (Acts 2:41).

Peter preached from the experience of a rollercoaster ride over the three years of following Jesus. There were many highs and many lows. (Peter still holds the world record for walking on water!) Peter followed Jesus’ example, ascending the Mountain of Prayer. Peter accompanied Jesus, ascending the Mountain of Transfiguration. Peter had his lowest moment in the High Priest’s courtyard but experienced the high of meeting the risen Christ, experiencing forgiveness and restoration. He learnt and accepted that Jesus was the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Given the great commission to go out into the whole world and preach the gospel, Peter waited in prayer for ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost. Finally,

he received the anointing of the Holy Spirit and preached Christ crucified and risen from the dead.

Conclusion

Today, God needs people who are willing to ascend the heights with Jesus. The picture on the front of this book shows a person kneeling before the cross. I chose the picture because the posture required on all three mountains is that of kneeling before God, if not physically, then spiritually. It is the posture of humility.

We ascend the Mountain of Prayer, in all humility, entering the presence of God, opening our hearts before him, and praying his agenda for the world and ourselves.

We ascend the Mountain of Transfiguration, in all humility, awe and wonder, worshipping the holiness of God. We explore the Law, Prophet and Psalms, Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Revelation, to feed on the word of God. We cannot stay on the mountain for at the close of our worship, our service begins. People are waiting to receive the healing touch of God and practical expressions of his compassion for them.

We ascend the Mountain of Crucifixion, in all humility, recognising our unworthiness that Jesus should die in our place for the forgiveness of our sin.

Peter journeyed to those heights. From the bold Peter, who emphatically insisted that Jesus would not die and rise from the dead or that he would deny him three times, we come across a Peter, broken but restored by his and our Saviour. The all-action Peter speaks to us saying, *'Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you'* (1 Peter 5:6-7). Peter was humbled under the mighty hand of God and exalted. He preached and taught, recalling the stories, teaching and many actions of Jesus, which Mark recorded in his Gospel. Peter did not hide from us his faults and failures. Instead Peter used his testimony of how God had changed him to show us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (1:1).

God has written his gospel in your hearts. In all humility, anointed by the Holy Spirit, let us not only come to Christ but go to the world and proclaim the Good News.

Let us pray:

Lord, I come to You,
Let my heart be changed, renewed,
Flowing from the grace
That I found in You.
And Lord, I've come to know
The weaknesses I see in me
Will be stripped away
By the power of Your love.

*Hold me close,
Let Your love surround me.
Bring me near,
Draw me to Your side.
And as I wait
I'll rise up like the eagle,
And I will soar with You,
Your Spirit leads me on
In the power of Your love.*

Lord, unveil my eyes,
Let me see You face to face,
The knowledge of Your love
As You live in me.
Lord, renew my mind
As Your will unfolds in my life,
In living every day
By the power of Your love.

(Geoff Bullock)

*

Questions for Reflection...

1. In what ways is God's call to repentance, renewal and revival still relevant in the 21st century?

2. Who has been the main character on your journey through these studies? Peter, Jesus, or you?
3. How does the illustration of the two red crosses and the one white cross help you appreciate what Jesus' death has done for you?
4. How may you have offended Jesus because you have decided not to offend the prevailing culture of the day?
5. How deeply do you desire intimacy, naming Jesus as number one in your life and following him?
6. In what ways do we sell people short if we do not tell them that there is a Father in heaven who loves them so much that Jesus died for them on the cross?
7. How much Shalom are you experiencing (peace with God, peace with others, peace with yourself and peace with creation)?
8. In what ways do you humbly need to come to Father, Son and Holy Spirit in repentance, and for renewal?
9. How does humbly praying through the song by Geoff Bullock renew your Christian life and work?

ASCENDING THE HEIGHTS

ENCOUNTERING THE LIVING GOD

In the Gospels we read of a number of critical events in Jesus' life which involved mountains. In this book, Paul Wilson expertly opens up these biblical occurrences of ascending the Mount of Prayer, the Mount of Transfiguration and the Mount of Crucifixion. He also considers their relevance and message for us today. Each chapter ends with questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion. It is written to help us join with Jesus in ascending the heights of encountering the living God.

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