

# Spiritual Life and the Kingdom of God

*Tom Davis explores how recovering the practice of classic spiritual disciplines can enhance believers' relationship with God and our impact on the world around us.*

There is a loss of spiritual knowledge of the truth of Christianity and how we live in light of that truth. This loss of spiritual knowledge is the result of shifts in cultural attitudes toward faith, happiness, ethics, freedom, and tolerance. The answer to the loss of spiritual knowledge is a return to the practice of spiritual disciplines. After examining the benefits of suffering and the disciplines of study, prayer, and fasting, I will show how these disciplines restore spiritual knowledge in society.

## Loss of Spirituality

Today's society is in spiritual turmoil. Most people are not knowledgeable about spiritual things. The National Study of Youth and Religion indicates that the Church has become less influential in the lives of people. The effects of modernity and post modernity have created a popular culture that is suspicious of any claim to objective religious knowledge and any idea of an authoritative source of information concerning spiritual issues. Christian Smith writes, "In this culture religion lost, at least in theory, any remaining principled, authoritative standing to make truth claims that it has enjoyed in previous eras of history."[\[1\]](#)

Basically, this means that most people have adopted a mindset that says, "You can't know anything for sure about religion. And if you think you do, you're an arrogant bigot."

## Five Steps to Spiritual Death

In his book, *Kingdom Triangle*, Biola professor and theologian J.P. Moreland claims that there are five cultural shifts that have contributed to today's state of spirituality in the culture. The first shift separates knowledge from faith.<sup>{2}</sup> All spiritual beliefs are considered valid because they are not real knowledge. Many people think that all religions lead to the same God. They say that we should not criticize other religions because they call God by a different name or hold different theological beliefs. These things are a matter of faith, not knowledge. This kind of attitude relegates all things spiritual to the subjective arena of faith. The things of the spirit are relegated to the "upper story" of faith. Real knowledge only exists in the "lower story" of the academic disciplines.<sup>{3}</sup> The result of this view of faith is that spirituality becomes something that is neither true nor false. Separating faith and knowledge ultimately leads to a denial of spiritual truth.

The second shift is the definition of happiness.<sup>{4}</sup> In the Bible happiness is portrayed as part of a right relationship with God. To live the good life meant that a person had intellectual and moral virtue. God created people to live well according to what they were created to be. J.P. Moreland explains, "So understood, happiness involves suffering, endurance, and patience because these are important means to becoming a good person."<sup>{5}</sup> The pressure of modernism and postmodernism has changed this view. Happiness is now associated with pleasure. Television commercials promise to deliver happiness through the next fad diet that will increase your sex appeal. Male enhancement drugs promise to give men happiness by giving them back their youth and an increased sex drive. Happiness can be achieved by buying the newest car, toy, accessory, or a trip to an exotic place or amusement park. The good life now means having fun and collecting things so that you can feel good.

The third shift that Moreland notes is a shift from duty and virtue in morality to a minimalist view of ethics.[\[6\]](#) Previously, moral knowledge was viewed as an objective set of propositions about right or wrong, or good and evil. It used to be that everyone would agree it was always wrong to torture and kill small children. Now moral knowledge is viewed as subjective feelings or opinions. This change can be seen if we look at the language we use when making moral statements. People used to say things like, "I know," or "I think that this is the right thing to do." Now we say, "I felt that it was right for me to do this."

Duty to one's society used to be viewed as an essential part of a moral life. People were expected to help their neighbor. If an old lady was trying to cross the street, young men were expected to help her. Now, as long as they do not push the old lady into traffic, or rob her, the young men are considered to be moral. This change is the result of culture. People are no longer expected to contribute to their society. As long as people are not hurting anyone else, they are now considered to be moral. This view of morality changes a person's view of life. Life is now about having the most fun without harming anyone. Life used to be about living for something bigger than the individual. People used to live for God and country. Now people live for themselves and their own pleasure.

The fourth shift is in how people view freedom.[\[7\]](#) Freedom used to mean that people could live the way they ought to live. People were free to do what was right without government interference. Now freedom means the right of people to do what they want, when they want. Popular culture says that as long as you do not hurt anyone you can do what you want.

The last shift that Moreland notes is a shift in the meaning of tolerance.[\[8\]](#) Classic tolerance is when people will allow others to be, do, or believe differently than they do, even though one person thinks that the view of another person is wrong. People were allowed to critique the views of other

people, but respect for the other person was still maintained. Contemporary tolerance is the view that people are not allowed to critique another person's beliefs. People are no longer allowed to say that someone is wrong. This attitude ends all public discussion. Every idea must be tolerated, except ideas that claim that other ideas are wrong. Ironically, the new tolerance fails its own definition of tolerance because they do not tolerate intolerance.

## **Returning to Spiritual Health**

The popular culture has raised five strongholds against the knowledge of God: separation of faith and knowledge, a self-centered view of happiness, a minimal view of ethics, a new view of freedom, and a new view of tolerance. How are Christians to respond to this? Paul writes, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Christians must recapture our spiritual disciplines.

## **Theology, the Intellect, and Spirituality**

The first thing that needs to be addressed is that Christians need a renewed interest in theology. J. I. Packer, while discussing the influence of the Puritans in his life, writes, "All theology is also spirituality, in the sense that it has an influence, good or bad, positive or negative, on its recipient's relationship or lack of relationship to God."[\[9\]](#) Theology comes from two Greek words. *Theos* is the Greek word for God; *logos* is the Greek word for logic. Theology can be understood as the logic, or science of God.[\[10\]](#) Spirituality, in the Christian context, is a person's relationship with God. In order to claim to have a relationship with God a person has to have knowledge of who God is. It would be odd to have a man talk about having a relationship with a woman and then say he does not know her and has never met her. The concept of a

relationship presupposes that each party in the relationship has knowledge of the other party.

## **The Bible and Books**

An essential step to gaining spiritual knowledge is a disciplined approach to reading the Bible. Billy Graham addresses the importance of studying the Bible: “Your spiritual life needs food. What kind of food? Spiritual food. Where do you find this spiritual food? In the Bible, the Word of God.”[\[11\]](#) Paul writes, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God gave the Bible to people so that people can learn about God. By studying the Bible a person will gain knowledge about God and strengthen that person’s relationship with God.

Christians should also read other books. The Bible contains essential information for salvation and knowing God. However, the Bible is not exhaustive in its knowledge. Christians can grow intellectually and spiritually by gaining knowledge about God’s creation. David Naugle, head of the philosophy department at Dallas Baptist University, sums up the impact of books on his life: “I have sought and still seek to be a person of the Book and of books, that I might know God and more and more about his world in the context of faith.”[\[12\]](#) The study of the disciplines of theology, philosophy, the humanities, and the sciences helps people develop a coherent worldview. A worldview gives people the ability to understand the world through the corrective lens of the knowledge of God.

The medieval priest Thomas à Kempis advises, “If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the saying of the ancients, for they

were not made without purpose.”[{13}](#) We grow intellectually and spiritually when we read the books of others. We gain insight to their wisdom. We should humbly read the books written by the ancient teachers. They left their wisdom in writing so that we can learn from them.

## **Suffering**

Contemporary society thinks that suffering should be avoided at all costs. However, suffering can have a good outcome. Paul writes, “More than that, we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4). When we suffer, we can learn to endure. Our endurance produces character—that is, we mature and learn to trust God. God is the only hope that will never fail. Matthew Henry writes, “He who, being thus tried, comes forth as gold, will thereby be encouraged to hope.”[{14}](#) When soldiers train, they punish their body; they suffer. Their suffering in training makes them better soldiers in combat because their suffering has made them stronger and given them more endurance. As a Navy veteran, I know this is true personally.

## **Prayer**

Prayer is the spiritual discipline of talking to God. God speaks to us in the Bible like the way people communicate through writing letters; the communication is one way. Praying is more like a discussion between two people. In prayer we get to talk with God.

Paul told the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The best way to start a disciplined prayer life is to pray every day. This is easier if we begin each day with prayer. J. P. Moreland writes, “When you get up in the morning, start off with praise and thanksgiving to God for the things you honestly appreciate about him and his dealings with you. Then lift your burdens to him until you have a sense of rest before the Lord.”[{15}](#) By beginning each

day with prayer we turn our minds and our hearts toward God and His will. Each day is a new opportunity to minister to someone in need. Our prayers will give us spiritual discernment so that we can recognize those in need. Our minds will also be turned towards God and the things of heaven, and we can continue to keep these things in our minds throughout the day.

John Calvin used four rules for prayer. First, we must “have our heart and mind framed as becomes those who are entering into converse with God.”[\[16\]](#) We must prepare ourselves to pray. Minds that are distracted do not make for good conversation. This is no ordinary conversation. People prepare themselves for meeting with important people. We should be prepared to open our hearts and minds to God when we pray. We should be aware that we are praying to our God, but that this God loves us and wants to bring our concerns to Him. Paul writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). We should not be anxious when praying because we know that God cares for us and can do all things. We should pray about all our concerns. Our prayers should be full of worship, thanking God for all that He has done.

One way to prepare to pray is to remember what David Naugle calls the “Three P’s.” These are “(1) my purpose, or what I would live my life for, (2) my profession, or what I would spend my life doing, and (3) my partner, or who I would spend my life with.”[\[17\]](#) David Naugle’s “Three P’s” cover the most important decisions we will make in our lives. Our purpose fills our life with purpose. We should pray for purpose so that God will align what we want our purpose in life to be with what He wants our purpose in life to be. Our profession is where we fulfill our purpose. A car mechanic can glorify God in fulfilling his purpose to be God’s representative in the auto shop. Our spouse is our ministry partner. Husbands



and wives are not separated from each other. They share each other's joys and burdens. Praying for these things will focus our minds on what is important and orient our hearts toward living a life pleasing to God.

John Calvin's second rule is "That in asking we must always truly feel our wants, and seriously considering that we need all the things which we ask, accompany the prayer with a sincere, no, ardent desire of obtaining them." [\[18\]](#) Our requests should be things that we truly want or need. When we pray for the wants and needs of others, we should try to feel their desire for the request so that we can better minister to them through prayer. James tells us, "Is anyone suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (James 5:13). We should be honest and sincere in our requests and in our thanksgiving. A sincere prayer would be praying for a loved one to get well when they are sick. An insincere prayer might look like praying for a job promotion when you know that you have not been putting your best effort into the job.

Third, "discard all self-confidence, humbly giving God the whole glory." [\[19\]](#) When we pray, we should realize who we are, and who God is. Jesus said, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others" (Matthew 6:5). The hypocrites' motivation to pray in the street corners was so that people would see them and think that these people were righteous. Jesus makes this point with more clarity in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast,



saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:10-13)

The Pharisee came to God in prayer thinking that he was righteous and better than other men. He even pointed out his fasting and tithing as if God should be impressed with these things. The tax collector was humbled in the presence of God. He would not look up to heaven because he understood that he was guilty before God. The tax collector prayed sincerely for mercy. Asking God for mercy gives God glory and humbles the person.

John Calvin's fourth rule of prayer is, "We should be animated to pray with the sure hope of succeeding."[{20}](#) God is all powerful, able to meet our every need. Jesus teaches this same principle, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8). By grace we have been made children of God. If we ask, God will give us what we need. When we humble ourselves before God, He will be merciful. God knows what we need and will give us what is good for us. Jesus said, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11).

Through our prayer life we should conform to the image of God revealed in Jesus. Andrew Murry taught:

And of all the traits of a life *like Christ* there is none higher and more glorious than conformity to Him in the work that now engages Him without ceasing in the Father's presence His all-prevailing intercession. The more we abide in Him, and grow unto his likeness, will His priestly life work in us mightily, and our life become what His is, a life that ever pleads and prevails for men.[{21}](#)

Our prayers should make us more Christlike. By praying, we

conform to God's will. Christ makes intercessions to the Father for us. We have the privilege of making intercessions to Christ for others.

## **Fasting**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life."[{22}](#) One way to exercise self-control is by abstinence (saying no to ourselves by not doing something we want). Fasting is one of the most difficult abstaining disciplines. Calvin defines fasting as "when we retrench somewhat from our accustomed mode of living, either for one day or a certain period, and prescribe to ourselves a stricter and severer restraint in the use of that ordinary food."[{23}](#) In short, fasting is abstaining from food for a short period of time.

Jesus taught:

When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting is to be done in secret. Again, Jesus points to the hypocrite, who wants to gain a reputation from his spiritual discipline. Jesus taught that people would be rewarded by not making a spectacle out of their spirituality.

What is the goal of fasting? Augustine taught, "While we live in the temporal order, we must fast and abstain from the enjoyment of what is temporal, for the sake of the eternity in which we desire to live."[{24}](#) Fasting reminds Christians that they do not depend on temporal things. God wants Christians to rely on Him to supply our needs. In a world where tight schedules are kept and frivolous distractions are available

everywhere, it can be easy to forget God. Fasting emphasizes the importance of a right relationship with the world by abstaining from the sustenance of food. John Calvin lists three goals for fasting: “We use it either to mortify and subdue the flesh, that it may not wanton, or to prepare the better for prayer and holy meditation; or to give evidence of humbling ourselves before God, when we would confess our guilt before him.”[\[25\]](#) Many times the flesh (the part of us that operates independently from God, either in active rebellion or passive indifference) will want to rebel against the spirit. Fasting deprives the flesh of sustenance and weakens it. The spirit can then rule the flesh. There are times when a Christian will need to place special focus on prayer and meditation. Fasting is one way to prepare the spirit for these activities.

## Reversing the Shifts

In our contemporary culture faith is viewed as being completely separate from knowledge. This faulty view originates within Christianity with the ideas of some Christian philosophers and theologians. Soren Kierkegaard saw faith as “the highest passion in a human being.”[\[26\]](#) He applies this view to Jesus: “The proofs which Scripture presents for Christ’s divinity—His miracles, His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven—are therefore only for faith, that is, they are not ‘proofs,’ they have no intention of proving that all of this agrees perfectly with reason: on the contrary they would prove that it conflicts with reason and therefore is an object of faith.”[\[27\]](#) Kierkegaard believed that Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead. But he thought that Jesus was unknowable through knowledge and reason. One could only know Jesus through faith, and that meant that faith was opposed to knowledge and reason.

When writing to Theophilus, Luke says, “Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, to write an

orderly account for you" (Luke 1:2-3). John writes "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you" (1 John 1:3). The New Testament authors were writing about what they knew. These men walked, talked, and ate with Christ for three years. These men knew Christ face to face. Wayne Grudem addresses the harmony of faith and reason: "Rather, saving faith is consistent with knowledge and true understanding of facts." {28} Faith is not separate from knowledge, it is trust in knowledge.

Once the facts of the Bible are known, faith in those facts will affect how we experience happiness. Happiness defined as satisfaction of desires is an empty pointless feel-good emotion that lasts only for a moment. But the joy of God does not fade. Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Christians get joy through meditating on the things of God. Neal Anderson and Robert Saucy state that "Meditation on the Word should produce thoughts that reach our emotions." {29} A relationship with God produces happiness, a deep well-being of the soul, that lasts. The Psalmist writes, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight" (Psalm 19:14). What we study and put into our minds affects our relationship with God. When we have knowledge of God then we can meditate on God. It is impossible to meditate on an object that you have no knowledge of. Meditation on the things of God brings joy.

The cultural shift to a minimalist ethic, the idea of contemporary freedom, and the meaning of tolerance are the result of relativism's effect on the culture. Relativism is the idea that there are no objective moral values, and morality is either decided by each person or each community. There are many problems with this view. Relativism makes it impossible to criticize others. If moral truths are subjective then each person gets to decide for himself what is right or wrong. Relativism cannot place blame for wrong doings. What

people do is neither right nor wrong. Right or wrong is up to each individual. Why should we expect each person to reach the same conclusion? Relativists cannot promote tolerance because any definition of tolerance is an objective definition that, if true, applies to everyone.{30} But if morality is objective (meaning that there are things that are right and wrong for all people at all times), then freedom cannot mean that people can do what they want when they want. People will have responsibilities. They will be free to do what is right, and they will be free to do what is wrong. Being free means that we make choices of our own volition.

## Conclusion

The loss of spiritual knowledge has caused a fractured society and people who lead fractured lives. The cultural shifts are a result of people not taking spiritual knowledge seriously. Spiritual knowledge must have absolutes to provide meaning for life. Francis Schaeffer observes, “we need absolutes if our existence is to have meaning—my existence, your existence, man’s existence.”{31} Absolutes are learned by practicing the spiritual disciplines. A careful study of the Bible will bring knowledge ABOUT God; heart-surrender to Him, coupled with learning to abide in Him, will bring knowledge OF God. Prayer will keep people in touch with God. Fasting will break down the resistance of the flesh to living a spiritual life. The five shifts of contemporary culture mean death. The spiritual disciplines bring people spiritual life. True spirituality can only be found in Christ. Only meditation and learning about Christ can return wonder to life. I pray that through spiritual disciplines we may retain the wonder of a life given to us by God.

## Notes

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# The Value of Suffering: A Christian Perspective

*Sue Bohlin looks at suffering from a Christian perspective. Applying a biblical worldview to this difficult subject results in a distinctly different approach to suffering than our natural inclination of blame and self pity.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



*There is no such thing as pointless pain in the life of the child of God. How this has encouraged and strengthened me in the valleys of suffering and pain! In this essay I'll be discussing the value of suffering, an unhappy non-negotiable of life in a fallen world.*



# Suffering Prepares Us to Be the Bride of Christ

Among the many reasons God allows us to suffer, this is my personal favorite: it prepares us to be the radiant bride of Christ. The Lord Jesus has a big job to do, changing His ragamuffin church into a glorious bride worthy of the Lamb. Ephesians



5:26-27 tells us He is making us holy by washing us with the Word—presenting us to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. Suffering develops holiness in unholy people. But *getting there* is painful in the Lord's "laundry room." When you use bleach to get rid of stains, it's a harsh process. Getting rid of wrinkles is even more painful: ironing means a combination of heat plus pressure. Ouch! No wonder suffering hurts!

But developing holiness in us is a worthwhile, extremely important goal for the Holy One who is our divine Bridegroom. We learn in Hebrews 12:10 that we are enabled to share in His holiness through the discipline of enduring hardship. More ouch! Fortunately, the same book assures us that discipline is a sign of God's love (Heb. 12:6). Oswald Chambers reminds us that "God has one destined end for mankind—holiness. His one aim is the production of saints." [\[1\]](#)

It's also important for all wives, but most especially the future wife of the Son of God, to have a submissive heart. Suffering makes us more determined to obey God; it teaches us to be submissive. The psalmist learned this lesson as he wrote in Psalm 119:67: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees."

The Lord Jesus has His work cut out for Him in purifying us for Himself (Titus 2:14). Let's face it, left to ourselves we are a dirty, messy, fleshly people, and we desperately need to

be made pure. As hurtful as it is, suffering can purify us if we submit to the One who has a loving plan for the pain.

Jesus wants not just a *pure* bride, but a mature one as well—and suffering produces growth and maturity in us. James 1:2-4 reminds us that trials produce perseverance, which makes us mature and complete. And Romans 5:3-4 tells us that we can actually rejoice in our sufferings, because, again, they produce perseverance, which produces character, which produces hope. The Lord is creating for Himself a bride with sterling character, but it's not much fun getting there. I like something else Oswald Chambers wrote: "Sorrow burns up a great amount of shallowness."[\[2\]](#)

We usually don't have much trouble understanding that our Divine Bridegroom loves us; but we can easily forget how much He longs for us to love Him back. Suffering scoops us out, making our hearts bigger so that we can hold more love for Him. It's all part of a well-planned courtship. He does know what He's doing . . . we just need to trust Him.

## **Suffering Allows Us to Minister Comfort to Others Who Suffer**

One of the most rewarding reasons that suffering has value is experienced by those who can say with conviction, "I know how you feel. I've been in your shoes." Suffering prepares us to minister comfort to others who suffer.

Feeling isolated is one of the hardest parts of suffering. It can feel like you're all alone in your pain, and that makes it so much worse. The comfort of those who have known that same pain is inexpressible. It feels like a warm blanket being draped around your soul. But in order for someone to say those powerful words—"I know just how you feel because I've been there"—that person had to walk through the same difficult valley first.

Ray and I lost our first baby when she was born too prematurely to survive. It was the most horrible suffering we've ever known. But losing Becky has enabled me to weep with those who weep with the comforting tears of one who has experienced that deep and awful loss. It's a wound that—by God's grace—has never fully healed so that I can truly empathize with others out of the very real pain I still feel. Talking about my loss puts me in touch with the unhealed part of the grief and loss that will always hurt until I see my daughter again in heaven. One of the most incredibly comforting things we can ever experience is someone else's tears for us. So when I say to a mother or father who has also lost a child, "I hurt with you, because I've lost a precious one too," my tears bring warmth and comfort in a way that someone who has never known that pain cannot offer.

One of the most powerful words of comfort I received when we were grieving our baby's loss was from a friend who said, "Your pain may not be about just you. It may well be about other people, preparing you to minister comfort and hope to someone in your future who will need what you can give them because of what you're going through right now. And if you are faithful to cling to God now, I promise He will use you greatly to comfort others later." That perspective was like a sweet balm to my soul, because it showed me that my suffering was not pointless.

There's another aspect of bringing comfort to those in pain. Those who have suffered tend not to judge others experiencing similar suffering. Not being judged is a great comfort to those who hurt. When you're in pain, your world narrows down to mere survival, and it's easy for others to judge you for not "following the rules" that should only apply to those whose lives aren't being swallowed by the pain monster.

Suffering often develops compassion and mercy in us. Those who suffer tend to have tender hearts toward others who are in pain. We can comfort others with the comfort that we have

received from God (2 Cor. 1:4) because we have experienced the reality of the Holy Spirit being there for us, walking alongside us in our pain. Then we can turn around and walk alongside others in their pain, showing the compassion that our own suffering has produced in us.

## **Suffering Develops Humble Dependence on God**

Marine Corps recruiter Randy Norfleet survived the Oklahoma City bombing despite losing 40 percent of his blood and needing 250 stitches to close his wounds. He never lost consciousness in the ambulance because he was too busy praying prayers of thanksgiving for his survival. When doctors said he would probably lose the sight in his right eye, Mr. Norfleet said, "Losing an eye is a small thing. Whatever brings you closer to God is a blessing. Through all this I've been brought closer to God. I've become more dependent on Him and less on myself." [\[3\]](#)

Suffering is excellent at teaching us humble dependence on God, the only appropriate response to our Creator. Ever since the fall of Adam, we keep forgetting that God created us to depend on Him and not on ourselves. We keep wanting to go our own way, pretending that we are God. Suffering is powerfully able to get us back on track.

Sometimes we hurt so much we can't pray. We are forced to depend on the intercession of the Holy Spirit and the saints, needing them to go before the throne of God on our behalf. Instead of seeing that inability to pray as a personal failure, we can rejoice that our perception of being totally needy corresponds to the truth that we really are that needy. 2 Corinthians 1:9 tells us that hardships and sufferings happen "so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Suffering brings a "one day at a time-ness" to our survival.

We get to the point of saying, "Lord, I can only make it through today if You help me . . . if You take me through today . . . or the next hour . . . or the next few minutes." One of my dearest friends shared with me the prayer from a heart burning with emotional pain: "Papa, I know I can make it through the next fifteen minutes if You hold me and walk me through it." Suffering has taught my friend the lesson of total, humble dependence on God.

As painful as it is, suffering strips away the distractions of life. It forces us to face the fact that we are powerless to change other people and most situations. The fear that accompanies suffering drives us to the Father like a little kid burying his face in his daddy's leg. Recognizing our own powerlessness is actually the key to experience real power because we have to acknowledge our dependence on God before His power can flow from His heart into our lives.

The disciples experienced two different storms out on the lake. The Lord's purpose in both storms was to train them to stop relying on their physical eyes and use their spiritual eyes. He wanted them to grow in trust and dependence on the Father. He allows us to experience storms in our lives for the same purpose: to learn to depend on God.

I love this paraphrase of Romans 8:28: "The Lord may not have planned that this should overtake me, but He has most certainly permitted it. Therefore, though it were an attack of an enemy, by the time it reaches me, it has the Lord's permission, and therefore all is well. He will make it work together with all life's experiences for good."

## **Suffering Displays God's Strength Through Our Weakness**

*God never wastes suffering, not a scrap of it. He redeems all of it for His glory and our blessing.* The classic Scripture for the concept that suffering displays God's strength through

our weakness is found in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, where we learn that God's grace is sufficient for us, for His power is perfected in weakness. Paul said he delighted in weaknesses, hardships, and difficulties "for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Our culture disdains weakness, but our frailty is a sign of God's workmanship in us. It gets us closer to what we were created to be—completely dependent on God. Several years ago I realized that instead of despising the fact that polio had left me with a body that was weakened and compromised, susceptible to pain and fatigue, I could choose to rejoice in it. My weakness made me more like a fragile, easily broken window than a solid brick wall. But just as sunlight pours through a window but is blocked by a wall, I discovered that other people could see God's strength and beauty in me because of the window-like nature of my weakness! Consider how the Lord Jesus was the exact representation of the glory of the Father—I mean, He was all window and no walls! He was completely dependent on the Father, choosing to become weak so that God's strength could shine through Him. And He was the strongest person the world has ever seen. Not His own strength; He displayed the Father's strength because of that very weakness.

The reason His strength can shine through us is because we know God better through suffering. One wise man I heard said, "I got theology in seminary, but I learned reality through trials. I got facts in Sunday School, but I learned faith through trusting God in difficult circumstances. I got truth from studying, but I got to know the Savior through suffering."

Sometimes our suffering isn't a consequence of our actions or even someone else's. God is teaching other beings about Himself and His loved ones—us—as He did with Job. The point of Job's trials was to enable heavenly beings to see God glorified in Job. Sometimes He trusts us with great pain in

order to make a point, whether the intended audience is believers, unbelievers, or the spirit realm. Quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada, no stranger to great suffering, writes, “Whether a godly attitude shines from a brain-injured college student or from a lonely man relegated to a back bedroom, the response of patience and perseverance counts. God points to the peaceful attitude of suffering people to teach others about Himself. He not only teaches those we rub shoulders with every day, but He instructs the countless millions of angels and demons. The hosts in heaven stand amazed when they observe God sustain hurting people with His peace.”[\[4\]](#)

I once heard Charles Stanley say that nothing attracts the unbeliever like a saint suffering successfully. Joni Tada said, “You were made for one purpose, and that is to make God real to those around you.”[\[5\]](#) The reality of God’s power, His love, and His character are made very, very real to a watching world when we trust Him in our pain.

## **Suffering Gets Us Ready for Heaven**

Pain is inevitable because we live in a fallen world. 1 Thessalonians 3:3 reminds us that we are “destined for trials.” We don’t have a choice whether we will suffer—our choice is to go through it by ourselves or with God.

Suffering teaches us the difference between the important and the transient. It prepares us for heaven by teaching us how unfulfilling life on earth is and helping us develop an eternal perspective. Suffering makes us homesick for heaven.

Deep suffering of the soul is also a taste of hell. After many sleepless nights wracked by various kinds of pain, my friend Jan now knows what she was saved from. Many Christians only know they’re saved without grasping what it is Christ has delivered them from. Jan’s suffering has given her an appreciation of the reality of heaven, and she’s been changed forever.



I have an appreciation of heaven gained from a different experience. As my body weakens from the lifelong impact of polio, to be honest, I have a deep frustration with it that makes me grateful for the perfect, beautiful, completely working resurrection body waiting for me on the other side. My husband once told me that heaven is more real to me than anyone he knows. Suffering has done that for me. Paul explained what happens in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

*“Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

One of the effects of suffering is to loosen our grasp on this life, because we shouldn't be thinking that life in a fallen world is as wonderful as we sometimes think it is. Pastor Dick Bacon once said, “If this life were easy, we'd just love it too much. If God didn't make it painful, we'd never let go of it.” Suffering reminds us that we live in an abnormal world. Suffering is abnormal—our souls protest, “This isn't right!” We need to be reminded that we are living in the post-fall “Phase 2.” The perfect Phase 1 of God's beautiful, suffering-free creation was ruined when Adam and Eve fell. So often, people wonder what kind of cruel God would deliberately make a world so full of pain and suffering. They've lost track of history. The world God originally made isn't the one we experience. Suffering can make us long for the new heaven and the new earth where God will set all things right again.

Sometimes suffering literally prepares us for heaven. Cheryl's in-laws, both beset by lingering illnesses, couldn't understand why they couldn't just die and get it over with. But after three long years of holding on, during a visit from Cheryl's pastor, the wife trusted Christ on her deathbed and

the husband received assurance of his salvation. A week later the wife died, followed in six months by her husband. They had continued to suffer because of God's mercy and patience, who did not let them go before they were ready for heaven.

Suffering dispels the cloaking mists of inconsequential distractions of this life and puts things in their proper perspective. My friend Pete buried his wife a few years ago after a battle with Lou Gehrig's disease. One morning I learned that his car had died on the way to church, and I said something about what a bummer it was. Pete just shrugged and said, "This is nothing." That's what suffering will do for us. Trials are light and momentary afflictions . . . but God redeems them all.

### Notes

1. Oswald Chambers, *Our Utmost for His Highest*, September 1.
2. Chambers, June 25.
3. *National and International Religion Report*, Vol. 9:10, May 1, 1995, 1
4. Joni Eareckson Tada, *When Is It Right to Die?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 122.
5. Tada, 118.

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## The Tug of War of Reason and Faith in C.S. Lewis's Favorite Novel

*Byron Barlowe examines the timeless battle between reason and faith in C.S. Lewis's novel—his favorite—Till We Have Faces.*

*Are they mutually exclusive or can they balance one another? How do we reconcile them? "To rationally look at love and logic and to gaze along, to creatively depict and model its living out, may soon be all that is left to us to reach a new generation."*

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*"You think the gods have sent you there? All lies of priests and poets, child . . . The god within you is the god you should obey: reason, calmness, self-discipline."*

– The Fox, Greek tutor in *Till We Have Faces* [\[1\]](#)

*"Heaven forbid we should work [the garden of our human nature] in the spirit of . . . Stoics . . . We know very well that what we are hacking and pruning is big with a splendour and vitality which our rational will could never of itself have supplied. To liberate that splendour, to let it become fully what it is trying to be, to have tall trees instead of scrubby tangles, and sweet apples instead of crabs, is part of our purpose."*

– C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* [\[2\]](#)

A strong relationship between C.S. Lewis's conceptions of Contemplation and Enjoyment persists throughout his novel *Till We Have Faces*. It seems most fruitful for today's apologist to examine two primary characters' relationship to the concepts in this way: the Greek slave-tutor known as the Fox, represents cold, hard, factual rationality which grudgingly gives a nod to the divine, but only in a limited, controlling way. He represents Stoicism more than any other school of thought. Meanwhile, the barbarian-pagan Priest of the god Ungit represents a less worldly wise, more mysterious and superstitious faith, rooted in earthy experience (fertility rites, blood sacrifice, etc.). Either worldview can limit human nature, truth and meaning. The Greek-infused

contemplative life-view (nowadays seen most strongly in Modernism and its irreligious pupils), largely eschews the heartfelt experience of the latter, while the latter's religiosity often dismisses the thoughtful, discerning caution of the former. This artificially strict dichotomy and lack of balance shows forth at every turn in the Church today, creating a blindly loyal fideism with few answers for contemplative questions; or we see, in an overcorrection, a clinical, spiritless, formulaic religion of pure reason. The former, an unreflective *modus operandi*, chills—and according to testimonies of many apostates and atheists, creates—skeptics, who much like the Fox, seizing on pure reason, ceaselessly explain away the immaterial and numinous. In doing so they, like the Fox's star student Orual, act as plaintiffs against God or the gods. One apologist recently found that nearly all the young men he surveyed who serve as leaders of college atheist/agnostic groups in the U.S. were raised in church and attended Christian youth groups. Given the ubiquity of broken families, where little love borne of God-given freedom exists—much like the main character Orual's situation—and know-nothing, superstitious Christians, it is no wonder that a mass exodus of youth from the Church continues. One antidote to the current state of imbalance of Contemplation (reasoned examination toward applied wisdom) and Enjoyed faith (in Lewis's sense, experientially realized) may be to use and model the dual approach of Lewis's *The Four Loves* alongside *Till We Have Faces*. To rationally *look at* love and logic and to *gaze along*, to creatively depict and model its living out, may soon be all that is left to us to reach a new generation.

In the mythic *Till We Have Faces*, which we will discuss here, the dual (and often dueling) dynamics of reason (often couched in secularized religion) versus mystical religion (often superstitious) interplay in various characters. It may help to explore these chief characters Lewis creates to embody the story of clashing worlds and worldviews, as well as the Fox's

prize student, Orual. Meanwhile, we will briefly attempt to apply the lessons Lewis teaches apologists into the modern milieu.

First, Lewis revealed the predominant worldview, the Fox's philosophy, early in the novel as he tutored Orual. His Platonic views were summarized thus, "'No man can be an exile if he remembers that all the world is one city,' and 'Everything is as good or bad as our opinion makes it.'" [3] As a well-taught classical Greek, he sets out to import real learning into the barbarian kingdom to which he is enslaved. Orual admired her "grandfather's" constant quest for knowledge and carried on his tendency to question, Socratically, all that went on. Yet, since her dear Fox, always the philosopher, seemed "ashamed of loving poetry ('All folly, my child'), she overachieves in philosophy to "get a poem out of him." [4] Foretelling the dismissiveness and globalizing of the numinous by today's naturalistic thinkers, the Fox scoffs at surpranatural / supernatural explanations with a curt, "these things come about by natural causes." [5] In an ancient instance of positive-mental-attitude-laced freethinking, he lectures, "we must learn, child, not to fear anything that nature brings." [6] When Orual's sister Psyche goes about ostensibly healing the townspeople, and Orual asks about the validity of the claims, Fox the Naturalist characteristically keeps the options limited but somewhat open. "It might be in accordance with nature that some hands can heal. Who knows?" [7] Herein lies a bit of epistemic humility, somewhat disingenuous it seems, something this writer detects quite a lot among materialist-naturalists.

The Fox's framework of Platonic forms emerges in his assessment of Psyche's ethereal beauty, "delight[ing] to say, she was 'according to nature'; what every woman, or even every thing, ought to have been and meant to be, but had missed by some trip of chance." [8] While talk of gods peppered his language ("Ah, Zeus" and "by the gods"—more than curses?),

fate seems to drive the universe's cause and effect. He considers suicide and opines about returning to the elements in death, fatefully acquiescing, to which Orual beseeches, "But, Grandfather, do you really *in your heart* believe nothing of what is said about the gods and Those Below? But you do . . . you are trembling." His Gnostic-tinged response: the body fails me. I am a fool, being trapped in it so long.[\[9\]](#) From what little the writer knows of Greek theology, its progeny thrives in and out of the Church today as an admixture of practical atheism, pantheism and pragmatism. Lewis sneaks in the side door of the skeptical fortress by characterizing so strongly the Fox, whose loving humanity belies his deadening philosophy. If Lewis's retelling of ancient myth can be refashioned again, or better, simply read, truth and meaning may get through.

On the second worldview, Lewis sets forth the theme of a grounding darkness, holy and otherworldly, chiefly through the pagan Priest of the local goddess Ungit. The Priest served as prophet, harbinger of judgment. He repeats the warning of Ungit's all-hearing ears and vengefulness to the irreligious king on two occasions[\[10\]](#) He carries out shadowy, ancient rituals without explanation and in dark places, sticky with blood offerings. Even outside the dank and sacred temple, "every hour the Priest of Ungit walked around [the sacred fire]," narrates Orual, "and threw in the proper things."[\[11\]](#) Throughout, Lewis equates the *holy* with the mysterious, the hidden and darkened. Divine silence, corresponding to the biblical God's hiddenness and holiness, presents as a major theme of *Till We Have Faces*. The Priest offers few and brief explanations.[\[12\]](#) The god judging Orual in the afterlife allows her lifelong complaints to speak for themselves. Her resultant epiphany balances the equation between reason and religion, witty words and wordless (if corrupted) wisdom, and reconciles the silence: "I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word [of inner secret] can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble

we think we mean?" [13] These characters serve as foils for one another, a creative way to tie Modern rationalism to man's inexorable and entirely unnatural acknowledgment of both the spiritual, or numinous and the moral law.

Sixteen years previous, Lewis had published *The Problem of Pain*, wherein he explores this undeniable yet insanely irrational or rather supernaturally revealed sense of numinous awe and moral law inherent in every man and culture. As if foreshadowing the clash of worldviews in discussion, Lewis writes, "Man . . . can close his spiritual eyes against the Numinous, if he is prepared to part company with half the great poets and prophets of his race, with his own childhood, with the richness and depth of uninhibited experience [the Fox, to a high degree, or] . . . He can refuse to identify the Numinous with the righteous, and remain a barbarian, worshipping sexuality, or the dead, or the life force, or the future [the old Priest]." [14] The concepts of Contemplation and Enjoyment intertwine through a scholar and a man of the altar, through the gods and humans alike. In life and in myth, "men, and gods, flow in and out and mingle." [15]

The Fox's and Priest's views of one another and each other's worldview clashed like contemporary apologetic debates. The Fox saw the Priest's work as "mischief" [16] and nonsense. "A child of six would talk more sense" was the Fox's response to the apparent contradictions of the Priestly doctrines regarding the Great Offering. [17] Contrarily, the Priest reflexively dismisses the Fox's Greek wisdom. According to Orual, "like all sacred matters, [a sacred, acted ritual] is and it is not (so that it was easy for the Fox to show its manifold contradictions)." [18] Yet, "even Stoicism finds itself willy-nilly bowing the knee to God." [19] The Fox at times let down his learned persona, evidencing the axiom that man is inherently religious. Yes, he gave a regular nod to the gods, and at the birth of Orual's sister Psyche he says wistfully, almost wishfully, "Now by all the gods . . . I



could almost believe that there really is divine blood in your family.” Though his comment regards the family bloodline, one picks up here and elsewhere a religious man, who then quickly covers the sentiment with appeals to reason, even rationalization. Such characterization seems both autobiographical on Lewis’s part and testimony to his many dealings with materialist, humanist, secularist, liberal Christian, and unbelieving scholars and laymen.

The Priest’s mythical, experiential religious conviction versus the Fox’s worldly wisdom weaves itself through a climactic showdown. A death sentence falls on Psyche as the Accursed, to be offered to the goddess Ungit. (Here is the clash of wills between man and the divine in a crisis of state and religion so often seen in history.[\[20\]](#)) “Ungit will be avenged. It’s not a bull or ram [sacrifice] that will quiet her now,” pronounces the Priest.[\[21\]](#) He mentions “the Brute,” who legend says will take away the human sacrifice. In classic rational fashion, the King challenges, “Who has ever seen this Brute . . . What is it like, eh?” In this moment, the Fox presents himself as the King’s counsellor, living out his reasonable *raison d’etre*. Prosecution-style, he determines that the Brute only exists as an image, a shadow, six-year-old nonsense. The Priest dismisses this as “the wisdom of the Greeks,” and seeks the peoples’ fear as a fallback position. (Interestingly, many who either believe in or dismiss the supernatural and mystical seek strength in numbers, popular opinion to make their case, which is no argument at all.) The high stakes exchange illustrates the gravity and consequences of the age-old clash. If religion is to be followed, it must be regulated by reason; if reason is to properly play its part, it must bow to realities beyond its grasp.

The Priest and Fox provide an extremely stark contrast of views during this conflict. The Fox presents a compare-and-contrast list of the Priest’s teachings, revealing what he believes defies the Law of Non-Contradiction.[\[22\]](#) The Priest

first responds to the abstractions by appeal to concrete realities. Greek wisdom “brings no rain and grows no corn.” He portrays such constricting logic as unable to offer “understanding of holy things . . . demand[ing] to see such things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written in a book . . . nothing,” he continues, “that is said clearly [about the gods] can be said truly about them . . . Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood.”[\[23\]](#) The apologist cannot help but think of the frustration of trying to communicate the mysterious paradoxes of spiritual truth and meaning to skeptics who demand only linear logic from a naturalist point of view. (The Fox continually appeals to “the Nature of things” and says “according to Nature.”) One must also guard against becoming Fox-like, limiting inquiry and explanation merely to that accessible to the physical senses and human reason. Either philosopher or accommodating priest / poet can make that mistake; via their opposite approaches, whether overly from man’s reason or God’s assumed reasons, deny the paradoxes of reality.

Ironically, Orual’s conversion to real belief in the numinous—halting and years-long—begins during this fight. Though she’d “have hanged the Priest and made the Fox a king” if she could, she realized the power lay in the Priest’s position.[\[24\]](#) Her convincing comes in a climactic moment, when pressed at literal knifepoint to stop prophesying the unwelcome judgment, the Priest shows unearthly peace, calm, and indeed a willingness to die. “While I have breath,” he intoned, “I am Ungit’s voice.” Resolute and full of faith at death’s door, his was evidence beyond reason, much as the testimony of Christ’s Apostles in their martyrdoms. This was not lost on Orual, who narrates, “The Fox had taught me to think—at any rate to speak of—the Priest as of a mere schemer and a politic man” who pretended and said whatever would provide him power or gain, in Ungit’s name.[\[25\]](#) The Fox’s prize student now saw through personal experience—the kind he

taught her to guard against—that the Priest was sincere unto death. “He was sure of Ungit.”[\[26\]](#) He may have been mistaken or misled, but he did not pretend. One of the modern apologist’s greatest arguments is a convinced life and a faith, well-tested, sometimes right in front of the skeptic. The ultimate witness: a life and death scenario.

After a lifetime, in the afterlife, the Fox repents of his constraints and biases of the supernatural and religious. In this, Lewis communicates a truth applicable today. “I taught [Orual], as men teach a parrot, to say ‘Lies of poets,’ and ‘Ungit’s a false image.’ . . . I never told her why the old Priest got something from the dark House [of Ungit] that I never got from my trim sentences . . . I made her think a prattle of maxims would do, all thin and clear as water.”[\[27\]](#) How like so many testimonies of those who, in our day, come to Christ after years of dismissing and rationally ruling out the reality of the transcendent. Words are cheap and book knowledge only gets one so far, the Fox admits. What a mirror of teachers who lead people of faith away from that which requires revelation using smart-sounding verbiage. Hence, for those enamored with the Richard Dawkinses of our time, a reading of this novel may be the foxiest way of all to reach them.

Orual is a product of her own Need-Love[\[28\]](#), which is serviced alternately by her Fox-taught Greek rationalism and belief in humanoid gods, whom she thinks she can control. As a young woman being flirted with by a prince on the lam, she characteristically staunches true emotions. “I had a fool’s wish to lengthen” the encounter, she says. “But I came to my senses.” On her odyssey to save her sister from a supposedly evil god, Orual blocks every sentiment with controlling motherly logic, eschewing all glimpses of and desires for the divine. She chooses to outwit the gods. She ends up the pawn in the hands of the gods, however gracious, that she fancied to be her equals.

The Orual-Queen-Psyche's-twin character spends a lifetime employing Greek wisdom learned under the Fox to seek out life's mysteries of human and divine relations, up to the bittersweet end, constantly denouncing the gods for the woes she experiences. Face to face with divinity, her bitter hiding reveals her glorious humanity. Now, true-faced, she is free. Up until then the helpless, yet defiantly and impressively skillful independence she exhibits as a mothering sister, and later as regent, so well illustrate fallen human defiance of the true God of the Bible, seen most vividly in well-educated apostates and atheists today. Those unbelievers, consumed by angry confusion regarding suffering and life's seeming futilities, should find both empathy and resolution in this novel.[\[29\]](#) While doing excellently (in human terms) for a lifetime, as Orual did, one can still deny the existence of the divine while cursing the god's or God's supposed effects on mere mortals. Orual's torturous private thought life increasingly revealed her sin nature, which she turned back into ravings against the fate of the gods. Control was her only weapon, until the deaths of all who propped up her life and kingdom, and until visions of her corrupted affections forced humility upon her. Such desperate machinations to live a meaningful life in the face of deadening routine punctuated by tragedy, in turn, raises the biggest questions of life: Why are we here? Are we mere mortals or eternal beings with a destiny? If the latter, what or who determines our fate—is there really meaningful choice or only divine whim or something else? Lewis creates multi-layered characters who live out the quest for ultimate answers.

In another resolution of sorts, the myth comes full circle through the Fox and priesthood back to Greece. Arnom, the new Priest of Ungit, adds a notation on Orual's book (at our novel's end) entreating anyone travelling to Greece to take it there,[\[30\]](#) which may ironically imply that the barbarians had something to teach the world's greatest philosophers. Likelier, Arnom, who put himself under the tutelage of the

Fox, meant to dedicate the Queen's life saga to a greater civilization. Is this a symbolic merging and maturing of the two schools of thought and faith? A reference to Arnorn as "priest of Aphrodite," likely indicates his fuller "Greekification." Whether this change was for ill, good or neutral is hard to say. Perhaps the former priest of the crude barbarian goddess Ungit was effectively sending a message, as if to preach: "To those in Greece, supreme land of learning and reason, place of the gods of the philosophers, we commend you this account of a Being beyond description who revealed our Queen's aching fallenness, journey into redemption, and glorified revelation as a goddess in her own right." This writer's weak grasp of Greek mythology and theology notwithstanding, it seems clear Lewis offers much resolution of reason and religion, of the contemplative and the Enjoyed, however incomplete it must naturally be.

[\[1\]](#) C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, (San Diego and New York: A Harvest Book / Harcourt, 1956), 302-303.

[\[2\]](#) C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (San Diego and New York: A Harvest Book / Harcourt, 1960), 117.

[\[3\]](#) Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, 7.

[\[4\]](#) Ibid., 8.

[\[5\]](#) Ibid., 10.

[\[6\]](#) Ibid., 14.

[\[7\]](#) Ibid., 31

[\[8\]](#) Ibid., 22.

[\[9\]](#) Ibid., 17-18.

[\[10\]](#) Ibid., 15,54.

[\[11\]](#) Ibid., 14.

[\[12\]](#) Ibid., 15-16, etc.

[\[13\]](#) Ibid., 293-294.

[\[14\]](#) Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1940), 14-15.

[\[15\]](#) Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, 301.

[\[16\]](#) Ibid., 33.

[\[17\]](#) Ibid., 49.

[\[18\]](#) Ibid., 268.

[\[19\]](#) Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 13.

[\[20\]](#) From the little the writer knows of Plato's *Republic*, there seem to be echoes of it here in the Fox's views. Worth exploring.

[\[21\]](#) Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, 46.

[\[22\]](#) Ibid., 49-50.

[\[23\]](#) Ibid., 50.

[\[24\]](#) Ibid., 51.

[\[25\]](#) Ibid., 54.

[\[26\]](#) Ibid.

[\[27\]](#) Ibid., 295.

[\[28\]](#) Lewis, *The Four Loves*, chapter 2 ("Affection").

[\[29\]](#) The writer plans to use the novel and its contemplative companion, *The Four Loves*, to reach out to a struggling apostate with mother issues on both sides of her adoption.

[\[30\]](#) Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, 308-309.

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# Oprah's Spirituality: Exploring 'A New Earth' – A Christian Critique

*Steve Cable looks at the teaching of Eckhart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey and finds it far removed from a Christian worldview. From a biblical perspective, their teaching is in line with that addressed by Paul in Colossians where he points to false teachers who are "taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind."*

Over 2,000,000 people from 139 countries have participated with Oprah Winfrey and Eckhart Tolle in a live Web-based seminar covering each chapter of Tolle's book entitled, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*[\[1\]](#). Why is this book so popular? Will it lead you deeper in your walk with Christ? Or is it counterfeit spirituality promoting a false view of God? In this article, we will address these questions as we embark on an exploration of Tolle's "new earth."

The underlying premise is that all material things (from planets to pebbles to flowers to animals) result from a universal, immaterial life force expressing itself in material form. Humans are a part of that expression. However, we have evolved to the point where we have the potential to become Aware of our oneness with the universal life force. The purpose of all mankind is to become aware that their Being is an expression of the One Life Force.

However, the vast majority of people are unconscious and unaware of the source of their being. Every human being has an illusory self image or ego which is completely conditioned by the past, always wanting and never satisfied. We also have an



individual and collective accumulation of old emotional pain Tolle calls the “pain-body.” Our ego and our pain-body are actively trying to keep us away from true awareness. When we identify ourselves with our ego, our thoughts about the past and future, our wants and our hurts, we cannot experience our true Beingness.

In Tolle’s view, this lack of awareness of our true essence and false identification with our egos has the world and the human race on the brink of extinction. Fortunately, the universal life force is manipulating this crisis to create an opportunity for many people to move from an unconscious state to consciousness. In order to become conscious, we must recognize that we are not our thoughts and/or egos. We must learn to accept and be present in the Now, because the past and the future exist only as thoughts. When most people are operating from their true essence rather than their egos, we will have drastic social and physical upheavals on this earth resulting in a whole new world order—that is, “a new earth.”

If you are thinking this sounds a lot more like Eastern mysticism than a deeper walk with Christ, you are on the right track. So why is this message so popular even among many regular church attendees?

## **Why Is *A New Earth* a Significant Issue?**

Since *A New Earth* is clearly incompatible with Biblical Christianity, why is it being read and recommended by many people who profess to be Christian?

First, the pervasive influence of post-modern tolerance continues to undermine commitment to the truth of the gospel even in evangelical circles. We are constantly assailed with the message that it is hateful and intolerant to believe that Christianity is true and other religions fall short. According to this viewpoint, the loving Christian will accept the validity of all religious traditions encouraging us to partake

from the smorgasbord of spiritual guidance available from other religions. Thus many people forsake Paul's warning in Colossians to not be taken captive by the traditions of men rather than the truth of Christ and thereby open themselves up to false teaching{2}. An immature Christian may say to themselves, "*A New Earth* offers a way to greater personal peace and an escape from unhappiness so why not find a way to glue it onto my Christian tradition." Tolle and Oprah cleverly encourage them by saying, "How 'spiritual' you are has nothing to do with what you believe, but everything to do with your state of consciousness." {3}

Second, *A New Earth* contains nuggets of truth about the nature of the body, soul and spirit and some practical ideas which may often prove helpful in dealing with anxiety, anger and other issues people face. Tolle is correct in pointing out that our individual and collective selfish egos introduce a lot of pain and suffering into this world. In addition, we may be filled with anxiety and discontent with our circumstances because our thoughts are preoccupied with past hurts and future hopes/fears. He encourages us to realize that we are not our thoughts or past pains. If we will affirm our intrinsic spiritual value and observe our ego at work, we can reduce anxiety and be able to accept our present circumstances. In some ways this is analogous to the instruction in Colossians to set our minds on the things of Christ not on the things of this earth because our real life is in Christ not in this earth. {4} It also reminds us of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where he tells us that through the Holy Spirit we can "take every thought captive in obedience to Christ." {5} So you can see how thinking this way could be helpful. Unfortunately, this is taught as a part of a broader teaching that will leave non-Christians separated from God and misguided Christians not fulfilling their God-given purpose on this earth.

The third reason for its unwitting acceptance among some

Christians is that quotes from Jesus and others in the Bible are sprinkled throughout the book in an attempt to show this philosophy is consistent with “true Christianity.” Like so many false teachers, he attempts to make Jesus support his worldview by removing the teaching of Jesus from the clear message of the gospel.

Fourth, and probably most importantly, Tolle found a powerful proponent in Oprah Winfrey whose endorsement catapulted his first book, *The Power of Now*, onto the *NY Times* Best Seller list. Now, Oprah is enthusiastically promoting *A New Earth* through her web seminar, calling it the most exciting thing she has ever done. Oprah is an evangelist for smorgasbord spirituality. During the first web seminar for *A New Earth*, she was asked how she could reconcile it with her Christian upbringing. Oprah explained that she began to get out of the box of Biblical doctrine in her late twenties when her pastor was preaching on the characteristics of God. When he said that “The Lord thy God is a jealous God,” she decided that she wanted to believe in a God of love not a jealous God. Apparently, rather than doing a study to understand what that Bible passage meant, she decided to make up her own Jesus. As she stated (see [Appendix A](#)),

“And you know, it’s been a journey to get to the place where I understand, that what I believe is that Jesus came to show us Christ consciousness. That Jesus came to show us the way of the heart and that what Jesus was saying that to show us the higher consciousness that we’re all talking about here. Jesus came to say, ‘Look I’m going to live in the body, in the human body and I’m going to show you how it’s done.’ These are some principles and some laws that you can use to live by to know that way. And when I started to recognize that, that Jesus didn’t come in my belief, even as a Christian, I don’t believe that Jesus came to start Christianity... Well, I am a Christian who believes that there are certainly many more paths to God other than

Christianity.”{6}

## Worldview Comparison

Let's continue our exploration of Tolle's new earth by considering some of the fundamental worldview questions. How does the worldview of *A New Earth* line up with a Biblical worldview? (see [Appendix B](#))

### God and the Universe

Let's first look at the origin of the universe and the nature of God.

According to Tolle, the material universe is a temporary manifestation of the universal spiritual consciousness. This One Life is impersonal and pervasive, investing itself in all matter not just living things. He states it thus, “Each thing has Beingness, is a temporary form that has its origin within the formless one Life, the source of all things, all bodies, all forms.”{7} And “Like all life-forms, they are, of course, temporary manifestations of the underlying one Life, one Consciousness”{8} Consequently, the being the Bible calls God is really an expression of this impersonal life force. Since everything is of God and is God, all material things must ultimately return to formless, unidentifiable union with the spiritual life force.

This view of God as an impersonal life force living in all things is directly counter to the Biblical revelation of God. According to the Bible, God is the creator of the universe not a part of the universe. God is an identifiable, personal being characterized by holiness, love, grace and compassion. The creator of this universe is a thinking being as God shares through Isaiah, “for as the heavens are higher than the earth...so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”{9} Paul reminds us, “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the

thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.”[{10}](#) God is a communicator, choosing to reveal Himself to us through the attributes of creation, through the Scriptures and through Jesus Christ.

## **Nature of Man**

What about the nature and purpose of mankind? According to Tolle, humans are an evolved material manifestation of the spiritual life force. Humans have evolved to the point where we are capable of being overtly conscious of our Beingness; of our oneness with the One Life force. However, our material manifestation includes the ego (a false sense of identification with our thoughts) and our individual and collective pain bodies which fight our attempts to be conscious of our real identity in the life force. We need to realize that we are not really a unique individual, but rather a material expression on the One Life force. Our purpose for existence is to bring a consciousness of the underlying one Life into this world. He states, “The ultimate purpose of human existence, which is to say, your purpose, is to bring that power into this world.”[{11}](#) However, the ultimate end for each human is to return our life energy back into the impersonal life force.

In contrast, the Bible teaches humans were intentionally created by God in His image. We are created with a body, soul and spirit. Our earthly bodies are temporary, but our soul and spirit are immortal. We are, in fact, individuals responsible for our actions with different eternal destinies determined by our relationship with God.

## **Sin and Evil**

In *A New Earth*, the concepts of sin and evil are severely distorted. According to Tolle, original sin is the collective dysfunction which prevents people from recognizing the point of human existence. He suggests that this barrier to true Awareness is built into our DNA. He states, “The collective

pain-body is probably encoded within every human's DNA, although we haven't discovered it there yet."[{12}](#) In other words, the collective hurts and perceived inadequacies of our parents and previous generations are not only passed on through our interactions with a fallen world, but are actually encoded into our DNA. This, of course, would require our thoughts to be able to modify our DNA so that these experiences are passed on to future generations.

However, since we are not our bodies or our thoughts, we are not responsible for our sins. As he states, "There is only one perpetrator of evil on the planet: human unconsciousness.... People are not responsible for what they do when possessed by the pain-body."[{13}](#) In fact, we cannot really distinguish good from evil since they all arise from the same life force. As Tolle puts it, "The deeper interconnectedness of all things and events implies that the mental labels of 'good' and 'bad' are ultimately illusory. They always imply a limited perspective and so are true only relatively and temporarily."[{14}](#)

In contrast, the Bible teaches that we are all sinners and apart from faith in Christ the result will be eternal separation from God.[{15}](#)

## Salvation

In Tolle's worldview, humans are not born spiritually dead, but rather spiritually unconscious. Our real self cannot be separated from God because our real self is a part of God. He states, "You do not become good by trying to be good, but by finding the goodness that is already within you, and allowing the goodness to emerge. But it can only emerge if something fundamental changes in your state of consciousness."[{16}](#) We become a new alive person, not through faith in the atoning death and empowering resurrection of Jesus, but rather through a process of becoming aware of our real self which has been masked by our ego. However, when our body dies, we cease to

exist as an individual merging back into the universal life force. Tolle states, “the recognition of the impermanence of all forms awakens you to the dimension of the formless within yourself, that which is beyond death. Jesus called it ‘eternal life.’”[\[17\]](#) So, regardless of what we do or believe during our earthly existence we all have the same ultimate destiny.

This view devalues the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Tolle’s view is true, Jesus’ death was unnecessary and His resurrection was an illusion. The Bible clearly states that “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”[\[18\]](#)

## **Jesus Christ and Christianity**

For Tolle, Jesus was an enlightened human. He joined Buddha and a few others in trying to communicate this concept to people and societies who were not ready to receive it. Jesus was no more God than any other human, but he was aware that he was a part of the One Life Force which He identified as God.

With this view of Jesus, Tolle clearly rejects the central gospel message: faith in Jesus’ atoning death on the cross and victorious resurrection is the only way to move from death into spiritual life.

## **Truth and Religion**

According to Tolle, truth cannot be found in thought, doctrines or narratives which are perceived through our egos. He states, “Every ego confuses opinions and viewpoints with facts. It cannot tell the difference between an event and its reaction to that event. Only through awareness—not through thinking—can you differentiate between fact and opinion.... Only through awareness can you see the totality of the situation or person instead of adopting one limited perspective.”[\[19\]](#) Thus, the only real Truth with a capital T is in my being. “The Truth is inseparable from who you are. Yes, you are the Truth. If you look for it elsewhere, you will be deceived every time.

The very Being that you are is Truth.”{20} He even claims that this is what Jesus was really trying to tell us when He said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”

Tolle writes:

“All religions are equally false and equally true, depending on how you use them. If you believe only your religion is the Truth, you are using it in the service of the ego.”{21} And, “Many religious people claim to be in sole possession of the truth in an unconscious attempt to protect their identity. Unless you believe exactly as they do, you are wrong in their eyes, and they may feel justified in killing you for that.”{22}

Like many people, Tolle confuses our inability to fully understand the truth with the lack of truth. As R.C. Sproul said, “Real truth is reality as seen from God’s perspective.” Real truth can only be revealed by God and is not about our need for identity or a need to create enemies. Truth is central to the Christian faith. Jesus told Pilate, “For this I was born and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the *truth*.”{23} As Christians, we are motivated to share the truth God has revealed because of His love for us and His “desire for all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the *truth*.”{24}

## **The Bible**

In addressing the Bible, Tolle attempts to play both sides of the street. Although he does not directly state it, he clearly does not believe that the Bible is an accurate revelation of the character of God and the nature of the universe. His worldview is totally contrary to the Bible in most areas, so he clearly does not consider it an authoritative source. But, knowing that much of his audience has a Christian background, he quotes the Bible over 25 times in this book. In most



instances, he takes the verse out of context and misinterprets it to align with his viewpoint. One example is when he claims that Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" in order to teach us that we are the Truth. Ignoring the fact that Jesus went on to say, "no one comes to the Father but through me." {25} Jesus said that if we lived according to His words we would "know the truth" {26}, not "be the truth."

## Conclusion

*A New Earth* is not so new after all. It is another presentation of Eastern mysticism with a focus on separating your identity from your ego. Although the mind exercises promoted in the book may provide some temporary help with issues such as anxiety and anger, the overall worldview is directly counter to the gospel of Jesus Christ. By denying the existence of a personal transcendent God, by denying individual responsibility for my sin, by denying an eternal soul, and the need for the redeeming death and resurrection of Jesus, Tolle's spiritual teaching will result in eternal separation from God for non-Christians and fruitlessness for Christians taken captive by this unbiblical worldview.

## Appendix A: Oprah Winfrey on reconciling *A New Earth* with her Christian background:

"I've reconciled it because I was able to open my mind about the absolute indescribable hugeness of that which we call "God." I took God out of the box because I grew up in the Baptist church and there were, you know, rules and, you know, belief systems indoctrinated. And I happened to be sitting in church in my late 20's...And this great minister was preaching about how great God was and how omniscient and omnipresent, and God is everything. And then he said, and the lord thy god is a jealous god. And I was, you know, caught up in the rapture of that moment until he said "jealous." And something struck me. I was thinking God is all, God is omnipresent, God is—and God's also jealous? God is jealous of me? And something

about that didn't feel right in my spirit because I believe that god is love and that god is in all things. And so that's when the search for something more than doctrine started to stir within me.

"And I love this quote that Eckhart has, this is one of my favorite quotes in chapter one where he says, "Man made god in his own image, the eternal, the infinite, and unnamable was reduced to a mental idol that you had to believe in and worship as my god or our god."

"And you know, it's been a journey to get to the place where I understand, that what I believe is that Jesus came to show us Christ consciousness. That Jesus came to show us the way of the heart and that what Jesus was saying that to show us the higher consciousness that we're all talking about here. Jesus came to say, "Look I'm going to live in the body, in the human body and I'm going to show you how it's done." These are some principles and some laws that you can use to live by to know that way. And when I started to recognize that, that Jesus didn't come in my belief, even as a Christian, I don't believe that Jesus came to start Christianity. So that was also very helpful to me.

"Well, I am a Christian who believes that there are certainly many more paths to God other than Christianity."

## Appendix B: Comparing A New Earth with Other Worldviews

	Christian Theism	<i>A New Earth</i>	Naturalism (Postmodernism)	Pantheism
God	Personal	Universal life force	Non-existent	Impersonal
World	Creation	Spiritual	Physical	Spiritual
Human Nature	Like God	Is God; corrupted by ego	Like Animals	Is God

<b>Body/Soul</b>	Unity	Spirit is only reality	Body Only	Soul Only
<b>Immortality</b>	Resurrection	Reunite with life force	Annihilation	Reincarnation
<b>Destiny</b>	Glorification	Absorption into grand plan of one life force	Extinction	Absorption
<b>Source of Authority</b>	Divine Revelation	Presence; "I Am Truth"	Culture	Spiritual
<b>Truth</b>	Absolute	Relative and personal	Culturally based	Personal
<b>Jesus Christ</b>	Son of God	Early enlightened being	A product of his/her culture	Enlightened being
<b>Salvation</b>	Redemption	Awareness, consciousness, presence	Whatever is effective	Meditation
<b>Evil</b>	Rebellion	Illusion results from pain-body	Culturally defined	Illusion
<b>Ethics</b>	God-centered	Counter ego	Culturally centered	World-centered
<b>History</b>	Linear	Predestined by the one life force	Culturally defined	Cyclical
<b>Culture</b>	God-ordained / man steward	Unconscious vs. conscious	Language-centered	World-centered

## Notes

1. Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*, Penguin Group, New York, 2006
2. Colossians 2:8
3. Ibid., 18
4. Colossians 3:1-3
5. 2 Corinthians 10:5
6. Oprah Winfrey, transcript of the first *A New Earth* web seminar dated March 3, 2008

7. Tolle., 37
8. Ibid., 4
9. Isaiah 55:9
10. 1 Cor 2:11-12 NASV
11. Tolle., 78
12. Ibid., 143
13. Ibid., 163
14. Ibid., 196
15. Romans 3:23, 6:23
16. Tolle., 13
17. Ibid., 81
18. Romans 6:23
19. Tolle., 69
20. Ibid., 71
21. Ibid., 70
22. Ibid., 17
23. John 18:37
24. I Tim 2:3
25. John 14:6
26. John 8:31-32

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## **Echoes of a Voice**

*Rick Wade explores how we hear echoes of a supernatural voice calling us through justice, relationship, beauty and spirituality.*

### **Is Anybody Listening?**

We spend so much time defending our beliefs and making a case for the faith, and we wonder why people won't listen. We have great arguments and evidences, and it's all so obviously true

to us, but they give it as much attention as we might if asked to consider some ancient Sumerian religion. Maybe they hear it filtered through preconceived negative ideas of Christianity. Think of the very vocal atheists who think that Christianity is not just old and useless; they think it's downright dangerous. Another problem is that people really don't know about Jesus and what He taught. We live in a society which has little understanding of Christianity outside the church and, unfortunately, inside it, too, in too many cases.

Maybe we should consider changing the order in which we make a case for Christ.

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century scientist and apologist, said that we should "make [Christianity] attractive, make good men wish it were true, and *then* show that it is."[<sup>{1}</sup>](#) Theologian John Stackhouse argues in his book *Humble Apologetics* that today we have to address the question of *plausibility* before that of *credibility*. "'Might it be true? Is Christian argument something I should seriously entertain even for a moment?'"[<sup>{2}</sup>](#)

Of course, Christianity has to be true to be worthwhile, but in some cases it could be better to postpone arguments for the truth of the faith in favor of simply putting it on display. If I tell someone I have a diamond in my pocket, before arguing that it *is* a diamond and not some kind of fake, maybe I need to pull it out and show them to get their interest.

What are some important issues in most everyone's life that could pique people's interest? For his book *Simply Christian*, Anglican bishop and Bible scholar N. T. Wright chose justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty. I'll draw from that book in this article.

There's another important dimension, namely, living out the gospel. Are the things we talk about *real*? Do we live them out across the spectrum of our lives' activities?

In the discussion that follows, I'll talk first about the four subjects just mentioned. Then I'll highlight a very important theme in Wright's book, that of the meeting of heaven and earth. Finally, we'll turn to the matter of Christians as the living voices of God on earth, heralding the day of final redemption, and showing how Christianity applies in some important areas.

## **Justice and Spirituality**

N. T. Wright says we hear "echoes of a voice" calling to us from many directions. To hear these echoes correctly is to hear the voice of God. By encouraging people to pause and focus on these echoes, we can help prepare them to hear a case for the truth of Christianity, if a case needs to be made at all.

One of those echoes is justice. Everyone hears it, even children. Let one child get to stay up later at night than another, and you'll hear it: "That's not fair!"

We want things to be right, to be in proper order, but we live in a world so often out of order. Racism, religious oppression, laws which serve only the powerful: we can multiply examples. We try to bring about justice, but it slips through our fingers.

Some say the echo we're hearing is just a dream, that there can be no justice. Others say there is such a thing as justice, but it's from another world and cannot be attained here. Still others say it's the voice of Someone speaking to us from elsewhere. God is calling to us, telling us what is right and wrong, and bidding us to pursue justice.

Spirituality is another echo. Wright tells a parable of a dictator who believes it isn't safe to have water coming from so many sources in his kingdom, so he decides to cover with concrete all the land that once was marked by springs and

provide one water source for all the people. This is safer, he thought. It's controlled. In time, however, the waters of the springs begin to break through the concrete, and soon they erupt all over the place.

The water in this parable is spirituality, and the dictator is the philosophy that has shaped our culture for a few centuries, that of naturalism.

As much as the "dictator" of naturalism hates it, spirituality is breaking out all over these days. Many religions are now practiced in America. Spirituality and the supernatural are regular themes on TV and in the movies. Bookstores sell scads of books on the subject. It's cool to be spiritual.

Why has this happened? People are hearing something, although many aren't hearing it correctly. Wright says that the formerly "hidden spring" of spirituality "[points] away from the bleak landscape of modern secularism and toward the possibility that we humans are made for more than this."[\[3\]](#) There is more to us than what can be studied scientifically.

## **Relationships and Beauty**

After dealing with spirituality, Wright turns to relationships. He wonders, "How is it that we ache for each other and yet find relationships so difficult?"[\[4\]](#)

It's obvious that we are made to live in relationships with other people. In the realm of relationships, we hear the echo of a voice telling us something very important about ourselves.

We find our meaning in the context of a society, small or large, including intimate relationships. Maybe especially so. Marriage is still popular even though so many marriages end in divorce. Many couples just live together in an attempt to avoid the messiness of divorce. We seek good relationships,

but plan on failed ones.

And even good relationships including marriages have to end, because death, that great separator, comes to all. We fear it, but we can't do anything about it.

Not only marriages struggle, but so do larger societies, especially democratic ones. We want to trust people, indeed we have to. But we're let down and cynicism is bred. Wright says that in Britain, more people vote on reality TV shows than in elections.

What keeps driving us to be so closely involved with other people despite all the risks? Christians have an explanation. But now I'm getting ahead of myself. That's for later.

What about the echo of beauty? Is beauty important to people? Not everyone is a patron of the arts, to be sure. But people put time and money into making their homes attractive places to live. Even a person who doesn't care about such things will be found outside on Saturday washing his car.

Yet for all our love of beauty, we find it difficult to capture. Artists paint canvas after canvas trying to get it right. Beauty is transient and incomplete. My wife often draws my attention to the late afternoon Texas sky. The sun, partly hidden behind clouds of white and grey shoots out a fiery glow of brilliant orange and red and yellow. And in a matter of seconds the colors change and then are gone.

The common belief about beauty is that it is in the eye of the beholder. But if that says it all, then nothing is beautiful in itself. Shared experiences of beauty with other people are just happenstance; their subjective response just happens to accord with ours at the moment.

But I don't think that idea exhausts the truth. We behave and talk as though some things are beautiful in themselves.



Through the transient beauty of our world, could we be hearing the echo of a real voice whispering to us of a beauty that will remain?

## Jesus: Where Heaven and Earth Meet

What explanation does Christianity offers for those “echoes of a voice” we’ve been discussing?

The bottom line is this: The death and resurrection of Christ provides a context within which these things come to fruition, where His creation will not be ultimately frustrated by the fallenness of the world.

One of the central motifs of Wright’s book is the meeting of heaven and earth. When he speaks of heaven, Wright is speaking of the supernatural realm where God is; he has in mind more two different realms than two spatial locations.

Wright describes three views of the way God and the world relate. Option 1, he calls it, is the belief that God and the world are identical; what is called *pantheism*. Option 2 is the belief that there is a great gulf between God and the world, what has been called *deism*. Option 3 is the belief that, while God and the world are distinct, their realms meet and even overlap at times.

In Christ, heaven and earth meet in their fullest, most profound way. Jesus, the full embodiment of God, became man; Emmanuel, God with us, is what Isaiah called Him. “In listening to Jesus,” Wright says, “we discover whose voice it is that has echoed around the hearts and minds of the human race all along.”[\[5\]](#)

In his ministry and his death, Jesus took on the powers of darkness. The victory He won didn’t only serve to get us into heaven. In defeating evil he won a victory over injustice, spiritual deadness, broken relationships, and an ugly world

among other things. His victory applies to us. Being a Christian isn't about leaving this fallen world behind to join God in a disembodied state way out there in heaven. Jesus has set us free and made us new creations, empowered by His Spirit to work at restoring creation in the here and now. We know that this work won't be completed until Jesus comes again and establishes a new heaven and new earth. However, we are to enter into His victory now. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," Jesus prayed (Matt. 6:10).

Jesus is the one who both makes sense of our longing for justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty, and who makes them possible.

## **Living in the Future Today**

So what do we do? What does this have to do with the matter of plausibility I discussed at the beginning of this article? I noted that people who won't hear a case made for the truth of Christianity might be open to hearing what it has to say about such significant matters as justice and relationships and others. I also noted, however, that people have to see them being worked out in our own lives individually and corporately.

In 1 Cor. 3:16 Paul tells us that we are individually temples of the Spirit. In Eph. 2:21 he says that the whole church forms a temple. The temple in the Old Testament was where God dwelled among His people. Now, we are God's temple, the place where God dwells. In us because of the Spirit within us, heaven and earth meet. And the Spirit, who is our constant companion, enables us to continue Jesus' work, to "begin the work of making God's future real in the present." [\[6\]](#)

We participate in the life of the church: we read and speak the Word; we engage in worship and prayer; and we partake of the Lord's Supper. In all these things, we declare that God is

engaged in this world.

And as a result, God's Spirit is at work through us to set the world to rights. Justice should be demonstrated by the church, and it *will* be complete one day.

We discover true spirituality, that we can partake in both the earthly and heavenly realms, because we are body and spirit. Both parts of our nature find their fulfillment in a proper relationship with God.

We are given a new relationship with God, and the Spirit works in us to show the love of Christ to others and hence to establish and maintain good relationships with people.

And through the church, the Spirit works to restore beauty to this world and to free it from corruption. One day God will restore beauty completely in remaking creation to be what it is supposed to be.

John Stackhouse writes that "We live in a time-between-the-times," in which people raised in a more or less Christian culture now are reacting against it. Christianity seems to receive greater disdain and resistance than other religions.[\[7\]](#) How can we get them to listen?

As Christians, Wright says, we are "workers for justice, explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty."[\[8\]](#) "We are called not only to listen to the echoes of the voice . . . but to be people through whom the rest of the world comes to hear and respond to that voice as well."[\[9\]](#)

When people see us living this way, maybe they will stop long enough to listen to our reasons.

## Notes

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* 187.
2. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the*

*Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.

3. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 20.

4. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 29.

5. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 92.

6. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 124.

7. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 51-52.

8. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 189.

9. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 218.

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