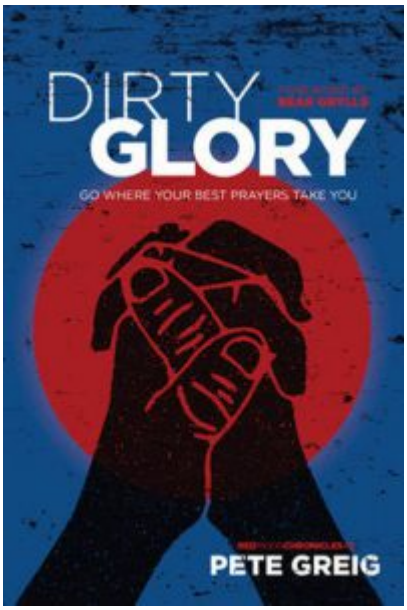
Review: Dirty Glory

> *Hey @PeteGreig. You don't know me, but I just blubbed my way through Dirty Glory. Fanned fire from both living flames and dormant embers. Holy mess. Not sure whether to say "thank you" nicely or wryly :-/. "For the sake of the world burn like a fire in me…" Groan. Now what?*
>
> *— Will Briggs (@WillBriggs)* ***April 7, 2018***



I remember a Bible college lecturer asking the class once, "What aspect of the gospel first impacted you?" For some it was about *truth.* For some it was about *forgiveness* and *renewal.* For others it was about *belonging* and *reconciliation*. The aim of the question was to get us to think about how the gospel is a *passionate* thing. How are we *moved*, *enlivened*, *stimulated* by the good news that Jesus, who calls us to himself, is King of this world?

There's a similar question about our sense of *vocation*, the part we play in God's mission. How does the command to *"Go and make disciples of all nations" move* us? For some it is a passion to *teach* and *preach.* For others, it's about *embracing* the broken with care and comfort. Some simply want to introduce people to Jesus. [Aside: there's a strangely fivefold shape to these missional passions].

It's a question worth pondering, because vocational fires dwindle. We come to plod from day to day, being as faithful as we can. Even church life can become a lurch from Sunday to Sunday; it can revolve around the management of buildings, and the placating of opinions. Individually, and together, we Christians are adept at curling up into ourselves and

maintaining a static equilibrium of spiritual excuses.

Sometimes we even forget what those old fires felt like. But then annoying books like Pete Greig's *Dirty Glory* come along and douse us in rocket-powering oxidiser.

I wasn't really expecting to begin to burn again when I read Greig's book. It was "just" another book; the standalone autobiographical sequel of "just" another hipster church leader and his well-marketed 24-7 prayer movement, (I mean, Bear Grylls wrote the foreword and everything!). I hadn't really looked into 24-7 much (it's mostly a UK-US thing and not as big in Australia). I'd heard enough to be both interested and slightly sceptical. And the thing is, I've read the book, and we've even visited Greig's Emmaus Road church in Guildford, and I *still* don't know much about the practicalities of the movement and the exact details of what they do. But there's something at the heart of this book, something in the intermingled testimonies and teachings, that has caused my heart to be strangely warmed.

Here are the principles that I can glean from what Greig has written:

Dissatisfaction. I get this. Without a sense of discontent, mission is reduced to "more of what we already have." Church health is reduced the *static health* of numbers and money, and not the *dynamic growth* of vision and depth.

> *I began to realise that it would now be possible to live the rest of my life as a minor entity on a Christian production line, busy and occasionally even applauded, peddling religious experiences without ever really nurturing the kind of inner garden that I admired in others, and which could make it all mean something in the end… It dawned on me, but only very slowly, that my inner turmoil could not be dismissed as a quarter-life crisis, it wasn't boredom, nor could it be attributed to a besetting sin from the*

> *predictable checklist. Worryingly, nothing was wrong. Everything was right and yet I felt hollow. 'Within me', confessed St Augustine, 'was a famine of that inward food: Thyself, my God.' This hunger in my soul, I began to realise was not bad. In fact it was good: a gift of dissatisfaction directly from the Holy Spirit. (Pages 29-30)*

For Greig, the touchstone of holy dissatisfaction is prayer. To express this he turns to the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, a house of prayer that had become filled with corrupt traders. He wants us to hear the rebuke of Jesus: "…[T]here could be large, impressive, popular churches… attracting large crowds… impressive buildings, strong brands, great wealth and a remarkable history…" but they might "evoke a similar rebuke" if "they have lost the fundamental heart of prayer", (page 44). From this, he develops his "blueprint" of *Presence, Prayer, Mission, Justice, and Joy* (page 45) which becomes the essence and structure of the book.

Presence speaks of the fundamental imperative in prayer to "seek his face always" (page 51). I have been exploring these thoughts in different ways recently, and I was able to rest in Greig's words here. What is fanned into flame is a posture of intimacy (page 71) and of surrender:

> *Urgent voices are calling us to abandon the familiar comforts of Christendom, to strike out into the unknown and rediscover the Nazarene. Let him hack our systems and take us back to the place of willing surrender in which we will simply do anything, go anywhere, say anything he tells us, whenever, wherever, whatever it takes… We need a theophany, a rediscovery of the terror of his proximity. (Page 57)*

> *Learning to dwell (and even to sleep) in the love of the Father is offensive to the strategic part of our brains: a violation of the ego; a sort of dying. It can seem irresponsible… It can appear profiligate… It can seem naive*

> *and scandalous… It can appear selfish… It can seem rude… It can seem unstrategic… [but] 'To be a witness', says the writer Madeleine L'Engle, 'is to be a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.' (Page 77)*

Prayer speaks of power. Greig recounts some amazing stories of answered prayer, of course, but this isn't about hype. This is about simple prayers – bold, simple prayers – simply answered. It is also about "predictable valleys of the mundane" in between, in which "we mature; our faith fills up into faithfulness, we learn to push into community and into God's presence, which is, after all, the greatest miracle of all" (page 108).

Luke 18:8 asks, "Will the Son of Man find faith, when he comes?" and Greig ponders "a big, fat, screaming 'if' hanging over the people of God in every generation: will we, will we not, pray when trouble comes?" (page 118). It is a real question. I used to think about ministry and church and simply assume that, of course, we would pray. After two decades in church ministry, I am no longer that naive.

> *Whenever prayer is reduced to a clumsy technique for getting God to mutter a reluctant 'Amen' to our selfish desires, it is merely wishful thinking in a religious disguise. But when prayer is an 'Amen' to God's desires, it is profoundly Christian and powerful beyond measure. (page 126)*

What is fanned into flame here is a connection of our worship with the renewal of the land. Greig draws on the promises to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 to do this, and takes us to "God's great project to see creation remade" (page 120). He speaks of prayer as a travailing and wrestling (page 129), as childbirth (page 130), and even of violence (page 131); to not have that in church makes as much sense as a soldier not having a gun, "a boxer his fists, or a theologian great tracts

of his Bible" (page 132).

I would pushback a little at Greig at this point, though, because he sometimes slips into a false progression: "Once the church is back to normal, pulsing with life, God's great project is to see creation remade" (page 120). These are not distinct steps, as if once God has finished building the church, he'll move on to the world! A church does not pulse to life unless it is *already* yearning for God's great project. Christ grows his church *as* he calls us out into his world-changing purposes, not *before* he does. I think Greig gets this though.

Mission reflects how God intends us to be a house of prayer *for the nations*. Greig takes us to stories of God's people being present – in America, Ibiza, and (later in the book) "Boy's Town" on the Mexican border. These are missionary stories of the old kind, like the ones that stirred Gill and I in our YWAM days. They are of ordinary folk stepping out in faith, daring to go where others would not, for the sake of bringing light to a life, to a place, to a generation.

There's some decent missiology in Greig's approach:

> *"In approaching any new culture our first task is always to remove our shoes, recognising that we are standing on holy ground. We are not bringing the Lord somewhere new, because he is already here. Our primary task, therefore, is to identify God's fingerprints and to trace his footprints in the new environment." (Page 208).*

And he helpfully addresses our propensity to perform mission as some form of service provision by professionals:

> *"Our own journeys of salvation and spiritual formation will… become intertwined with those to whom Christ is sending us… We go to the lost and make space for them to preach to us, to teach us, to minister to our unbelief. This requires*

> *stillness, and humility, a deeply anchored assurance in the gospel, and the ability to ask gently disruptive questions." (Page 213)*

Justice is the touchpoint at which mission impacts the real world. "Prayer without action is just religion in hiding", (page 238). Justice is where mission gets real. Greig quotes Bob Pierce as he tells us that "one of the most dangerous prayers you can ever pray: 'Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God'" (page 247).

There's a lengthy exposition of Kelly Teitsort's ministry in Boy's Town Mexico which fans these flames well. And Greig backs it up biblically: He runs a thread through the pre-exilic prophets (page 255), Christ's cleansing of the temple, and his claim to fulfill Luke 4:18-19 (page 250) and then connects it to our own worship and mission. We are not just about reaching souls, we are about "recognising that "something [is] wrong systemically and it [is] only going to be changed by a profound cultural shift" (page 283).

> *"Compassion for the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner is not an optional extra for those with a strong social conscience. It bleeds from the heart of true Christian worship. When we care for the poor, we minister to Jesus himself." (Page 254)*

> *When God freed the Israelites from captivity in Egypt he did it literally – not just metaphorically. Similarly, when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralysed man… he proceeded to heal him physically too…* ***Down the ages, it has always been the tendency of the rich to reduce salvation to a purely spiritual experience.*** *But if you're hungry you need real bread before you will consider the heavenly variety. If you're in chains you take the Bible verses about freedom very literally indeed. (Pages 278-279, emphasis mine)*

Joy is the outcome of faith as it works itself out through dissatisfaction. We are content with nothing else but the presence of God, manifest in power, mission, justice, etc. Jesus is our answer, and his presence is our joy, in with and through all circumstance. Greig spends much of this section talking about the fifteenth anniversary celebrations of his movement. He truly celebrates, but there is a warning away from triumphalism. He points us to the "Jesuit 'Litany of humility'… From the desire of being praised, *Deliver me, O Jesus…*" (Page 315).

So why does all this make me burn up (in a good way)? I'm not entirely sure.

There are certainly some points of personal connection. I know what it is like to share the journey with a chronically-ill wife ("I'm sick of being sick", page 116). I know what it's like to travel internationally as a family, involving our children in the discernment and the cost (page 300). My tears flowed as Greig spoke of his wife's graduation after "illness had robbed her of so many precious moments" (page 299). They flowed even more when I encountered the thought of "the Lord inviting us to pioneer together once again" (page 299).

I found myself repenting at points, or at least, crying out with a *desire* to repent. In our current season I know I have had to turn from the idolatry of comfort. I have had to repent of the faithlessness by which I have placed my sense of identity and worth, and the source of my family's protection and care, not in God's hands, but in broken ecclesial systems.

There was also times of frustration in my reading of this book. Having had my passions awakened, the engines are revved up and that is accompanied by a familiar sense of wheels spinning. No grip, nowhere to go. It's time to turn this towards intimacy, towards trusting God not just for the fire, but the fireplace in which to burn, and the specific promises for a specific people to cling to.

For me then, the greatest help was Greig's image of "Blue Camp 20." This is drawn from his time in America where he learned the history of his local town: It was once a camp, a place where pioneers, originally intending to go on further, often decided to settle down instead. It speaks of premature comfort with a road not yet travelled.

I was moved by Greig's confession of the temptation to "settle down here and stop pioneering… would it really be wrong to serve the Lord with a bit more cash, a bit more kudos, and a lot less rain?" (Page 141). Indeed, having experienced church planting, and time-limited placements, I am sometimes jealous of the seemingly comfortable run that some of my clerical colleagues get to enjoy! But then there's that annoying, calling, stimulating and painful fire: "I signed up to change the world. I never wanted to be like it." (Page 153).

> *It's easy to pioneer when you're too young to know what it will cost you, when you feel immortal and invincible and the whole of life is an adventure waiting to begin. But pioneering a second time is hard. Abraham was one of the few who never settled down – even in his old age he lived 'like a stranger in a foreign country… For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and build is God' (Heb. 11:9-10). (Page 143)*

> *We tend to assume that Blue Camp 20 is the frontier from which we can pioneer into new territory geographically, or into new effectiveness professionally, but ultimately it is the place of testing from which we can pioneer into deeper intimacy with Jesus than ever before. We wrestle with God at Blue Camp 20… to come close to him in greater intimacy. We lay down comfort at Blue Camp 20… We pioneer from Blue Camp 20 not to achieve something for God, but to receive something from him – a deeper fellowship with him in his death and resurrection (Phil. 3:10-11). (Pages 147-148)*

Perhaps all that is happened in me is that Greig's prayer for his book has been answered. It has deepened my thirst, because it has "rubbed salt on my lips" and woken me up, (page 12). It has had me shaking off the protections and pretenses of being a performing parson. It has had me reflecting on the past and the present. It has got me dreaming for the future. It has got me longing for his kingdom to come, real, substantial, local, global.

I no longer have the vigour and brashness of my youth and younger pioneering days. I know what real mission costs. I have regrets, and I have hopes. And all I can do is pray, to the glorious God who meets us in the dirt. Somehow, that's where life happens, and I long for more of it.

> *I give you back today the prayers I have prayed that are not answered – yet. The seeds I've sown that haven't borne a harvest – yet. The dreams I've buried that haven't risen – yet. Restore the years, the prayers, the trust that the locusts have eaten. Remember me, Lord, redeem my life, and answer my oldest, truest, prayers. Amen.*
> *(Page 307)*

Q&A: How would you unpack the Bible step by step to show God's big picture, that grace is a free, unmerited gift?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

My Mormon friends believe that they are saved by grace after all that they can do.

One of their former presidents said: "One of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation".

How would you unpack the Bible step by step to show them God's big picture – that grace is a free, unmerited gift? (And importantly doesn't lead to licentiousness, which is what they have been taught.)

I've talked about the purpose of the OT law, that all our works are like filthy rags, that Jesus takes my sin and gives me his righteousness. But I think I need a logical structure that walks them through it rather than my scatter gun approach. Your thoughts would be much appreciated!

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Hi Sarah,

Intriguing question! A good place to begin our thoughts is in Ephesians 2, especially verses *1-10*.

> *1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,*
> *2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of*

this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

There are two reasons to ground ourselves here:

1) There's some explicit language about salvation by grace alone. Firstly, the language is about the *necessity* of grace: Verse 5, "…it is by grace you have been saved…", verses 8-9, "…For it is by grace you have been saved… not by works, so that no one may boast." Secondly, the language is about the absolute *extent* of grace, i.e. that grace does more than provide the means for our rescue, the grace of God is what actually does the rescuing. This is found in the depths of our predicament: Verse 1, "…you were dead in your transgressions", Verse 3, "…by *nature* deserving of wrath". It is also found in the *agency* of God: Verses 4-5, "*God* made us alive with Christ", Verse 6, "*God* raised us up…", Verse 10, "We are *God's* handiwork…"

2) The context of this passage connects us with a bigger

picture; Paul sees the work of Jesus on the cross resulting in the creation of a *"new humanity"* in which the great "mystery" of the Gospel is the inclusion of all people in the covenant promises made to Israel: that "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise…." (Ephesians 3:6).

It's this second point that perhaps guides us to a framework for the story of grace: It is best to tell the story of God's covenant; his *promises* to his people, and especially to Abraham. Perhaps it might go something like this, as my own feeble attempt:

1) The human predicament is one of rebellion against the ways of God, and God's response is always both righteous deserved judgement and undeserved gracious provision. *Consider Genesis 1-11; the fall itself, the murder of Abel, the hardness in the time of Noah, the attempted usurpation of God by human empire at Babel. In each part the judgement is obvious, but also consider how God clothes Adam & Eve, protects Cain, puts a rainbow in the sky etc.*

2) By grace, therefore, the ultimate provision of God is his *intervention* in human history. In our historical record, this intervention is grounded in the life of a man called Abram (later Abraham). This intervention is fundamentally *gracious* and it is received by *faith.* There is nothing particularly special about Abraham. He was weak and old. Any righteousness he has derives not from his works or moral fortitude, but as a gift bestowed ("credited") by God and received as Abraham trusted him. *Consider Genesis 12 and how God's gracious involvement with Abraham naturally follows from the rebellion at Babel. Consider also Romans 4:1-3*

3) By grace, God binds himself to Abraham in a covenant, i.e. a promise. Chief among these promises is that *"in you*

all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This is the intervention, the promise of salvation; a new heaven and a new earth. *Consider Hebrews 11:8-10 and consider Abraham's vision with that of the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation 21*

4) By grace, God guides Abraham's children towards this blessing. He protects his chosen people, he saves them from Egypt, and instructs them on how they can be true to the promise: "This is how you embrace this grace! This is how you bless the families of the earth." In this way, the Law itself is grace, and there are times when we get a glimpse of that blessing. But mostly, what we see is the rejection of the promise, a refusal to trust God; the law continues to point to the promise and so reveals how far away God's people are from it. *Consider: the entire OT.*

5) By grace, God provides a true Son of Abraham; he is not only of Abraham's flesh, but also a Son of the Promise as well; i.e. he has faith after that of Abraham. He takes responsibility for his people; by meeting the just requirement of their transgression he deals with their *separation* from the promise. And he *receives* the fullness of the promise – the renewal of life, resurrection itself. *Consider: John 3:16 and Romans 4*.

6) By grace, the promise to Abraham is now fulfilled. The blessing of salvation now applies to all the "families of the earth." It applies as we all (both Jew and Gentile), dead in our sins, are "raised up with Christ." We are all made heirs of Abraham, children of his promise. *Consider: Ephesians 2-3 (which is where we started).*

It's a narrative of salvation in which the defining agency is God, the defining action is his promise, and the basis on which the promise applies to me is not me and my faithfulness, but Christ and his faithfulness. When we add anything else to this dynamic, we actually disavow it; Embraced by Jesus, I am

child of Abraham and so called to live by faith as he did. Any attempt to prove myself worthy is a disagreement that the heart of salvation is promise; and if I do not share in the promise, I am not a child of the promise; I do not share in Abraham, or in the fulfilment of all that God bound himself to do; I do not share in Christ, and I am not saved. In short: *grace is essential, and absolute*. It is necessary for salvation, and cannot be added to.

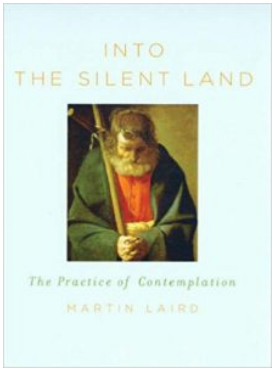
Does this lead to licentiousness? As Paul would say, *"Absolutely not!"*. To deliberately sin is also to depart from the way of promise; how can licentiousness bless all the families of the earth? Grace abounds, I am still raised with Christ; but that grace calls me to holiness.

I hope that helps. Having just gone back and read what I have written, it seems terribly insufficient. In the end, what you are doing is proclaiming the gospel. Can I encourage you as you take your question to the Scriptures? Have you noticed how many of my references have been to the book of Romans, especially chapters 4-6? It's a good place to begin, and perhaps to take your Mormon friends.

Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/Univ. of Virginia

Review: Into the Silent Land – The Practice of Contemplation

I have recently been engaging with the more contemplative side of Christian spirituality. It hasn't been a mere academic exercise. My current circumstance demands I reflect on all matter of things regarding life, and church, and the ways of the world and it has led me to something of an eddy, of going around in circles a bit.



It's an *intellectual* eddy; I know what I think about things, and while I will always have an enquiring mind, it's been a long time since I have come across new thoughts about the things that matter.

It's a *leadership* eddy; I am aware of all manner of strategies for mission, and while it will always be a defining passion, it's been a long time since I have come across anything that is essentially able to reach beyond insubstantial churchy forms.

The grace in this is that God has led me deeper, to an unsettling proposition: that the answers to life's deepest questions are not fundamentally about intellect. The foundations of vocation are not, in the end, matters of skill, ability, or even opportunity. Rather, we are called to spiritual depths, to simple mystical things such as the love of God, and the fact that, lo, the Spirit of Jesus is actually with us to the end of the age.

In these eddies, I have remembered an experience I had about eight years ago. At that time I experienced what some might term a "breakdown." It was also a "breakthrough." I found myself in a place where intellect and leadership had been taken away from me by my overworked and broken brain. All that was left was worship, rest, silence. Jesus' Spirit was present, and all that was required of me was to simply, trustingly, "be" in his presence. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.

My brain healed, and life moved on. Now in recent years, with my brain and body well and able, I am facing again the end of intellect and "leadership skills." In that place, I have been helped by Martin Laird's *Into the Silent Land*.

It's not a perfect book by any means. In fact, I would go as far as to say that it might be a hindrance to those who are not confident in their biblical theology. There are, for instance, clear influences of late 20th-Century pseudo-Eastern spiritualism when he oversteps from seeking closeness and oneness with God, to an almost panentheistic sense of "union" in which we avoid the "illusion of separation" (page 15). Nevertheless, I found it a *helpful* book. If we are to *discipline ourselves*, including our interior life of thoughts and feelings and anxieties, we need some equipping. We can *learn* to *quieten our soul*.

I can certainly identify with the experience of the "wild hawk of the mind" (chapter two) as the "mind's obsessive running in tight circles generates and sustains the anguish that forms the mental cage in which we live much of our lives – or what we take to be our lives…" (page 20). I see the turmoil of anxiety and fantasy that can dominate my thoughts. But it takes more than recognition to resolve it; like attempting to calm waters by splashing down on the waves that rear up, our attempts at "self-control" can simply add to the churn. We need quietness, silence; we need to find ourselves *abiding* in Christ, not *striving* for peace but *living* in the peace that he has already given us.

Laird draws, of course, on contemplative practice, and particularly on the notion of "breath prayer." This is nothing magical, it is simply a discipline of praying and breathing that assists internal quietness. We use our body to respond to spiritual things all the time – standing to sing, closing our eyes for prayer, sitting attentively to learn, etc. – and this is of the same kind. It is the use of posture, a simple "prayer word" or phrase, and a focus on breathing. It has a

quietening effect:

> *At times the mind flits like a finch from branch to branch and at other times it is like the three-headed dog, Cerberus, unable to decide from which bowl which of its heads should feed at any given moment. Then again, and more often that we may like to admit, the mind is uninspired and limp as a mildewed dish cloth. The mind has countless faces. For centuries the advice of the contemplative tradition has been: well, then, give the mind something to do. If it can't be still, give it a short phrase or a word to repeat silently. And so when we sit, we give our attention wholly to the gentle repetition of the prayer word. We will find that our attention is forever being stolen. As soon as we become aware that our attention has been stolen by some thought, we gently bring ourselves back to the prayer word. (Pages 34-35)*

For me, this is not an eradication of self or something equally as eery, it is simply the *quietening* of all that is in me that tunes God out. Faced with various anxieties or concerns, I could push into them with my intellect or strength of will, and I all I would find would be more anxieties or concerns. Any wisdom, any insight, any creativity – that simple sense of "hearing from God" is elusive when I am noisy. In order to hear the groanings of the Spirit, to watch the glow of illuminated Scripture, I need the quiet.

If I confront my anxieties, I add to the noise. But instead, using a simple act of worship with my body, I "look over the shoulder" of the anxiousness, trusting that the Spirit of Christ is present in the moment of all that's left. It's a surrender, an offering, a laying down, by relaxing the clawing clinging fingers of my mind. Into his hands I commit my anxious spirit… by meeting it with silence.

As I have practiced and adapted what Laird speaks of, I have found it beneficial. Whether it be times set aside, or five

minutes caught during the day; I have resolved two things: 1) Not to reach for my phone and dull myself by flicking through distractions, and 2) Not to run with the bulls of my anxieties and fears. Instead, I have sat myself down, grasped hold of a phrase (usually a line from a worship song or psalm), and have leant back into that gentle worshipful repetition. I don't look for "results" (that would defeat the purpose), but there has been fruit nonetheless: a sense of peace, a word of encouragement for someone, a gentle prod to pray in a specific way, the strength to forgive.

Laird's ongoing explanation of this practice has described something of my experience. He speaks of "three doorways of the present moment" (page 52) and I get what he's talking about.

The **"first doorway"** is the sense in which we seek quietness as a refuge. We sense the noisiness. The "videos" of anxiety and fantasy are coming thick and fast, and we seek silence as a solace. We calm ourselves. We respond to the content of our thoughts. Has someone made me angry? Instead of responding to that anger, I quieten myself. In that place of quiet, God can change the narrative, or give me quiet resilience.

The **"second doorway"** is the sense in which we find ourselves using silence not only as a refuge, but almost as a deliberate form of engagement. Here we respond not just to the content of the thoughts, but the anxious thoughts themselves; we don't just look over the should of the person who has made us angry, we look over the shoulder of the anger itself.

> *The deeper we delve into the prayer word, the less we use it as a shield from afflictive thoughts. Rather we meet the thoughts with stillness instead of commentary. We let the thoughts simply be, but without chasing them and whipping up commentaries on them. (Page 63)*

From my own experience, I find myself noticing "I am anxious",

rather than “I am anxious about X.” In the first doorway, I seek silence, rather than chasing down the solutions to X. In the second doorway, there’s a gentle recognition that anxiety is not my bedrock, Jesus is. Rather than focusing on the anxiety, I quieten myself, and so allow his presence, on his terms. The anxiety may be or not be, I will look over its shoulder, to the quietness of trusting Jesus.

The **“third doorway”** is where I think Laird slips too far (“my ‘I am’ is one with Christ’s ‘I am'”, page 67). But there is some substance in his gist. It was something like this in the midst of my breakdown-breakthough: I could not do anything else, other than be. Being was simply enough. Outside of my triggering stressors, I could watch and observe almost everything, including myself. I didn’t have a need to perform, to strive, to prove. I have heard people talking of “falling into the arms of Jesus”, of finding themselves able to “breathe underwater.” The words are hard to find – for me, it was like the gravitational pull of God was inside of myself, pulling me inwards towards a truer sense of self, that was God-centred, not me-centred. It was the utter contrast of the anxieties that would rip me apart. It wasn’t mystical or amazing. It simply was.

My aspiration, moving forward, is to grow in this sense of abiding in Christ. I don’t want to be defined by my circumstances. I don’t want to be defined by my emotional chemical response. I want to be defined by the present character of God. It can’t be manipulated into being by my intellect. It can’t be manufactured by my strength of will. It is a place of embodied trust.

> *The bottom line is this: minimize the time given over to chasing thoughts, dramatizing them in grand videos, and believing these videos to be your identity. Otherwise life will pass you by. (Page 71)*

This contemplative area is new to me. But it matches my experience. Above all, it has been a way for me to apply *hope*; a vehicle for faith in my inner world.

> *We move from being victim of what is happening to being a witness to what is happening. Things keep happening, but we experience them differently. This move from victim to witness is an early psychological fruit of the contemplative journey. (Page 81)*

I sometimes wonder what Jesus used to do in his times of solitude. I don't think it was complicated. I think it matched the "emptying out" of Philippians 2:1-11. In fact, I have been reflecting on Hebrews 5:7 where the writer talks of how Jesus often offered up anguished prayers that turned to "reverent submission." He didn't lose himself, but was able to place himself in his father's hands; it marked his ministry, most clearly on the cross. Truly, he must have ministered from an experience of *shalom* – the "stillness [not] of a rabbit hiding from a predator, but the stillness of a mountain presiding over a valley" (page 101).

Laird ends his book well, by finding application in the experience of our woundedness ("The Liturgy of Our Wounds: Temptation, Humility, and Failure.") Our rights-based culture cannot cope with woundedness, except by increasing the clamour, within and without. Yet the joy and blessing of failure and hurt is the thirstiness which draws us to look beyond the noisy experience. It's not an avoidance of woundedness, it is of finding God even there. "I am going to seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart" (Hosea 2:14).

Naturally Supernatural: Contemplative and Charismatic

I have just returned from the Naturally Supernatural Winter conference, held and hosted by Soul Survivor Church Watford. The form and substance of it would be familiar to anyone who has attended any of the Soul Survivor youth festivals in the last couple of decades: Charismatic worship and ministry that is both invigoratingly contemporary and solidly cemented in old school Wimberesque wisdom.

My intention here is to give a short reflection on my own personal experience of this week, and highlight one particular realisation: Not only was this a charismatic conference, with all its joys and highlights, it was also, unexpectedly, a contemplative retreat. Let me explain:

The *charismatic* aspect is obvious, not just in the substance of it, but in the form: Three sessions a day, each headed up by 45 minutes to an hour of musical worship, before a teaching time, and "ministry time." NSN does it well. The songs (while occasionally a little, um, committed to the "high rotation" list) were *declarative*; they were *worshipful* in the truest sense of recognising God and our right place before him. The teaching was biblical, the personalities large but self-effacing, the prophetic words were gentle and constructive, and the times of expecting the Spirit to be ministering were emphatically disconnected from hype and manipulation. The focus was not on some glitzy self-prospering, but true mission; it was an exhortation to change the world, beginning by lining ourselves up with the love of God in Jesus. I've touched on this before.

The *contemplative* aspect of it, however, may not be a first thought. But look at it like this: My personal experience this week was a *spiritual journey.* It had this sort of shape:

1. An encounter with *hope*. The early times of worship (and excellent teaching from Ali Martin) connected me with the hope of the gospel. My encounter began with comfort, feelings of being able to soar, and of being called to deep life-changing gospel truths.
2. An encounter with *brokenness*. The Word of God *reveals*. We find ourselves *exposed* with our hurts, sins, brokenness. I felt *blocked*, incapable of fully grasping or expressing the love of God. It was a time of thirsting, of being uncomfortable. *As the deer pants for the water*, I experienced a longing for the rich absolution of a renewed *"right spirit"* within me.
3. An encounter with *godly frustration*. As speaker after speaker (but I'm thinking especially of Tre Sheppard) reminded us again and again of the mission of God, those old vocational fires began to burn. They had been smouldering and now they were blown into a consuming flame. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (*1 Cor 9:16*). Even if it means I burn up, "for the sake of the world, burn like a fire in me."
4. An encounter with *painful release*. There are times when Mike Pilavachi is Grecian comic, and then there are times when he speaks words of heavy, pregnant, prophetic, truth. As he spoke about the call of the church away from dysfunction to mission, the truth lapped upon me like antiseptic on a wound. The Spirit of God took me by the hand to encounter some of those hurts and burdens that accrue in ordained ministry, even and especially in this otherwise green and pleasant land. I groaned from the depths of myself, as the Holy One reached in to heal. "Even what the enemy means for evil, he turns it for our good."
5. An encounter with *gentle mercy and ministry*. I could

describe it like this – “I was able to pray for and minister to others” – but that wouldn’t be entirely accurate. It was more a case of being allowed to stand close to people and watch the Spirit of Christ do his thing. I got to watch and pray, to observe and listen, to simply be alongside those who were being brought to something new. What a privilege. When I got to say something, all I was doing was describing what I could see: “prophetic” words as a simple testimony of the immediate. And others did the same for me; loving words were both given and received.

6. An encounter with *peace*. At the end of the week I received a benediction, spoken over me not by the grand Greek guru at the front, but by a young woman who had the boldness to approach a big ugly Australian with a word of encouragement. It released, commissioned, and completed something. What a gift.
7. An encounter with *fellowship*. Connections of kindredness that welled up and simply happened. Brothers and sisters to know by name. Recognition of one another. Collegiality. “Your bride will come together, and we’ll sing.”

The thing is, I’ve been on these sorts of spiritual journeys before. On quiet days, or in weeks of gentle guidance and “alone time” at a retreat centre, I’ve also had these encounters with hope, brokenness, pain, mercy, ministry, peace, and fellowship. I have wept similar tears on top of a Tasmanian mountain reading 1 Corinthians during a day “away from it all.” I have been led through pain into peace in quiet services of compline after a day walking in the Gloucestershire countryside. I have found fellowship and fraternity in weeks spent with brothers in a mutual mentoring “pastor’s retreat group.”

Similarly, in the last little while I’ve been exploring different ways in which I am able to pray. After all, prayer

is the only thing left in the belly of the whale. Sometimes the point of the season is to lean back into fishy stomach walls, and learn to trust that the Lord will bring about a vomiting at the right time and place. There we pray. This prayer is prayers of suffering, prayers of forsakenness, and simple prayers of quietness. We seek the face God and we learn to offer an inner sacrifice, not only of our praise, but of our buzzing anxieties and frantic minds. And we breathe.

In the midst of this week's charismatic experience, I have been finding myself praying this way. I have drawn on contemplative depths to fathom the charismatic ones. In the midst of worship, I am offering contemplative prayer. While observing the Holy Spirit at work in the tears around me, I am quietening my soul. I am content to allow, and observe, and not to push and to strive. There is grace in that.

There's no doubt about it, Naturally Supernatural is not the same experience as a silent retreat. But in this week I've seen something of the depths of spirituality that are common to both the charismatic and the contemplative. I knew it intellectually, and I've seen it in Gill (who is years ahead of me on this), but this week I've *realised* it profoundly. The charismatic and the contemplative are not so far apart: they draw us to the heart of God. Both whisper to us the Word of God. Both fuel us with the Spirit of God. Both embrace us with the blessing of being in Jesus Christ.

For the sake of the world, burn like a fire in me.

Q&A: Do we neglect the doctrine of hell?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

Do we neglect the doctrine of hell? I recently read Jonathan Edwards' "sinners in the hands of an angry God" and my reaction was:

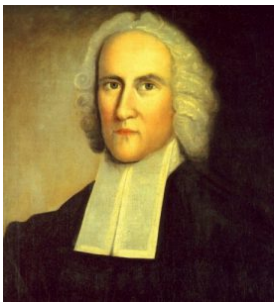
To marvel at the magnitude of my rescue;
To be reminded of the urgency of sharing the gospel and my part in that.
(I also thought you'd have to be brave to talk like that in our generation!)

I understand that Jesus spoke more of hell than heaven. Salvation is a rescue – should we talk more about the reality of hell both to draw people to the Rescuer, and to increase our worship of God and our evangelism, whilst avoiding both the Middle Ages fascination with grisly imagery and the laughed off sandwich board person proclaiming that the end is nigh. If I am honest, (and holding this alongside election) I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell.

A related question is do we neglect the doctrine of heaven…

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Hi Sarah, thanks for the question.



I must admit, I've never read this sermon from Edwards, (which was penned in 1741, and now available online for those who are interested). He is preaching on Deuteronomy 32:25 :- *To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time…* (to use Edwards' probable translation). I haven't been able to look at it in depth, but there are a couple of things to note that can help us here:

> **Firstly**, Edwards gets the *audience* right, at least initially. The text is not so much about God raging against the world, it is about God's broken heart about *his own people*! Edwards describes them as "wicked unbelieving Israelites, who were God's visible people, and who lived under the means of grace; but who, notwithstanding all God's wonderful works towards them, remained… void of counsel, having no understanding in them."
>
> In this he is, indeed, reflecting the focus of judgement language in the New Testament. e.g. Jesus uses language such as "hypocrites" and John talks about "a brood of vipers", referring to his own people. Similarly, it is the *temple* which will have no stone left on top of another. It is a message, first and foremost, *to the people of God,* including the church.
>
> This understanding locates judgement in the midst of grace. Jesus is no Pharisee, loading down but not lifting a finger to help. No, he is the good shepherd, reflecting the heart of his Father. He has *come* to his intransigent people, to take responsibility for them if they would have him.

You ask “should we talk more about the reality of hell?” If we do, we need to take heed; we can’t preach judgement without going through our own refining fires. And sometimes I see a whole bunch of tinder-dry unChristlikeness amongst those who take Christ’s name. I fear it needs to be a great conflagration, and I am well and truly including myself in this brood.

Secondly, Edwards asserts that the wrath of God is real and present, withheld only by his grace, and he is right about this. This is hard for people to hear, (we are understandably uncomfortable with divine anger!), and it should always be communicated clearly. But it must be, and can be, communicated:

After all, the wrath of God is simply an aspect of his justice. It isn’t fickle, or out-of-control. It is the appropriate response to wrongdoing. We are bland and apathetic, God is not. We harden our hearts and walk past injustice, God does not. There are times we should be more *angry* at the unchecked sin in the world, and certainly at the unchecked sin in our own lives. The fact that there are homeless people on the streets of my otherwise middle-class town, is an injustice, it should *move* us. The tears of a teenager misused by her porn-addicted boyfriend, should induce something in us; a cry for justice at the least, the power to act if we can. Those who don’t want God to be wrathful shouldn’t also ask us to care about #metoo. God is not #meh about this world.

Similarly, the wrath of God is never disconnected from his righteousness and his grace. We sometimes have this image of God as someone caught in an internal battle “Do I love them, or do I hate them?” No, God is love in all things. “Making things right” through bringing justice in judgement is an act of love. Withholding judgement as an act of grace is love. When we face analogous issues – say, perhaps, in our parenting – we often experience conflict because we lack

the wisdom, or the security, or, indeed, the affection to do it well. God does not lack those things.

So should we talk about these things? Yes. In fact, our current series at the St. Nic's evening service is looking at the foundations of faith, drawing on the list in Hebrews 6:1-2 as an inspiration. "Eternal judgement" is one of the topics we will be looking at. The application will likely include those things that you mention: gratitude about the grace of God, and urgency about declaring the gospel. It will also include the imperatives that relate to pursuing God's the Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

But your question is not just about judgement, it is about the concept of hell. And this is where you'll probably find that I differ from Edwards. I push back at the caricature of "total eternal torment", for I find little, if any, of it in the Bible. If anything, the *exact nature* of the final state after judgement, is a second-order issue for me; I won't go to the stake for it.

My eschatology (my understanding of "the end") looks to the renewal of this earth as the gospel hope. I've talked about this in my review of N. T. Wright's excellent *Surprised By Hope.* Wright draws on C. S. Lewis with regards to the outcome of judgement, and speaks of a final state of "beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all."

Wright's view has merit. My own take is closer to *annihilationism*, that the outcome of eternal judgement is either eternal life (for those in Christ), or simply ceasing to exist (you can't get more eternal than that). I've written about this before, and I won't reiterate it here.

So yes, we should talk about these things more. But here's my final thought: You say "I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell" and I get that. But I don't think I would

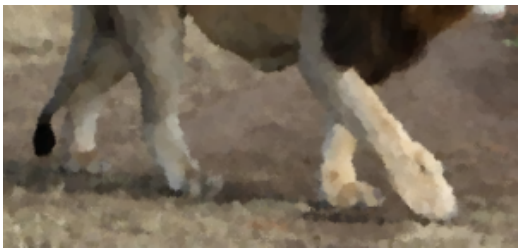
quickly, if ever, say it that way. I *would* say this: I want to belong to God, because he is the most holy, delightful, awe-inspiring, identity-giving, glorious One. He is my eternal Father, and I love him.

Q&A: How can we cultivate a 'space' for God to move?

Anonymous asks:

In your experience, how can we cultivate a 'space' for God to move in a way that is natural & supernatural, expected & unexpected? How do we do this in different contexts? Church, work, school, family, relationships etc?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]



What a great question. If we dived in deep we would have enough to write books and books. We can only skim over the surface here.

So let's begin by considering what it might mean for "God to move"…

It is partly, I think, an *experiential* question. It's the same sort of thing when we talk about God being "present"; the raw theological truth is that God is *omni*-present, he *is* everywhere, but that doesn't mean that we are talking

nonsense. There are times when we have a greater *sense* of the presence of God than at other times. The psalms (e.g. Psalm 73:28) speak of the "nearness" of God as something to be experienced, he is a God who can be *found*. The implication is that sometimes we might "*grope for him*" like someone stumbling in the dark, and this is our *experience* even though, in reality, *"he is not far from each one of us."*.

Similarly, then, when we talk about God "moving," the raw theological truth is that God is *always* active. What we are talking about is our *experience* of God's activity. Sometimes it is a vague sense of the *wind blowing*. Other times it is a clear sense of direction or even *divine frustration.*. Sometimes the Spirit is *"present to heal"*, so to speak, and sometimes it is *otherwise*. In my own experience, there are seasons when I do not *experience* God's movement; prayer seems lifeless, life seems hard, sin looms, and all ambitions and pursuits seem to turn to dust.

In all this I am glad of the way you have phrased your question. You have said "cultivating *space* for God to move" and this is different to what we are usually tempted to do: to *cultivate* the movement of God itself. When God seems to be absent or static, we long to *experience* his presence and movement, and we try and mimic that experience. We resort to positive thinking, hype, self-determination, and even belligerence. A lot of the prosperity gospel "name it and claim it" manipulation happens in this space, and we need to be wary of it.

Not that there is anything innately wrong with a little bit of positive thinking, though. Deliberate choices to use our body positively have their place in raising our eyes and counting our blessings. Because the flip side of trying to generate the movement of God is to believe the lie that he *isn't* moving at all. Ezekiel's *depression*, after seeing God work wondrously on Mt. Carmel, is both understandable and instructive. He is locked into a narrative that almost assumes defeat: " I am the

only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

Taken to their end, these two responses of not experiencing God at work, close us to the truth that God is actually at work, whether we like it or not. The first presumes that his movement depends on our inflated experience. The second presumes that his movement can not overcome our deflated experience. Neither is what we are looking for.

The reality is, is that Jesus *is* building his kingdom; the prayer of his people, "thy kingdom come", *is* being answered. All authority in heaven and earth *has* been given to him; his kingdom *is* inaugurated and will reach its end, and in the meantime he *is* with us always to the end of the age, empowering us to immerse this world in his name and his ways (Matthew 28:18-20). Theologically speaking, that makes me a missional inaugurated-eschatology man.

We cultivate our *experience* of this work of Jesus when we respond to it in faith, actively seeking to follow him on his terms. We diminish our experience of that movement, when we dictate our own terms. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is control.

In practice, then, what does that look like? You ask for my experience, let me give you an overview:

It looks like plodding. I remember during our church planting days, when asked to reflect on our experience, I would say "It's slog work for Jesus." It looks like preaching week in and week out, in season and out of it. It looks like simply being *bothered* – bothering to care for people, to take time, to talk, to listen, to fix what can be fixed and to allow the rest of the serenity prayer to kick in as well. It looks like not avoiding responsibility but carrying whatever loads are given to us along the way. It looks like roads in the valley more than soaring above the mountain.

What we come to experience is that the movement of God can be

incredibly ordinary, and awe-inspiring in that ordinariness if we care to look. We may want the hair-standing-on-end experience, but heaven cheers for the ordinary extraordinary life-bringing moment just as hard, probably more. e.g. I once returned to my church after a holiday to discover some of my brothers and sisters had taken it upon themselves to befriend and draw close to a survivor of child abuse who was taking a lonely stand in the witness box as she faced her abuser.

Some of the most profoundly applicable spiritual teaching I've heard has been from my wife… while she was talking to our children in the car, driving home from school, in a conversation that started with "How was your day?" We plod along, we seize the ordinary, we don't avoid the mess, we simply *bother*. And God moves.

The regular rhythm of spiritual disciplines is part of this. You may have heard how God has moved at the Ffald-y-Brenin retreat centre in Wales. Their experience rests on their regular rhythm of prayer that invades the landscape. They simply pray, and if God moves in someone, they simply entrust that person to God… and continue to pray. We have brought these sorts of rhythms into our family; morning prayer before school, thanking God around the table for something in the day. It is ordinary space, in which God can move.

It looks like waiting. This is similar to plodding, but has a slightly different direction. Plodding "gets on with the mission". Waiting is worship, when God seems absent. Waiting is the space of emptiness.

There are many things about the world, church, and life in general that can seem impressive. I have learned in my experience to be less impressed. These things are usually "achievements" – scores, marks, promotions, wealth, numbers, activities, tasks, and programmes. None of them are bad in themselves, many of them are blessings in their way. And we want them. We want them, so we grasp them. We use our

strength and our power to pursue them. I count myself in this! God is gracious, and sometimes he uses us, but I have learned that they are not usually the stuff of a "move of God" in the sene that we are talking about. We can't seize God's plan, we are called to active waiting.

The right response to "unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain" (Psalm 127:1) is to *wait*. This does not mean passivity (we keep on plodding after all!), nor does it mean a lack of expectancy in which we fail to seize opportunities. What it does mean is that we refuse to despise the fallow years. We refuse to fill our lives with busy self-justifying activities, a conglomeration of straws to cling to for the sake of self-worth. Rather, we offer ourselves, we put ourselves on the line for his sake by stopping and waiting.

In that waiting, God moves, sometimes more than ever. It is there that he brings about adaptive change in us – a change in who we are, not just in what we might do. The sense of his absence draws us deeper into him. As the level of our spiritual fervour recedes hidden sins are revealed, insecurities manifest, and we find how shallow we actually are… and he calls us deeper.

The movement of God is deep. And we may not even know it until after it is over. A current favourite story of mine is the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24. The two on the road are despondent and low, plodding along in their experience of everything falling apart. We know that Jesus is with them, but *they* don't. It is not until afterwards do they realise that during their journey of despondency, their hearts had actually been burning the whole time. God moves when we wait; he makes our hearts burn.

It looks like active, discerning, worship. This is one of the things I have appreciated in the Soul Survivor movement (which also has its roots in plodding and waiting). They have high

production values and excellent musical skills, but they have done well (by and large) to keep these as means rather than ends. They keep their eyes open to discern how God is moving during the time of worship. When they sense an experience of God they often stop the music and allow the silence.

What they are doing is using worship – musical declarations of God's grace and other words – as a form of creating space, encouraging an openness to God, expressing faith. I have found similar in other traditions: devout Anglo Catholics who find this space in ancient rites and the presence of God in the sacraments; reformed evangelicals who thirst for the spoken exposition which brings the Word alive.

There are some things in common to these worship experiences: 1) The focus is God, it is declarative rather than subjunctive ("Lord, you are" rather than "This is how I feel"); 2) The senses are entertained (it *is* an experience), but nothing is forced or coerced; 3) What is done is good in its own right – praises are sung, sacraments administered, the word is preached – and even if there is no significant experience, there's a real sense in which good has been done, we have worshipped the Lord; 4) Time is taken as we diminish our control; whether it be 45 minutes of praise worship, bible teaching, or contemplative prayer, we give God the gift of time to do what he wants in us. You'd be surprised (or perhaps you wouldn't) how easy it is for a worship leader to be driven by the demands of the clock and the expectations of the flock about style more than substance.

These things from corporate worship can be brought into "school, work, family etc." Whatever we do, we take time to focus on God through something innately good (e.g. private or shared devotions), we allow him to move, we don't try and generate it, and so we rest in him.

It looks like response. Some people talk about seeking a move of God through *expectancy*. We are to pray

with *expectancy,* mustering a belief that our prayers not only *will* be answered, but *must* be. I get what is meant, but it's hard to imagine it in practice: Somehow an attitude of "OK God, this is what I'm expecting" doesn't exactly create space for God to move; and anything that does happen could easily be taken as self-justification of prayers well prayed.

Rather, I think that sense of expectancy is better described like this: when we seek a move of God, we do so with a *readiness to respond*. If we ask God to "move in us" and he confronts us with our sin, our response should be to repent. If we feel called to pursue something, we should count the cost and act according to our faith. If we find someone or something laid on our hearts, we shouldn't let that pass but should pursue it further.

For me, that is more helpful than some of the caricatured answers you see: e.g. "The Holy Spirit can't work if you have sin in your life, a lack of expectancy, or if you don't have enough faith." Ouch. Rather, God *is* moving, and our experience of that movement simply doesn't make sense if we don't respond, so we get ready to respond.

To conclude: This is a big topic and a simple blog post can't do it justice. But you ask for my experience, and this is where I'm coming from. Thank you for the question – I haven't really had the opportunity to put words down on this topic before. You've stirred my thinking, and I'm sure my thoughts and words will develop.

Q&A: What does it mean to be

co-heirs with Christ?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

What does it mean to be co-heirs with Christ in Romans 8:17?

It must be unfathomable, outrageous grace to inherit all that Christ has as God the Son!

This is way better than Eden isn't it?

What does being co-heirs with Jesus look like expressed in our relationship with him for eternity – how does it fit in with us being the worshippers and him being worshipped? I suppose I mean what does it mean to be alongside God as heirs but being glorified humans, not divine?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Thanks Sarah,

The passage you are quoting is (to use the NIV) Romans 8:14-17:

> *14 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17* ***Now if we are***

> ***children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ****, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

To respond to your first two points. Yes, this is "unfathomable, outrageous grace" and yes, "this is way better than Eden"!

You ask what does it *mean*?

Firstly, we need to grasp what Christ's inheritance *is.* The answer is big and simple: Christ's inheritance is *everything*. It isn't always spelled out; after all, how do you detail everything? What might it include? *Big things*, like "eternal life", the "new heaven and the new earth", and "peace." It's *everything*.

The go-to passage that helps us out is Hebrews 1:1-2

> *1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed* ***heir of all things****, and through whom also he made the universe.*

You might also be familiar with the "attitude of Christ" that Paul espouses in Philippians 2:1-11. This passage talks about the "self-emptying" (the technical term is *kenosis*) of Jesus, "who, though he was in the form of God… emptied himself, taking the form of a slave… he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." Paul then talks about Christ's *exaltation,* and in many ways he is talking about Christ's *inheritance* – what God the Father *rightly* gives the Son who gave himself up for his people:

> *9 Therefore God also highly exalted him*
> *and gave him the name*
> *that is above every name,*

10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Christ's inheritance is the *reverse kenosis*, that comes not from himself, but from his Father.

And it's not just every *thing,* it is also *all authority*. Just look at Matthew 28:18 or 1 Corinthians 15:24 and many other places. Jesus really *is* the "Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 21:6).

That's his inheritance. Of which we are *co-heirs*.

That's amazing.

We can pull it apart theologically, but the narrative is simple: The heart of God has always been to share the fullness of himself with his people. We see it in Eden. We see it as he reaches out to Abram, making his promises, intervening in history. We see it as his presence goes with his people out of Egypt, through the sea, and on into the wilderness years. We see it as he speaks through his prophets. We see it as he nurtures a king whose heart is after his own. We see it as he pours himself out as a child, and in sharing our humanity, *covers us* with his grace and his purpose. He now shares with us his sonship, his sweet heart of faith, his trust and dependence, his obedience even to the point of death, and the blessings that rightly flow from it.

We are "in Christ" as he covers us, and Christ is "in us" by his Spirit. Salvation catches us up into the relational dynamics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thinking of salvation without any sense of sharing in Christ's inheritance, is like conceiving of a banquet without any

reference to food; you can sort of imagine something in the abstract, but it doesn't really make any sense.

But your secondary question draws the meaning out even more. You ask, "*What does being co-heirs with Jesus look like expressed in our relationship with him for eternity – how does it fit in with us being the worshippers and him being worshipped?*"

I think there's something here: God *is* a worshipper. The object of God's worship is himself. This is not vanity, it is truthful *delight* and entirely appropriate. The Father *adores* the Son. The Son is *devoted* to the Father. The Spirit *raises up* the name of God! Surely we can say that Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God, rightly *worships* his Father, perfectly, throughout his life and especially in his death.

To be co-heirs with Christ is, therefore, to share in his role as a worshipper. In Christ, we offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and, in Christ, it is worthy and honourable and *received* in great delight by Almighty Creator God.

Again, there's something amazing about that.

But does our inheritance with Christ also mean an inheritance in the worship he *receives*? In some sense, yes, but I mean this very carefully: as Christ's people, we share in the worship *he* receives, not in any worship *we* receive, but in the worship *he* receives.

What I'm trying to grasp is in this account from the end of the book, in Revelation 21:9-27:

> *9 One of the seven angels… came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God, and its*

> *brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.*

John then goes on to talk about the gates and walls of the New Jerusalem and includes imagery of apostolic foundations and things like that. The overall picture is one of beauty, and purity, of the Bride of Christ, who shines (and this is the point) *with the glory of God*. Jesus covers his bride with *his* glory. *That* is our inheritance. It is not *our* glory. It is *his*. But we share in it. All creation will gaze upon us, his people, and worship him.

And that brings us back to Romans 8:17, where we started, because there it is in the second part of the verse:

> *Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that* ***we may also share in his glory.***

It *is* outrageously amazing.

Image credit: Licensed by Waiting For The Word under CC BY 2.0

Q&A: Should we pray for blessings for unbelievers?

Sarah A writes:

Hi Will,
Should we as individuals or churches offer prayer for unbelievers for God to intervene in day to day challenges or bring his blessings on a situation?

I completely appreciate that the motivation to offer this is loving and evangelistic and that God of course can use these interactions for his glory.

But is it right to be offering this kind of prayer? It seems to be offering prayer for what God can do rather than seeking him for who he is. Clearly an unbeliever's first and greatest need is to come to repentance and find Jesus. To me, offering prayer for problems or asking for blessings seems to put God in the role of fixer with the Christian acting as an intermediary therefore bypassing the need for a relationship between God and the one who wants prayer. But we know that only Jesus is the intermediary between man and God and the promise of Hebrews 4:14 – 16 is for Christians who now have access to the throne of God to receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

1 John 5:14 – 16 tells us that if we ask anything according to God's will, he hears us. So does God hear these kind of prayers?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Thanks Sarah,

Great question. In summary, you ask "Should we pray for unbelievers for God to intervene or bring blessings?" In summary, my answer is "Yes." Does he "hear these kind of prayers"? Yes, but as with all pastoral encounters, praying for someone in this way comes with a responsiblity to exercise care, faithfulness, and discernment.

There's a lot going on behind this answer, though, and I'd like to unpack it if I may. The first thing to consider, although it may seem like a simplistic question, is this:

What do we mean by "unbeliever" anyway?

I'm not sure I actually like the term "unbeliever" as it's a little denigrating: everybody believes in *something* after all. But clearly we do need to grasp some sort of distinction between those who do and do not believe those things that *Paul* tells us are of "first importance", "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day." We are at least talking about those who do not have a personal faith in Jesus.

That's simple enough. If we start there, it is biblical example that leads us to conclude that praying for someone who doesn't have this faith is not only permissible, but it is often desirable.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus himself intervened in the lives of many who had not yet put their faith in him in a formal sense. Similarly, in *Matthew 10*, he commissions the disciples to go and "freely give" just as they have "freely received" and in practice that means that they are to "heal those who are ill, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons." I think that puts us in the ballpark of "praying for God to intervene in day to day challenges and to bring his blessings on a situation", to use your words.

I find the example of Peter and John in *Acts 3* particularly informative. Here the lame man does not ask for salvation, not even healing; he is simply asking for money. Peter and John do not take the opportunity to evangelise to him (although the end result has the man dancing in praise to God), rather we get the following famous line (emphasised below):

> *When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, 'Look at us!' So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said,* ***'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.'*** *Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.*

This phenomenon appears to be writ large in *Acts 5:12-16* where we read that "a great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured." None of this appears to depend on those involved having a pre-existing state of belief in Jesus. In fact, usually the intervention and intercession *leads* to belief.

We could just about leave it there, but **let's push a little deeper**.

That push begins with something of a counterpoint to what I've just suggested: You see, one problem in using the examples I have is that all those who are being blessed are, in some way, *already part of the people of God*. That is, they are members of the Jewish people, under the covenant promises of God. The miracles, blessings, and interventions that we see being ministered through Jesus and his disciples are not so much prayers for unbelievers, but a demonstration that God's promises to his people have been fulfilled.

This, itself, is gospel: The kingdom of God is here, the blessings of the covenant are fulfilled in Jesus; enter into the hope of your people. Or simply, in application, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"

In some sense, then, these blessings and interventions are "in-house." The covenant blessings come to God's people when the covenant is obeyed, (just consider *Deuteronomy 28* if you

have the time). It is no surprise, then that these blessings of healing, restoration, and divine intervention are made manifest through the faithful *obedience* of Christ, especially in his death. The blessings now flow, through him, to the *"lost sheep of Israel"*. Examples such as the healing of the lame man in Acts 3 are not so much about "praying for unbelievers who are on the outside" but "demonstrating that the gospel is true on the inside."

But that doesn't mean I've contradicted myself. What we've done is dug down to the roots of the gospel, and found them grounded on the covenant promises of God. So let's go back to that covenant:

What is at the heart of the promises of God?

Look at the covenant that God makes with Abram (later called Abraham) in *Genesis 12*:

> *'I will make you into a great nation,*
> *and I will bless you;*
> *I will make your name great,*
> *and* ***you will be a blessing.***
> *I will bless those who bless you,*
> *and whoever curses you I will curse;*
> *and* ***all peoples on earth***
> ***will be blessed through you.****'*

Here's the impetus: Whatever blessing comes to God's people, it is to flow out into the world. Whatever blessing we have in Christ, we are to share it.

So perhaps we should turn to a different biblical example to interact with your question. Consider something like Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman in *Matthew 15* as he heals her daughter. This example is particularly telling: Both the woman and Jesus make a point about blessings for those who are currently *outside* of covenant grace. The dialogue about Jesus

only going to the “lost sheep of Israel” and whether or not she might “eat the crumbs that fall from the table” serves not to diminish but *amplify* the faith she has exhibited outside of the fold. She was not yet been brought into the fold, so to speak, but the blessings can and do *flow* to her. Her prayer *was* heard and it was answered. Jesus is simply doing what the promises of God demand; sharing the blessing.

So our very foundation, the grounding of God’s words of promise that sets the shape of who we are in Jesus, shifts us to look outwards. Seeking the blessing of those who are “outside” in some sense is not just one possible outworking of our own belief and covenant inclusion, it’s *essential* to its very character. We bless because we are blessed, we freely give because we have freely received. **We, who are in Christ, are to act as he acted, and continues to act through his Spirit in us.**

To pray for a person who is not yet “in Christ” doesn’t usurp Christ’s role as an intermediary, it *exercises* it, as long as we pray according to his character. We can only pray from the basis of the covenant blessing we have in him, i.e. we can only pray in *his* name. To offer to pray for someone in their circumstances, is therefore an act that *reveals* Jesus more than it hides him. To pray for someone in their circumstances is to act *according to* the promises that God has fulfilled in Jesus, not against them.

That’s the foundation I’m coming from, in answering your question. There are, however, a couple of things to tease out:

Firstly, you write “*It seems to be offering prayer for what God can do rather than seeking him for who he is. Clearly an unbeliever’s first and greatest need is to come to repentance and find Jesus. To me, offering prayer for problems or asking for blessings seems to put God in the role of fixer with the Christian acting as an intermediary therefore bypassing the need for a relationship between God and the one who wants*

prayer.”

I think I get what you mean, but excuse me if I miss the mark.

Clearly, our longing for people to share in the blessings of God is ultimately met if they, too, become a part of the covenant people; if they turn to Jesus in faith, and receive forgiveness, renewal, and all the other things. But we cannot separate prayer for other forms of blessing from this. If comfort, healing, or divine intervention comes from answered prayer, this is more likely to draw people to the ultimate blessing rather than hide it. To separate prayer for salvation from prayer for blessing in general creates a **false dichotomy**.

But **secondly**, your concerns are valid, and should remind us to **be careful** in how we pray. In some way, this is why I bother to go to some of the depths that I do in answering these sorts of questions. If we pray as if “God is a fixer” then that is the “gospel” that we will proclaim in those prayers; and, especially in the event that the “fix” doesn’t come as we thought it might, we might *hinder* people’s view of God.

But if we pray from an understanding of who we are in Christ, covered by his grace, filled with his spirit, inheriting his blessing, that is what we reveal. We know how we pray for ourselves and for our fellow brothers and Christians, with confidence in God’s character, with an understanding of how he works all things together for good, with an assurance of God’s love even in the midst of suffering. We pray from the same place when we pray for those who don’t share this understanding, and we must be additionally careful to ensure that this understanding, and our meaning, is clear.

I’ve seen it done badly. I’ve also seen it done well. I’ve been to big events where it’s all about the guru fixing things on some messiah’s behalf. I’ve also been to big events where sweet prayer and intercession has been offered, and things

were gently and clearly explained along the way; the heart of God was spoken of, shared, manifested.

In short, wisdom is required. Whether it be a “Healing On The Streets” ministry, or an opportunity that comes from a conversation with a friend, as we come to our Father on their behalf, we need to ensure that our words help them to come along with us.

In the end, that’s the sweet childlike dynamic on which it all rests. We have found the one who is our, Saviour, Lord and Leader, who has the words of eternal life, the blessings of eternity. In him we are caught up into our Creator. This is a precious, beautiful, sacred thing. It’s not ours to hide, but we share it carefully, with wonder, joy, and delight. And who knows what our Lord will do?

Q&A: Should we make more of Baptism in the Holy Spirit?

MK asks:

It’s taken me an age to get to this point, but certainly for some, baptism is just the start. Simply recognising another broken person wants to be fixed. Sometimes, of course, a recognition that parents see their child needs to be fixed which the child confirms later. There is another baptism we need, that from the Spirit. This one must necessarily come later as our brokenness is being mended. Nonetheless it seems crucial. We don’t seem to make too much of this in ‘official’ church, but should we?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this

blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

This is an interesting question, and it goes where angels fear to tread… to some of the most precious parts of our Christian experience, and the words that we use to describe them. As a church we *should* be making more of these experiences, but we often struggle for the language, and the courage.

There is a pastoral dilemma, you see. In our insecurities, often the exuberant expression of one person's testimony can feel like an invalidation of our own. And "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" is fraught in this regard. I think what you have described is an excellent expression of the Christian journey, but we must be careful in how we talk about it… but sometimes we are too careful and we avoid the difficult conversation.

Here's the problem: the word "Baptism" is being used in multiple senses – to speak about both the *beginning and promise* of the Christian journey, and also for the ongoing *experience* of the Christian journey.

Baptism rightly describes the beginning. Baptism with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a sacramental *beginning* of the Christian journey – it so symbolically embraces the promises of salvation and covenantal inclusion that we can look upon it as the foundation on which our faith experience is built. It incorporates a "fixing" as you say, either for ourselves or as an embrace of our children.

That "fixing" includes the understanding of being "born again" (Baptism symbolises a dying and resurrection), of having the Holy Spirit come and dwell within us (an important declaration in the act of *confirming* one's Baptism), of being

regenerate by the grace of God, and of taking our place within the Body of Christ.

Our Baptism with water is therefore much more than "John's Baptism" of repentance only. Yes, it is a sacramental symbol of repentance, but it is also a baptism *into Christ*. John himself says "I baptised you with water; but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" (*Mark 1:8*), and he is referring to the new *beginning* that Jesus will bring about.

Similarly, in Acts we see a couple of occasions when new Christians had only received John's Baptism. Paul's experience in Ephesus in *Acts 19:1-6* describes this:

> *While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'*
> *They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'*
> *So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?'*
> *'John's baptism,' they replied.*
> *Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.*

Paul baptises them "in the name of Lord Jesus", as the foundation and beginning of their faith, and the Holy Spirit coming upon them is part and parcel of that. Amongst the baptised people of God there are no gradations, and no one is a second class Christian needing another dose of God's grace, if you know what I mean.

It's in this sense of beginnings that I prefer the use of the word "Baptism." The "official church" does talk about this

lot, and usually reasonably well.

Nevertheless, "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" describes a genuine experience, which I share and affirm, even if I might use slightly different language. And, yes, it's usually something we don't talk about well at all. Indeed, often we prefer stability and order, and so we inhibit new experiences, misconstrue and misunderstand them, or seek to restrict them to controllable structures and programs. In so doing, even when well-intentioned, we discourage growth and maturity.

The genuine experience that we're talking about here takes many forms. It invariably involves a sense of God being closer than he has before, of being filled, touched, moved, even overcome by the Spirit of God. It often comes with a sense of freedom, restoration, healing, and sometimes an increase in boldness and courage. I think this is the sense of "being mended" that you are talking about.

It's an experience that for some can be almost spontaneous and unexpected, for some it comes as an answer to prayer in the midst of trauma or darkness, for some it's because someone has laid hands on them, others have experienced it in ecstatic worship, others have found an encounter in times of deep contemplation. It is an experience that is often accompanied by the manifestations of the Spirit that we see in Acts and read about in places like *1 Corinthians 12* – tongues, interpretations, prophesying and all the other sorts of gifts of the Spirit.

For some it is a unique one-off phenomenon, for others it's like a new chapter in their "deeper walk with thee." It is not wrong to call it a "baptism" with the Holy Spirit, in the broad sense of an "immersion" in the Holy Spirit, a filling up, an overflowing etc. But I try to avoid the "baptism" language so as not to confuse with Baptism as the sacrament that speaks of being included in Christ.

The two senses come close together sometimes though. I have observed that an experience with the Holy Spirit can feel like a fundamental new beginning. I observe this in three ways:

1) Sometimes, in people's experience, their actual Baptism was not a matter of faith. It had meaning, but it was the meaningfulness of ritual, social expectation and so on. In experiential terms, their Baptism was akin to "the Baptism of John." The subsequent encounter and "Baptism with the Holy Spirit" coincides with a coming to faith. They have an experience of regeneration and renewal and the presence of God. Theologically, I would affirm this as a "coming to life" in faith of what was previously done in ceremony. In experience, it would feel like a new beginning, an initiation in itself.

2) Sometimes, it is an experience that precedes receiving Baptism in water. People come to faith, and encounter the Holy Spirit in a real and tangible way. In this experience the encounter is a new beginning, and the sacrament is a means of catching up to what God is doing, just like in *Acts 10:47*.

3) For others the experience so marks a significant step in their walk with God, that it feels like a new beginning, a refreshing, revitalisation of faith. This is especially so if there had previously been resisting of the work of God in their lives, or if they had received a fundamental shift in their understanding of God through the reading and hearing of Scripture, prayer, or prophetic word. This sense of a new beginning can also come with the "laying on of hands" in a commissioning into a ministry (e.g. Acts 13:3) or to impart a spiritual gift (e.g 2 Timothy 1:6). In all these cases, the encounter with the Spirit is a *significant moment*, and precious, but it's a part of the journey, a fresh chapter in something already begun. Something broken has become significantly, experientially mended.

In all of these experiences I don't *mind* if people call it a

“baptism in (or of/with/by) the Holy Spirit” but often I find other language to be more helpful.

But your question is a necessary provocation. Whatever language we use, we *must* make more of these experiences. We must talk about what’s it like to journey with Jesus through the realities of life. This *experience of God*, as opposed to the mere theory, must be part of our preaching and teaching, our praying, our sharing, our testimony, our pastoral care, our intercession etc. We must be willing to pray for and help people encounter the Holy Spirit in their lives in real and substantial ways, and help provide the language to describe it.

Instead, it seems to me, that our tendency as the church at large is to practise a form of ongoing abandonment as we act more like a boarding school than the family of God: We’ll give you some rites of passage, teach you some theory, and expect you to act your part – but for everything else you’re on you’re own. “Discipleship” in this caricature is a classroom, and “vocation” is about appointment to house captain or something.

Rather the Holy Spirit calls us to an intimacy with God and a vulnerability, a depth that can we come to share with one another. As we receive him, are “overcome” by him, and yes, in that sense “baptised” in the Holy Spirit, we come to see God, and see one another. We walk with each other, share those experiences of brokenness and restoration (this is discipleship), and we call out to one another what we can see the Holy Spirit is doing and gifting in us and through us (this is vocation).

So yes, we should make much more of these experiences, providing the context, the space, the protection, the understanding, the language, and the simple *care* for people to grow and encounter God. Sometimes I think we would rather be organised, but at what cost?!

Thanks for the question!

Q&A: Who are the poor? Is our first challenge the spiritually poor?

Anonymous asks:

We are challenged certainly in some Anglican communities to look after the poor. I suppose the biggest question is going to be who are the poor? May seem a daft question, but in financial terms we have very few poor. However, certainly some of the financially richest people I know are very, very poor; spiritually and otherwise? My personal thought is that we do have poor with us, right now. Our challenge is to reveal those clothes they are wearing are actually rags. Is that our first big challenge?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Thanks for the question. I have some general thoughts on this in a recent review: A Church for the Poor?

My first thoughts on the poor usually arrive with the famous "sheep and goats" passage of *Matthew 25*. In this passage the returning King, acting as judge, declares (for the righteous):

> *"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."*
>
> *'Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?"*
>
> *'The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."*

And of course, there's an equivalent and negative judgement for those who did not feed, give drink, clothe, or visit etc.

This gets us into your question. **Who are the poor?** They are indeed those who are financially, physically impoverished: hungry, destitute, excluded by their circumstances.

We can't overlook this. There is a clear gospel challenge to look after and to care for the physically poor. This is clear from the Scriptures: the laws on *gleaning* is about providing for those who are literally hungry, as are the many passages that talk about caring for widows and orphans, who lack the stability and security not only of societal standing, but also of the basics of life. James considers the care of these physically vulnerable people to be an aspect of *"genuine religion*".

It also gives some exhortational force. **Who are the poor?** The ones who *we can see*. We are held to account for who is *in front of us;* e have *personal* responsiblity for those who God brings across our path. There is also *communal* responsiblity for those who are in front of us *as a community*. This is just as serious and calls us to *move* our community towards caring for the poor through advocacy and social justice and personal example.

We cannot ignore the physically poor. As Keith Green would imply, we make too many excuses, individually and together, we ought to care for those who do not have as much we are do. It is good in its own right. It is a gospel imperative. Or shall we insist that what we have is ours alone, and not God's?

But you are right, there is also a **spiritual poverty**. But there are *two ways* in which we need to take this.

Firstly, there is spiritual poverty that speaks to a hardness of heart, a self-righteousness that, as you say, dresses itself in resplendent rags. This is not just preening and pride, but facade, self-reliance, the idolisation of financial security, and other "decent" sins.

Such folk are the "goats" of Matthew 25. They are the *rich man with Lazarus*. They are the *fat cows of Bashan*. Such hardness of heart is rightly and justly judged harshly. And notice how the *spiritual* poverty is often marked by the hardened attitude towards those who are *physically* poor, or a general dismissiveness of those who are weak and dependent in some way.

Is it, then, as you say "our challenge to reveal those clothes… are actually rags"? That is, **is it our task to reveal this hypocrisy, this hardness of heart?** To some extent, yes. We are called to not only advocate for the poor, but also to exhort people to repentance, to soften their hearts, to take a posture of faith and humility, to enter into the insecurity of

faith whereby their hearts might break with the massive longings of God's own heart. Biblical and Christian history is full of characters who have served us in this way, by provoking us towards righteousness.

We must feed them, as we must feed the physically poor. These people need the Word of God ("All they need is Moses," the rich man is told…), and they are in front of us. If church members and even clergy find themselves uncomprehending of how to apply the *elementary teachings of the faith* then it's not somebody else's job. We must dig into the Word, speak the truth, exhort repentance, paint a vision of hope, etc. etc. That is, we are called to "feed the sheep" that are in front of us, even if they think they are princes.

Secondly we might think of *spiritual poverty* in the sense of being **poor in spirit.** This is a more positive sense.

There is a recognition that those who are physically poor, by their circumstances, are dependent, vulnerable, reliant, weak. The poor in spirit may have enough to eat, but they may be dependent, vulnerable, reliant and weak in other ways – even if they don't know it. In our middle class town I know those who are involved in picking up the pieces from addictive behaviours, neglected children. The book that I reviewed, A Church for the Poor?, understands this, for instance, and speaks of things such as *aspirational* poverty and *relational* poverty.

There is a similar imperative to care for these who are in front of us: If we encounter a depressed young man, we cannot turn aside. If there is a lonely widow in front of us, we should not simply "leave her to the professionals." And when society begins to produce a younger generation with increasing incidences of anxiety we should be amongst those standing up and saying "Come on, we can do better, let's change how we do this!"

But here is the difference between hard-hearted "spiritual poverty" and being "poor in spirit." Itis this: the way of Christ moves away from one and toward the other.

You see, in this context, being "poor in spirit" is an indicator of faith, a positive thing – the opposite of being "poor in spirit" is being "rich in ourselves" that is, self-righteous. The *physically* poor teach this lesson, they weather circumstances in which they are weak, vulnerable, and dependent, and God *honours* them by valuing the related things of *faith, trust, and honesty* and judges the rich-in-themselves for their lack of them.

No wonder Jesus identifies with the physically poor! They look more like Jesus than the self-secure rich!

Just as we are all relatively physically wealthy in the global scheme of things, we must realise that we are all relatively poverty stricken, hardened in the spiritual sense. I know for myself that while I might have "done good" from time to time, I am most likely to be moved by the financial and other physical insecurities that beset my own family. I find myself protecting myself emotionally as I encounter those who are wounded by life. I cling to my wealth, my strength.

The Christian journey begins and continues with the basic understanding of "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling." Any challenge to "reveal the rags" must begin in us. When we realise that we are spiritually poor, we are also drawn to our weakness, vulnerability, and dependency, and, faith, trust, and honesty is the sweet fruit of it. We cannot turn to ourselves, so we turn to God, and inherit the *kingdom of heaven.*

The Christian journey is one of constant relinquishment and surrender in this regard, a long slow walk of obedience. We become poor in spirit, and find ourselves with riches that are not limited by our capacity, but strength in our weakness,

life in our death. This is what Jesus looks like.

That is our first big challenge. To look to our own posture before God, a posture of faith that is soft towards God and others, and not self-reliance that just builds fine looking decent protective, hard, walls.

[Image Credit: Lithogr Wellcome V0021724 CC BY 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons]