

# THE ART OF **SHALOM**

Experiencing the Whole Life of Christ



**Russell D. Wills**



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# ש ל ו ם

The Hebrew word SHALOM ש ל ו ם has little in common with its English translation of “PEACE.” SHALOM ש ל ו ם does not have the passive, even negative, connotation of the word “peace.” ש ל ו ם does not mean merely the absence of strife. It is pregnant with positive, active and energetic meaning and association. ש ל ו ם connotes “totality,” “health,” “wholesomeness,” “harmony,” “balance,” “success,” “the completeness and richness of living in an integrated social milieu.”

*- Rabbi Gershon Steinberg-Caudill*



# Preface

Thank you for reading *The Art of Shalom*.

I need to express my gratitude to several people who have been extraordinarily helpful. I particularly want to thank my mother-in-law (Mom<sup>2</sup>) for her tremendous proofreading help. She helped me correct hundreds of typos, punctuation errors, and grammatical mistakes in addition to making many excellent suggestions. She also challenged my theology and arguments in several areas, some of which I am still wrestling through. (Thank you, Mom, I love our conversations about the Lord!) My sister-in-law Mary also gave me some tremendous input and advice. Vincent Staiger, a former student at Pillar College (formerly Somerset Christian College), provided invaluable editing help. Leonard Sweet assisted a great deal not only in helping me to understand the publishing process and brainstorming with me to come up with a title for the book, but also by informally mentoring me for several years after I earned my master's degree. In addition, Gustavo Avila unexpectedly volunteered to redesign the book cover. I can't thank you enough for your time and skill, Gustavo!

Thank you all very much for your help and guidance.

I hope the ideas presented in throughout this book will bless each individual reader, and most of all I hope this book will become a catalyst to strengthen the body of Christ.

Shalom!



-Russ Wills



# THE ART OF SHALOM

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION



# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Birth

I have become aware that a majority of theologians, especially within my evangelical background, are male. Through a male lens birth is quick and beautiful and leads to a screaming baby. Birth, however, looks quite different through a female lens. Birth takes time. In fact, birth takes a very long, painful time.



I had no idea what to expect during my wife's first pregnancy. Katie was feeling sick quite often for the first three months. Before the pregnancy we used to eat egg salad and hard-boiled eggs all the time. One day while I was boiling eggs for myself, Katie came in and nearly threw up. She generally felt better by the end of the third month. At least until the trip to the hospital, that is. She began having severe pain in her abdominal area. The doctors were on the verge of doing surgery for appendicitis, putting the baby at risk, but just hours before the surgery the pain miraculously stopped.



Throughout the second trimester she apparently felt bad that I had been picking up a lot of slack around the house, so she all of the sudden started cooking for me and doing all sorts things for me. "Nesting" kicked in. I liked that! It was nice. But then the third trimester brought more severe exhaustion and back pain. By the end of the nine months Katie was trying all the old wives' tales in a desperate effort to bring on labor

6/13/09

On March 20, 2004 my first son, Josh, was born. Knowing how horrible my memory is, I decided to keep a journal to help me remember life as he was growing up. Since then my wife Katie and I had two more boys, Zach and Tim, and I continued jotting notes over the years.

I had a very difficult time as a new parent, but I have grown unbelievably in just a few years. I imagine I have learned more about God and abundant life from my boys than I will ever be able to teach them.

The Bible teaches that a parent/child relationship is a glimpse of God's relationship with the Church. In this book about Life, I chose to include selected journal entries. Some are funny, some are cute, some are profound, but all of them are parables of something much bigger. As you read about abundant life, you'll also be following my journey of understanding life, growth, and joy.

early. She went for long walks, she ate certain foods that were supposed to bring on labor, she did jumping jacks (though she stopped that pretty quickly). All because, "This baby needs to get out *now!*" and "I need to have my body back!" She was in severe pain throughout. Pregnancy, carrying a new life, is a very beautiful and extraordinarily painful process. (I am glad I'm male!)

Katie and I heard an old wives' tale that walking will bring on labor, so we walked a couple miles into town to a local diner. We had just finished our burgers when Katie announced, "I think I just had a contraction." "Should I go get the car?" I asked. "No," she answered, "let's walk back. We have plenty of time."

Contractions usually begin at roughly twenty-minute intervals. Women are generally not told to go to the hospital until the contractions are consistently five minutes apart. Katie's started at twenty minutes,

but immediately jumped to fifteen minutes, ten, five, three, two. We panicked – we thought it would take much longer than that. She was just about to call her doctor when we realized her contractions were slowing down again. Back to three, five, ten, and twenty minutes. She continued this irregular cycle from twenty minutes down to two and back to twenty.

The contractions gradually became much more painful for Katie. We arrived at the hospital in plenty of time and actually spent most of the night walking around the corridors of the maternity wing. At



one point the doctor gave her Petocin. Petocin helps to regulate and strengthen the contractions. Petocin also makes the contractions much more painful. I tried holding Katie's hand when she had her first contraction after the Petocin kicked in, but I couldn't. She was gripping the bedrail so tight that I

could not pry her fingers apart – it felt like her finger would break before I was able to take her hand.

Katie had an epidural and has recommended it to the entire population of the world since her experience. One minute she was in more pain than I ever want to see her in again. The next minute she was smiling and announcing, "I think I'm having a contraction now." Ahh, the wonders of modern medicine!

The birth itself really was beautiful. In a very weird sort of way, that is. Beautiful in sort of the same way that a good hockey fight is beautiful. There is passion, skill, technique, and a lot of blood. When Josh was born, he was covered in a beautiful blend of gook, blood, and I don't want to know what else. The umbilical cord was nothing like what I expected. I expected some sort of soft, flesh colored garden hose. Instead it was this really big, curly, blue, bloody thing that looked like a spring. I got to cut the cord, which was weird because even though I knew it didn't hurt either of them I was basically cutting through (what at least looked and felt like) very thick flesh.

Birth is not an easy process; birth is very painful. Excruciating. Thankfully, Katie's delivery only took minutes. She pushed a few times over roughly six minutes and Joshua was born. But Katie had suffered for nine full months. Then, once Joshua was born, sustaining this new life became very difficult as well. Postpartum depression kicked in (for both of us). Months of sleepless nights made us both a bit delirious and sometimes rather cantankerous. Josh's \$10,000 a day food and diaper habits didn't make life any easier either.



Katie swore she would never go through that again. One child is plenty. Within only a few weeks, however, Katie was watching Josh grow up and announced, “I think someday I would like to have another one after all.”

Never once has either of us regretted having children. The pain, the sleeplessness, the financial problems, the arguments, the tantrums, the trips to the doctor and hospital all seem worthwhile. Life is difficult, but beautiful. Creating and sustaining life is not easy and is not always enjoyable, but it is always worthwhile.

Spiritual birth is no different. Spiritual birth is painful, scary, messy, and certainly not easy.

## Why Study “Life”?

Several years ago a close friend began to confess that he was struggling with his Christian beliefs. He just didn’t “feel it.” There must be more

(March 2004 continued...)  
 Josh was kind enough to give us a minute or two warning when he was hungry. He would stir a bit while he was sleeping, and if we saw it we would know to start getting a bottle together. Then he would open his eyes and look around. He would coo a little, then make some whimpering noises. I think the English translation would be, “Hi. Hi, I’m hungry. Hi?” Then, after a minute and a half or so he would start saying, “HEY! I ASKED FOR SOME FOOD HERE! WHERE THE #\$%#@ IS MY @#\$\$@ BOTTLE? WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?”

to the Christian life than this. “I don’t know if I even believe in God anymore,” he concluded.

I, along with most other Christians in our circle of friends, assured him that loving God far surpasses our feelings. “Love is not a feeling, it is an action,” we guaranteed him. “You can experience real life,” we insisted. “Pray about it.” “This lost feeling will pass in time.” “Pray about it some more.” “Read the Bible more.” We gave him every bit of sound Christian advice that exists. He

March 2004  
 Before Josh, I would have music playing all the time. After Josh came home with us we got used to our new background noise - screaming. And when the screaming stopped, there was more screaming. Josh really didn’t scream more than other babies. In fact, he probably screamed quite a bit less than other babies. But that was still a whole lot more than what we were used to.

attended different church congregations and denominations searching for the heart of Christianity. He spoke with great men and women of faith seeking advice, mentoring, and answers. Our friends all prayed for him. We prayed frequently, not just as an afterthought now and then.

Finally, after years of struggle, genuine searching, fervent prayer, and honest questioning, my friend found the answer he was looking for. Christianity is simply not for him. There is little or no difference between life as a Christian and life as an unbeliever. Nor is there much difference between his Christian friends and his friends who do not follow Jesus.

My friend moved across the country to pursue a music career and is now very happily married to a wonderful woman who is an atheist. He has confessed that he is no more joyful than he was when he professed faith in Christ, but neither is he less joyful. Life simply did not change all that much. But he at least has more peace now that he has given up his incessant struggle to find fulfillment of some abstract promise of life.

**(March 2004 continued...)**

**Every time we fed him for three months we would do exactly the same thing. The bottle goes in the mouth, he happily drinks two or three ounces, then we take the bottle out of his mouth to burp him. As soon as the bottle comes out of his mouth, he screeches bloody murder. I seriously didn't know any human could make the sound he made when we took the bottle away. You'd think after awhile he would realize he'd get more milk once he burped, but no. Take the bottle away, even for an instant, and the world would end.**

My friend's decision is, unfortunately, not an isolated incident. I hear his story time after time. Writers are now calling the United States a "post-Christian" nation. According to the US Census Bureau, the median age\* of a United States citizen (as of 2000) is thirty-five<sup>1</sup>. Yet the average age of a worshipper is fifty<sup>2</sup>. According to research done by the Presbyterian Church (USA), "The average age of church members in the United States is increasing with each passing day. According to information collected for Presbyterian, PC(USA)

\* The Census Bureau defines the median as "The age which divides the population into two numerically equal groups; that is, half the people are younger than this age and half are older."

(March 2004 continued...)  
Within a few weeks he developed a scathing high-pitched shriek. It sounded very much like a fire alarm in a large corporate building; it had that same shrill, ear piercing quality that made your eyes fuzzy after a couple minutes of it. And he started doing that when I burped him, which means his mouth was right next to my ear. I'm surprised I can still hear.

congregations, with each decade, the median age of church members rises four years.”<sup>3</sup> In some denominations, such as the United Methodist Church, the average worshipper is over sixty years old.<sup>4</sup> The *average* age is over sixty!

Many church congregations have no trace of entire generations of people. According to some statistics, roughly 3,500 church congregations

cease to exist each year.<sup>5</sup> That averages out to roughly ten churches *each day* shutting down.

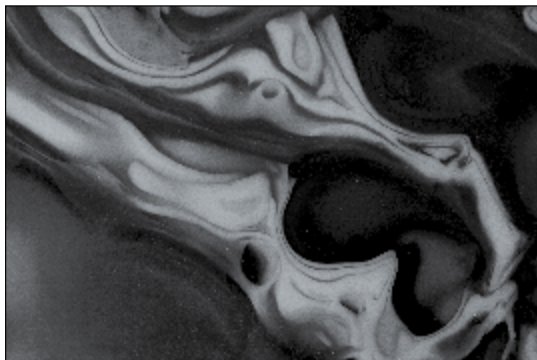
If Jesus is who he claims to be, if he truly has given us “abundant life,” then something is wrong!

There is no easy solution to the Church’s problems. There are no “ten steps to a thriving church” that will transform the religious climate of our country.

We can, however, work to become catalysts for life.

## Fire

Several times each year we hear about massive forest fires across the United States, especially in the west. Some of these fires begin unintentionally – perhaps lightning strikes in an excessively dry area or a camper gets careless while cooking or smoking. Other fires are set intentionally. An arsonist deliberately sets a fire that burns uncontrollably, destroying millions of acres and sometimes even taking human lives.



Forest fires will not occur if the proper elements are not there. If the area is not dry enough, there is not likely to be a wildfire. A dry forest, however, does not cause a fire – there has to be a spark. And a spark in a dry area will not sustain a fire – there has to be plenty of fuel for the fire. With the right conditions in place, however, the fire can blaze uncontrollably for weeks.

Merely developing the elements of life will not produce life. But developing these elements strategically will create an atmosphere where, as in arson, a small spark can create a massive fire that nothing in this world will be able to easily extinguish. Once ignited, God's Fire will not be extinguished like a forest fire; this Fire will continue to burn as long as the elements of life exist.

Jesus, our source of life, participated in the creation of the world. Jesus is life, and he made humans alive at the creation of the world. To begin learning about life, we should examine what the Bible says about creation.

An inspection of the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2

(March 2004 continued...)

He also had a game he liked to play. I think he called it "Pee On Daddy." He would wait until just the right moment – "Okay, the old diaper is off, not yet, wait, waaaiiit, new diaper is juuuuusst about ooooooon, aaaannnd, NOW!" And there it goes, all over me, all over the wall, all over his clothes, all over him. So then he needed a bath, which meant he'd be exposed again and in a perfect position to pee all over me again.

It wasn't just me, though. One time I was at my desk studying and Katie was in the other room. I heard her talking nice and gently to Josh while she changed him, and I wasn't paying much attention to what was going on. But suddenly Katie started yelling, "Oh my God! Oh my God! Uhhhhmm, uhhmmmm, Russ?! Help! Oh my God! ..." I ran in as fast as I could, not really knowing what was going on. I'm not sure what I expected to see, but whatever I expected, it wasn't this. He had projectile pooped all over everything. His changing table was about waist high and there was a little ledge at one end of it where there was another shelf type thing. The poop didn't land on the changing table. Instead it was all on the higher ledge. His poop defied gravity. He shot it right onto the ledge, where we kept just about every bit of sanitary baby stuff you could imagine. It was no longer sanitary. He pooped into his open tub of A&D ointment, all over his sponges, into the egg crate that held his brushes and nail clippers and nose squeegee thing and pretty much everything else. It was pure nastiness. I had to take everything one by one into the bathroom and either clean it off or throw it away. The entire time, of course, he was smiling and cooing.

offers some key insights into the elements of life. Adam and Eve were created to live in “shalom.” Their lives are the ideal lives – abundant, whole, complete, and fulfilled. “Life” here, then, refers not just to biological existence, but also to shalom. Five specific elements of this life jump out.

This book does not intend to provide a formula for experiencing abundant life. Instead, the book will examine five specific elements of life in Scripture and suggest ways to embrace these elements to create an environment where life can flourish.

## Defining Life and Shalom

“Whoever believes,” taught Jesus, “has eternal life” (paraphrase of John 6:47). The phrase “has life” is in the present tense. This is much bigger than going to heaven after we die; Jesus desires for us to be *fully* alive *now*.

In offering us life, Jesus is offering what Jewish people call “shalom” – wholeness, completeness, life as it was intended to be lived. English-speaking people usually translate the Hebrew word “shalom” as “peace.” We tend to think of “peace” as either the absence of war and conflict or a state of tranquility. Many of us imagine “peace” as sitting by the ocean with a group of close friends drinking margaritas and listening to good music. This is, perhaps, a small piece of what “shalom” can refer to, but this is at best a very limited and shallow understanding.

(March 2004 continued...)  
When he wasn't peeing on me or pooping all over everything we owned, Josh's next favorite game was to vomit on me. I learned very quickly to wear a cloth on my shoulder when I burped him, because he would drink two ounces and spit up three. (Babies defy all laws of science.) We would get all done with a meal, he would be happy as could be, he'd have burped, rested, played for a couple minutes, and I'd take the cloth off me, and immediately, “blah!” all over my shirt.

Speaking of shirts, Katie had three baby showers, and we had enough infant outfits to last us about six months without doing wash. And we used every single one of those outfits in two days. Every time he peed, which was often, it would leak out of his diaper and we'd have to change his outfit. We later learned that even though everyone we talked to told us Pampers were the best diapers, only Huggies would fit Josh correctly. I wish we had learned that sooner, like maybe before we brought him home from the hospital!

May 2004

This parenting thing is every bit as difficult as I had feared. I'm having an extremely hard time adjusting to this new life. It's like every once in awhile I see a light at the end of the tunnel, I make it to the end of the tunnel, start to rejoice and then realize I'm just about to enter another tunnel. Eventually the light at the end of the tunnel doesn't even bring hope, because I know something else is just around the corner. My relationship with Josh these days is pretty much waiting on him every waking minute and most sleeping minutes. He cries, fusses, needs to be on my shoulder walking around. Don't stop, don't sit, don't check email, don't cough, don't answer the phone, just walk around. He yells at me constantly, trying to tell me things and ask for things and I just can't understand him. So he yells harder and louder with that ear-piercing shriek right in my ear. Then, every so often, he smiles at me. Just often enough to keep me sane. And when he does, it's like some weird magic happens. The rest of the crap I'm feeling seems to be all worthwhile. I can't explain why. I remember people telling me "When they smile at you it makes it all worth it." And I was like, "Yea, right. Whatever." But it's true. It makes no sense, but it's true. I guess that's part of what love is. Love is giving up your own rights and desires and doing what the other person needs even when it's the very last thing in the world you want to do. Love is laying down your life for someone. And somehow something inside me is raised from the dead when he smiles at me.

Rabbi Noah Weinberg teaches that part of "shalom" involves inner peace. To experience shalom is "to be at peace with yourself."<sup>6</sup> Other rabbis describe shalom slightly differently, but the idea of "shalom" always refers to wholeness and completeness.

Shalom is the state that God initially intended for humankind. Shalom is life as God designed it.

The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* expands on the common English translation of shalom as "peace", teaching that shalom "means much more than mere absence of war. Rather, the root meaning of the verb Shalem better expresses the true concept of shalom. Completeness, wholeness, harmony, fulfillment, are closer to the meaning. Implicit in shalom is the idea of unimpaired relationships with others and fulfillment in one's undertakings."<sup>8</sup>

Jewish people greet one another by saying, "Shalom." You walk up to someone on the street and greet the person by essentially saying, "I wish you all the wholeness that God intends for you." Saying "hi" in English seems a bit shallow in comparison to say the least.

6/1/04

Katie and I celebrated our anniversary in the hospital this year. Josh had a fever, so we took him to the doctor. I thought this was a bit unnecessary. "Just give him some Tylenol," I thought. But Katie does have those maternal instincts, so off we went. The doctor said it was most likely just a virus but told us to watch him closely for the next twenty-four hours. If the fever increases call right away, and if it's not gone by tomorrow, bring him back. The fever didn't go away, so back we went. The doctor recommended that because he is only two months old we should bring him to the emergency room.

My first reaction was, "The hospital? That's a bit overkill. It's just a fever. Give him some Tylenol." But, again, I trusted Katie's maternal instinct. I figured we were better off having the doctors at the hospital tell us to give him some Tylenol and go home than to let Josh continue getting sicker without treatment. So off we went.

We were in the emergency room for a few hours before learning that Josh may, in fact, be sicker than we had expected. The doctors informed us that he would have to stay overnight so they could monitor him and wait for test results.

The test results the next day were still not telling them what was wrong. We were told we may be there for two or three days. The first of these three days included a spinal tap, which I think is where Josh really perfected his infamous shriek.

A few more days went by, and the doctors finally determined that Josh had either e-coli or salmonella. (They eventually narrowed it down to salmonella.) Josh had to stay in the hospital for two full weeks with an IV pumping antibiotics into his two month old body. The antibiotics gave him diarrhea that caused diaper rash worse that I had ever imagined possible. (The nurses treated the diaper rash with stuff called "Butt Paste" - I love that name!)

I don't think I ever really understood until these two weeks how badly a man's heart could ache over someone else's pain.

We all did anything and everything we could to help Josh during this time. Sometimes the only thing that helped him at all was carrying him around the hallways of the hospital. The nursing staff got to know us very well - we were the ones who said hello to them every 90 seconds or so as we walked around and around and around and around and around... The other thing Josh liked was to sit in the little red wagon. After awhile the nurses let us just keep the wagon in our room because it was the only thing that could stop him from crying. And as boring as it is to walk around a small, square hallway hour after hour for two straight weeks, we did it. We would have done anything for him. If it were possible to take his pain from him and go through it all in his place, any one of us would have done it in an instant.

Many people are aware that Jesus came preaching and offering the peace (shalom) of God. I was quite surprised, however, when I created a list of every instance that Jesus used the word “peace” in Scripture. He actually did not use the word very often. In fact in Matthew’s gospel the only instance of Jesus talking about offering peace was recorded as Jesus warning that he did *not* come to bring peace, but a sword.

In Mark, Jesus told a woman who had touched his garments to “go in peace” after she had been healed because her faith had made her well. He also instructed the disciples to be at peace with one another, though he was not directly offering them his peace in that instance.

Luke records Jesus telling a sinful woman to “go in peace” because her faith had saved her. Luke also echoes the few accounts in Mark of Jesus offering peace.

Other than two quick mentions in the context of explaining his pending death and resurrection to the disciples, John does not record *any* instance of Jesus offering peace before the resurrection.

June 2, 2004

We’re finally home from the hospital. What an experience. We have no idea how he got salmonella. The doctor was explaining to Katie how people can get infected with salmonella, and we are absolutely amazed how easy it is. In fact, the more we learned, the more amazed we are that the entire human race is not extinct.

So, needless to say, we wanted to take some precautions. We bleached everything. Both sets of parents bleached everything. Josh’s entire world was immaculate. No germ could possibly have lived though this experience. We were as close to germ free as people could get. But I realized that Josh actually needs germs to stay healthy. If he lives in an environment with no germs or bacteria and then we take him out anywhere, he will be exposed to things that he won’t be able to fight off. We would actually be hurting him by trying to protect him this way. So we’re taking precautions, but we stopped getting too crazy. It’s certainly hard to find that balance after two painful weeks in the hospital!

## **Peace, Resurrection, and the End of the World**

Every other instance in the gospels of Jesus offering peace to people appears after the resurrection. This, to me, is a remarkable discovery.



Jesus is often considered merely a good teacher who preached and lived a message of peace; this is simply not the case.

Consider for a moment Jesus' statement that he did not come to bring peace but a sword. We have no record in Scripture that Jesus ever picked up a sword, and he certainly did not lead a violent revolt. On the contrary, when the apostle Peter cut off the ear of a soldier who came to arrest Jesus, Jesus rebuked him and healed the soldier's ear. Was Jesus lying, then, or was he misleading the people when he told everyone he came to bring a sword?

Immediately after Jesus said he came to bring a sword, he explained himself using Scripture. The context of Matthew 10, along with a parallel passage in Luke 12, involves Jesus teaching about the end of the world, often called "the day of the Lord" in the Hebrew Scriptures. ("The day of the Lord" is not the sole focus of these passages, but a great deal of what he teaches here alludes to that time.)

A brief overview of the bigger Story at this point is vital to understanding what Jesus is teaching. (A more thorough overview of the Story will be given later.) After creation, a picture of shalom, came the fall and the beginning of God's process of redeeming the world to shalom. God made a covenant with a man named Abraham. Abraham had children who had children who had more children and eventually formed the nation known as Israel. After a cycle of falling into idolatry, facing oppression from enemies, crying out the Lord, finding deliverance from their oppression, and falling back into idolatry, the people wanted a King.



The first King, Saul, did not obey God and was rejected by God as king. God then gave the nation king David and promised David, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your

June 2004

Katie and I went on "vacation". I had this illusion that there was still such a thing as a vacation. We pretty much lived the same chaos on this so-called vacation that we've lived for the past three months or so. We're just doing it by the ocean for a week. I'm starting to wonder if maybe the account of God creating the world is just a myth. He created two new human beings, and he rested on the seventh day? Right.

When I was growing up, my grandparents lived at the beach. I spent a lot of time there as a kid. The beach became a sort of refuge for me over the years. I would sit for hours staring at the water, fascinated by it. The ocean is alive somehow. It's a fierce monster that would let me sit right against it and touch it. It would brush gently against me, and yet its power was unbelievable. Always moving, never resting, always roaring, but in a mysteriously calming tone. I brought Josh to the edge of the water while we were on vacation, and he just stared at the water. And stared. And stared some more, fascinated, just like his daddy. And for one of the first times ever I was at the edge of the water paying no attention to the ocean. I was just watching my son.

throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). His descendants, however, fell back into idolatry. Civil war split the nation in two; Israel in the north and Judah in the south. God judged the idolatry of these nations by using the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to take the people of Israel into exile.

Before, during, and after the exile, the prophets of God were teaching that a descendant of David would come to save and restore Israel. This "anointed one" (the Hebrew word for "anointed" is where we get the word "messiah") would not just save Israel, but would also restore all things to the way God intended. The messiah would bring shalom to the earth. Part of this restoration would involve judging the unjust, particularly the nations who were oppressing the Jewish people. From a Christian viewpoint, the Jewish people misunderstood how the messiah would accomplish this task. They assumed Israel would be restored, the enemies of Israel would face judgment, and there would be peace (shalom). Just as many Christians today have a very well-thought-out understanding of what Jesus' return will look like, the Jews of Jesus' day had a very well-thought-out understanding of how the messiah would accomplish these goals.

When Jesus said he did not come to bring peace (shalom) to the world, but

a sword (Matthew 10:34), he did not mean he was going to lead a revolt. Instead, Jesus was referring to the prophet's teaching of the messiah bringing judgment. He was explaining that he was the messiah who had come to judge the sin of the nations.

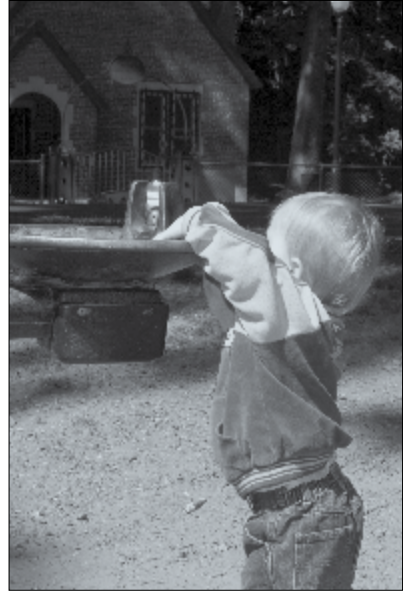
Jesus, of course, accomplished this by taking all the sin of the nations on himself at his crucifixion. In John 14, before his crucifixion, Jesus promised his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." He made a similar promise in John 16, also before the crucifixion. The context of this entire section of Scripture is that Jesus was explaining his death and resurrection to his disciples. He is explaining that even though he must "go away," the disciples must not be afraid because he will send the Holy Spirit, the Helper. In other words, "I am going to die, rise, and ascend to be with the Father [go away], but do not be afraid because I am sending my Spirit and I will give you my shalom." Jesus' promises of peace in these passages directly involved his crucifixion and resurrection.

Finally in John 20, after the crucifixion and resurrection, "Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" After the resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples "shalom." The judgment of sin has been accomplished, and the messiah has brought shalom into the world. This judgment and restoration did not look at all like what most Jewish leaders of Jesus' day had expected. The entire world was not restored to shalom at that moment, nor was the nation of Israel delivered from their enemies (the Romans at that point.) These things are still to come.

June, 2004

Josh can't talk yet. It gets frustrating sometimes. He communicates, but he doesn't talk. I talk to him, and he barely understands a word I'm saying. Sometimes I take advantage of this and tell him about controversial theological issues, the edgy things Bart Simpson said, or my frustrations at work. And I'm sure he tells me all sorts of things that are going on in his world, and I don't understand much of it. And yet, even though we don't understand one another's languages, we still communicate. Even better, he stares at me for ages as if in awe.

At the same time, however, the work of this son of David who will reign forever was much bigger than most people had expected. Jesus offers all who follow him “abundant life.” This is the life God intended us to live. This is shalom at its fullest. The final judgment and restoration of all things has not yet happened, but all who are disciples of Christ should be experiencing shalom.



## Elements of Life

Before introducing the key elements of life, I must reinforce my motivation.

I am not in any way suggesting that there are five easy steps to coming alive. Nor am I suggesting that having these five elements guarantees fulfillment or that God will not make us alive without each of these elements.

Instead, I suggest that these five key elements are significant pieces of God’s design for abundant life. We cannot force God to do anything, but living out these five elements of life puts us in a position where life is likely to flourish. Just as striking a match against a matchbook does not guarantee a flame, doing each of these things does not guarantee fulfillment. On the other hand a match is *much* more likely to light when a person strikes it against a matchbook than when the match is simply left alone on a table. Implementing these five elements of life places us in a position where we are most likely to experience true shalom.

## The Breath of God

The easiest place to see a picture of true shalom is in the story\* of creation. When God first created man, he “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). The Hebrew word for “breath” used in this passage can also be translated

\* By “story” I do not imply fiction. I am speaking of God’s Story, in which we as believers play an important role.

“spirit.” Breathing into Adam’s nostrils “the breath of life” is filling Adam with the living Spirit of God. Without this breath of life from God there is no life.

### **Work**

Once Adam received God’s breath, God put him in the garden called Eden “to cultivate it and keep it.” God immediately gave Adam some work to do. God also had Adam name the animals, rule over the other living beings, and care for the earth. We often think of work as drudgery; this is not what God intended. God created work to fulfill us. Work is part of being fully alive.

*June, 2004*

*I’m fascinated by Josh’s mood swings. He is happy one second, furious the next, and sleeping a moment later. As an adult he would be labeled manic-depressive and would be medicated. But he’s an infant, so for some reason this is considered cute. He’s also a selfish little creature - if he doesn’t get what he wants immediately, he has a fit. As a good (?) parent, my job is to deal with his fits and not give him what he wants immediately. Otherwise he really will need to be medicated later in life.*

### **Food**

God made the garden “to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food.” God gave mankind “every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you.” God provided food for people to maintain life. Food, which I will expand to holistic well-being, is another essential element of life.

### **Community**

Finally, while in Eden with food to eat and work to do, Adam was face to face with God in a perfect world. There was no sin. Adam had direct access to God. And for the first time, God said, “This is not good.” Genesis 2:18 reads, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” Relationship is essential to shalom.

*June, 2004*

*Josh is learning lots of fun new games these days. Games like “Stand Up, Sit Down” and “Drool Into Daddy’s Mouth”. That’s the fun game where he hovers over me using my mouth for target practice. Sometimes I can’t believe the things I do to make him happy.*

This relationship, however, is bigger than marriage. People can remain unmarried and still experience

abundant life. God gave this couple more work to do: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” (God intends work to be fun!) Once Adam and Eve have some kids who have some kids who have more kids there would be quite a few people on the earth, especially given the life spans of these first people. Adam, Eve, and their descendants, in obeying God’s command to bear children, would create quite a community.

The idea here is not just that God wants people to marry, but that God wants people to be together in community. Rob Bell points out that with two people in a garden you have a nice garden. With a few more people in the garden, the garden gets crowded. The more the population grows, the less garden-like Eden would be and the more city-like Eden would become<sup>9</sup>. God’s design for Eden was not just a garden, but a city. God wants people living together in community with one another. Without relationships in community, it is “not good;” there is no shalom.

### **Interaction with God**

The final element of life is, strangely enough, most clearly seen in the account of the fall. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they “heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” The author writes this very casually, as though this were a common event. Adam and Eve obviously recognized the sound of God walking. (What in the world would that sound like?) They hid, so God called to them,

*June, 2004*

*I’ve been thinking lately about the birth process. We spend every moment of our existence in a dark, warm place, relatively free from anxiety, disease, hunger, pain, etc. Suddenly there is a light, you’re forced through a thin tunnel too small for your body, hands grab you, slap you, and stick you with needles. There is blood and gook all over the place. Then a bunch of huge creatures poke and prod you, gawk at you, make nonsensical sounds and speak in a language you can’t understand, pass you around to other big creatures, make strange (laughing) noises, and flash bright lights (cameras) at you. Birth is beautiful.*



“Where are you?” Adam answered, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” God asked, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man then blames the woman, who blames the serpent.



The point here is that there is open, direct verbal communication between God and the humans. God came looking for the people and conversed with them. Before the fall we read things like, “God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant...’” God gave commandments about the tree of life, again “saying” something to the man. Most pointedly, God brought all the animals to Adam “to see what he would call them.” This was not just God giving Adam and Eve instructions – God listened as well.

God wants interaction with humans. God initiates life by his breath. Each of the other elements of life (work, food, and relationship) comes under the umbrella of interaction with God. Without interaction with God, these other elements will become meaningless at best. Just as stale and shallow religion comes from liturgies and religious practices apart from the presence of God, doing work, eating food, and being part of a community are all meaningless if there is no interaction with God.

There are several other items that could potentially be included in this topic. Some are found in the creation account, and many are found throughout the Bible. These particular five elements, however, 1) the breath of God, 2) work, 3) food and holistic health, 4) community and relationship, and 5) interaction with God, are the main elements that work together as a catalyst for the shalom that God desires every human to live in.

5/2/05

Late this morning, Katie and I found out that Katie is pregnant! We were extremely excited (though also extremely surprised). It's amazing to think that there is another child growing inside my wife. There are suddenly four of us sharing this condo now. Even though I'm excited, the reality of this new child hasn't hit me yet. It's a nice idea, but it feels like life will just keep going on as it is now. (Whoa, am I in for a surprise!) It will be great for me to have another child and experience what it means to love both children just as much, without my love for Josh being cut in half. The more we love, the more love grows inside us.

Several years back, I left a very good paying job as a computer programmer and went back to school to get a Masters of Divinity. I went for a total career change. Throughout, I have still done a fair number of freelance computer jobs. I repeatedly heard God telling me to stop doing this, to learn to rest and relax, and to focus more on the arts. I resisted. I felt "safe" doing what I knew best (though in hindsight I question whether I really was better at computers than the arts; I suspect that this notion was mostly in my head). I finally began to accept this "calling" to move completely from computer work to ministry and the arts.

I recently told a former client that I was not going to take as many jobs. I felt a sense of relief and excitement as I began to truly make this transition instead of just thinking about it. I began to become aware of how "perfect" life is right now. We have an extremely inexpensive mortgage, I'm days away from graduation, I'm financially able to live comfortably on two enjoyable part time jobs.

Then we discovered Katie is pregnant. This reminded me of an episode of "The Simpsons" where Homer quits his job and lives his lifelong dream (working at a bowling alley) and everything is perfect. He says: "Dear Lord: The gods have been good to me. For the first time in my life, everything is absolutely perfect just the way it is. So here's the deal: You freeze everything the way it is, and I won't ask for anything more. If that is OK, please give me absolutely no sign. [Pause...] OK, deal. In gratitude, I present you this offering of cookies and milk. If you want me to eat them for you, give me no sign. [Pause...] Thy will be done." He then finds out Marge is pregnant, and they won't have enough money to provide for the family, and all sorts of turmoil begins.

This afternoon Katie asked Josh, "How would you like to be a big brother?" Without any hesitation, Josh said, "No."









# THE ART OF SHALOM

CHAPTER 2: THE BREATH OF GOD



## Chapter 2: The Breath of God

This chapter is probably the most important chapter in this book, and yet I have the least to say about the breath of God. The breath of God is the most difficult topic to understand and has been among the most divisive topics for Christians, with Christians arguing for centuries over a proper understanding. This book will not attempt to resolve these debates, but will focus on the role of the breath of God in the experience of shalom.

The breath of God is also the area over which we have the least control. *Understanding* the breath of God will not necessarily help us to actually *have* the breath of God. We cannot conjure the breath of God; either God grants this primary element of life to us or not.

As we already saw in the story of creation, God created the first man and breathed this breath of life into him. There is no life without this breath of God.

Interestingly, although the commandments given to God's people in the Torah (the Law of Moses) address each other element of shalom, I have yet to find anything in the Torah commanding the people to have the breath of God. This omission from the Law should provide some insight into Paul's teachings in the New Testament when he compares and contrasts the Law of Moses with the work Christ accomplished.

The word for "breathe" reappears in Ezekiel 37:9. God showed the prophet Ezekiel a valley of dry bones. God then asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel had seen enough from God to know that



"no" was not the right answer. Instead, he replied, "O Lord God, You know." God then went on to command Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones, saying, "Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive,

5/21/05

Josh tried learning to walk down stairs by himself today. Unfortunately, Katie and I weren't there with him. He managed to sneak past a dozen people on the porch while I had turned my back for a few seconds. He got down one or two of the three deck steps before losing his balance and going head-first onto the stone below, resulting in a big gash on his head. The damage could have been a lot worse than it was; we were thankful he was not badly hurt. I learned that as a father I need to keep my eyes on him every second!

and you will know that I am the Lord.” Ezekiel obeyed, and God did as he promised, but “there was no breath in them.” An incredible miracle happened – a pile of dry bones moved together into the shapes of skeletons and then grew sinews and flesh. But God was not satisfied, because they were not alive. So God commanded Ezekiel again, this time saying, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may come

to life.’”” The word “breathe” here is the word used in the creation account. Ezekiel obeyed and the breath came into them. Now “an exceedingly great army” stood on their feet, alive. When the Spirit of God “breathed” on the bones, they came alive.

What in the world is this puzzling passage about? Luckily the passage follows with God’s explanation. The bones, God explains, “are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.’” God does not give a flowery speech simply saying, “All is not lost, don’t give up.” Instead, God agrees with this assessment; they *are* cut off and hopeless. But God then gives an even greater message of hope. In spite of this little detail that you are dead and have not even a hint of life in you, “Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel.” What an incredible promise! What an incredible hope! There is hope where there was no hope. There is life where there was no life.



I speak with many people who feel that their church congregations are like the lifeless bodies Ezekiel spoke to. Sometimes people will go as far as saying their congregation more closely resembles the dry bones Ezekiel found lying in the valley. Can our lifeless churches come alive again? Can individuals who feel spiritually “dead” hope to experience life again? The statistics are not promising. In many cases there are few signs of hope. To add to this hopelessness, this passage is written specifically as a prophecy about Israel, and perhaps as a promise of the resurrection at the end of time, not as a prophecy to the Christian church. I suggest, however, that the same God who can cause these dry bones to live is able to, and even desires to, breathe life into his Church. This does not mean that God will save every dying congregation. This does, however, imply that there is hope for the Church. Great hope. The life that will potentially permeate the Church is not found in politics, worship styles, evangelism, preaching,

12/28/05

Zach's due date is approaching very quickly. (Yes, we found out it's a boy and we've picked a name already.) Katie took a chance today and kept her hair appointment even though she woke up convinced this would be the day. She figured if she had any contractions within an hour of the appointment, she would cancel. But she was fine, so she went and got her hair done. I was home playing with Josh. Katie came upstairs and she looked great. She said she didn't like the cut at first, "but I think I like it now." "Oh," she added, "and I'm contracting."

So tonight's the night; awesome! I wondered when we'd go, when the contractions would get quick enough to call the doctor, and when he'd be born. It was exciting. Then Katie called from the other room, "I'm having a contraction, could you time it for me?" "4:49:43." I figured I should get a pen and paper ready so in twenty minutes I would be ready to write down the time of the next contraction, but before I even moved she announced, "I'm having another contraction." 4:52:13, just two and a half minutes after the first one. "Whoa, already?"

When Josh was born, her contractions were very irregular. There was actually a strict pattern, but it would start at twenty minutes, then ten, then eight, then five, then two, then back up. And that pattern was the same every time. So I figured this labor would be the same and we must be in one of those down swings. But as I timed them, they were all between two and four minutes apart. They never got longer. I told Katie, "We should probably call the doctor."



In conversation I asked, "When did these contractions start, was it right when you got home or earlier?" "No," she answered, "It was right after I got to my hair appointment." "But your appointment was at 12:30," I said, a bit confused and concerned. "Yea," she replied, "so it was probably about 1:00." It was now well after 5:00 and her contractions were two minutes apart! "You forgot to tell me that little detail!" She said, "Oh, sorry, I thought you knew..." So I frantically gathered things and called my parents to watch Josh and then we asked a neighbor to stay with him until my parents showed up. We got on the highway for our twenty-five minute drive to the hospital and she asked, "How fast can you drive?" We got there very quickly!

or leadership. The hope for the Church is found in God himself. Without the breath of God, there is no life.

As I mentioned, the word used for "breathe" in Ezekiel 37 is the same word used in the Septuagint in Genesis 2. God breathed life into these dry bones just as he did with Adam in the first creation. There is, then, a re-creation. God's breath leads to a new creation, just as Jesus promised that he will make each of us a new creation when we are in him.

## The Breath of God in the Gospels

Speaking of Jesus, another place this particular Greek word is used appears in John 20. Jesus spent three years teaching people about life. You must lose your life to find it. Whoever believes in him has life. He came to give life. To know God and Jesus is to have life. Then, to the utter shock and dismay of his disciples, this life-giver died a brutal death. The disciples were then even more shocked to learn that Jesus rose from the dead. Death could not hold this man. His promises of life must be true after all.

While the initial shock of the resurrection was still overwhelming the disciples, Jesus appeared to them in a locked room and showed them his hands and feet. The first thing John records him saying in this scene is, "Peace be with you." Peace, remember, is the English translation of "shalom." Jesus rose from the dead and immediately offered shalom.

\* "Shalom" is a Hebrew word, not a Greek word. The meaning of the Greek word "eirene" is similar to "shalom", however. In addition, Jesus would almost certainly have been speaking in either Hebrew or Aramaic. Either way, Jesus is offering people the fullness of abundant life.

Katie was not in labor for all that long. She started just after 1:00 in the afternoon and Zach was born at 10:21 that night. She only pushed for roughly ten minutes. She didn't beat the eight minutes she did with Josh, but she sure was close! The delivery went great.

When Josh was born, I stayed by Katie's head holding her hand. I felt like she didn't need me staring between her legs the whole time, and I wanted to be there for her to help her instead of just focusing on the baby. That is exactly how I was this time, too, even when the doctor said, "Look, Russ, you can see the head." I took a quick peek and went back to Katie's side. But the doctor persisted, "Look!. Here, stand here." I finally gave in to my curiosity and desire to watch the birth and stood back by the doctor. I figured if I have anything to say about it, this will be my last opportunity to witness birth, and I didn't want to miss it. Seeing my son born was every bit as disgusting as I expected, but strangely fascinating and very beautiful.

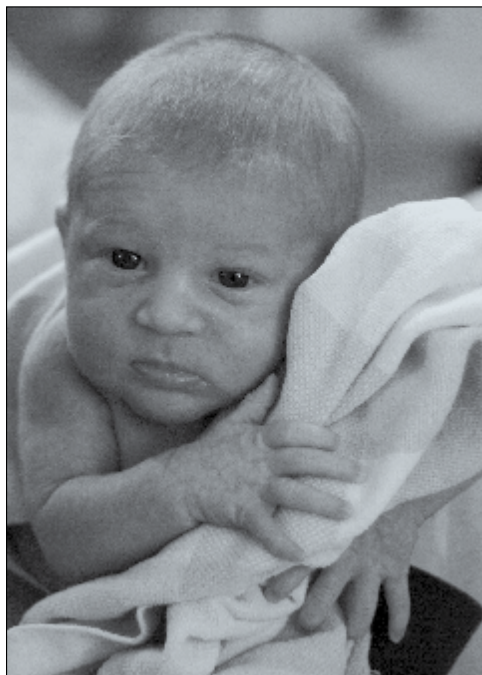
A wrinkled gray thing appeared that looked quite a bit like the brains coming out before the body. I only recognized it as Zach's head because it looked like Josh's head when Josh was born. It would pop out just a bit, then disappear again. Katie kept pushing. Maybe because she's a singer and knows how to use the muscles in her stomach she did a great job pushing. She did everything exactly right even though the epidural kept her from feeling her muscles. After a relatively short amount of time, the head came out, along with just a bit of the shoulder. It happened so quickly that it was like this gray mass suddenly got much larger and grew a face. With the next push, Zachary was able to get his arm out. Once his arm was out, he did most of the work. He actually pushed himself out with his hand. The doctor was laughing, and told Katie, "Don't bother pushing, he's going to do this by himself!" And he pretty much did! A foreshadowing of his personality, perhaps?

Katie held him for quite some time. Both of them were exhausted. When I finally got to hold him, I put my hand near his, and he grabbed me so hard with both hands that when the doctor needed to take him it actually took some effort to shake my hand free. I felt like we bonded pretty quickly there. He didn't make eye contact with me the way Josh did right away (he didn't really make eye contact with anyone until a few days later), but somehow we bonded right away. I was still struggling with the idea of having a second child. But at the same time I fell in love with him.





After speaking with the disciples, “He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” This is the same word “breathed” that was used in Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9. There are a couple important things to learn from this interaction. First, this breath from God, the breath of life, is associated with the Holy Spirit. This is where the debates begin – what exactly does this mean? As I mentioned, I do not plan to resolve these debates. I will say, however, that when we receive *life*, we receive the *Spirit of God*. Life begins with the breath of God.



There is nothing we can do to earn this life, and there is no formula for receiving this life. Understanding exactly what it means to receive the Holy Spirit is not *how* we receive the Holy Spirit. There is nothing we can do to earn the breath of God, no way to conjure God's spirit or persuade God to give us the breath of life. Sharing my views about what it means to receive the Holy Spirit, therefore, will do little to actually help people receive life.

Our problem is not that we fail to understand what it means to receive the spirit; the problem, rather, is that we cannot do anything to coerce God to breathe life into us. We must recognize that Jesus came specifically to give people life. He promised peace (*shalom*) to his followers after his resurrection. He made outrageous statements about *being life*\*. He promised abundant life (and remember, *shalom* is a picture of abundant life) to those who believe in him. Jesus *wants* to breathe life into us! While we cannot conjure God like a genie or order God to obey us, we can *ask* God for the breath of life.

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\* John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

## The Breath of God in the Early Church

Paul wrote some profound words about the breath of God to the church in the city of Corinth. Many believers quote 1 Corinthians 2:9 as a passage of great hope for God's people:

Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,  
and which have not entered the heart of man,  
all that God has prepared for those who love him.

This passage is often quoted in the context of great things God has in store for each of us that we cannot yet imagine. While there is likely some truth to that interpretation, this is not the context of passage. Paul is referring to a passage in Isaiah that is predicting the coming of the Lord. Paul did not quote this passage to give hope to believers for their individual futures, but to point out that as believers we have already experienced what was promised in that passage. He elaborates on the "things" promised in that passage, saying, "To us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God." He then adds, "We have received ... the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God. Paul concludes with a quote further on in that same passage of Isaiah, "Who has known the mind of the Lord, that He will instruct

him?" Paul then asserts, "But we have the mind of Christ."

How amazing is that? Those who have received the breath of God (the Spirit of God) have the mind of Christ! We "know the mind of the Lord!"

This is the level of intimacy with God that we have after we receive the breath of God. We literally can know the mind of God. Why, then, do we so often fail to live as though we know what God wants for us? Unfortunately no easy answer to that question exists. There are likely many answers, and the answers

2/24/06

Other than smiling at me now  
and then, Zach pretty much  
just sleeps and cries. He  
doesn't cry excessively at all,  
no more than any other baby.  
But he's a very demanding  
little creature. When Josh  
was an infant and got hungry,  
he would stir a little bit,  
make cooing noises for awhile,  
then get a little upset, then  
start crying. Then, if we  
still hadn't gotten the bottle  
for him, he would scream  
bloody murder. Zach, on the  
other hand, stirs and fusses  
for about six seconds and  
then skips right to screaming  
bloody murder. "Why the  
\*!@#^ #&^# haven't you  
given me my @#\$ bottle yet,  
you @###!? I've given you  
ten @#!@ seconds and it's  
not here yet!"

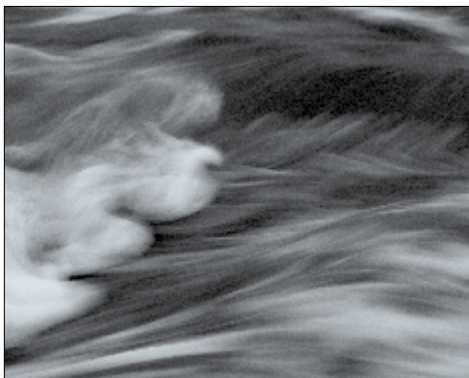
probably vary from person to person. Instead of an answer, though, the question begs some other questions. Do we actually believe what Paul wrote? Do we truly believe that we have the mind of Christ? Do we take time to listen to God? Do we desire to know the mind of God? Are we too busy trying to get God to understand what's on our mind to listen to what's on his mind? Are we listening for God only for answers to our life questions instead of listening for *whatever* God shares with us? Perhaps instead of telling us what career path to follow, God desires to provide food for a neighbor or tell us that he loves us or even desires to enjoy time with us in silence.

Having the mind of God does not mean that we will hear whatever we want from God whenever we want it. That would put us in the place of God with God as our servant. But if we let God be our God and we listen to know what is on his mind, we will hear him.

## It's All About Jesus

Many people toss around cliché phrases like, "It's all about Jesus." Often these clichés are very misused. People try to sum up all of Christianity on a bumper sticker. On one hand many of these trite statements are packed with truth. On the other hand, when we reduce Christianity to these ideas, we rid ourselves of the immense mystery and beauty of our relationships with God. At the risk of falling into this trap, I feel the need to affirm in this book that Life is, indeed, all about Jesus.

I make this affirmation not to please the masses or to make the book



more marketable by using an appropriate amount of Christianese, but because the Church in the West has, to a frightening degree, forgotten the truth of this statement. Some Christians, for a wide variety of reasons, have become jaded or have lost faith that Jesus is really at work in the

3/11/06

When Josh was born I had a very difficult time. Now Zach is a here, and though I've been doing better than I did with Josh I'm still a bit of a mess. I think it's the inconsistent sleep messing with whatever body chemicals keep us sane. I rarely cry, ever. Not because "men don't cry" or because I'm too tough or "manly" to cry. I'm not sure why, really. I just don't. But today something came over me and I had a minor breakdown.

I've been working too hard without enough rest, and I'm still not pulling in quite enough money. I found out I had just bounced a serious handful of checks for the third time and had collected the same insane number of overdraft charges. I started questioning whether I'm pursuing the right career or whether I should go back to the corporate world. The kids were both crying and the phone rang, and it was just one of those moments. And Katie, in passing, mentioned that we were out of bottled water for Zach's formula. That's all it took. I just snapped.

I quietly went into the bedroom, shut the door, and started bawling. Katie came in to look for something, and I just grabbed her and held her and cried. She had no idea what was happening, she only knew I needed her.

Josh picked that exact moment to come in to the room. "Mommy, you movie? Mommy, you movie, please?" Katie told him, "Josh, go in the other room and play with Zach for a couple minutes." I'm not sure exactly what happened then, but I suspect that Josh realized he wasn't going to get his way and at the same time realized that something was wrong, so he started crying. He wanted Katie to pick him up and hold him, so he cried, "Mommy, you uppie?" Katie said, "In a couple minutes, Josh. Mommy needs to talk with Daddy. Go in the other room for just a couple minutes." So Josh cried harder, "Mommy, uppie! Uppie!" And I'm there thinking, "Yea, this is exactly what I need now."

I started thinking a little while later about everything, sort of getting things into perspective. When we take Zach's bottle away to burp him, he screams like the world is about to end. It's like he thinks we're going to starve him to death. Josh did the same thing at Zach's age. And now Josh reacts like that with toys. If he can't fit a square block through a round hole he gets all sorts of upset. And God forbid we wash his blanket and he goes without it for an hour; the world really may end. And in the grand scheme of things a handful of bounced checks is about as important as the block getting through that hole or going without my blanket for an hour. I won't sit on the porch with Katie when I'm ninety saying, "Well, honey, I would have lived a good life if it weren't for those blasted checks I bounced back in 2006." It just isn't that important.

In hindsight I realized that when Josh saw me upset, he got upset. He did not understand what was going on, but he knew his daddy was upset and in his eyes that is not okay.

world. (Their reasons, by the way, are worth considering. Church leaders who desire to impact the people of our culture would be wise to listen carefully to their stories.)

Many Christians who truly do claim that life is all about Jesus, including a large number of church leaders, throw this phrase around carelessly and often fall in one of two erroneous camps.

4/9/07

I've been catching myself using words like "poopies" and "snotties" in conversations with adults. Is that bad?

People in the first camp fall into the trap I mentioned earlier, losing sight of the immensity of our faith. Leaders who reduce Christianity to "Jesus" too often forget that God gives us a role, often a very enjoyable role, in the work that he is doing. In a course I teach about understanding post-Modern culture and ministering to people in the post-Modern era, students often challenge me saying, "I don't see why we have to get caught up in all this culture stuff. It's the Holy Spirit who changes people, not our efforts." And I agree completely. At the same time, however, the same Spirit who is doing all the work invites us to play an important role in the process. God instructs us in the Bible to sing to one another in "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16). Music is very cultural; we cannot include music in our worship services without embracing elements of culture. Sermons are spoken in a specific language, another element of culture. Evangelism, Bible study, fellowship, and nearly every other element of church life all involve culture.

When we reduce Christianity to a cliché, we often fail to see the bigger picture. In this example, we sacrifice our role in God's plans. When we claim "culture does not matter," we either cling to the culture that fits our comfort zone and become ineffective or we cease to do anything at all, expecting that God will do all the work without us. Either way we miss out on a wonderful opportunity to interact with God while we serve him.

On occasion I bring one or more of my boys with me to work or let them help me with a project. When my kids help me, jobs that should take me an hour usually take me three or four hours. God does not

need us; he could just do everything himself. (If you want a job done right...) But he chooses to allow us to help him. Part of Christianity is living out this journey. God does the work, but he offers to accomplish the work through us, using even our humanity and imperfect efforts to achieve his goals. When we reduce Christianity to nothing more than a bumper sticker phrase, we often miss out on the inexpressible joy God desires to share with us. Worse still, we fail to see the full beauty of our faith and even of God himself.

People in the other erroneous camp often acknowledge verbally and intellectually that life is all about Jesus, but barely give God any room to work while we “help” him get the job done. Our churches are not growing, so we study business models and apply them to our churches. We hire marketing experts to draw people to our church and help us sell our “product.” We build teams of leaders and read all the latest leadership books together. We view Christian maturity as the ability to lead various church ministries. We use test results to tell people what their spiritual gifts are rather than teaching people to listen to God to have God tell them what their gifts are. We make our church planters take Myers-Briggs or other personality tests as part of our criteria to assess their “calling.” It is much safer assigning people to leadership roles by giving people a reliable spiritual gifts test than to risk having the people hear God incorrectly.

I searched Google for church planting training, and the very first site that I found requires a pre-assessment for potential candidates: “Pre-assessment (self-assessment) often includes the completion of a Myers Briggs Temperament Indicator, a DISC personality profile,



and spiritual gifts profile.”<sup>1</sup> We use all of the proven techniques, many of them taken directly from the corporate world (because surely corporate leaders provide a good, Godly model for

the Church!), to learn what God wants for us instead of actually considering that God himself might tell us.

None of these things are necessarily bad, but they can easily shift our focus from Jesus to leadership, small groups, ministries, and Christianity in general. The Church should never be culturally irrelevant; however, if our focus is on being culturally relevant,

we have missed the point. Jesus is relevant to all cultures. We must learn the culture God places us in, but we must do so to love the people of the culture the way Jesus loves them, not so we can use business models to increase attendance. We must remember that we are doing these things because God desires to do his work through us. Very often the most effective way to serve God is to get out of God's way! God uses us to do his work, but the work is God's, accomplished by his wisdom and through his spirit and strength, not our own. Be wary of focusing so much on the work that we lose our focus on the one we are working for.



We need to acknowledge that life, and all that goes with it, is about Jesus. Life is not about our own happiness, church growth, programs, culture, or even Christianity. "It's all about Jesus." At the same time, we need to listen to Jesus and practice each of the elements of Life discussed in this book. We don't practice these elements of Life to achieve happiness, nor should we allow any of these things to replace our focus on Jesus. We don't do these things because they will give us life. They don't. They are merely elements that exist where life exists. Life comes from God, and without the breath of God there is no life.

The temptation in reading this book will be to see the elements of Life as a program: do these things and you will be fulfilled. This book is not about individual happiness or fulfillment. We do not strive to experience Life because it will help us, but because Jesus wants us to be fully alive. We are his Bride. We have a responsibility to pursue abundant Life, but for his sake, not ours.

10/14/06

Wow.

I should be excited. And I am. And I'm also terrified. And worried. And thrilled. And numb. And confused. And happy.

Yes, it's starting all over again.

Katie got up early and told me (while I was half asleep) that she was going out to get diapers before the boys woke up. At around 8:30 I was still pretty dead to the world. And, due to some abnormal cosmic intervention, the boys were still asleep. Katie came in and lay down next to me in bed. I woke up enough to roll over and look at her. Something wasn't right. She had a funny look on her face. I couldn't tell if it was a good look or a bad look. I asked, "Are you okay?" She didn't really answer verbally; she nodded her head. She looked a little bit like she was going to cry, but she also looked very happy, and in my half-asleep stupor I couldn't tell what she was feeling or thinking. Then suddenly it dawned on me. "Ooohhh!" She smiled with an excited look on her face and nodded again.

I've sort of known for a few days already. God has a way of preparing me.

I've also been thinking logistically about how this is going to work. We're going to need a bigger place to live. Or, I suppose the boys could sleep in our room, the baby could sleep in the boy's room, and Katie and I could sleep in the storage unit in the basement. Maybe I could get a tent. The baby monitor should reach out back. That would make nighttime feedings a bit more difficult, but we wouldn't have to buy a house. Assuming we find a bigger place to live, I'm going to have to get a new job so we can afford it. I love my current job. A lot. But somehow over the past few months I've been feeling, for reasons I really can't easily explain, that as much as I love my job I could sort of take it or leave it. I am certain that God has been preparing me for this moment. I will need to do a lot of work to figure out what I can and should do vocationally to make enough money to live on. In this part of New Jersey the husband and wife generally both work full time to barely make ends meet. Not always, but usually. We don't want to leave the area because both of our families are nearby. And we both want Katie to be able to stay home with the kids. This all makes things much more difficult. I will need a bigger salary than I'm making right now. Unless, of course, I can come up with a good get-rich-quick scheme. But those rarely even work in the movies, so I doubt they'll work in real life.

Anyway, I think I'm learning more about laying down my life for others. I love my job, and I love my life the way it is now. But there has been something a bit unsettled in me lately. And I'm ready. As ready as a person can ever be, at least. Having three kids will be great. It will certainly keep life from getting boring. Katie is extremely excited. She's an incredible mother, and she's wanted another child since soon after Zach was born.

Yet I still can't help but think, "What did we just do?"



*It's all about Jesus.* Jesus desires to breathe life into each of us the same way he breathed life into his disciples. He desires his Church, his bride. Without his breath, everything else becomes irrelevant.

Jesus is our Life. Jesus is our shalom. Life truly is all about Jesus. Live life as part of his Bride, and enjoy your Groom.

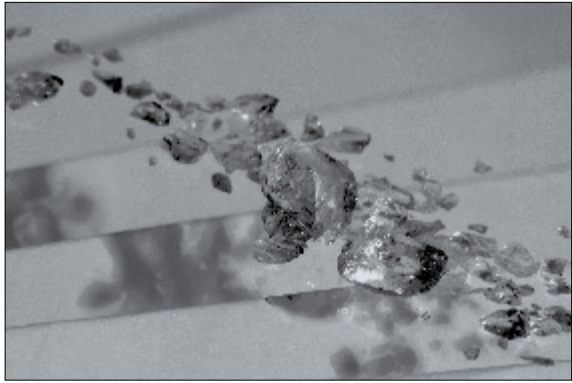
## **Re-Creation**

What exactly happens to a person when God breathes the breath of life into him or her?

There are, I believe, some powerful and important misconceptions circulating throughout the church (and society as a whole) about what it means to be “saved” or “born again.” What are we saved from? What does it mean to be born again? Many Christians will answer that we are saved from sin, and being born again means that we will go to heaven, not hell, when we die. While this is true, it is far from the whole truth. Salvation is much bigger and much more glorious than simply going to heaven when we die!

Keeping the big Story in mind is vital to understanding what it means to be “saved” or “born again.” God created everything and declared it “very good.” The world was as it should be, in shalom. God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; if they were to eat of this tree, they would die. Adam and Eve both ate of the fruit, and sin entered the world. As they fell into sin, they fell out of shalom. Shalom vanished from the earth. Humans were living by their own rules rather than God’s rules. The rest of the Story, including hints given when God pronounced the curse resulting from sin in Genesis 3, talks about God restoring the world to shalom. From God’s blessing on Abraham to God’s interaction with Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, and countless others, everything pointed to the Messiah who would come and restore shalom. When Jesus came, therefore, offering abundant life and peace (shalom), he was coming as the promised messiah who would restore the world to shalom.

What, then, are we “saved” from? Sin, yes, of course. But the idea that Jesus came to simply save me from my sin so I can go to heaven is a very Modern idea, steeped in Enlightenment individualism. Before



Modernity, people were very community-oriented and much less individualistic. Jesus did not come for “me,” but for “us.” I, of course, am included in the “us,” but salvation should not be quite as inward focused as we have made it throughout the Modern era. So while I am saved from my sin, *we* are saved from *our* (corporate) sin. And if sin is, as I will argue later, that which destroys life (shalom), then to be “saved” does not only mean that our sin is forgiven, but that we are being restored to shalom. Sin keeps us from shalom; salvation, in a sense, restores us to shalom by removing sin from the equation.

Jesus taught that to be “saved” in this sense, to be restored to shalom, a person needs to be “born again,” or in other words “born of the Spirit.” Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians that when we believe in Jesus we become a “new creation.” We now have the breath of life restored to us so that we can be fully alive again. We can now experience abundant life.

Jesus promised in John 6, “He who believes *has* eternal life” (italics mine). The word “has” in this sentence is present tense. This is not a promise of a future life in heaven, but a promise of abundant life *now*. God wants, even longs, for us to live in shalom *now*.

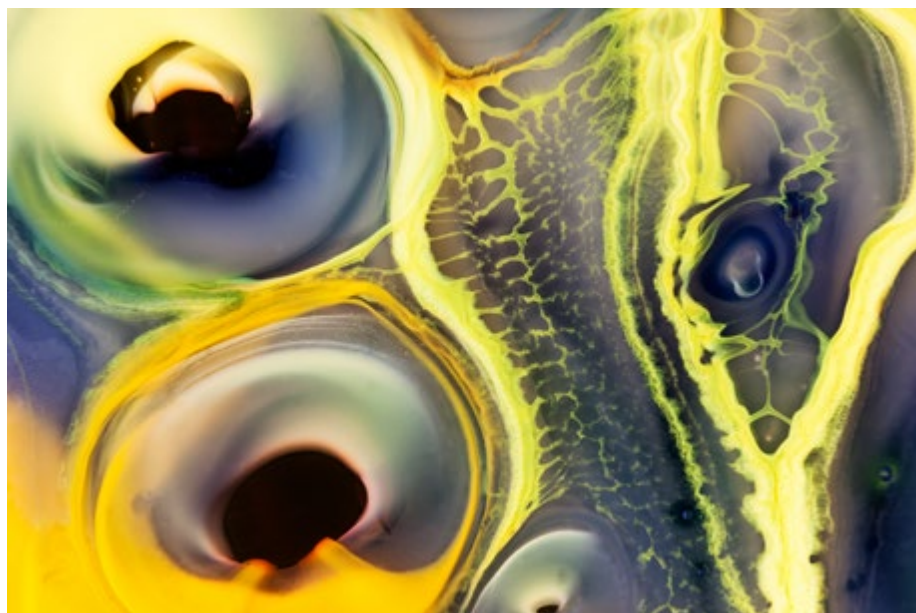
Why, then, do Christians, those who have received the breath of God, fail to live fully in shalom even after receiving the breath of God? I suggest one of the primary reasons is that we do not embrace the other key elements of life. A fire cannot continue to burn without fuel. The breath of God is the initial explosion; the remaining elements of shalom provide the fuel to keep the fire burning.





# THE ART OF SHALOM

CHAPTER 3: WORK



## Chapter 3: Work

The topic of work within Christianity is often another misunderstood and even abused area of the Christian life. People in the Church have been arguing for centuries about faith versus works – are we saved by faith or by works? Martin Luther wrote that the epistle of James should be thrown out of the canon of Scripture because the letter places so much emphasis on works as part of our salvation. What is a healthy emphasis on work in the Christian faith?

When God created the first man and woman, he gave them several jobs. In Genesis 1, God says, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:26). God decides to make human beings and before he even creates them he has a job waiting for them – to rule over the earth. The very first thing God does after creating Adam and Eve according to Genesis 1 is to say, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” God puts them right to work.

In Genesis 2, God created Adam and immediately, “The Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.”

5/07

I've had quite a few ups and downs lately getting ready for a third child. At the same time I've suddenly become very aware of the extremely negative view of children we have in the USA. My rebellious (Irish?) side kicked in a few weeks ago and I chose to be optimistic and very positive about having a third child no matter how hard it may be at times. Children are a blessing. One reason (among many) is that the Bible uses the relationship of parents and children as metaphors of the relationship between God and us. If God views us the way we view children in this culture, wow! We're in deep trouble! Having three children will certainly not be easy, but it will be good. I want to show people Christ's love by the way I love my children. I'm tired of the jokes about needing birth control or getting my tubes tied. Children are certainly difficult, but my children are never a burden. The more children I have, the more I love.

God then had Adam name the animals. In ancient Hebrew culture, the name of something defines its identity. Adam created names for animals that captured the essence of the animal. This is no easy task.

Gardening, farming and the other jobs the first humans held were not easy, but certainly not overwhelming either. In fact, Leonard Sweet urged me to rename this chapter “Play” instead of “Work.” God intended work to be desirable, not to be something to be avoided, hated, and resented. Work did not become “toil” until after the fall. Yet there was work in Eden, in perfection, in Shalom. Work is not something to avoid; work is an essential element of abundant life.

## What Is Your Wildest Dream?

I have a DVD from Ginghamburg Church that shows a series of street interviews.<sup>1</sup> The interviewer asks people, “What is your wildest dream?” People have all sorts of answers from, “I want to be a professional artist” to “I want to be a professional athlete” to “I want to be the President of the United States.” They follow this question with another, “What are you doing to achieve your dream?” Nearly all the people in the video for one reason or another answer, “I’m not pursuing my dream.” Most had very good reasons. Art doesn’t pay the bills. I never went to school. I’m too old to be a television newscaster. Some dreams are just plain not realistic. We cannot just blindly follow our dreams.

Or can we?

What if, hypothetically, God is restoring the world to Shalom? And what if work really is a part of Shalom? And what if God puts the desires in our hearts to do the work that will most fulfill both our desires and God’s desires?



\* *Special thanks to Leonard Sweet for his incredible help not only in finishing this book but also for helping me get where I am now in my service to the Lord.*

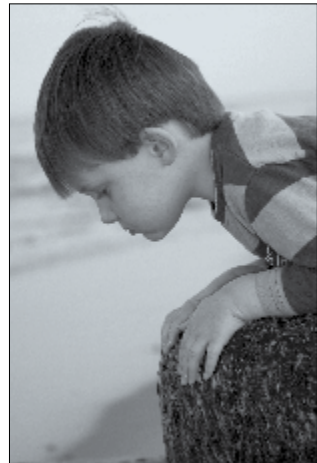
In many cases this is reality. God is restoring Shalom. This is the primary message of the entire Bible. And work *does* play a large role in experiencing Shalom. God, therefore, does want our work to fulfill us. This does not necessarily mean that we can do whatever we want and are guaranteed success. It does, however, mean that as Christians we should be finding fulfillment in our work.

If we are not fulfilled in our work, we should examine two things:

- 1) our relationships with God may not be right, or
- 2) we may not be doing the work God has called us to.

God certainly does call people to jobs that are not “fun”. There is a massive difference between “having fun” and “being fulfilled”. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, was beaten and thrown into a dungeon for his faithful service to the Lord. He even accused the Lord at one point, saying, “O Lord, You have deceived me and I was deceived; you have overcome me and prevailed.” Jeremiah was basically on the verge of giving up his work for God, but he concluded, “But if I say, ‘I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,’ then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it” (Jeremiah 20:7, 9). In other words, his job was killing him (nearly literally), but he couldn’t not do the work. When he tried to stop serving the Lord, he was miserable. His heart burned in him. He was not fulfilled when he was not doing the work of the Lord, regardless of how difficult his job was.

Psalms 37:4 teaches, “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.” This verse is often misinterpreted. This does not mean that if you delight yourself in the Lord that he will give us anything we want. Instead, the verse means that when we delight ourselves in the Lord, the Lord will literally give us the desires he wants us to have. He will cause us to desire the things he desires for us. And when we desire what God desires, and we pray for that thing, of course the Lord will grant it to us. We will be praying for God’s will to be done.





6/22/07

At 12:15 am, Katie and I were in bed wondering if the baby would ever come when she had a contraction. We still weren't sure whether it was a real contraction or false labor (which she had a handful of times recently). Then two minutes later she had another. I thought to myself, "They don't start at two minutes. It must be false labor again." I was a bit disappointed. Then another one came two minutes later. And another. And another. After about half an hour of contractions coming two minutes apart, Katie called the doctor, who told us to come to the emergency room.

Her contractions stopped whenever she was lying down and the doctors were not sure at first whether they were going to keep her at the hospital. They did not want to give her the epidural yet, but they offered to give her Demerol instead. Katie ended up having quite a trip. By about four in the morning I was drifting off to sleep in a chair. Every five minutes, just as I would fall into a deep sleep, Katie would wake me up in a panic. "Russ? Russ? Something is wrong! Everything is going really slow. It's like I'm in a cartoon." "It's okay," I would assure her. "It's just the medication. It will wear off soon. Try to get some sleep while you can." "Are you sure?" "Yes, I'm positive. Everything is fine." About five minutes later just as I fell sound asleep the whole thing would start again. "Russ? Something is wrong! Everything is going really slow..." Ugh.

I used to do all-nighters in college without thinking twice about it. That was about fifteen years ago. I still feel like I'm in my twenties, but my body reminds me quite often that I'm not. So my lack of sleep probably increased the effects of my low blood sugar. Poor health combined with the excitement and anxiety of having another child and all the life change that goes along with it got the best of me. I've been through two births already and I've held Katie while she received two epidurals. This was the third epidural. I heard the same crunching noise that I heard both other times when the doctor put that forty-foot needle into Katie's back. For some reason this time that noise grossed me out. No matter how hard I tried to stop, my brain insisted on trying to picture what was going on inside Katie's spine as the needle went in. And have I mentioned that I was exhausted? I wanted to sleep. My stomach churned with a sort of overtired can't-stand-up-anymore sort of queasiness. Suddenly I realized the room was getting darker. I didn't want to pass out and distract the nurses and doctors, so I figured I should just leave Katie's side and sit down in a nearby chair. I vaguely remember reaching the chair. The next thing I remember is hearing a bunch of voices saying, "Come on, Russ! Come back to us, Russ!" I remember thinking, "Where am I, and who are these people, and why won't they just let me sleep?" Then I remember thinking, "Oooh, what a nice smell." They were waving smelling salts or ammonia or something under my nose to bring me back to consciousness after I passed out. Ugh. How embarrassing!

Soon all that excitement died down and the time came for the delivery. The doctor told Katie, "Okay, push!" She did. Then one more time, "Okay, push again!" She pushed again and out came Timothy. She beat her original eight-minute record by more than half. Roughly two and a half minutes of pushing and she was done. She's amazing. And I held Timothy for the first time.

6/23/07

My parents brought Josh and Zach to the hospital to meet Timothy. Josh was thrilled and couldn't stop talking. He kept walking over to Tim and stroking his cheek and talking to him. Zach, on the other hand, understood what was happening and wanted no part of it. He played happily, but he barely acknowledged that Timothy was there in the room. At one point I touched Josh on the head and said, "Josh." Then I touched Zach on the head and said, "Zach." Then I touched Tim on the head and prompted, "And..." I waited. After a long pause, Zach finally acknowledged him. "Imotee."

The second day was much like the first for Zach. He seemed fine, but he barely acknowledged his new brother's existence. Finally, just as he was leaving with my parents, he walked over to Timothy and asked to look at him and touch his head. I asked, "Zach, do you want to say bye-bye to Timothy?" Zach responded, "Bye-bye Imotee. I yuv ooh."



Our job, then, is first to delight ourselves in God and second to dream big dreams. Allow God to give us our desires. Allow the desires he gives us to be big. Real big. Finally, our job is to follow God in living out the dream.

Guitarist Wayne Scott Farley once told me that he believes mid-life crisis is what happens when a person fails to pursue God's vocational call. The more I study and the longer I live, the more I agree with his theory. I suspect, though, that mid-life crisis can be triggered when we are missing any of the elements of Shalom, not just this one. We reach a point when we realize life is flying by and we are still unfulfilled. We are not experiencing the fullness of Shalom. We do all we know to do in order to find fulfillment. Often this gets lived out by purchasing expensive toys (boats, sports cars, technology, etc), developing new hobbies, changing careers, or even committing adultery. In reality, however, the only thing that will fulfill us is finding delight in the Lord and then following the desires the Lord gives. We are in crisis because we are not experiencing life as God intended. Only abundant life, Shalom, will satisfy.

## Vocation

When we think of vocation in this culture, we often think of our

responsibility to get the highest level of education possible and then climb the corporate ladder to achieve the American Dream. This is considered the “right” thing to do. After all, sooner or later you will have children, a mortgage, and car payments. As one bumper sticker put it, “Money is not everything, but it sure beats whatever is in second place.”

Many years ago as an undergraduate in college I was seriously considering a career as a musician. Many people, most of whom were Christians, strongly discouraged me from this career choice. Life as a musician is difficult, there is not much money in it, there is little or no security, it is simply not “safe.” In hindsight I am glad I did not pursue a career in music, but not because of the financial implications and lack of security. I simply love where God has taken me now. Yet I am still, after all these years, very disappointed by the Church’s lack of faith in God’s provision.

After college I ended up in the computer field doing web programming for a large corporation. My current salary is less than half of my salary in the corporate world. Leaving that good, fairly secure job in the midst of a poor economy to go back to school with no income and then work part-time jobs after graduation to make ends meet while supporting a wife and baby was not the safe choice. Some would even argue the decision was just plain stupid. And I admit that I second guessed myself after the second and third rounds of bounced checks. The journey was far from easy, but if I could go back in time I would choose the same path all over again.

There is more to life than money. We all know that. But I suspect we do not really believe that. There is also more to life than safety

**8/2/07**

**I've been spending some time with Tim. He's very cute, and he's another very easy baby. I've lucked out three times. Yet he's still a baby, and no baby is really easy no matter how good they are. I'm feeling much better than I did with Josh and Zach. I experience rare, quick bouts of depression instead of a full four to six months. I almost feel human this time. But not quite. Tim is doing his job well enough that I don't feel altogether good. He's very cute but he does nothing yet other than cry, eat, cry, sleep, cry, and smile now and then. Yet I have much more respect for babies and for life now. I've changed drastically over the past four years.**

and security, and I am not convinced that we all know this. Christians in the West certainly don't seem to live it. We may not trust in other gods the way people did in ancient times, but I don't see evidence that our faith is fully in the Lord either.



Along with our culture's focus on safety and security, our culture (including our Christian subculture) esteems certain types of careers over others. Matthew B. Crawford wrote an article where he criticizes our culture's tendency to look down on people who work with their hands. Crawford writes:

When we praise people who do work that is straightforwardly useful, the praise often betrays an assumption that they had no other options. We idealize them as the salt of the earth and emphasize the sacrifice for others their work may entail. Such sacrifice does indeed occur — the hazards faced by a lineman restoring power during a storm come to mind. But what if such work answers as well to a basic human need of the one who does it? I take this to be the suggestion of Marge Piercy's poem "To Be of Use," which concludes with the lines "the pitcher longs for water to carry/and a person for work that is real." Beneath our gratitude for the lineman may rest envy.<sup>2</sup>

If God is calling you to a certain vocation, pursue it. Or, more precisely, follow God regardless of the vocation he leads you to.

Life may not be easy when you pursue God this way, and doing so may attract criticism and even judgment from other believers. On the other hand, nothing but the Lord will fulfill a person. Truly following the Lord even in spite of a lack of security, finances, and acceptance from others will lead to Shalom.



## Danger

People often say, “The safest place to be is in the will of God.” Yet when I read Scripture, I see God’s people being led into dangerous battles, thrown into prison, fed to lions, even tortured and killed. Certainly many of God’s people are miraculously rescued, but not all. Hebrews 11 lists the great men and women of faith, people who followed the Lord in spite of the dangers and irrationality of their journeys. The chapter gives an encouraging account of dozens of people whom the Lord rewarded and rescued from danger. This amazing list of people who conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, and other miraculous feats ends by praising other people who “experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.” The *best* place to be is in the will of God. Often, however, the will of God is far from the safest place. The Church in the West needs to question the high value we place on safety.

[Back to September 2004 - Josh is our only child]

Josh is about 6 months old now and is desperately trying to crawl. He knows he should be able to move, but he can't figure out how to do it. He becomes extremely frustrated. Nearly every time he tries to crawl he ends up inadvertently pushing himself backward. Yet he is doing this developmentally earlier than the average infant - even though he is moving backwards, he is doing something extraordinary.

Up to now I've been doing pretty much everything for Josh - spoon feeding, holding his bottles and cups, etc. But now I'm starting to have him learn to do things himself. As he learns to do something, I stop doing that thing for him. This helps him to grow. Food goes everywhere, but it's necessary. Spaghetti is always an adventure. Actually, just about anything he eats by himself is quite a mess. And yet even though there is food all over his face, in his hair, on his clothes, and in places I had never even thought to check before, I'm still proud of him for the small bit of food that he actually gets in his mouth by himself.

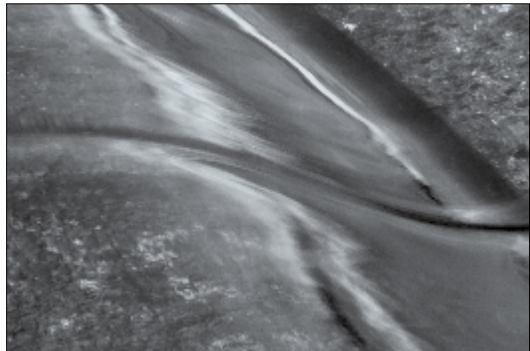
The economy in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has betrayed our culture's trust in corporate America and our "safety nets." When we hope in the American Dream, a job, the stock market, savings, or anything else other than Jesus, we will sooner or later be disappointed. Though very few Christians would admit it, we place far too much faith in our economy and security as wealthy Western people than is appropriate for citizens of God's Kingdom.

If (or rather *when*) the Lord instructs you to do something that is not safe, pray hard. Get advice. Do not take dangerous risks just for the sake of taking risks. But you must refuse to value safety above God's call. Each of us needs to become willing to move into whatever vocation God calls us to, regardless of how safe or dangerous the job will be. Each of us must be willing to lay down our very lives for the sake of the Lord's call. Not recklessly, but faithfully, immersed in prayer and the support of our community.

## **Moses – When we Fail**

Very often God plants some hint of his dreams within us even before we are following him. However, following our own dreams, even when the roots of those dreams are from God, can be quite dangerous if we are not finding our delight in the Lord.

Consider the story of Moses. Through a series of divine interventions, Moses, the son of an Israelite woman, grew up with the family of Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. Moses evidently felt a strong call to free the Israelite people from oppression. "Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exodus 2:11-12).



We know from scripture that God did, in fact, call Moses to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Moses, however, was so passionate about this desire that God had given him that he jumped ahead of God and did things his own way instead of God's way. As a result Moses spent forty years in the desert working as a shepherd while God's people suffered an extra forty years. Like many of us, Moses jumped ahead of God in his passion to fulfill this "mission" that God had ingrained in him from youth.

**2/25/05**

**Josh officially started walking today. I take walking so much for granted, it's not something I consider a difficult task. And yet seeing him walk is absolutely amazing to me. This simple action makes me extremely proud.**

God did not revoke his calling on Moses. Nor will God give up on us when we do things incorrectly. Remember, though, that after forty years as a shepherd, when God finally called him, Moses had no desire to go. His preemptive obedience resulted in a complete loss of desire to do God's work. Moses openly expressed his doubts and his reluctance and even told God, "Send somebody else" (paraphrase of Exodus 4:13). Yet God refused to give up on Moses. God transformed Moses at eighty years of age into the greatest leader Israel has ever had.

The stakes, of course, are much higher when we pursue the Lord into a very risky vocation or activity. Failure can have severe consequences. Yet there are times when failure is precisely what God is leading us to. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, was called to preach a difficult message to God's people knowing in advance that they would not listen. Jeremiah was subsequently thrown into prison and had his very life threatened on several occasions. By the world's standards, Jeremiah failed; yet by God's standards Jeremiah was a faithful, obedient servant.

The same is true of Ezekiel; he was called to preach a message that would go unheeded. God told Ezekiel very firmly that his job was to speak the message, not to worry about the results. In Ezekiel 3, God gives Ezekiel frightening and sobering instructions: "When I say

to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand." Failure for Ezekiel did not mean that his message went unheeded; failure meant only that Ezekiel did not obey God.

As long as we follow the Lord, we do not need to fear failure. In fact, as Christians we need to redefine "failure." The way we fail as believers following the Lord is to cease following the Lord. Results are in the Lord's hands, not ours. If we follow the Lord, we have succeeded, regardless of the outcome of our efforts.

## Do the Impossible

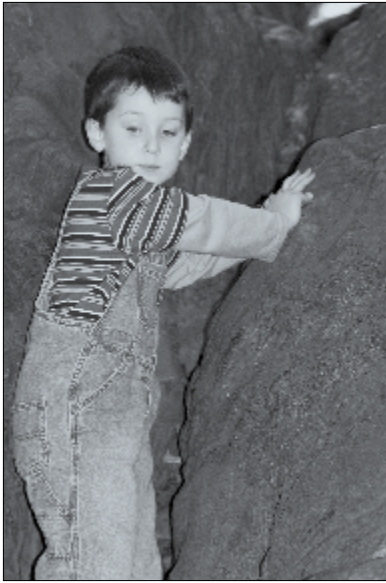
Many critics of the Bible are quick to point out that certain elements of the Story can be easily explained scientifically while other elements are completely unrealistic and could not possibly have happened the way they were written. In most cases they are probably correct. The events *are* unrealistic, and the critics have tremendous scientific evidence to support their criticisms.

For example, the number of Israelites leaving Egypt (probably more than two million) is unrealistic and was probably inflated. Two million people could not survive more than a few days at most in the desert; the numbers were probably inflated from two thousand or even two hundred. The sea the people crossed through was the Sea of Reeds, which was at most six inches deep. The details of these stories are merely myths that evolved over time from folklore that was, perhaps, based on some element of the history of the Israelites.



Such conclusions, however, miss the point of the Story. The critics, of course, are correct; two million people could *not* survive in the desert for more than a few days. As Dr. Bill Creasy points out, though, from his personal experience, it





would be difficult for two well trained people to survive for more than a few days in the conditions the Israelite people faced. Moses could not possibly have led even two *hundred* untrained slaves into the desert and survived for forty years. There simply would not be enough food and water for these people to live more than a few months, if that.<sup>3</sup> For two hundred people to survive for forty years in this wilderness, God *had to* step in and provide supernaturally. Two hundred or two million, then, does not make a tremendous difference.

God had to intervene. And, if God is as big as we say he is, he is able to supernaturally provide for two million just as easily as two hundred.

If the people crossed safely through six inches of water rather than seeing God part much deeper water in the Red Sea, miracles still ensued. Either Pharaoh's well-trained army all drowned in six inches of water, or this army, commanded to destroy the Hebrew people, decided it was not worth getting wet to carry out Pharaoh's orders. Either case is extremely unlikely. Whether the people crossed the Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds, God intervened in the supernatural.

The provision of manna for food can easily be explained away by scientific theories. More difficult to explain, however, is the detail presented in Scripture that any manna kept overnight went bad, smelled, and was filled with maggots by morning – except before each Sabbath, when the people were commanded to gather enough for two days with no such consequences. Nor can science explain (without completely disregarding these details) how the people's sandals did not wear out for forty years.

The critics are right – these things are not possible. And that is *exactly* the point. God does the impossible. It is impossible for Gideon to

defeat a huge army with only three hundred men, but God made it happen. It is impossible for enough water to flow from a rock at Moses' command to satisfy two million people, but God made it happen. It was impossible for Jesus to feed five thousand men, but he did. It was impossible for Peter to heal people in the streets just by walking up to them and announcing, "In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene – walk!" (Acts 3:6). But the man was healed. It is impossible for a group of elders to heal someone by praying and anointing a person with oil, but James commands elders to do this very thing with a promise that the sick person will be restored (James 5:14-15). For that matter, it is impossible for Jesus to rise from the dead. But he did.

6/24/05

Josh and I went for a walk and he was holding my hand. There were times he was particularly insistent on going a certain direction. He pulled and tugged on my hand, and he was forceful enough to make it clear he was in charge. I enjoyed letting him lead. I even let him run ahead when he wanted. I had a much better time letting him take me for a walk than I would have if we had just gone around the block.

As Christians we are *expected* to do the impossible.

I must clarify that last statement – *we* do not do the impossible, but *God desires to do the impossible through us*. Someone recently pointed out to me that most instances of healing in Scripture do not come from a healing prayer service or from people gathering to pray for someone (though as I mentioned the elders are commanded to do this). Instead, most instances of healing happen when a believer simply walks up to someone and announces something like, "In the name of Jesus, be healed." The Lord does the healing; we are merely instruments.

Why, though, does this happen so rarely today? I constantly hear stories, often from people I know personally, about incredible miracles, healings and spiritual encounters in third-world countries. The percentage of such stories I hear about situations in the third-world is dramatically higher than the number of stories I hear in the Modern Western world. There are several possible reasons for this. First, it could be that in spite of my trust in my sources these stories

are mere folklore. Often, though, the stories come from friends and acquaintances who leave for these countries as missionaries. These people have not generally experienced very many supernatural events before leaving the West, and come home reporting incredible



things they have seen with their own eyes, even including their own lives being spared from certain death after encounters with angels. I therefore doubt that many of these stories are folklore.

Second, it is possible that the people who claim to experience supernatural phenomena are simply more open to the supernatural. Perhaps these people incorrectly believe supernatural explanations for events that can actually be explained scientifically. However, the timing of such events is often far too perfect to be pure coincidence – a person being healed at the exact moment people are praying, or a car dying at the very moment friends are praying for the traveler, preventing the person from driving into an ambush. I have heard of local rebels converting to Christianity just before an attempt to ambush and kill defenceless missionaries after seeing “all the large men with swords surrounding the campsite.”

Finally, perhaps these “poor” third-world people are actually spiritually rich in ways we do not understand in the West. Perhaps there is validity to these stories. Perhaps there is a thriving spiritual world that Modern Western people are oblivious to, even within the Church, because we are so immersed in Modern reason and Enlightenment thinking. Perhaps even Christians who believe that every word of the Bible is true and that everything written in the Bible happened literally as it was written have become so married to Enlightenment thinking that even though we believe in the miraculous, we do not expect it.

God does the impossible. Should we believe this? *Do we believe this?* What does it look like to believe that God does the impossible?

8/10/05

Josh started swimming today. It was awesome. He has one of those floaty suits that look like muscle man costumes. The suit fits over his body and keeps him floating so all he has to do is move his arms and feet and he'll stay above the water. At first I held him, then loosened my grip a bit, then eventually let go completely. Once he realized he could do it on his own he was immediately all over the pool.

People got upset with me for letting him swim in the deep end without me hovering over him. That seems a bit silly to me. He can't stand in the shallow end, either. The whole pool is the deep end to Josh. Why teach him to fear the deep end for no reason? I'd rather teach him to swim.

## Dream Big Dreams

It is not, of course, possible to plan the impossible. Through the Bible people usually did not know what God was going to do until he did it. We cannot plan something impossible (at least not without supernatural guidance) and order God to perform it.

We can, however, put ourselves in a position to perform whatever impossible task God calls us to perform. We can do this by allowing ourselves to dream big dreams. Dream bigger dreams than we could possibly carry out. Dream the impossible, and then be ready to follow your dreams.

If I am correct that God gives us our desires when we find our delight in

him, than we are free to follow our God-given desires, especially when they are risky or seemingly impossible to achieve.

If we begin planning our work for God with safe, achievable tasks, we will most likely do a good job with our tasks. And we will most likely be missing out on the great things God wants us to do and experience. We will miss out on the abundance of life that God wants for us in the work we do for him.

On the other hand, if we begin with impossible, unachievable tasks and are willing to allow God to refine our desires, goals, and plans,



we will almost always be amazed to see what God does through us. As Michelangelo said, “The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.”<sup>4</sup>

If you love music and business, don't limit yourself to starting a record company. Many people have done that and have succeeded. Dream bigger. What could you do to completely reform the music industry? What could you do to compete successfully with Sony Records? How could you promote great artists who are serving the Lord with brand new musical styles that will become trend-setting sounds throughout the industry? How could you use music to transform the music video industry? MTV has shaped, created, enhanced, and even destroyed cultures all over the world.<sup>5</sup> How could God use you to transform your culture?

If you desire youth to become closer to the Lord, don't just start another basketball team at your church. Dream bigger. What if you somehow used basketball to reach every young man and woman in a one-hundred mile radius of your house? What could you do to completely transform the culture of a crime-stricken inner city? How could you transform suburban youth all over the country?

As an artist, don't just try to create artwork; co-create with God. Converse with God and allow God to give you your ideas. If God is the creator of the entire universe, surely he will be able and willing to give you great ideas that could transform the art world. And art, in turn, often transforms cultures. Allow God to use you as an artist to transform an entire culture.

**8/18/05**

I've been taking Josh to the pool most of the week. I let him go do his own thing. Now that he's done it once on his own, he's free to go everywhere. I pretty much put him in and he swims. I stay close enough that I can get to him quickly if I need to, but I also stay far enough away that he is completely on his own. He absolutely loves it. He swims toward me, and I slowly back up, keeping about five or ten feet between us. He follows me all around the pool. At times I lift him up on the edge of the pool while I'm in the water and have him jump in to me. One time I didn't catch him quickly enough and his head went under. I expected him to flip out and be afraid to go near the water again. He came up, coughed a couple times, laughed and wanted to do it again. It was wonderful.

8/20/05

Something very interesting happened today. After telling Katie all week about how incredibly Josh is doing, Katie was finally able to come with Josh and me to the pool. She got in the water with him and I stayed on the edge to watch and be proud. He got in and started swimming, and she stayed about two inches from him. I told her to back up a bit and give him some room, so she backed up two more inches. And Josh liked that. When Katie got farther away than that, he would either go back to the stairs or swim as fast as he could to the side. He wouldn't let her get farther than a few inches away. I told Katie to put him up on the side and have him jump in. She put him up and told him to jump, but had her hands nearly touching his arms. He jumped, and she caught him before he even touched the water. So I told her to let him do it himself, and he refused.

The next time I was in the water with him, he was back to swimming all over without any help and jumping in over his head and the whole deal. That was the most drastic illustration I've seen yet of the very different relationships Josh has with Katie and me. Children, I guess, play differently with Mommy than with Daddy. A few days later Katie stayed outside the pool and watched while he swam with Daddy. She was just as impressed as I was. And we had a blast.

Expect God to heal bad marriages.

Expect God to heal the sick.

Expect God to give you great ideas that will only be achieved by his supernatural intervention.

Question the mindset that God changes us rather than our circumstances. This is true, but this is also too often a cop-out – God can and does change circumstances.

God does the impossible. Let him. Ask to be a part of his work. Let the work that you do with and through him bring you life; let this life be inspired by our living God. Let this life be abundant.

## Redefining Greatness

Contemporary church culture values strong leaders. The Church holds a very large number of leadership conferences each year. Many pastors attend these conferences and send their up-and-coming leaders for training. I have attended several of these conferences and have been encouraged, trained, and prepared for leadership positions. I would even say one or two of these conferences had a profound impact on me that helped lead me to where I am now. I highly recommend these conferences.

On the other hand, I see a bit of a dilemma. We as Christians value strong leaders. Jesus, however, taught us to be servants. Instead of rethinking the over-emphasis we place on leaders, we created “servant leadership.” Servant leadership is wonderful, but is it possible that as a community we’re missing the point?



The movie *The Incredibles* is about a superhero family living at a time when they are not allowed to use their super powers. During a conversation between Elastigirl and her son Dash after he got in trouble at school, Dash protests, “Dad always said our powers were nothing to be ashamed of. Our powers made us special.” His mom replies, “Everyone’s special, Dash.” Dash replies with a pout, “Which is a another way of saying no-one is.”<sup>6</sup>

What does it mean to be “special?” Did God make everyone special? Did God make everyone great? Is it possible to be great in God’s eyes without rising above others? Without being a leader?

If God called every Christian to be a leader, the Church would end up with all shepherds and no sheep. This is not what God intends. The pastor of a church I attended for quite a few years used to regularly teach that a grandmother who does nothing but care for her grandchildren could potentially receive a better reward in heaven than Billy Graham simply because she was faithful to her calling.<sup>7</sup> We are “great” by being the person God created us to be, not by doing what the world (or too often the Church) declares is “great.”

When I talk about dreaming big dreams, I am talking specifically to Christians who are afraid to step out of comfort zones to pursue God. We become too bound by our own limitations and our human perception of what is possible. We must discern truthfully what God is calling us to do. God may be calling us to change the world; God may be calling us to be great fathers or mothers, nothing more. God

may call us to be world-renowned mathematicians. God may be calling us to be great math teachers at a very small school, never to be known except by our students. (Not necessarily a “Christian math teacher,” but a great math teacher.) God may be calling us to be missionaries to far parts of the world, or God may be calling us to do nothing more than stay home and pray for other people. (This could very well be the single greatest work that a person could be called to!)

We as the Church need to redefine what it means to be “great.” I believe we all need to be great, but I do not believe we all need to be great as the world defines “great.” The Oxford American Dictionary defines “great” as “of an extent, amount, or intensity considerably above the normal or average.” If we are all called to be “great,” then we are all called to be “above average” – this is impossible by definition. Perhaps “great” should mean “living to our fullest potential.” (Unfortunately this definition would still render us “above average” because so many people fail to reach their full potential!) I consider a person to be “great” when that person is faithfully doing the work God calls him or her to perform. A person could be “great” by eliminating the AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa or by being a good husband. A person could be “great” by becoming a great leader and starting a megachurch with 10,000 or more people attending weekly, or by faithfully attending a Bible study with five other people and praying for each person faithfully each day. A person can be “great” by starting a successful company that makes millions of dollars each year, ten-percent of which goes to feed and clothe the needy, or by working faithfully at a low paying job that barely pays the bills each month.

If God is calling a person to plant a church that will grow into a megachurch and the person stays “stuck” in a five-person Bible study group, that person has failed to achieve greatness. If God calls a person to attend a small Bible study group and pray for the members, and instead the person goes on to start a successful megachurch,

**8/7/06**

**Josh happily announced, “Look what I made, Mommy. A mess!”**

that person has failed to obey God. That person has failed to achieve the full potential God has placed in him or her. That person has failed to achieve “greatness” no matter



how impressive the results appear.

Any of us can and should be “great” in God’s eyes. What is keeping you from greatness? Pride? Fear of failure? Fear of success? As God commanded Joshua, “Be strong and courageous.”



Be courageous enough to overcome your fears. If God calls you to do something you think is “small,” do it, knowing that you are becoming “great.”

The only reason this section on “greatness” does not receive a larger focus in this book is that even though far too many Christians fail to achieve greatness because they are striving for greatness by the world’s definition instead of God’s definition, I fear that far more people are avoiding greatness altogether out of fear or lack of faith. We are afraid to do the impossible because, well, it’s impossible. We forget that all things are possible with the Lord. That makes inspiring plaque material, but too often we don’t really believe it. We need to live our faith. If God calls you to do the impossible, do it.

## **Creativity – Get out of the Box**

Within the context of a redefined definition of “great,” I suggest that the Church needs to embrace creativity.

What does it mean for us to be created in the image of the Creator?

One of the first jobs God gave Adam was to name the animals – a very creative task. (Pick a dozen animals and try coming up with names that don’t exist yet that will capture the essence of these animals. This is a very difficult and very creative task.) God also told Adam to care for the garden, another task that involves creativity. God also commanded Adam and Eve to “multiply” – in other words, God created humans and then told those humans to create more humans.

Humans are commanded to create just as God creates! God created us to be creative.

Too often, however, we settle for the uncreative. The Psalms challenge us to “sing a new song” to the Lord, yet our music leaders are often chastised for playing music in church that the congregation does not already know. Disciples of the Creator should be the first to embrace the creative and the new; too often, however, we are among the last.

One church I attended for awhile nearly split because the church leaders decided to install a new sound system. They made the mistake of installing the soundboard in part of the sanctuary where an older family had been sitting each Sunday for several decades. On one hand, I understand the need to respect our traditions and especially the people who have been supporting our congregations for decades. On the other hand, if a church is ready to *split* over a *seat*, something is very wrong!

Many Christians fear change. Creativity often leads to change. Therefore, Christians often fear creativity.

Some Christians quote the Bible insisting, “God is not a God of chaos, but of order.” These people are making the mistake of equating change with chaos. For many people a church congregation is the only constant in a world that is changing at an overwhelming pace. Granted, the church has a wonderful opportunity to minister to people who need some sort of constant; this, however, does not in any way imply that God resists change or that change is chaos. Nor should this thinking ever prevent people from embracing creativity.

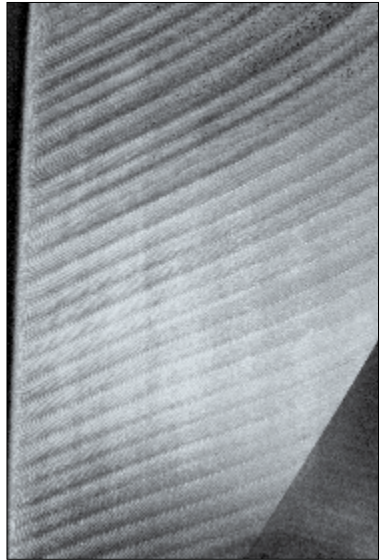
To serve a creative God as people made in the image of this creative

**9/29/06**

**I took Josh out for a walk tonight, and at one point he said, “Look, Daddy! The moon!” I said some profound thing like, “Yea, buddy, there’s the moon.” And then he got this beautiful dreamy look on his face and told me very emphatically, “Someday, Daddy, I’m going to jump on the moon.” I was really impressed by how determined he seemed about this, as though he had given it a great deal of thought and it was his life dream at two-and-a-half. Then he added, “And I am going to break the moon.”**

God, we will often be called to creativity. We as a Church need to move past our fear of creativity. There are no easy ways to overcome this fear other than to prayerfully confront our fears. Not all change is good. Some change, however, is vital. Without creative thinking, vital change may never happen.

“Creativity,” by the way, does not necessarily mean “art” (though I see God using the arts much more frequently all the time). Creative thinking is necessary to solve mathematical problems, diagnose illnesses, discover new scientific principles, build new buildings, interpret Scripture, solve social problems, free the oppressed, teach, learn, and worship.



People argue bitterly about the best kind of music for worship services. Whatever style of music you consider “best” was written by creative people whether it was written yesterday or four centuries ago. Your favorite hymn was once a new song that people likely criticized at some point in history. Our greatest hymn writers faced opposition in their churches for their creativity.

Consider the picture of a church meeting presented by Garth Bolinder: The church board meeting was going long into the night. Fatigue and frustration were raising tempers to the boiling point. Finally, one rather rotund gentleman rose to his feet in red-faced exasperation.

“How long do we have to put up with this nonsense?” he demanded as his fist pounded the long oak table with a resounding thud. “We’ve tried and tried to be cooperative, but he just won’t listen. Let’s face it. He’s impossible, and his music is even worse.”

“Well, I think we ought to give him a chance,” responded the thoughtful-looking gentleman in the corner. “At least he’s concerned that worship be ...”

“And what do you know about worship?” snorted the first man,

his bulbous nose pulsating. “You’re new here. You don’t know how things are done.”

“My wife says he’s too demanding with the children. She says the kids don’t even want to go to Junior Choir anymore,” chirped a bespectacled man in a long coat.

“If he’d just play some of the old familiar hymns once in a while. Those new tunes are so difficult to sing. When he gets going on that instrument, it seems like he’s in another world.”

“Well, what do we do?” asked the chairman, trying to keep a semblance of order.

“My wife thinks he should have the decency to leave on his own accord, for the sake of the children.”

“He oughta be fired,” challenged the rotund one.

“We can’t. He’s under contract,” the chairman interjected.

“Then let’s send him a written ultimatum that tells him in no uncertain terms he’s under probation. He either gets with our program or he’s out. Don’t you agree, Pastor?”

Now we don’t know if the board meeting actually happened like that, but we do know a stern letter was sent through Dr. Deyling to the music minister. It was dated February 16, 1730. The recipient was a hard-working musician employed by a local church in Leipzig. His name? Johann Sebastian Bach.<sup>8</sup>

Bach, one of the greatest composers of the hymns many people fight for in church congregations today, faced opposition for being too creative.

We need to be willing to listen to God, and we need to be willing to embrace the great ideas God gives us. (Remember the redefined definition of “great.”) Allowing ourselves to embrace creativity will free us to hear and respond to the big ideas God gives us.



Phil Vischer wanted to use current technology to reach children. Instead of merely creating another cartoon, he pushed technology to its limits to create the best possible show.<sup>9</sup> VeggieTales thrived beyond a typical Christian children's cartoon. Teens ended



up being the ones to make VeggieTales successful. The humor, story lines, references to pop culture, and effective use of technology all contributed to the success of Vischer's work among teenagers as well as among children and parents.

Mr. Rogers was distraught by the way television was being used (people threw *pies* at each other<sup>10</sup> – what is this world coming to?) So instead of fighting against the television or the entertainment industry that he hated so passionately, he joined it and had a profound impact on our culture.

Mike Foster was praying, asking God to let him do “something huge” to reach people for Christ. God spoke to him, “Porn.” His immediate response was, “What did you say, God?” While most Christians would immediately reject this thought as the work of the devil, he continued listening. Why in the world would God say this? “What about a church basketball league?” he asked. But as he continued listening for God's voice, he began to understand that millions of men, including great men of God, are addicted to pornography, and many women are trapped in the industry longing for freedom.<sup>11</sup> He launched xxxChurch, a thriving ministry to men who struggle with porn and sex addiction. The ministry attends porn conferences where they share the Gospel and pass out Bibles to porn stars and industry leaders. His creative thinking and willingness to listen to God's big ideas paved the way for a desperately needed ministry to people the Church has a history of shunning or condemning.

God does not call every one of us to change the world in a high-profile ministry. He does not give every one of us brand new creative

ministry work to do. On the other hand, God may not want us to do the same thing everyone else is doing. My deep conviction is that God calls more people into creative endeavors than the Church has been willing to admit in recent decades. Given



the current statistics on church growth (or lack thereof) Christians need to be willing to invite God's innovative ideas. We must never limit God to what we already know. Listen to God for new ideas. Avoiding innovation will lead to missed opportunities.

One final thought. The phrase "get out of the box" has been thrown around carelessly for many years now. If I say that the Church needs to "get out of the box," I would be implying that there is a box, one box, that the Church is stuck in and needs to get out of. In reality, there are thousands upon thousands of boxes. We cannot just say, "Get out of the box." We need to also ask, "Whose box are you talking about?" Many Christians need to begin by simply recognizing that they have put Christianity into some sort of box and that our infinite God is bigger than that man-made box. Once that person (or congregation) moves out of the box, they will simply move into a bigger box and must eventually repeat the process.

This is not to say that there is no box. God himself sets guidelines. Our infinite God has placed himself in a box; he has created limitations for himself. For example, when we say God cannot sin, we do not mean that God is too limited to sin. Rather, we mean that God is so holy that he will not sin. He cannot sin because he has placed a limitation on himself. I recognize that there are some people who may contest this example, but I hope you at least get the idea even if you disagree with my theology in this example. Our infinite, all powerful God gave himself limitations. Jesus, the creator of heaven and earth, came to earth in a human body embracing tremendous limitations.

Our job, then, is not to break out of all boundaries. Instead, our job is to constantly invite God to challenge the boundaries we currently place on ourselves and be open to the idea that perhaps they are not nearly as wide as the boundaries God desires for us. We are not breaking out of boundaries just for the sake of doing so, but to embrace and enjoy the freedom we have to serve Christ. We can serve the Lord much more effectively when we listen to him instead of merely assuming one way of doing things. We need to embrace creativity in order to serve, know, and enjoy God effectively. Break past what we know and experiment with something new and innovative.

11/06

Josh wanted to use his toilet today. I always want to encourage this even though he's been doing it for a month without actually doing anything into the toilet. So he proudly walked into the bathroom, pulled down his pants, pulled down his diaper, and stood there as usual. Suddenly he started peeing! The pee went everywhere but his toilet, and he looked up at me with absolute horror in his eyes, as if to yell out, "What the \*#&&\* is happening?" And even though I was a bit grossed out and wasn't thinking of much more than how I'm going to clean this up, I smiled and calmly affirmed, "Josh, you did it! That's great!"

Failing at something new and creative is not sin. Failure is the path to success.

## Faith Versus Works

James' letter teaches, "Faith, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17), "Faith without works is useless" (2:20), and again, "Faith without works is dead" (2:26). He asks, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?" He goes on to teach, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone."

Protestants, with our emphasis on salvation by faith alone, are quick to either reject or explain away these statements. Far too many pastors teach that when James said, "A man is justified by works and not by faith alone," he did not really mean that we are not justified by faith alone. Yet it's right there in the text; if he did not mean this, he would not have said it. Martin Luther went as far as suggesting that this epistle should be thrown out of the canon of Scripture because it

contradicts the clear teaching of Paul and others that people are saved by faith alone. In his *Preface of the New Testament*, Luther called the epistles of James “an epistle of straw.”<sup>12</sup> Luther also wrote:

The epistle of James however only drives you to the law and its works. He mixes one thing to another to such an extent that I suspect some good and pious man assembled a few things said by disciples of the apostles, and put them down in black and white; or perhaps the epistle was written by someone else who made notes of a sermon of his. He calls the law a law of freedom (James 1:25, 2:12), although St. Paul calls it a law of slavery, wrath, death, and sin (Galatians 3:23-4; Romans 4:15, 7:10-11).<sup>13</sup>

Luther concludes:

[James] wishes to guard against those who depended on faith without going on to works, but he had neither the spirit, nor the thought, nor the eloquence equal to the talk. He does violence to Scripture and so contradicts Paul and all Scripture. He tries to accomplish by emphasizing law what the apostles bring about by attracting man to love. I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible...<sup>14</sup>

Assuming that the Holy Spirit guided the canonization process and God does actually want the epistle of James included in our canon, we need to wrestle through this difficult teaching without merely explaining it away.

To understand the role of works in our salvation, we need to appreciate the meaning of “salvation.” The word “salvation” is derived from a word meaning “to save.”<sup>15</sup> We are “saved” from something, but what? The quick, easy answer is that we are saved from sin. This is true, but



salvation is bigger and more beautiful than this. To understand salvation, we need to explore the idea more fully with the big Story in mind.

God created the world and called it “very good.” Adam and Eve lived in



Shalom. Adam and Eve sinned, death entered the world, and Shalom was destroyed. When Jesus died and rose, all our sins were put on him. Jesus received the judgment we deserved for our sins. In taking our sin on himself, Jesus was able to restore Shalom.



The Story of the Bible is, at least in part, the story of God restoring all things to Shalom.

We are saved from sin, yes. But our salvation is more than being forgiven and allowed into heaven. Salvation means that because we are forgiven we can live abundant life. In other words, we can experience Shalom. As we have seen, one key element of Shalom, the abundant life our faith in Jesus restores us to, is work. If we are not doing the work God is calling us to, we will not be fully alive.

Work, then, is essential to life and is therefore essential to salvation, our restoration to Shalom. As most pastors teach, we are not “saved by works;” we are not saved by what we do. Without works, however, we cannot be fully alive. We cannot enjoy the fullness of our salvation. Faith without works is, as James teaches, dead.

## **Alms**

An expectation has always existed in the Jewish world and in the early church that we should care for the poor. Provisions for helping the poor were created in the Law. At harvest, for example, landowners were to gather their crops (their wealth) by going through the fields once. They were not to return to get what they missed; anything leftover was left for the poor to come and glean. Likewise, people were not to glean from the corners of their fields; these were left for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10). When the prophets stepped up before and after the exile to announce the sins of Israel, the thrust of their message was that Israel had turned from the Lord to follow other gods and they had oppressed people and failed to care for the poor. The poor are extremely important to the Lord.

The Law of Moses insisted, “There should be no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). Yet just a few verses later, the Law states, “The poor will never cease to be in the land” (Deut. 15:11). The poor will always be among us, but we are commanded to do all we can do to help them. Some people become poor because of bad life choices or because of sin – getting pregnant outside of marriage, marrying a horribly sinful person, engaging in drug use, abusing alcohol, and many other scenarios. Christians are *not* absolved from helping the poor even when the poor person is completely to blame for his or her own misfortune. Refusing to give someone money because the person *may* use it for drugs or alcohol should not be our decision to make. We are commanded to care for the poor. Period. Giving money is not the only way, often not even the best way, to help. But we are not free from the responsibility to help.

Giving money to a charity is a good start. Yet it is just that, a start. The poor need touch, respect, community, and opportunity as much as or more than they need money or food. The poor need Shalom, not just soup and a sermon. What would it look like if every Christian man and woman would refuse to stop at giving money to a soup kitchen and instead take a homeless person out for a meal? Not a bagel or a value meal, but a steak dinner. What if every Christian would wash the feet of homeless people? What if every Christian business owner would hire a homeless person for a significant job? What if Christians stood against our hyper-consumerist culture by giving money to help the poor instead of buying material “needs” that advertisers insist we must have?

There is nothing wrong with being wealthy. The Bible is clear about that. Abraham, David, and other great men and women of God in Scripture were quite wealthy, and their wealth came directly from the Lord. Proverbs 10:22 teaches, “It is the blessing of the Lord that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it.” Yet at the same time, it is easier for

1/21/07

Zach started walking today. He's been taking some steps for a couple weeks now, and at the beginning of the weekend he was taking four or five steps and then diving onto my lap. But today he just decided he could do it and walked from one side of the room to the other to play with toys. [And from that moment he hasn't stopped.]

a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:24). We in the United States live in the wealthiest part of the world. Many of us who are facing severe financial struggles still have a washer and dryer, dishwasher, refrigerator, cell



phones (or at least land lines), one or more automobiles, plumbing, fresh water, heat and air conditioning, and other luxuries (that have been deemed necessities). Appalachia is home of some of the poorest of the poor in the United States. Yet people in run-down trailer homes host a satellite dish. We, even in our difficult financial times, live more comfortably in some ways than kings lived until a century ago.

If the work I perceive God calling me to is all about me and my happiness, perhaps I am hearing wrong. The poor will always be among us. We will not change the world by our own efforts. Yet God usually makes changes by calling us to be his hands and feet. We must rely on God through prayer to make change. But when we pray, God often calls *us* to work for him. We must rely on God – on God’s strength, God’s provision, God’s power – to change the world and free the oppressed and feed the poor. But God uses us. Very often this is the “work” that God calls us to. This is often the work that will bring us fulfillment.

Shalom is the state where everything is as God intends it to be. There is no room for poverty in Shalom. We will enter Shalom as we help others to find Shalom. We must rise up and care for the poor and oppressed. We must help all people achieve Shalom.

## **Worship**

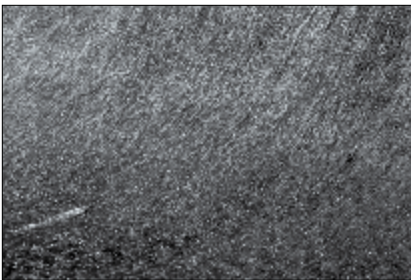
One last word about work. Christians throw around the word “worship” a great deal these days. We have “worship services” on Sunday morning. We listen to “worship music” led by “worship leaders.” Many people either think of “praise and worship” as a single entity or think of the fast, upbeat music as “praise” music, followed by

the softer, more serious and contemplative “worship” music. In most cases we are completely misusing the words “praise” and “worship.”

There is a clear distinction in scripture between “praise” and “worship.” 2 Chronicles 20:18-19 is one of many passages that demonstrate this distinction: “Jehoshaphat bowed with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the Lord. Then some Levites from the Kohathites and Korahites stood up and praised the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.” Typically in the Old Testament the word “worship” is associated with falling down, while “praise” is associated with standing and making noise.

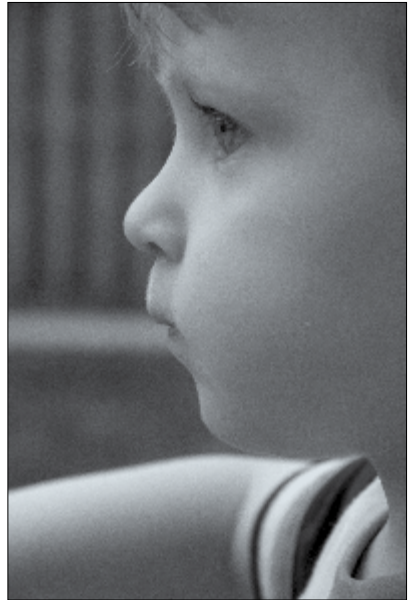
Christians today tend to refer to a church’s “worship service.” Usually, though, they are referring to a time of praise, not a time of worship. In general, praise refers to expressing to God how incredible He is and how we feel about Him. Worship, on the other hand, refers to what we *do* as a result of how incredible he is. Worship, in a sense, involves work.

There are a number of different words translated as “praise” throughout scripture. One such word used frequently in scripture is the word “barak.” “Barak” means “To bless God (as an act of adoration).” Another word used quite often in the Old Testament is “halal,” meaning “to boast, glory, commend, or celebrate.” Interestingly, though, this word can also mean “mad” or “rage.”<sup>16</sup> Praise has to do with the idea of expressing our emotions; to praise God, then, is to express to God our feelings for him. Although most churches have “worship leaders” to lead their “worship service,” most of what we do during these times is really praise, not worship, by the Bible’s definition.



Worship, on the other hand, has very little to do with emotion. Worship may come about as a result of emotion, but it is not simply an expression of our emotion. Some words in scripture used for “worship” are “latreia,”

“shachah,” and “abad.” “Latreia” means “service rendered for hire,” or “to perform sacred services.” “Shachah” means “to depress or prostrate.” “Abad” means “to work, to serve, or to enslave.” In Exodus 3:12, God speaks to Moses saying, “And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship [abad] God on this mountain.” Moses eventually *served* God on the mountain; this is worship.



Usually in the Old Testament the word “worship” is associated with bowing down in reverence or prostrating oneself before God. This is not merely an expression of our emotions, but an action, something we do out of reverence and respect regardless of emotion. When we praise God, we are expressing to God how we feel about Him and how incredible He is. Then, as a result of these feelings, we desire to serve him. This service may be considered worship. Another important thing to realize is that both praise and worship are typically associated with joy. God desires that we find all of our joy in him (Psalm 43:4, Psalm 37:4). Praise, then, is really an expression to God of the joy that we find in Him. As a result of that joy, we desire to worship God by doing what God prepares for us to do. We are able to do these things with great joy, not grudgingly; we do them out of love, not necessity.

With that said, we should also take time to consider the things that praise and worship are not. Neither refers to singing, praying, speaking in tongues, reciting liturgies, or any such things. These things may be tools people use to praise or to worship, but praise and worship do not imply any of these things. We can easily express ourselves to God without singing; this can be done in artwork, prayer, dance, or pretty much anything. Psalm 63:3 is one of many examples of praise that speaks of praising God with your lips. This verse mentions nothing about music or singing.

One of the most common methods for praising God in scripture is through music. However, just as praising God does not imply singing, singing praise songs in church does not necessarily mean you are praising. Music is simply a tool that we can use to praise God. If we sing the songs but are not actually expressing ourselves to God, we are not praising.

Finally, to “worship” God often has nothing to do with singing songs to him, shouting, praying, or attending a “worship service.” Rather, to worship God, by definition, is to serve God. We worship God by our *work*. Work is spiritual. Work is essential to the Christian life.

## Reproduction (Evangelism)

For many Christians, particularly among evangelical believers, Christianity almost solely revolves around evangelism. Every activity in every waking moment must have some connection to evangelism. Some people have a special gift to evangelize, and all Christians are called to this task at times. Although I do not agree that everything we do must involve evangelism, I do assert that evangelism at some level is essential to abundant life.

“Evangelism” does not mean what many people think. We are not all called to stand on a soapbox and warn people of fire and brimstone.

2/5/07

Josh was playing one of his new favorite games today - spinning around in circles as fast and as long as he can. He turned himself around and around and around, then ran in circles (stumbling now and then), then spun around some more. The entire time he was saying, “Look at me, Daddy! Look what I’m doing!” This went on for several minutes. He finally stopped and caught his balance. He got a curious look on his face, pointed at the wall, and asked, “Daddy, what’s the house doing?”

Nor are we all called to tell everyone we come in contact with that Jesus “loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” A math teacher is not necessarily required to teach math at a Christian school and slip the Four Spiritual Laws into each lesson or hand out tracts to students each day. For some reason Christians feel that any believer who has any sort of public audience, whether as an artist, a musician, a politician, an athlete, or a high-profile CEO, must “preach the gospel message”

(verbally) every time he or she is in front of people. This is not necessarily what we as Christians are called to.

On the other hand, one of the first commandments Adam and Eve received was to have babies. Human beings are supposed to reproduce. Likewise, the Body of Christ, the Church, is supposed to reproduce. Many Christian denominations in the United States and elsewhere are currently in steep financial trouble. Part of the problem is that these denominations are not planting new church congregations and very little evangelism is happening. Many local churches are closing because there are only ten people left at the church and all of them are over age sixty-five. In some cases these church congregations are only open because the existing members have not passed away yet.<sup>17</sup> Having spiritual “children” is vital to the life of the Church.

Literally having children is one way to address this issue. Many children today are growing up outside of the Church. When these children become parents and “return to their roots,” their “roots” will have nothing at all to do with the Church. On the other hand, children born into strong Christian homes will grow up praying and (usually) attending a local church. Pastors often acknowledge that the children in youth groups are “the future of the church.”

Unfortunately our culture views children as burdens. I have personally had a very difficult time on and off as a father, but my attitude toward children (and *having* children) has changed dramatically in the past five or so years. Parenting is difficult, but children truly are a blessing.

In the past, if a husband and wife did not have children, they could literally die. People lived by growing food, which meant





working the fields. Children and grandchildren would do the difficult physical labor and support their elderly parents and grandparents. Those without children were often considered cursed.

Today, on the other hand, when someone announces she is pregnant, people are quite aware that the baby may not be a welcome addition to the family. Women must stop working, at least for a short time, after giving birth. Babies hinder career goals and cost a whole lot of money. Not to

mention they are exhausting little creatures.

Katie and I discovered we were pregnant with our second child just over a year after Josh was born. We faced some fun poking and prodding from friends, things like, “Wow, you work fast” and the like. But when Katie got pregnant with our third, the responses shocked us both. “You know, there are ways to prevent this.” “Three? Are you crazy?” “Time to get the tubes tied, already!” “Wow, how are you going to do it?” It felt as though we had become infected with a preventable disease. And most of these comments were from Christians! Our culture’s negative attitude toward children has permeated the Church in the West.

Such negativity is particularly shocking considering what the Bible says about children. Not only did God command people to “be fruitful and multiply,” but the Bible uses the parent/child relationship as one of its primary metaphors for the relationship of Christ to the Church. When I say this, I do not merely mean that we can learn something about Christ by witnessing a parent/child relationship. This relationship is much deeper than that. God created the parent/child relationship specifically to allow us to experience the love God has for us. This relationship is a mirror of God’s relationship with people. A healthy parent/child relationship perfectly models God’s love for us.



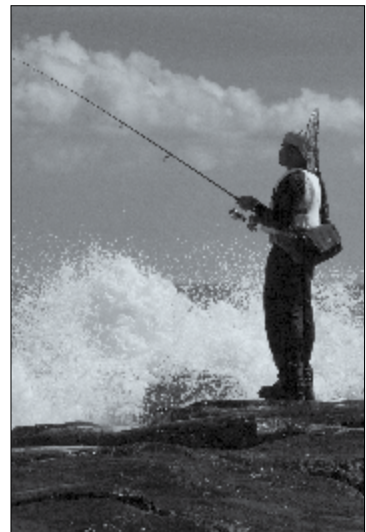
When parents fail to love their children properly, they are misrepresenting God. Remember what happened to Moses in Numbers 20 when he misrepresented God – he was denied entry into the Promised Land! This is a very serious sin in God’s eyes.

Yet this negative attitude toward children has crept into Christian circles. Our attitude toward children says that children are a burden. A married couple is expected to have a child or two, but more than that and you’re either unfortunate or just plain crazy. What does this attitude in the Church speak about God’s love for us? Are we a burden to God? Does God *really* love us? Even if God does love us, does he *want* us? When we pray are we merely distracting him from something more important? Christians know this is not true (hopefully), yet I suspect that our attitude toward children is a large part of the reason the Church in the West is struggling so deeply. Intentionally or not, our negativity toward children is speaking volumes about God’s love for his people.

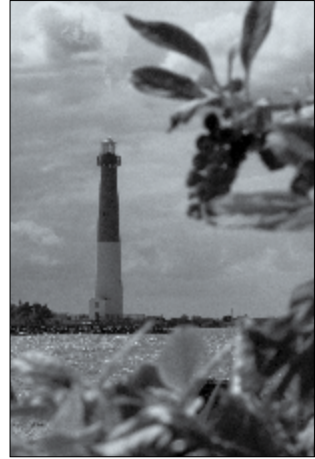
Extend this thinking a bit further. If spiritual birth is a result of evangelism, then evangelism will not be valued any more than children are valued. I doubt many people consciously think of evangelism in these terms, but there is a very obvious aversion to evangelism throughout the Church. There are at least three additional reasons I have become aware of that Christians in general are not comfortable with evangelism.

## **We Need to Get Out More**

First, the problem I struggle with the most: Christians today are often so sheltered within Christian circles that we rarely, if ever, interact with people outside the faith. The ways Christians evangelized in the Modern world often fail miserably in the post-Modern world (for reasons that fall far outside the scope of this book). In post-Modern culture, the most effective way to share the gospel



with people is by establishing a relationship with people. Become friends with the person. Listen to the person talk about his or her beliefs. Share your own beliefs. Allow the person to watch you live out the gospel. Be a genuine friend, not just a pseudo-friend for the purpose of dragging them to church and “getting them saved.” People in the post-Modern world communicate through relationship and community. Build a relationship with someone and invite the person into your community. Enter into their community. Do not just bring the person to a church service – offer the person genuine community.



Many Christians today attend a worship service Sunday morning, some other church function Sunday afternoon, a men’s or women’s group on Monday, prayer meeting on Tuesday, mid-week worship service on Wednesday, family night on Thursday, a fellowship group on Friday, and a church lunch on Saturday. We hang out in Christian cafes, listen to Christian music, attend Christian concerts, and participate in Christian events. We even plan our vacations with Christian travel agents to go on a Christian cruise and we purchase computers from a Christian computer store. No lie – I have actually seen those things! None of these things are bad, but when we are this completely immersed in what some people call the “Christian ghetto,” we never interact with anyone who is not a Christian. And if we don’t interact with anyone outside of the church, we will certainly not be building relationships with people.

## **We Misunderstand What Evangelism Is**

Second, because we are so immersed in Christian culture (a lifestyle some call “Churchianity”), we misunderstand what evangelism really is. We only have time for hit-and-run evangelism – hand someone a tract, explain the Four Spiritual Laws, and hope they say the sinner’s prayer and show up at your church. This may have worked well in the past, but this type of evangelism is no longer very effective. Nor

is it comfortable, nor is it what the Bible instructs us all to be doing. But since it *has* worked in the past, especially at the height of the Enlightenment, and since we have no time for anything else, we figure that must be the “correct” or even the “only” way to evangelize. And since it doesn’t work for me, or because I get such anxiety before I do it that I feel sick to my stomach, I just ignore the call to evangelize. Then I am guilt-ridden because I am not leading anyone to Christ. At the same time, pastors preach sermons that make me feel worse – I am part of a statistic that condemns people like me for never having “led someone to Christ.” And because I feel guilty, I shun evangelism all the more. This is in large part because we fail to realize that soapbox preaching and explaining the Four Spiritual Laws to strangers or acquaintances when you know they don’t want to listen is not the only way to lead people to Christ.

## **We Misunderstand the “Gospel”**

Third, not only do we misunderstand what evangelism is, but we also fail to fully understand the “good news” we are supposed to be sharing. Most Christians I speak with, including very respectable church leaders, define the gospel by offering an abridged version of Paul’s definition of the gospel from Corinthians, “Jesus died and rose again.” Some add that our sins are forgiven, while others refer to the literal translation of the word “gospel”, “good news,” specifically the good news about Jesus forgiving our sins so we can go to heaven. These answers are correct but quite incomplete.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul defined the gospel saying, “...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared [to many]” (1 Cor. 15:3-5). Defining “the gospel” by saying, “Jesus died for our sins and rose again,” is subtly but significantly different from saying, “Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures and rose again according to the Scriptures.”



The New Testament was not yet written when Paul was writing. With few exceptions, references to “Scripture” in Paul’s writing and throughout the New Testament refer to the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. Since Paul includes the Scriptures in his definition of the gospel, we must examine the Hebrew Scriptures to fully understand what Paul is saying. I gave a quick overview earlier, but to understand what the gospel is, we need to be familiar with much more of the Story.

### **The Beginnings of the Story**

God’s Story begins with creation. God created the heavens and the earth and declared his creation “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Everything was exactly the way God intended all things to be. People lived in Shalom. Shalom, remember, is wholeness, the state where everything is exactly the way God intended it to be. After the fall, true Shalom was lost. The rest of the Bible, at least in some sense, is focused on God restoring humankind to Shalom.

Early in history, God called Abram (later known as Abraham), saying, “... you shall be a blessing to all nations” (Genesis 12). God’s plan was for Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing to the world. Abraham bore a son named Isaac, who bore a son named Jacob. Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, had twelve sons, the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob gave prophetic blessings to his sons toward the end of his life. To his son Judah, he announced, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Genesis 49:10). This prophecy that the scepter would never depart from Judah’s descendants, that one of Judah’s descendants would always sit on the throne, was given long before Abraham’s descendants were a nation and long before they had a king.



Abraham's descendants eventually moved to Egypt during a famine. God blessed the people and they began to grow into a great nation. In time, Egypt's leader became afraid of the Hebrew people, so he began to oppress them, forcing them into harsh slavery. God delivered the people through Moses, who led the people for the next forty years. God gave the Law through Moses and prepared the nation to enter the land God had promised to them. Interestingly the Law of Moses teaches the people to embrace each element of Shalom *except* the breath of God. The Law of Moses does not command, or even suggest, that the people have the breath of God. As the New Testament writers teach, the Law of Moses cannot bring the fulness of life, at least in part because the Law does not provide the breath of God.

7/25/07

I had a strange dream last night. I was studying and teaching the Bible at the college, but the Bible was a can of baby formula, and I taught it by scooping out the formula into baby bottles.

After Moses died, the people entered the "promised land" under Joshua's leadership.

### **The Monarchy**

The people began a cycle of falling into idolatry, facing oppression from enemies, crying out to the Lord, and experiencing deliverance. Eventually, after repeating this cycle for many decades, the people cried out for a king to lead them. God announced to Samuel (the current leader), "They have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Samuel 8:7). Although God's design was that God himself would be the King of his people, God complied and gave the people a human king.

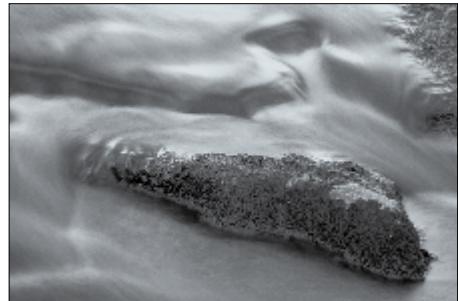
The prophet Samuel anointed a man named Saul as king over the people, but Saul sinned against the Lord and was rejected by God as king. David, Israel's second king, is known as the greatest king Israel has had. God promised David that one of his descendants would sit on the throne forever. David led the nation that was to live out God's call to Abraham to be "a blessing to all nations."

When Samuel anointed David as king, David was known as “the Lord’s anointed” or the “anointed one.” The Hebrew word for “anointed one” is the equivalent of the English word “messiah.” The word “messiah” literally means the “anointed one”, and referred originally to the king of Israel.

After David, all but a select few kings turned away from God and worshipped idols. Israel engaged in a civil war and split into a northern kingdom, Israel, and a southern kingdom, Judah. Despite a series of warnings by God’s prophets, neither kingdom fully avoided idolatry. The northern kingdom was eventually taken over by Assyria, and the southern kingdom was later defeated by Babylon. The “Jews” (the people of Judah) were taken into exile and scattered throughout the known world. The temple, the central place of worship for God’s people, was destroyed. God’s promise had been broken; there was no longer a king over Israel. David’s descendants were no longer on the throne.

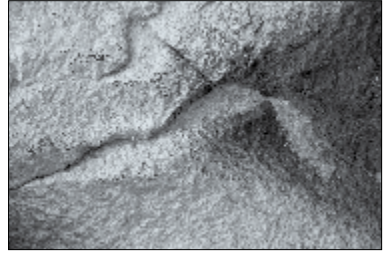
God sent prophets, however, to offer a glimmer of hope. The people would be allowed to return to their land, and God would send an “anointed one,” or messiah, to deliver the people from oppression and restore their nation. But not only would Israel be a nation again, people’s hearts would be turned back to God, the sick would be healed, the oppressed would be freed, and this messiah would be the descendant of David who would reign forever as king. The prophets also predicted Shalom by alluding to each separate element of Shalom found in Eden and by declaring that this king to come in the line of David would be their Shalom.

Seventy years after Judah’s defeat, the people were allowed to return to their land. They rebuilt the Temple that had been destroyed decades earlier. They established leaders. They took measures to ensure that the nation would not fall into idolatry again. But they were still not an independent nation and they still had no king.



## Jesus and the Gospel

After Rome became a world power and dominated the Jewish people, a boy named Jesus was born. He was a descendant of David, and amazing prophecies surrounded his birth. An angel told his mother, Mary:



He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end (Luke 1:32).

The messiah, the “anointed one,” the long awaited king, had arrived.

Stephen Harris defines the word “gospel” as the “good news” about Jesus. “Good news” means more, however, than simply the death and resurrection of Jesus. Harris explains:

In the Greek-speaking world of New Testament times, [the Greek word] *euangelion* commonly was used to denote public proclamations about the Roman emperor. The “good news” of the emperor’s military victories, welfare policies, or elevation to the status of a god were typical examples of Roman political “evangelizing.”<sup>18</sup>

The Priene calendar inscription, for example, declares:

Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him...<sup>19</sup>

The phrase “good tidings” in this inscription is the “good news,” or “gospel,” of Caesar Augustus. “Evangelists” would bring this “gospel” to the people to make them aware of the political changes or events that have taken place.

Jesus began his work by preaching “the gospel of God,” saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus was using the common meaning of the term “gospel;” when he said, “believe in the gospel,” he was proclaiming that *his* kingdom was at hand, that he had come as a savior to “end war and arrange all things... surpassing all previous benefactors...” Mark and Luke place the birth of Jesus right at the beginning of their “gospel” accounts. They, similar to Augustus,



are stating that the birthday of Jesus was the beginning of the good tidings. The “gospel” of Jesus is about the kingdom of God. Jesus, the king, has come, bringing God’s kingdom to earth, subverting all human kingdoms. These gospel writers, along with the disciples and the members of the early Church, are “evangelizing” the “gospel” of Jesus.

The gospel accounts are packed with instances of Jesus teaching about his kingdom. He prepared his disciples for “battle” to usher in his kingdom, but he did so by teaching them to love their enemies and neighbors, to serve one another, and even to lay down their lives. Jesus himself laid down his own life by handing himself over to his enemies. He suffered on the cross and died. But then he rose from the dead. Jesus did not just overpower the Romans; instead, he forgave our sin, restored our relationships with God, and even conquered death itself. His resurrection was evidence that Jesus’ work was accomplished, that he was victorious over sin and death, and that the kingdom of God had indeed prevailed.

### **Paul**

As we saw earlier, Paul defined the gospel saying, “...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that

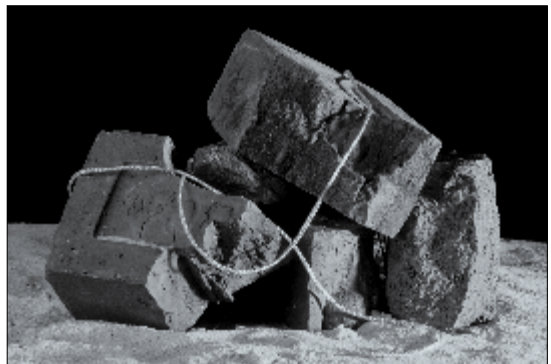


He appeared [to many]" (1 Corinthians 14:3-6). Paul was not merely defining the gospel as Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul defined the gospel saying Jesus died and rose "according to the Scriptures." Jesus declared that he had not come to abolish the Scriptures, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). Jesus fulfilled the Story. He restored Shalom. He restored life by defeating death as the coming King, the descendant of David who would make all things new and who would sit on David's throne forever. He did this through his death and resurrection, as prophesied in the Scriptures. He will return and reign forever.

### **The End of the World**

The "gospel" is not simply the good news that we can go to heaven when we die. Those of us who exercise faith in Jesus have life *now*. Our salvation is not merely a future thing. Christians who are waiting for some future time in heaven to come alive are missing out on abundant life now. That is not to say there will be no suffering now. But there is joy within suffering because although we live in a painful world, we are citizens of another kingdom. In the midst of our suffering, we are offered peace (Shalom) that surpasses all understanding. We are serving our King while we exist in this world, and our King has given us life now, even while we live as strangers in this world.

Jesus has promised a new heaven and a new earth. We still await that time when we will live in this new heaven and earth where Jesus reigns as King. Until that time, Jesus has promised that the kingdom of heaven is within us (Luke 17:21), even while we exist in this world's kingdom. Fight against the world systems, as Paul commanded in Ephesians 6, so other people can enjoy shalom. Fight the way Jesus fought, by loving our enemies, loving our neighbors, and even laying down our lives for one another. Enjoy the life, the Shalom, that Jesus offers us. Spread the good news - "the kingdom of God is at hand."





# THE ART OF SHALOM

CHAPTER 4: FOOD



## Chapter 4: Food

I once saw a bumper sticker that said, “The quickest way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” I think there may be some truth to that statement. One of the first things God did for Adam and Eve was to feed them. In the account in Genesis 1, God created Adam and Eve, gave them a job, and then gave them “every plant... and every tree with has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you.” In the account in Genesis 2, God breathed life into Adam and then planted a garden, including “every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food.” Food is essential to life.

We all know, of course, that if we do not eat food we will eventually die of starvation. Our physical bodies cannot live for long without food. What, though, about our spiritual life? What does food have to do with “abundant life” and Shalom?

Instead of jumping into a discussion about “spiritual food,” people need to understand the importance of physical health. Eating well is vital to Shalom, our spiritual well-being. Scan the Bible for references to food and you will find a massive list of passages. Food is vital to every part of our being.

At one point in Jesus’ ministry, Jesus and his disciples traveled to a rural area around the Sea of Galilee. Luke and Mark call the area a “secluded place.” Dr. Timothy J. Keller explains that this place was “the hotbed of revolutionary resistance to the Roman imperial rule.” This, Keller explains, was the place where all the “freedom fighters”



and “guerrillas” were hiding out. Even though people followed Jesus from the cities, Keller suggests that most of these people would have desired “the violent overthrow of Roman rule.”<sup>1</sup> This was, after all, what the Jewish people expected

the messiah to be – a king who would free Israel from its oppressors and restore Israel as an independent nation. John reaffirms Keller’s teaching, writing that Jesus perceived “that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king” (John 6:15). The people wanted a revolution, and they were there, at least in part, to discern whether Jesus was the messiah.

Obviously Jesus convinced the people that he was the messiah they were waiting for. This is why they planned to make him king. What did Jesus do to convince the people? He did not call fire down from heaven. He did not raise the dead (yet). Instead, he fed them. He met their holistic needs.

Feeding them, of course, was miraculous provision – all 5,000 men (most likely their wives and children as well) were fed by five loaves of bread and two fish. Keller points out that in feeding the people, the bread, representing his body, would have been broken. The “revolution” would not be fought the traditional way, but by Jesus’ broken body.

Food is the sign Jesus chose to send his message to the crowds. Careful study of this account reveals several fascinating facts about Jesus, his role as messiah, his teaching about his death and resurrection, and other areas. Food is not unspiritual; our holistic needs are important to Jesus’ message and our own spirituality.

## Holistic Well-Being

When I talk about food, I am actually referring to overall physical health, or holistic well-being. Paul acknowledged to Timothy that physical training (exercise) is of value (1 Timothy 4:8). Paul wrote in the context of godliness

**[Back to June, 2004 before Zach and Tim were born]**

Josh and I had an experience today. Josh was crying, so I made a bottle. He absolutely refused to take it. He would suck on it a few times and then just cry. And cry some more. And scream. Then suck just a bit more, then cry some more. It was time for him to eat, and he was showing every sign of being hungry, but he just wouldn’t drink. This went on for nearly an hour before I realized that the nipple wasn’t working. He had been trying to drink and nothing was coming out. I put a new nipple on the bottle and the world was good again. Ugh. I have a lot to learn.

being much more valuable than physical exercise, but in making this statement he acknowledged that physical exercise is valuable. I have heard dozens of people teach that proper diet, exercise, and sleep patterns would cure massive numbers of ailments that are currently being treated through medications.

Caring for your body can seem “unspiritual.” After all, shouldn’t we be focused on storing up “treasures in heaven?” I have heard more than one pastor teach that we should not worry about caring for our bodies. I don’t believe they were actually trying to teach that this is unimportant, but they were making the point that our home is in heaven and not in this world, so we should not worry about our bodies. In making his point, one pastor even said something along the lines of, “Just give me cheeseburgers and pepperoni pizza – it’ll get me home to heaven quicker!”

This thinking is wrong on multiple levels. For one thing, this logic assumes that our goal is to get to heaven. I have already suggested that getting to heaven is not our ultimate goal. In addition, neglecting our bodies actually *does* affect our spirituality.

In the ancient Jewish world (the world from which we get our Bible) there was no distinction between the material and the spiritual. According to *The New Testament Milieu*, “A Jew saw no sharp distinction between material and spiritual things. All was part of the



one life that was under God’s control. Thus food was not a mere physical necessity, but was associated most closely with God. The Jew regarded his food as holy because it belonged to God.”<sup>2</sup> This is one reason Jewish people would not eat with Gentiles; eating was an intimate spiritual activity. Everything is spiritual, including care for our bodies. Paul even calls our bodies “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19). Our physical health is an important element of our spiritual life.

8/04

As Josh is getting older and gaining eye-hand coordination, he is learning to put things into his mouth. Everything new must go into his mouth. This is how he learns about things. "Hmm, tastes like plastic. Must be a pacifier. Tastes like a dog. Must be a pacifier."

Katie and I put him in the middle of dozens of toys - big, bright toys with flashing lights and fun noises, anything an infant could desire - and he looks right past them to pick up the small piece of paper towel that is lying just past the wonderful toys. The paper, like everything else, goes in his mouth and he chokes on it. He'll ignore all his toys to find the smallest object that could hurt or kill him and wants to play with that. We take him outside, and leaves go in his mouth. One time he tried to put a plastic bag in mouth. I don't know where the bag even came from; I think he conjured it up out of thin air to scare us.

I remember one time I had cleaned, vacuumed, and cleaned some more. I childproofed everything. Somehow the vacuum missed one tiny scrap of dirt. As fast as he could, Josh crawled from his bedroom, through the hallway, into the living room, across the room, to the only piece of dirt on the entire carpet and put it in his mouth. It doesn't matter how careful we are - he will find some scrap of something to choke on. My primary job at this point is to keep him from dying.

I teach full time at Pillar College, a small college in New Jersey. I have also been teaching a course or two for the past two semesters at Nyack College in New York. The subject matter I teach at the two schools is not drastically different and the classroom sizes are roughly the same. The courses are offered at the same times of day (afternoon or evening). Yet the responses of the students between the two colleges are drastically different. At Pillar College, the students are generally very engaged and enthusiastic about the courses. I keep their attention easily, they engage well in conversations, they think critically, and I thoroughly enjoy the interaction. My first semester at Nyack was the complete opposite. Students were falling asleep in the class. People were often silent during group discussions. Students didn't pour themselves into the class the way they did at Pillar College. I felt like I was pulling teeth just getting students to interact at all.

It took months before I understood the difference. Pillar College is a small college with no residence program (until very recently). Students commute from home and a fair number of students are returning to school after working for a few years. Nyack, on the

other hand, is a larger and more widely known college. Students come from all over the country and beyond. Most students, therefore, live on campus. And many students did exactly what I did when I was an undergrad – stay up until three or four in the morning hanging out and goofing around, get up for morning classes, barely make it through the day, maybe get a quick nap, and go out at night to do it all over again. This, of course, is not true of all the students in my courses, but I can tell immediately which students get enough sleep and which do not. (Thankfully once I realized this I was able to change my teaching styles and became much more effective.)

1/06

I was at my computer today typing an email telling more of our friends about Zach's birth, when Josh walked over. He held out his hand and commanded me, "Daddy, go." So I took his hand and he led me with a very serious look on his face through the room, into the hallway, then into the kitchen, to the far side of the kitchen, and then stopped and turned around, looked me right in my eyes, and with an extremely matter-of-fact look on his face commanded me, "Cookie."

When we are exhausted, we simply do not perform our best. If work is a key element of life and we are too exhausted to perform our work well, this will affect our quality of life. People who do not eat well for significant periods of time feel run down. That's just how our bodies work. Likewise if we do not exercise.

In addition, when people are run down, they often become irritable. Again, this is how our bodies work. If we're irritable frequently because we are not getting the right food, exercise, or sleep, our holistic health (or lack thereof) will adversely affect our relationships, another key element of life.

Adam and Eve were free to eat of any tree in the Garden with only one exception. I doubt that these trees grew cheese steaks or ice cream. The food in the Garden was healthy, and at least some of the work Adam and Eve were assigned involved exercise. They ate primarily fruit and vegetables and got a nice workout while they were gathering their food and caring for the garden.



4/1/06

During Josh's bath this morning, Josh drank the bath water and said, "Yummy water." Katie said, "No, don't drink that, that's dirty water!" He thought for a moment and announced, "Yummy dirty water!"

I am surprised that in a culture plagued by obesity, church leaders tend to condemn drinking a glass of wine while overlooking regular, habitual overeating (the definition of gluttony). One argument I hear often against drinking alcohol is that doing so could lead someone else to get drunk. While alcoholism

is certainly a problem in our culture, so is gluttony; yet Christians are too often numbered among the overweight. We are overweight largely because we neglect our physical health. We eat too much of the wrong food and do not get enough exercise and rest. Yet church leaders take a firm stand against alcohol consumption while ignoring or even contributing to the obesity problem that plagues our country.

This certainly does not mean, of course, that Christians should not enjoy pizza or an ice cream sundae. If these make up our diets, however, our spirituality will be affected. We will fall asleep while we pray. We will lose the desire to pray altogether. We will lack the energy required to serve God and fulfill our vocational call. We will become irritable and will have a difficult time maintaining healthy relationships. We will eventually become sick and physically unable to even gather with our brothers and sisters.

Imagine for a moment that God calls Dan to be a preacher. (Not that this is a more spiritual vocation than anything else, but bear with me for this illustration.) Dan works hard and becomes very skilled as a preacher. Hundreds of people are growing closer to the Lord each week because of Dan's preaching. One day there is a young woman struggling with anorexia and sexual sin who finally decides to go hear Dan preach. The Holy Spirit has been pulling her closer and closer to the Lord. Dan, called to be the one to finally help this girl to know God, has been speaking so



8/18/06

Right now as I'm typing  
Zach is sitting on the  
floor enthusiastically  
eating a hairbrush.

much that he has resorted to a diet of fast food; he has no time to eat properly or to exercise. Just before he speaks that night, he has a diabetic attack. His blood sugar gets so high that he has to be rushed to the hospital.

The girl doesn't get to hear his presentation. Nor do the hundreds of other people who would have attended the event. Is the girl lost forever? No, that's not how God works. But the girl may have to wait longer to learn how to receive abundant life. And Dan is certainly not experiencing what God had intended while he is stuck in the hospital.

Diet, exercise, and sleep will not prevent all illness, but they certainly help. Forsaking them, on the other hand, typically does lead to illnesses like colds, flus, heart attacks, diabetes, asthma, and other diseases that could be avoided if we simply took care of our bodies.

Eating well and caring for our bodies is not unspiritual. Rather, physical health helps us to live more healthy spiritual lives. If a person has to choose between physical health and spiritual health, spiritual health is preferred. But we *don't* have to make that choice. Physical health is part of spiritual health.

## Genesis – Food and Salvation

In Genesis, Jacob's sons sold their brother Joseph, Jacob's favorite child, into slavery. Through a series of events Joseph ended up working directly under the Pharaoh where he gathered grain during seven years of abundance and then carefully dispensed the grain during seven years of massive famine. Jacob and his other children, unaware of Joseph's fortune, traveled to Egypt during the famine to buy grain so they would not perish. Joseph recognized his brothers and was eventually reunited with his father.



God used food and our need to eat to reconcile Joseph with his family and to bring the soon-to-be nation of Israel to Egypt. Jacob and his family were on the verge of starvation; if they did not find food soon, they would have died. Joseph provided salvation (“preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss” according to the Oxford American Dictionary) through food.

## Passover – Food and Remembrance

After living in Egypt for four centuries, the Hebrew people became quite numerous. The leaders of Egypt, afraid the Hebrew people would rise up against them, ended up forcing the Hebrew people into slavery and heavy oppression. God sent Moses to deliver the people from the Egyptians. In the process, Moses pronounced a series of plagues on the Egyptians, the last and most severe being the death of every firstborn in the nation. The Hebrew people were instructed to offer a sacrifice and spread the blood of this sacrifice on the doorposts. When the angel swept through the land to kill every firstborn child, the angel would “pass over” every house with this blood on the doorposts.

God gave the people very strict guidelines for observing the Passover. First, the people were to eat this sacrifice together. Second, the people were to eat only unleavened bread during the Passover observance. Leaven, a symbol of sin, was to be completely removed from each household. Finally, and possibly most important, the people are to observe the Passover every year in exactly the same way. The Bible specifically teaches that the observance of Passover is an opportunity to remember what God has done, to remember where we have come from and what God has taken us from, and to instruct our children.

11/06

Zach has started begging for food lately. Whenever we eat he magically appears at our side with his mouth open saying, “Ahh. Ahh.” When we go into the kitchen he crawls in after us and climbs up our legs so he is standing. He needs to see what kind of food we’re getting for him. This happens especially in the morning. Every morning I get up and shower and then have a bowl of flavored oatmeal mixed with yogurt. He knows my routine and comes directly to me as soon as he sees the bowl. If I sit somewhere out of sight he hunts me down and stares at me with wide eyes and open mouth until I give him some. Scavenger.

Remembering our story is vital to our faith. We must always remember where God has taken us from. We must also remember what God has done to deliver us. And we must faithfully teach our children.

The Bible tells us how to teach our children - we eat! Passover is celebrated primarily over food and drink. Food brings us together in community in order that we will remember our stories.

In our Modern Western world, we think of time as a timeline. We start at the beginning (creation), move along a straight line, where we exist as a dot on the line, and move forward toward the end of time. This was not, however, how the ancient Jewish people viewed time.

Instead, Jewish people saw (and still see) time as more of a spiral.<sup>3</sup> The spiral has a starting point, but each year we end up at exactly the same point on the spiral, just one rung higher. When Jewish people celebrate Passover, they are not merely remembering a historical event the way many Christians remember the resurrection of Christ at Easter as a dot on a timeline. Rather, they are, in a very real sense, reliving the original Passover. They are thousands of rungs higher on the spiral, but they have still spiraled back to the original event. Eating unleavened bread and celebrating the Passover Seder is not mere religious observance; this food connects them to their forefathers who experienced the Passover firsthand, eating the same Matzah as people on every other rung of

1/8/07

Zach has been eating like a madman lately. I think he has a hose running from his stomach directly into the abyss. He's only a year old and he actually ate two slices of pizza the other day! And somehow he's still thin. He will polish off an entire banana plus a slice of bread and then cry because he wants more. If any of us goes into the kitchen he crawls in at lightning speed and starts crying because we haven't given him anything yet. He has a sixth sense - no matter where he is he mysteriously knows when any of us goes into the kitchen and he shows up wanting food. He could be visiting someone 10 miles away, and if we go into the kitchen he'll find a way to crawl back in 23 seconds and start begging. When the three of them are teenagers we're going to have to buy a cow to give them the milk they'll need! Josh, on the other hand, is in the phase of life where everything that isn't peanut butter and jelly is "yucky" and he won't try anything new. We have to force feed him. Zach normally eats twice as much as Josh these days. Amazing.

the spiral. Food is a point of connection for remembering our past as well as the history of God's people through all time.

## The Torah

The Torah, the first five books of the Bible, describes the formation of the Israelite nation from creation through the death of Moses. These books are also known as “the Law” or “the Law of Moses” and contain instructions for living, both for individuals and for communities. Within the 613 commandments of the Torah\* are packed dozens of commandments about food, some about what to eat or not eat, some about food offered as sacrifices, some about sacred feasts and festivals, some about providing food for the needy, and some about how to prepare food. Food is incredibly important to God.

Most Christians are thankful that we are not bound by the Law of Moses, known to the Jewish people as Torah. Many people associate the Torah with the Pharisees. People errantly believe the Pharisees were fanatics who kept every nuance of this Law and Jesus thankfully freed us from the drudgery of adherence to these empty religious observances in exchange for a deeper relationship with God.

This is not at all an accurate picture of the Torah (or of the Pharisees for that matter). The Torah, in a sense, is more than God's list of dos and don'ts. The Torah is the Hebrew people's relationship to God. The Torah is also known as the “Word,” the very Word that John insists “became flesh” (John 1:14). Jesus fulfilled the Torah, but he did not abolish it. Christians are free from the Torah, but this freedom does not render the Torah irrelevant.

Some people teach that the kosher laws were established to keep God's people healthy. We should not eat shrimp and lobster, for example, because people can develop deadly allergies. We should not eat hot dogs because they are high in fat.



\* *Maimonides and other rabbis count 613 unique commandments.*

Today we know more about health and medicine, so, as the logic goes, enjoying these prohibited foods is okay.

I suggest that keeping kosher, or obeying the food laws in the Torah, is about much more than food allergies and health. The Israelites were surrounded by pagan nations and were constantly at risk of being led away from the Lord to other pagan gods. Dr. Bill Creasy points out that socializing with people while keeping kosher is extremely difficult. You cannot keep kosher and eat at most restaurants or in



most non-kosher households. To keep kosher, it is almost entirely necessary for a person to eat only with other people who are keeping kosher.<sup>4</sup> The food laws in the Torah, therefore, were at least in part designed to keep the Israelite people separate (another word for “holy”) from all other people who were worshipping pagan gods.

There are, of course, health benefits to keeping the food laws in the Torah. God designed these laws to help his people stay physically healthy. Health benefits are most likely secondary, however, to the fact that God is using food to help his people live holy (separate) lives. Ask an orthodox Jew why he avoids shellfish and he will not say, “Because shellfish can be unhealthy.” His answer will almost certainly be, “Because God commands it.”<sup>5</sup>

I am not teaching that Christians should be bound by the Torah or that we should keep kosher. Enjoy your shrimp and be thankful to God while you eat. My point is that what we eat and how we take care of our bodies is important to God. God uses food to establish our relationships with him. Food (along with our overall physical health) is spiritual.

## The Wilderness – God’s Provision

Food is also a sign of God’s provision in scripture. Christians borrowed the idea of “saying grace” before meals from the people who lived during New Testament times. Jesus “gave thanks” before he ate (Mark 8:6). The Torah, however, commands us to “bless the Lord” *after* we eat (Deut. 8:10). Either way we acknowledge that our provision is from the Lord, not by our own doing.

God taught Israel this lesson throughout the forty years in the wilderness. The people cried out for food and God provided manna daily (except on the Sabbath). The people cried out for water and God provided water out of a rock.

Note that the people had to cry out to God for this provision. It is easy, especially for those of us who live in the wealthiest nation in the world, to criticize the Israelites for being so “faithless.” After all, God had done miracle after miracle – how could they just grumble against God and assume God would not give them food and water? But a human being can only live for roughly three days without water. The people had gone for roughly three days without water in the middle of the desert with no water in sight. And the Bible says there were about two million people who needed water in the middle of this dry desert. They waited as long as they could wait and God did *nothing*. These people were not just thirsty – they were dehydrated, probably becoming sick, and they were literally about to die. I would like to think I would have responded with more faith than they did, but most likely I would have been grumbling by day two at best! Especially when my wife and three little boys appeared as though they were about to die of dehydration.



God did provide, though at the last possible moment. Likewise with food when the people were literally about to starve to death. God taught them that provision comes from

him, not from our own doing. God “let you be hungry, and fed you... that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:3).

God is our provision. This is easy to forget in a time and place where we throw away enough food each day to feed impoverished nations. We must give thanks for all we have, perhaps before *and* after we eat. When we forget that our provision comes from the Lord, not corporations, governments, and our own hard work, God will do what he must to refocus us. Food should serve as a metaphor to remind us several times each day that God is our provision.

## Jesus and Food

Jesus, the Word made flesh, invites us to some other interesting teachings about food. First, after feeding 5,000 men plus women and children with five barley loaves and two fish, Jesus and his disciples traveled across the sea. John’s gospel records a conversation between Jesus and the people where the people demand a sign. The people pointed to the provision of manna, saying, “Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread out of heaven to eat’” (John 6:31). After a bit more conversation, Jesus responded, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst” (6:35). Later Jesus said something more profound and even offensive: “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51). Jesus added, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (6:53-54).





As if this were not enough, Jesus added an even more profound statement, “For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.” According to Jesus, eating food is merely a metaphor for eating his flesh, the true food. Drinking is a metaphor of drinking his blood, the true drink.



It is interesting, then, that Jesus' first public miracle was turning water into wine. The water was symbolically placed in buckets used for ceremonial washing and was turned into wine, symbolic of the blood of Jesus that cleanses us fully. Wine in Scripture is symbolic of both blood and celebration. Wine was poured out to the Lord during certain offerings (Numbers 15, 28:7). Deut 32:14 refers to wine as “the blood of grapes.” Wine was used to celebrate the Passover, as the nation remembered and celebrated their history. Wine was used at weddings and other celebrations. Wine was associated with rejoicing and wrath, blessing and punishment. Wine points us to the blood of Christ, reminding us of the judgment that was ours and the celebration that is now ours because of what Christ did for us. (Drunkenness, of course, becomes a distortion of this metaphor. Drunkenness is not bad simply because it is unhealthy, but because it destroys the metaphor of the restoration to Shalom through the blood of Christ.)

## **The Lord's Supper**

Matthew informs us that the event we know as the “Last Supper” was “on the first day of Unleavened Bread,” the beginning of the Passover celebration. When Jesus broke the bread during this celebration, he would have blessed the bread saying, “Praised are you, Adonai our God, King of the universe, who has made us holy through his commandments and has commanded us concerning the eating of matzah.”<sup>6</sup> This blessing over the Passover feast is a reminder that Moses led the people from oppression in Egypt. Moses also delivered the Law to the people, the “first covenant.” The blessing Jesus would

have given during the meal acknowledges the Law of Moses (the “commandments”). The bread signifies God’s deliverance from oppression through Moses as well as the subsequent covenant God established with the people through Moses.

Jesus, instead of observing the traditional Jewish liturgies about the matzah, made yet another seemingly blasphemous statement: “Take, eat; this is My body.” Later in the feast Jesus passed around the wine, adding, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:26-28).

**1/27/07**

**Josh and Zach went to Grandma and Grandpa’s place tonight. Grandma took Josh to the store to buy ice cream. Josh couldn’t wait; he talked about it non stop for an hour. When they finally arrived at the store, Grandma asked Josh, “What kind of ice cream should we buy?” Josh answered, “We should buy vanilla, because Zach can’t have chocolate.” After a bit of a pause, Josh added softly, “But I really like chocolate.” It’s amazing how much he cares for Zach!**

The disciples must have been utterly shocked! Jesus was not just ignoring tradition; Jesus changed the entire meaning of the Passover as the Jews knew it. He changed the Torah’s commandment, an act the apostles would have understood to be blasphemous. The Passover was a time of remembrance of what *God* had done for the people through Moses. This was not mere tradition; this is precisely what God had commanded them to do (Exodus 12). Jesus did not acknowledge the Passover as freedom from slavery in Egypt nor did he spend time remembering what God had done in the past. Nor did he focus on Moses, the Torah, or the blessed covenant God established with his people. Instead, he said, “Do this in remembrance of *Me*” (Luke 22:19). Jesus also added that he was instituting “the new covenant” by his blood, the wine. This is the new covenant Jeremiah spoke of (Jeremiah 31:31-2) and that the Jews were desperately waiting for.

Jesus did not initiate a new liturgy for the Church to follow during the Lord’s Supper. Instead, he completely changed the meaning of an existing liturgy. In the process, he declared himself to be both Messiah and God. Christians, then, are to celebrate the Passover feast (“as often as we do it”) by remembering Jesus.

Food, according to Jesus, is instrumental in remembering Jesus.

## Resurrection

Jesus changed the meaning of the Passover, ushered in the New Covenant, died, rose from the dead, and in the process of preparing his disciples for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the lifelong ministry to come, he gave them a profound command, “Come and have breakfast” (John 21:12). According to Luke, Jesus met two men on the road to Emmaus who did not recognize him until Jesus took bread, blessed it, and broke it, “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:31). One of the first things Jesus did when he appeared to his disciples was to ask, “Have you anything here to eat?” (Luke 24:41).

Jesus, the “firstborn from the dead” (Rev. 1:5), was the first to live, die, and live again in the resurrection body. (Other people were raised to live after death, but these people were still living in their original bodies and all died again. Jesus alone lives in his resurrection body.) The firstborn from the dead finds food valuable, perhaps even essential, for life, community, remembrance, and general spirituality.

## The Early Church

This sentiment carried into the early Church where people spent time every day “breaking bread from house to house, [and] taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart...” (Acts 2:46). Eating together was a normal part of life in the early Church. Paul rebuked the church at Corinth for abusing some of the sacred feasts, providing some insight into the feasts of the early Church. The people were eating so much during the Lord’s Supper that other people did not have anything to eat and some were getting drunk on



the wine. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the early Church, then, apparently did not involve a small wafer and a shot of grape juice, but looked more like a healthy chunk of bread and a glass of wine, a significant portion of a meal.

## Today

Perhaps Christians today should resurrect some of this emphasis on food. Perhaps we should do more than merely have pot-luck dinners a few times a year and wafers with grape juice on the first Sunday of each month. Perhaps we should return to eating together daily, or at least frequently. Young and old eating together, wealthy and poor, Baptist and Presbyterian, Black and White, all sharing the intimacy of food in the community the Body of Christ is supposed to become. Food (and dare I add wine?) has the potential to transform the Church by creating and strengthening community, helping us to remember where we have been, reminding us of God's provision, giving us opportunity to provide for those who don't have enough, and helping us to view time in a spiral and relive the amazing and transforming times God has led us through.

## What About Fasting?

If food is truly a key element of life, why would the Bible command us to fast? Wouldn't fasting hinder our abundant life rather than enhance it?

A healthy person can live for roughly forty days without food and roughly three days without water. The same healthy person will die within minutes without air. We can fast from food; we cannot fast from air.

This same distinction exists in these elements of Life. We cannot live without the breath of God or interaction with God. We can, and at times should, live without food, community, and work for some short period of time. These fasts are healthy and are sometimes necessary to maintain our spiritual and physical health.



The Bible stresses the importance of fasting. God desires that we experience Shalom, and God would not instruct us to do anything that hinders Shalom. Since God commands us to fast at times, fasting must somehow enhance our lives by temporarily removing one or more elements of life.

A word study reveals something interesting about fasting. God's people were commanded to fast on the Day of Atonement, outlined in Leviticus 23. The word for "fast" in this passage (often translated "humble your souls") is the same word used in Exodus 1:11 – the taskmasters "afflicted" the Hebrew slaves. The word used to describe fasting in one passage is used to describe affliction in another passage. There is a relationship in Scripture between fasting and affliction. One purpose of fasting, therefore, is to remember the affliction God delivered us from.

According to Scripture, another reason for fasting is to strengthen us spiritually. In Deuteronomy 8:3, Moses reminds God's people, "[God] humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know... that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord." "Humbled" in this passage is the same Hebrew word as "humble your souls" in Leviticus 23 and "afflicted" in Exodus 1. God caused the people to fast. Fasting, then, reminds us that God is the source of all life, including the food we eat.

Early Christian tradition also teaches that fasting from food helps us to maintain control over our "flesh." The Catechism of the Roman



Catholic Church, for example, insists that fasting trains us to be able to control and restrain our bodies. The Catechism states that a time of fasting "helps us acquire mastery over our instincts and freedom of heart."<sup>7</sup> This, too,

reminds us that we need the Lord, not the things our flesh desires, to be fully alive.

One important fact to keep in mind is that fasting, or depriving ourselves of a vital element of life, is quite different from feeding ourselves unhealthy food. Poor nutrition actually poisons our body and detracts from life, while studies have shown that fasting actually cleanses our bodies.<sup>8</sup>

If we keep our bodies healthy, we will be able to fast longer and much more effectively. If we do not stay healthy, we may be unable to fast as long, or even at all, and are likely to be less effective in our fasting. The Roman Catholic Church, in fact, discourages people with health problems from fasting (at least from food).

There are times that we should fast from food, from work, and from community. As we have already seen, the Bible commands occasional fasting from food. The Bible also commands God's people to keep the Sabbath – a fast from work. There are also passages that recommend fasting from community to enjoy silent times alone with God. All three types of fasting will benefit our spiritual growth by depriving ourselves of key elements of life. Nowhere, however, does the Bible ever permit us to “fast” from the breath of God or from interaction with God. This observation does not imply that the other three elements of life are unimportant; rather, they stress the importance of the other two. A life filled with the Holy Spirit in

2/1/07

Katie went out early this morning while the rest of us were sleeping. The boys woke up a little bit earlier than usual and a lot earlier than my body was prepared for. All I could do was sit in bed listing to the song. “Mommmyyyyyyyyy!” “Mommmyyyyyyyyyyyyy.” “Mommmyyyyyyyyyyyyy!” “Mommmyyyyyyyyy.” This went on for about ten minutes (roughly 4,000 rounds of the song) before I admitted to myself that I really needed to get up. So I dragged myself out of bed, threw some clothes on, and opened the door to the boy's bedroom. Zach was standing in his crib, and when he saw me come in he jumped up in the air and shot me a huge smile. He even made a cute squealing noise. Josh heard the door open and saw Zach jump, so he spun around with an equally huge smile and enthusiastically said, “Mom...” [pause] As he saw me his face changed to a look of disgust as he continued, “Mommy.” I answered, “I'm Daddy.” He shot back in an almost rude tone, “I want Mommy.” So I said, “How about, ‘Good morning, Daddy, I love you.’” “Where's Mommy?” “Mommy went to church.” Then he surprised me with the next question: “Can I be naked?”

constant interaction with God is vital to spiritual survival. This, I suspect, may be the reason a large part of the Church is struggling but is not dying – the people who make up the Church are experiencing some, but not all, of these elements of life.

## Sabbath

God commanded the people through Moses to rest every seventh day, a fast from work. The people were not allowed to gather or cook food on the seventh day, for the seventh day is a “holy sabbath to the Lord” (Exodus 16:23). This command, though spoken by Moses, was not part of the Law. Moses commanded the people to observe the Sabbath just after they left from Egypt, before the Law was given. The Sabbath, therefore, transcends the Law.

We went inside, and Josh played for awhile. I went to the kitchen to get some milk for Zach. Josh appeared at the entrance to the kitchen and told me very firmly, “I want yogurt.” I answered, “How about, ‘Hi, Daddy. I love you.’” He answered very politely with a pleasant smile, “Hi, Daddy. I love you.” I replied, “Thank you, buddy. That was so nice.” He came back with, “Now can I be naked?”

As Christians, we are free from the Law. But if the Sabbath was given before the Law, are we still free from the Sabbath?

I do not plan to answer this question. Some will argue that no, Jesus freed us from the Sabbath. We know this because he rebuked the Pharisees saying, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Luke 6:5). Others feel just as strongly that this statement does not free us from God’s plans for us to find regular rest (Hebrews 4 for example).

My point here is not at all to teach that Christians must keep the Sabbath; instead, I desire to point out how important rest is in God’s eyes. There are times laid out in Scripture where God expects us to fast from food, community, and work. In our modern Western culture, rest is often a swearword. We punish our athletes by benching them. New York is often praised as “the city that never sleeps.” Employees are rewarded for working as much overtime as possible. Often workaholicism is expected or even demanded of employees. Our culture does not value rest.

The culture's attitudes toward rest have permeated the Church. Many Christians are unable to be without a cell phone for a few hours, let alone relax for an entire day each week without doing any work. Yet God desires that we rest and promises that we will find rest in Jesus. Does this mean that we can keep working sixty or more hours each week and still stay healthy?

Some Christian organizations push their employees this hard and justify it with passages about Jesus being our rest. I suggest this will lead Christians to burn out. This, in turn, results in Christians who can no longer do the work God has called them to, who are physically and spiritually unhealthy, and are no longer experiencing the Shalom, or abundant life, that Jesus promised.

Whether Christians are to keep the Sabbath or not, we *must* find time at least somewhat regularly to fast from food, community, and work.

## Food as a Metaphor of Scripture

Jesus also used food as a metaphor of Scripture during his temptation in the wilderness. Jesus ate nothing in the wilderness for forty days and, as Scripture so eloquently states, "He was hungry." This is beyond the dinner-is-an-hour-late kind of hungry. Humans cannot live much longer than this without food; Jesus was literally on the verge of starvation. I'm certain that Jesus both wanted and needed food. The devil appeared and challenged him, saying, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus *could* have done that. Yet he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone'" (Matthew 4).

The Jewish people for the most part had the entire Hebrew Bible memorized. Very often Jewish people





would quote one small part of a passage instead of reciting a larger portion of scripture. This practice is similar to quoting one line of a popular song to bring to mind the rest of the song along with the song's meaning. Jesus, as a Jewish Rabbi, had something very specific in mind when he answered the devil in this temptation. Deuteronomy 8:3 says, "[The Lord] humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord."

3/16/07

I brought Josh some toast today at his request. He hasn't been as polite as usual lately, so we keep reminding him to say "please" and "thank you". I brought him the toast and he just took it and ignored me. Katie said, "Josh, what do you say to daddy?" Josh quickly answered, "It's hot!"

The word of God, therefore, provides nourishment just as food nourishes us. Hebrews 5:12-14 and 1 Corinthians 3:2 echo this metaphor. The Scriptures are our "spiritual food." To be fully alive and experience Shalom, we must consume Scripture.

Remember, though, that listening to sermons and attending a "Bible-centered" church does not replace reading Scripture. It is Scripture that changes us, not a pastor's commentary on Scripture or books about Scripture (though those things may certainly help us to understand and apply Scripture to our lives). In fact, in many Bible-centered churches I have visited, people spend time singing, greeting one another, making some announcements, and then listening to a sermon based on a passage of scripture; yet these "Bible-centered" churches often fail to actually read more than a few sentences of the Bible during the service! These churches are not "Bible-centered" - they are "sermon-centered".

Compare this to the Israelite people in the book of Nehemiah who read the entire Torah together. Imagine spending several hours each day standing for large amounts of time, reading the first five books of the Bible together as a community. We have a difficult time today reading a single chapter together, especially if that chapter happens to

be some list of commandments in Leviticus. But these people read Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, all in one meeting.

**7/27/07**

**Zach was drinking from a bottle of water and tilted it just a bit too far. As water gushed out of the bottle all over his face and shirt, he announced, "I'm raining!"**

## A Warning

The prophet Amos warned:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “When I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, But rather for hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

A famine is a severe shortage of food. Amos is warning against a shortage of hearing the words of the Lord, our spiritual food. Without food, our bodies cannot thrive. Without the word of the Lord, our spirits cannot thrive. Starve a body or a spirit long enough and death will ensue.

People who rely upon a weekly sermon (or even multiple sermons) for spiritual nourishment instead of actually reading the Bible are at risk of experiencing this famine. Sermons are very valuable for understanding Scripture and learning to apply Scripture to our lives, but sermons should never replace actually reading Scripture. We should not settle for being spoon-fed by our pastors, no matter how accurate the teaching. Sermons should supplement, not replace, our reading of Scripture.

Amos’ reference to “hearing the words of the Lord” may not refer directly to Scripture. Rather, this phrase could refer to a time when people do not hear God speaking at all, either personally, through prophets, or any other way. If this interpretation of the passage is correct, a famine for Scripture may still be part of this warning. The warning could, however, indicate that people will stray so far from the Lord that we will cease to hear God’s voice altogether.

## Food and Work

Shortly after Jesus interacted with a woman at a well in Samaria (the same passage where Jesus called himself “living water,” referring to God’s provision for the people when they wandered in the desert), the disciples urged Jesus to eat. Jesus replied, “I



have food to eat that you do not know about.” The disciples puzzled over this for a bit before Jesus explained, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4).

There is work to be done, and performing this work nourishes us, bringing us abundant life. Failing to do this work starves us spiritually, much like neglecting the reading of Scripture. To experience Shalom, we *must* work.

Many people are leaving churches these days because they are “not getting fed”. They generally mean that the pastor’s sermons are not helping them to grow. And, granted, some pastors are simply not very dynamic speakers. And, worse yet, some pastors do not teach or read Scripture.

The Bible, however, never uses food as a metaphor for a pastor’s sermon! Our spiritual nourishment does not come from good sermons, as helpful as they are. Our nourishment comes from

- 1) the word of God, and
- 2) work - doing the will of him who sent us.

There are certainly times a person should leave a church and find some other community to worship with. However, these cases are much less frequent than many Christians today seem to think.

People who are considering leaving a church because they are not getting fed should consider two things. First, are they failing to receive spiritual food because they are relying on a pastor to spoon-feed them Scripture that they could be reading themselves? In the case of a

pastor's sermons being boring or irrelevant, a person can simply go online and find hundreds of excellent Bible teachers to listen to. And second, are these people malnourished because they are failing to do the work God has called them to? Jesus himself called his food doing the will of the father – surely this work, the food that nourished our Lord, will nourish us more than a sermon.

## **Food and Community**

One final thought about food. As I mentioned, Jesus' first miracle involved food (drink, technically) at a wedding celebration. The required sacrifices, very holy occasions, involved food. Jesus' last act before his death was celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples. The early church ate together. At the resurrection there will be a great feast. Food unites people. Food creates and enhances community.

Nearly all celebrations in nearly all cultures involve food. In the United States, for example, we eat cake and ice cream at birthday parties, serve potluck dinners at church, and take our spouses or dates out to dinner. When we desire to build relationships or strengthen community we generally involve food in the occasion.

In a New York Times op-ed column, Nicholas D. Kristof wrote:

So how do we discipline our brains to be more open-minded, more honest, more empirical? A start is to reach out to moderates on the other side — ideally eating meals with them, for that breaks down “us vs. them” battle lines that seem embedded in us.<sup>10</sup>

Eating together builds relationships, breaks down barriers, and unites people. Our goal here is not necessarily “to be more open-minded” (though that is not always a bad idea), but to break down barriers and unite the Church. The Church today is deeply divided, not only by denominations but



also within denominations and even within individual congregations. God created food as a powerful tool to unite us.

I propose that the Church should take food seriously as a community-building tool. We should take this beyond potluck dinners, though. What would happen if, as in the early Church, members of our communities gathered to eat together? I'm not talking about a big party every day in the church building or an event scheduled on the church's calendar. I'm talking about families and individuals getting together for breakfast, lunch, dinner, or a snack simply because they can. Our congregants would get to know one another on a much deeper level. People who might not otherwise talk would begin sharing and meeting one another's needs. People with common interests and callings would have opportunity to share ideas and work together. Discipleship would happen naturally. Denominational boundaries could be erased.

In essence, food is a tool that could promote healthy Christians and healthy church congregations. Food creates and enhances community. Perhaps the bumper sticker really does capture God's wisdom – the way to a man's heart really is through his stomach.



# THE ART OF **SHALOM**

CHAPTER 5: COMMUNITY



## Chapter 5: Community

At creation, God brought Adam and Eve together and commanded them to “multiply and fill the earth.” God’s initial intent for humanity was for large numbers of people to live together. God desires people to establish relationships within communities.

Much of the Bible after the account of the fall involves God restoring Shalom to the world. God’s plan for restoration will culminate in the return of the King who will make all things right in a re-creation process. At the end of all things, at the introduction of the new heavens and the new earth, we do not find a new garden but the New Jerusalem, the “holy city.”

God still intends for people to live in community with one another. Community (and the relationships that result from community) is an important element of abundant life. Without community, life cannot thrive.

In the movie *Castaway*, Tom Hanks played the lone survivor of a plane wreck on a deserted island. His character, Chuck Noland, learned to find food and water and gained the skills he needed to stay alive, yet there were no other people with him. Noland eventually drew a face on a volleyball and named the ball “Wilson.” Noland took the ball with him everywhere. He talked to the ball, argued with the ball, and even listened for the ball’s responses. Noland became so desperate for a companion that he personified the ball to such an extent that most people would have considered him crazy. When he finally lost the ball in the ocean, he grieved for the ball as if he lost a brother. The movie captures how desperately we need community.





## God as Community

The Hebrew word for “God,” “Elohim,” is plural. The Jewish people explain that this word for God is plural in order to emphasize the greatness of this God. From a Christian standpoint, however, it is quite feasible



to see that the plurality of this word is a hint of the Trinity, God in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, together as one Being. God is community.

The Shema, a very important passage to the Jewish people, begins with Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God (Elohim, plural), the Lord is One.” The Hebrew literally says, “Hear Israel Lord God Lord one.” Christian theologians point out the triple emphasis here – “Lord, God, Lord.” From a Christian perspective this passage could be another reference to the Trinity.

The word “Trinity” is never used in the Bible, but there are plenty of references, some blatant and others obscure, to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as One. I bring up the Trinity not to prove the idea, but to show that God is community. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been together since before the beginning of time in what some theologians have called a “dance.” We, then, created in the image of this holy community, are not complete without community.

## Restoration

In John 20, Jesus breathed life into his disciples, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The very next statement he made baffled me for quite some time. “If you forgive the sins of any,” Jesus announced, “their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” I’m still not sure I completely understand all the

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\* *I would love to give credit to the appropriate people for this idea, but unfortunately I cannot recall where I first heard the dance metaphor.*

subtle nuances and implications of this statement\*, but one thing has become quite clear to me. Forgiving one another's sins has something incredibly profound to do with the breath of God. Forgiving sins therefore has to do with receiving the Holy Spirit and coming alive.

Community and relationship are vital to Shalom. Sin breaks community and destroys relationships. Jesus' resurrection accomplished the restoration of Shalom by allowing us to be "born again" of the spirit. This new life not only restores us to Shalom, but also gives us the responsibility to play our part in the restoration of Shalom. Jesus, who had spent at least three years teaching people to forgive one another, taught here that forgiveness of sins and the subsequent restoration of broken relationships are part of what it means to be alive.

The entire New Testament, perhaps the entire Bible, teaches us to forgive one another. This is not simply a rule we must obey, but a commandment to restore relationships, thereby restoring Shalom. Forgiving one another restores relationships, in turn restoring community and rebuilding Shalom.

(Back to 12/29/05:  
Zach's Birth)

My parents brought Josh to the hospital today to meet his little brother for the first time. Josh came in and saw Katie and me, and a big smile formed across his face. He ran over and gave us hugs and kisses. Then I got Zach and sat down on the floor holding him. Josh started walking over, and I asked him, "Buddy, do you know who this is?" Without any hesitation, he smiled and shouted, "Baby ZACH!" He spent the next hour or so going from me to Katie to my parents talking and playing. Now and then he would climb up on the bed to see the baby. He would stroke his face and kiss him. Then he would climb down and play again. My parents had bought him a five-foot Elmo balloon, which of course he loved. So he was playing with the balloon. And playing harder and harder until he was basically beating the crap out of the thing. Elmo got punched in the head, kicked in the shins, head-butted, tackled, and got a couple right hooks in unmentionable places. Josh was laughing like crazy the entire time. Which raises concerns for me about how Josh will like to play with Zach. But we have some time to worry about that. Meanwhile, when it was time to leave, Josh gave us all hugs and kisses, including Zach. He asked specifically to give Zach a kiss. It was very cute and a bit relieving.

\* Dr. Bill Creasy gives an excellent explanation of this passage by addressing the grammar of the original Greek manuscripts in his May 2010 newsletter, available at <http://www.logosbiblestudy.org>

## The Early Church

There is tremendous speculation about what life looked like in the early Church. There are a few things we know for sure, however. First, after the resurrection, Jesus gathered the people together (Acts 1:4). Jesus desired that his disciples be together in community. Next he commanded them not to leave this community. (At least not yet; later they were sent out of this community in order to form new communities.) Specifically, “He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised” (1:4). He gathered them into community and then instructed them to wait in the city with one another until the Holy Spirit came. The disciples obeyed. “When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying” (1:13).

Within this early upper-room community, the disciples prayed (1:14), preached and listened to teaching (1:15-16, 2:14-36), made decisions together (1:23-26), received the Holy Spirit together (2:3-4), baptized new people into their community (2:41), shared their possessions (2:44), met one another’s needs (2:45), met daily in the temple (2:46), broke bread and shared meals (2:46), and praised God together as a community (2:47).

This picture of Christian community in the beginning of Acts gives an illustration of what our communities today could and should look like. Be careful, though, to resist the temptation to read our own practices into this passage. For example, many Christians hear that the group “praised God” and immediately assume this means a particular music style. The way the early church praised God together may not have been through music at all. Some like to point out that because the people met together in the temple, we must go to church each Sunday.



But the early disciples met in the temple *daily*. This is not referring to a weekly worship service. I have no doubt the early Christians attended some sort of regular worship service at the temple or at a synagogue, but that is not what this verse refers to. When we read

our own cultural and denominational practices into Scripture, we risk missing other beautiful (and often more accurate) meanings.

Worship was a communal event, not an individual event. Sharing meals created community. Caring for one another's needs enhanced and supported community. The people in the early Church did not have the individualist mindset that we have created and maintained in the West during the Enlightenment. In fact some elements of the way we experience community today would sound absurd to the people in the early Church. One small example would be taking thirty seconds to shake people's hands in the middle of a worship service. Some congregations go so far as to label this time a "Time of Fellowship" in their bulletins. The early church may or may not have taken time to shake hands, but this is certainly not what the writers of the Bible considered "fellowship." "Fellowship" in Acts 2 (koinonia in the Greek) involves living life together, sharing possessions, and meeting needs, not just shaking hands. "Fellowship" was a lifestyle, not a few seconds during a church service.

The early Church is certainly not a model of a perfect community. People have told me many times, "If you ever find the perfect church, don't join it because you'll ruin it." There is no such thing as a perfect church. Shortly after Pentecost, already filled with the Holy Spirit, the Greek believers complained of discrimination by the Jewish believers. If there were problems on this scale in the early Church, surely our churches today will have problems.

12/31/05

Katie still wasn't feeling too well tonight after just giving birth. Josh was home from Grandma's house and Zach was awake and crying on and off, so this really didn't feel like New Year's Eve. Katie celebrated by going to bed early and I celebrated by trying to read a bit before feeding Zach next. This is what it's like to grow up, huh? Can't wait until our kids grow up a bit so I can regress! Anyway, I've been reflecting on the day. Josh had been having crying fits in the afternoon. The day was overwhelming him. Too much change. Too much adjusting. So Katie, Josh and I were sitting on the couch trying to calm Josh down. Katie asked, "What's wrong, Josh?" He cried, "No." I, being the wonderful father I am, asked, "Josh, what's wrong?" (Surely he must understand the question when it's asked that way!) Still crying, he said, "No." So Katie asked him, "What would help you to feel better." He stopped whimpering just long enough to look her in the eye and answer, "Cookie." And he got a cookie.

Imperfection, however, is not an excuse to remain complacent. When the problem arose in the early Church the apostles chose men who were filled with the Holy Spirit to step in and help resolve the problem. They took appropriate steps to care for the Greek widows. They created change to address the problems. There are very real problems in our churches today; to simply blow off the problems and accuse believers of leaving to find the perfect congregation is to neglect the greater community.

## Enlightenment Individualism

As much as Christians struggled through the Enlightenment against the “evils” of Modernity, many of these values still crept their way into the Church. Christians all over the Western world became, among other things, very individualistic. “It’s just you and me,” sings one popular Christian artist in a “praise and worship” song. Coincidentally this song is sung during corporate worship at concerts and church services where people are supposedly gathering *together* to worship *together*. We sing, “I love you Lord,” not “We love you Lord.” And church leaders encourage or even mandate that the members of their flocks practice “daily quiet times.”

A “quiet time” is generally a time where a person sits alone with God to pray and read the Bible, usually early in the morning. The idea itself is not new; people in Scripture went off alone to pray. Jesus himself did this. Yet to mandate that a person must rise early each day to spend time in prayer and Bible reading is a product of the Modern Era.



Bible reading in particular falls into this category. Before Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in 1455, only the very wealthy and a few religious leaders had copies of Scripture. Often an entire town shared

one copy of a Bible. People did not retreat to an empty space to read the Bible each day. This was simply not possible. Instead, the entire community would come together to read the Bible.

This does not mean that individuals today should not read the Bible. Modernity has given us the gift of technology, through which we can each have multiple Bibles in different translations. We can exchange notes and discoveries through the Internet. We can listen to Bible teachers from nearly anywhere in the world. We should not neglect this gift. I am in no way implying that reading the Bible as individuals is a bad thing. I am merely pointing out that this is a new idea. We should not, however, read the Bible as individuals at the neglect of reading the Bible as a community.

I have been to a fair number of “Bible-believing” churches where the people critique the Roman Catholic Church because Roman Catholics do not read their Bibles. And to a degree I share this critique – many Roman Catholic believers I talk with admit that they don’t know their Bibles well (though this is changing due to some new efforts of the Church). On the other hand, Roman Catholics read a fairly lengthy passage from the Old Testament, another from the New Testament, a Psalm, and a passage from the Gospels each week. Those who attend daily Mass read Bible passages daily. But they read these passages together as a community.

1/1/06

Overall Josh just wasn’t having a good day today. I think he was a bit jealous of Zachary. He needed to know that he still has the same relationship with Katie and me that he had before. But even though we love Josh as much as ever, that relationship has changed somewhat. This reality is not acceptable to him. He is challenging us and testing us. We normally punish him for throwing anything other than balls in the house, and so today Josh would pick things like our telephone and stare us in the eyes while throwing the phone as hard as he could. Or Katie would ask him to do something and he would just ignore her. He would pretend not to hear right up to the point that Katie would tell him he was going in timeout, then he would come running and crying, “No, no no!” But he still plays with us, and he still laughs and jumps on us and hugs us and tells us he loves us when he’s not having these fits. We expect that he’ll be like this quite a bit for awhile. He’s adjusting to life as a big brother, and he’s approaching his twos at the same time. That apparently is not a fun combination.

Roman Catholics are continuing a practice from the early church that many Bible-centered churches unfortunately neglect, often without even realizing it. Many Bible-centered churches read at most a short passage of Scripture and then listen to a long sermon about the passage. Sometimes no Scripture will be read at all at these “Bible centered” churches. There will simply be a lengthy sermon based on Scripture. And while these sermons are often very good and are indeed based on Scripture, it is Scripture, not a pastor’s commentary on Scripture, that is “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Many Christians are excellent at individual prayer and Bible reading, but most instances of prayer and Bible reading in Scripture are described as corporate activities. Jesus taught that, “Where two or three have gathered together in my name I am there in their midst” (Matthew 18:20). This does not mean that he is absent when I pray on my own, but it does imply that God desires us to live out our faith, including prayer, within community. As the writer of Hebrews instructs, do not neglect meeting together in community.

## Church Community

Some readers will immediately jump to incorrect conclusions about what “community” means. When Hebrews commands us not to neglect meeting together, the writer does not add “at church” or “on Sunday morning.” Nor does the Bible ever instruct people to “go to church.” We, Christians, *are* the Church. Church is not something we go to. Church is not an event. The Church is our identity as believers.



Most Christians acknowledge that the Church is the people, yet we still talk about “going to church.”

I have had an interest in church planting for quite some time. Most church planters, including those who train people to plant churches,

understand this idea that a church is the people. Church planters therefore work hard to gather a strong core group of people, a strong community, before launching a new congregation.

The mistake I feel many church planters make, however, is that once this core group is together, the focus shifts almost entirely to planning Sunday morning worship services. Leaders study demographics to determine the best musical style, the way leaders should dress, how much childcare to provide, etc, all for Sunday morning worship services. Once that momentum builds, people forget that there is more to church than Sunday morning (and perhaps small group events).

The mindset we have created by focusing so much on Sunday morning worship services has played right into the danger of what people are calling “consumer Christianity.” There are dozens of church congregations people can choose from. How do they decide what church to join, if any church at all? They show up on Sunday morning and judge the music style, the preaching, and a few other lesser details. If these do not meet their taste, they go somewhere else. Or, if they have exhausted all the local possibilities, they either “settle” for something that does not satisfy or stop attending altogether. Some people will travel long distances to attend a church service with good music or good preaching. *If church leadership places a vast majority of its emphasis on Sunday morning worship, why would people who attend the churches do or think differently?* The event-driven model has created and reinforced the consumer mindset.

6/2/06

I've been trying to spend significantly more time with Zach lately. Not that I had been neglecting him or anything, but he's hitting an age where he enjoys being thrown in the air and rolled over and things. So I was teaching Zach to roll over today. I would roll him onto his stomach and back again, and he would laugh. This was a wonderful new game. On the stomach. On the back. On the stomach. On the back. Could this possibly get old? Ever? Anyway, as I was playing, I realized Josh had become a bit quieter than he had been. I looked over to see him lying in Zach's little play area, lying on his back and pulling on a rattle just like Zach does, only with a sad look on his face. Katie saw it at the same time I did, and it broke our hearts! His face told the entire story. “Daddy is starting to play with Zach instead of me.” I think life with two children just become significantly more difficult.



What would happen if we kept the primary focus of our church congregations on the community and on relationships among people? This does not mean, of course, that we stop worshipping together on Sunday morning (or



whenever); rather, our worship times are just a small portion of the many times that we come together as a community. Our congregants would actually get to know one another. We would eat together (remember how important food is), play together, grieve together, worship together, pray together, read Scripture together, and live our entire lives together. Visitors would be welcomed into a church *community* instead of into our Sunday morning event.

What if the first time a visitor attends a “church” it is at a party instead of at a worship service? I can almost guarantee that when a visitor meets the people of a congregation and gets to know and love them, they will end up attending the Sunday morning worship services if for no other reason than to be with friends. They will not care what the musical style is or how good the preaching is – they will come to worship their God with their friends.

We need to take a close look at our focus to see if it truly matches what Scripture teaches about church. When we do this, we must be careful to see what Scripture *says* instead of looking in Scripture for what we already *think* it says. For many church leaders, such an honest and diligent study will yield many uncomfortable surprises.

**1/6/07**

**Josh:**

**“Grandma, can you get something for me please?”**

**Grandma:**

**“Sure, honey. What do you want me to get for you?”**

**Josh:**

**“Can you get Zach out of my way?”**

## Gather Together

The Bible tells us frequently, in the Old Testament and the New, to gather together. Community is vital, and coming together for prayer, worship, praise, Bible reading, feasts, and other activities helps us to thrive in abundant life.

The Bible, however, never commands us to become members of an existing 501(c)(3) organization.

I went through many years without being a member of an existing church congregation. I still spent quite a bit of time with other believers. I prayed both alone and with people. I studied the Bible alone and with people. I sang to God. I had close friends who were Christians. I worshipped and praised God. I did all the things I would have done at a church, but I did them outside of an existing church setting. During that time I had dozens of people explain to me that I needed to attend a church. When I asked why, they usually explained that I needed the fellowship of other believers in corporate worship. So I complied and I attended a church. And nearly every time I did so, I had some variation of the same experience. I showed up, the pews filled up (or not), there was an opening song, and some announcements. Then the praise band (or organist) led us in singing a few songs, followed by the long awaited “fellowship” – all the people shook hands for thirty seconds. Then I listened to a sermon and



sang the gratuitous “closing song.” As the song ended the pastor gave a benediction and I watched roughly eighty-percent of the congregation race for the doors. At some of these church services a handful of friendly people said hello to me and told me how glad they were that I was there. After attending for a few weeks that was usually as close as I would get to people – thirty seconds of handshakes and some friendly smiles after the service.

2/1/07

**Zach fell and hurt himself today. Nothing serious, just a little bump on the head, but he cried like mad. As soon as Zach started crying, Josh went over to the couch, grabbed Zach's blanket and brought it to him. They are incredibly good to each other!**

If I said anything to my “critics,” I was met with something along the lines of, “Well of course! You can’t expect to know anyone without getting more involved in the church. Attend some small groups and then you’ll get to know people.” So the main reason I need to attend church in the first place is for fellowship, but I don’t get fellowship by going to church. I get fellowship by attending small groups. But I already had my own “small groups,” so why attend church?

In hindsight, my reasons for leaving the organized church in the first place were in part immaturity and in part living as a post-Modern person, immersed in post-Modern culture, and attending churches that were fighting against my culture in order to maintain Modern values and ideals. This topic is one I love to discuss but falls far outside the scope of this book. I encourage church leaders, though, to research post-Modern culture (“culture,” not necessarily “philosophy”) in order to discover some of the good that comes from it instead of focusing only on the evils of this culture. When church leaders are able to engage the people of this culture effectively, churches will be filled with the twenty and thirty-year-olds who have abandoned the church.

The word translated into English as “church” is “ekklesia,” meaning “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly” (Strong’s number 1577). The word can also mean, “the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth” (Strong). An ekklesia, or church, by definition is a gathering of Christians in some public place, regardless of whether that gathering is part of a denomination, owns a building, has a full-time paid pastor, or has a choir or music team.

Recall the description of the early church. People are quick to find “proof texts,” verses that “prove” the validity of ideas, to show that the current model of church is the Biblical model. Most denominations do things differently, however, and most



can “prove” from Scripture that their way is the only right way using proof texts. If dozens of denominations and congregations do things differently and each one is “proving” from Scripture that their way is the best or the right way, someone must be wrong.

I suggest that careful study does not involve finding a verse somewhere in Scripture to prove that what your church does is right. Instead, consider what other possibilities might be valid according to Scripture. Find out what your congregation does or teaches that violates Scripture. Study Scripture to find out what your congregation fails to do. Instead of examining Scripture to find out what Sunday morning worship should look like, find out what the Church looked like as a whole. Was the focus of the early Church primarily Sunday morning worship services?

Many church congregations today, especially but not exclusively within the megachurch movement, encourage or even mandate small group attendance. Some churches even measure the health of the congregation by the percentage of members who attend small groups. Church leaders today recognize that attendance on Sunday morning is not sufficient for spiritual growth, that more is needed, and that life-changing community that does not exist on Sunday morning can be found in small groups.

Instead of asking why people do not grow by only attending on Sunday morning, or more importantly why church members do not naturally gather together and form relationships outside of Sunday morning, churches merely go on insisting that the current model is the only acceptable model and they continue attempting to meet these additional needs through additional attendance requirements. We have a flawed solution to a bigger problem.

Instead of one large community coming together to worship God, we have created a system where a bunch of individuals come together to worship with barely any interaction.



**4/9/07**

**Something fun and new happened this morning during the early morning ritual. Katie and I usually wake up to either Zach screaming bloody murder or Josh yelling, "Maaameeeeeeee!" over and over until one of us goes into the room. This morning was the latter. Josh called out two times, "Maaameeeeeeee!" The third time he got as far as "Maaaa..." and then coughed. As Josh had his coughing fit, Zach finished, "meeeee."**

We then meet together in smaller groups, so members of a thousand-member congregation get to know a dozen or so people. The youth are not involved so we create a youth group. Singles are struggling so we supplement their need with a singles ministry. We have men's groups, women's groups, twelve-step support groups, MOPS groups, groups for retired people, and small groups to meet every need. Each of these small groups is filled with people who are convinced that church still revolves around Sunday morning.

This solution segregates people. Young people spend time with other young people. Singles spend time with singles. The elderly spend time with the elderly. Young parents spend time with other young parents. Then all these segregated groups come together for the "highlight" of the church – Sunday morning worship. During worship these people mostly sit as spectators, usually enjoying thirty to sixty seconds of "fellowship" where they say hello to one another, shake hands, and perhaps greet visitors.

The young people rarely get to know the elderly. The young parents rarely get to know older and more experienced parents. The singles see church as a social club where they can meet other Christian singles and find a date. Singles fail to learn about the difficulties of married life because they do not spend time with married people; they are too busy meeting with the singles group.

I am not saying that this system never works. I am, however, saying that this system may not be addressing the problem. I am suggesting that maybe we, the individualistic Modern Western church, have our priorities backwards. I am suggesting that perhaps church leaders need to study Scripture with an open mind to see what *else* the church could look like apart from the current structure.

Many people have written books critiquing this model of Church and suggesting other solutions. I do not intend to duplicate this work. My goal in this book is not to advocate, nor to critique, these authors' ideas. I merely suggest that now, especially during our transition to a post-Modern world, we have an incredible opportunity to reexamine the structure that we cling to. We should, at the very least, ask ourselves some challenging questions. I suggest that perhaps much of what we do comes more from a Modern Western worldview intermingled with Scripture than from Scripture by itself. I suggest that we have flexibility to shift the focus of our congregations away from Sunday morning while still making Sunday morning worship even more powerful than it already is and while obeying the ideas Scripture presents for the Church.

Most of all, I am suggesting that we focus primarily on community that leads to Shalom in our churches and allow Sunday morning to become a secondary, though still very important, focus. It is this community, not an hour on Sunday, not a sermon, not a musical style, that leads to abundant life.

## Escaping the Ghetto

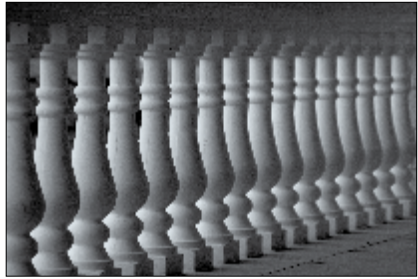
When I write about community I am not promoting what some have labeled "the Christian ghetto." A ghetto is defined as, "an isolated or segregated group or area."<sup>1</sup> We should not isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul commands people to avoid believers who are living blatantly sinful lives, but he adds, "I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:10). The Bible tells us to engage the people of the world, not to avoid them.

Perhaps some confusion is created by the word "holy." To be "holy" means to be "set apart."<sup>2</sup> This does not mean, however, that we are set apart by keeping to ourselves. "Holy" means dedicated or consecrated to God.

6/22/07

Things I never thought I'd say:  
 "No, Josh. Your brother's head is not a steering wheel. Please do not steer your brother's ears."

We can and should be set apart (dedicated to God) while in the midst of the world.



Instead, some people attend a church service at least once on Sunday, a small group on Tuesday, evening worship on Wednesday, a prayer meeting on Friday, and a church picnic on Saturday followed by a church coffeehouse in the evening. We listen only to Christian music, have lunch only with our Christian coworkers, read only Christian books, and watch only Christian movies. We spend our lives doing safe Christian things with Christian people at Christian venues. These things are not bad in and of themselves; they become bad only when in doing these things we end up hiding in our Christian bubble and neglecting the world.

N.T. Wright suggests, “The church is not made so that there can be a safe ghetto into which people can run and escape from the world, but so that God can shine out his light into the world, exposing (among other things) the ways in which the world has structured itself into darkness.”<sup>3</sup> Many Christians have, unfortunately, retreated to the safety of the ghetto, avoiding the dangers of the world at all cost.

Christianity is not meant to be safe. You would not know this from paying attention to Christian media. We have radio stations that gain listeners by being “safe for the whole family.” We have our own music industry and our own television stations so we can keep ourselves from the “corruption” of the secular world. (We rarely realize how corrupt these “Christian” industries can be!) We have pastors and lay people warning one another against ever stepping foot in a bar. Perhaps less mature believers should not hang out in bars. If so, the job of pastors should not be to keep such people out of bars, but to lead these people to maturity.

Is it wrong to desire safety? I suggest that when safety becomes an overarching value that defines how we live out our Christian faith, then yes, it is wrong. Obviously, desiring to stay safe is not bad. Turning

on music that we know will not corrupt our young children's minds is a good idea, especially if that music will help our children think about the Lord. Some people, many alcoholics, for example, need to stay out of bars or they will fall into a lifestyle of drunkenness. But as Paul asks, "How will they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" I will add, who will preach to them when Christians are busy escaping to the safety of the ghetto?

My wife and I generally don't watch much television. (This is not for any deeply theological reason; we simply have other interests that take our time and so we don't want to pay the money for cable television.) Every once in awhile, however, there is something I really want to watch. I am a big ice hockey fan. Shortly after Katie and I were first married, the Olympic hockey finals were approaching. I hadn't been able to watch any of the games to that point, and I was a bit sad that I wouldn't be able to watch the finals either. So Katie surprised me and brought me to a local sports bar so I could see the game.

The game was in the middle of the afternoon, so the bar was fairly empty with less than a dozen people there. None of these people were there to watch hockey. I love watching people, and I think I watched these dozen or so men just as much as I watched the game. They all knew one another very well. They laughed together. They cared about one another. I heard questions like, "How is your wife feeling?" and "Have any job leads yet?" One guy came in a half hour or so after I got there and it was like a scene from the television show *Cheers* where they all shout, "Norm!" I could almost hear the theme song in the background, "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came." The guy sat at the bar, greeted his friends, and then ordered a round of drinks for everyone, including my wife and me, total strangers. He welcomed us into their community.



I remember realizing three things that day. First, these people are *not* there primarily to drink; they are there for the community. Their community simply focuses on alcohol the way



our church communities focus on worship. I am not advocating this; I am merely pointing out that these people are there first and foremost for community, not alcohol.

Second, this scene models what our churches should look like. I rarely find community as tight and as accepting as this in the churches I have visited. (I have no doubt this sense of community exists in a large number of churches, but I don't see it often in my travels.) And the people in this bar have obviously not found that sort of community in churches either, or they would not have felt the need to go to a bar and drink in order to experience it.

6/29/07

The three boys were with Katie's parents today. At one point Tim began crying, but his grandma was in the other room changing Josh's diaper. So Zach came in and announced, "Timothy crying." She answered him, "Okay, thank you, honey. I'm changing Josh's diaper, and as soon as I'm done I'll go help Tim." That seemed to satisfy Zach for a little while. He went back to where Tim was, but his grandma did not return quickly enough for his taste. So Zach returned with a very insistent voice, saying, "TIMOTHY CRYING!"

I don't mean that people in churches are unfriendly or unwelcoming. I do mean, however, that the friendliness in many churches is very surfacy. The level of acceptance in churches is often much less than the level of acceptance I found in that sports bar. Friendliness is not community.

Many churches "love" people no matter who they are, but fewer churches "accept" or "like" people however they are. We sing, "Come Just As You Are," and too often we mean, "Come as you are so that we can change you." In other words, "Even though you know you are not worthy of us, come anyway and we will help you become worthy of us."

I have experienced an unspoken sentiment where, "We love you just as you are, and we will help you to change to become like us so that we can accept you as well." A "mature" Christian is often a Christian who looks and acts like the rest of the congregation. In Bible-centered churches, maturity is often measured by how well a person knows

the Bible. In other circles, maturity is measured by the amount of time people spend in small groups or service projects, while other groups measure maturity by the way people dress, the activities they avoid, or the music they listen to. This mindset implies that until I appear and behave like the community, I am not good enough as I am to be fully embraced in the community. They love me, but only after I become like them will they accept me.

We should be striving to become more like Jesus, and our community should help us on our journey. Yet we also need a community that truly loves us *and accepts us* the way we are now; we need friends who will help us grow and will accept us even when we don't change. To be just a bit cliché, we need a place "where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came."<sup>4</sup>

Third, I realized what an incredible opportunity it would be for Christians to hang out in bars. What would happen if Christians would step out of the ghetto and hang out in bars? We would become part of these communities. We could listen to these people's stories. They would listen to our stories. They would see that we have hope that transcends anything they have ever experienced. Over time they would see that the love and joy of Christ transcends any love or joy they have ever experienced in the bar or anywhere else in their lives. This does not mean go into bars simply to invite "those poor drunks" into our ghetto because our ghetto is better than theirs. Rather, this means investing in people's lives, sometimes grieving as we watch them get inebriated, often grieving as we hear their stories, sometimes driving people home safely to their families, and opening ourselves up to share our own pains and trials. When we show people the love of Christ on this level, I cannot imagine that lives won't be changed in ways that would never happen simply by handing them a tract on their

**6/8/07**

**We visited my aunt and uncle today. They have a decent size pool in their yard, so the boys were swimming and playing. At one point Josh found a small shovel, scooped some water out of the pool, and dumped it on Zach's head. Zach got a bit upset, but controlled himself. Instead of screaming, Zach waited strategically for the right moment, walked over to the toy box, grabbed the biggest shovel he could find, scooped as much water as he could out of the pool, and dumped the whole thing on Josh's head.**

way out of the bar or inviting them into our Christian coffeehouse.

Will Christians be tempted to get drunk in this type of ministry? Of course this is a possibility, though I doubt it would happen nearly as often as many critics would suggest. This is not a “safe” ministry. But, remember, Christianity will not always be safe! I, for one, would rather stand before the Lord and confess that yes, I got drunk a few times than stand before the Lord to confess that dozens of people who could have become disciples lived and died in the bars because I did not leave my safe communities to interact with them. God certainly does not want me to be drunk, but I suggest he is much more concerned about people’s souls than he is about my individual sins, sins that Jesus died for and forgave.

Please do not misunderstand – I am not at all advocating drunkenness or saying that individual sins do not matter. They do. God does care about these things. But he cares much more about people. The two main sins that led to the exile of the Israelite people were not simply broken commandments. The themes that are repeated over and over by the prophets were first that the people worshipped other gods, and second that people mistreated other people. And in the New Testament, Jesus focused much more on rebuking the Pharisees for legalism than on condemning other sinful behaviors. Again, this does not excuse us to sin. But we need to ask ourselves whether we are focusing so much on avoiding sin that we are neglecting the people God desires us to love into the Kingdom.

In this post-Christian culture, simply inviting people to our churches is generally no longer an effective form of evangelism, especially when



our churches are clinging so tightly to Modern values and cultural practices. We need to be out in the world. Jesus sent us out into the world to make disciples, teaching that the fields are ripe but the workers are few. We need to obey and

leave our safety zones to serve God faithfully by loving the people he is trying to draw to himself. We should not do this work at the neglect of our own communities, but our own communities should not become safe places to escape from the world.

## Technology and Community

Technology is creating quite a controversy within the Western Church. As of 2009, teenagers send and receive an average of nearly eighty text messages each day.<sup>5</sup> People are constantly connected through technology. At the same time, Sarah Kershaw describes a fairly new phenomenon among teens: teens are constantly hugging one another. Guys hugging guys, girls hugging girls, guys hugging girls. One teen claimed, “If somebody were to not hug someone, to never hug anybody, people might be just a little wary of them and think they are weird or peculiar.”<sup>6</sup> Teens are all about community, and they are in community both online and in person.

One problem with this trend is that there is never any break from any given community. Family members are always connected by cell phones; when teens are out with friends, their parents are still right there with them, virtually at least. When these teens are home spending time with their families, they are still interacting with other friends. While there are certainly advantages to these new relational trends, a disadvantage is that teens have a hard time being fully present with any given community. Perhaps a bigger problem is that this trend does not stop with teens, but is also true of their parents. Parents are texting, checking and sending business emails even during dinner. “Family time” is no longer exclusively time for just the family; it is time where the family is together in person but the individual family



members are partially connected to one another and partially connected to their friends and colleagues.<sup>7</sup>

Although I am a huge advocate of online connection and creating community through technology, I embrace both extremes. Stay connected, but find appropriate times to “go offline.” Dare to be countercultural in this area. Let time with specific friends really be time with those specific friends instead of interacting with two or three (or more) groups of friends at once. Let time with family be devoted to family. Let business and other communities wait, even if just for an hour. Embrace your virtual communities and let them strengthen, not hinder, our face-to-face relationships.

Cell phones allow us the freedom to be connected to nearly anyone at nearly any time. Embrace the advantages of technology, but remember that our phones and computers also have “off” buttons. Use them, even for a short time, to strengthen relationships with the people you are with in person.

4/10/11

We finally had a nice warm spring day, so we took the boys to the playground. The girls across the street were there too. One of them is around Zach's age and another one is around Tim's age. The oldest girl loves flowers, particularly dandelions, and she was walking around looking at them. I asked Zach what he thought of the flowers. He answered, “I don't know.” His tone of voice, however, told me exactly what he thought. “Flowers are for girls.” I told him that Ava likes flowers and explained how nice it would be for him to pick a flower and give it to Ava. He wanted no part of it. And granted, that's probably not something Batman would normally do. And if Batman wouldn't do it, why should he be bothered? Anyway, after some more prodding he surprised me and picked a flower. He picked it up, looked at it for a moment, then looked at me as if to ask, “Okay, what now?” “Go give it to Ava,” I prompted. “It will make her very happy.” So he walked slowly over to Ava. She look up at him and he slowly held out his hand with the flower. I proudly witnessed his first romantic moment. The moment ended abruptly, though, as he got an annoyed, gruff voice and insisted, “Here!”



# THE ART OF SHALOM

CHAPTER 6: INTERACTION WITH GOD



## Chapter 6: Interaction With God

As Bono sings, “If you want to kiss the sky, better learn how to kneel.”<sup>1</sup> (On your knees, boy!) Prayer is essential to abundant life. However, I refrain from calling this section “Prayer” because of the numerous misunderstandings and preconceptions about what prayer is.

Prayer is not simply talking to God. Nor is prayer a prewritten litany to be recited. Prayer does not have to be beautiful and does not need to be spoken in Old English. Any of these *can* be prayer, but prayer is much bigger than any of these.

I define prayer as interaction with God. I say “interaction” because other words imply verbal conversation. Prayer transcends words. In addition, “interaction” is two-way; we talk to God, and God talks to us as well.

My wife and I can (and do) talk about anything. Yet there are many times when we are together merely sitting in silence with one another. We enjoy these times as much as we enjoy the times we spend talking with one another. Many years ago I heard a sermon where the pastor said he knew he was in love with his wife when the two of them were together with nothing to say to one another. They just sat in silence enjoying one another’s company.<sup>2</sup> The same is true of our relationship



with God. When we are truly intimate with God, we can sit with God in silence and enjoy each other.

Without interaction with God, each of the other elements of life becomes stale and useless. Receiving the breath of God but neglecting interaction with God leads to lifelessness. Work, community, and food (in all their literal and metaphorical meanings), without interaction with God, lead at best to dead religious observances. Church congregations can



[Back to October 2004  
Josh is an infant]

One of my favorite things lately has been when I pick Josh up and he ends up nuzzling his head into my neck to sleep.

enjoy all the typical church functions. Christians can attend Christian events with Christian people, listen to Christian music, even speak in tongues of angels, and still be on spiritual life-support. Christians can read the Bible, practice a form of prayer, attend church regularly and still fail to live the abundant life Jesus

promised. Without *all* of the elements working together, people will not experience the fullness of life.

## Interaction in the Garden

Interaction with God obviously involves verbal communication at times as well as silence. Too often, though, prayer is merely an individual or community rattling off a wish list to God as if God were a giant, invisible genie waiting to obey our commands. Or, worse yet, we don't actually believe that God will even listen to us – we merely list our desires without expecting God to respond at all. People and communities all through Scripture talked to God and expressed their desires to God. However, talking to God is just a small piece of what prayer is.

Prayer is *communication* with God. The Bible suggests that marriage is an illustration of God's relationship with the Church. If I communicate with my wife by constantly talking to her and never listening to her, the

4/05

Josh is also hitting the dangerous and awkward age where he repeats everything we say. Neither my wife nor I use very much foul language. However, every once in awhile we catch ourselves saying something a bit more "mature" than things he should be saying. My wife, for example, uses the word "hell" every now and then, as in "What the hell do they think they're doing?" She never really considered it to be swearing until I insisted that it is swearing in that context. I, on the other hand, picked up the word "crap" somewhere along the line and use it fairly regularly. ("Oh, crap! I forgot my wallet.") It's amazing how having children makes you aware of all these little things that you never noticed before! We've begun to wonder if our vocabulary will result in a scene in pre-k where Josh suddenly yells out, "Oh crap! Who the hell stole my crayon?" Needless to say, our vocabulary has been changing.

marriage will be disastrous. This is especially true if the only things I say to her are requests for her to do things for me. Of course I ask her to do things for me now and then, but that does not characterize our communication. She also asks me to do things for her, and I usually do them.



But more important, we tell each other about our day, our hopes, our fears, cute things the boys did, and how we crave ice cream. We banter playfully. We sit together in silence. And yes, we occasionally argue. This is the metaphor that God chooses to use to show us how to relate to him.

If you look at the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2, you will find numerous instances of the phrase “God said.” Pay particular attention to how often this phrase is used of God talking directly to Adam and Eve. From the very beginning God talked with people. He does not just sit in heaven listening to us tell him what we want – he communicates with us. He talks to us. This interaction with God is part of Shalom.

According to Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sinned, Adam and Eve heard God walking in the Garden (what did *that* sound like?) and they hid. God called out, “Where are you?” Adam told God that he hid because he was naked. God answered with two questions, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

5/10/05

Josh has been singing constantly lately. When he's awake in his crib, he sings. He sings when we're changing his diaper, when he's walking around, when he's playing, pretty much all the time. He started singing a beautiful new song today. It went, “da - dee, da - dee, da - dee, da - dee, da - dee, da - dee, da - dee...” Katie said he's singing my praises. I like that! A new favorite.

Did God ask, “Where are you?” because he did not know where they were? If God is omniscient and omnipresent then of course God knew where to find the two humans. And of course he already knew exactly how Adam and Eve realized they were naked;

he knew they had eaten the forbidden fruit. So why did he ask?

God was not asking questions to seek information. He was communicating with Adam and Eve. He was, among other things, giving them the opportunity to confess their sin and repent. He is not a distant God merely running the world. He is a personal God, desiring interaction even with sinful human beings.

Most sermons on Genesis 1 and 2 focus on the debate over creation and evolution. This is a very Modern reading of the story. The Enlightenment shifted the focus of these chapters to a discussion about science and faith. The original intent of these chapters was not to provide a scientific account of how God made the world. (I am not necessarily affirming or denying the accuracy of this account; I am merely stating that this was not the intent of the author.)

The gods of the ancient world were generally distant. Most gods cared little, if at all, for humans. Most creation accounts present the earth as the result of a cosmic battle or accident. When Moses wrote down his account,\* his goal was not to tell us scientifically how God created the world. He was contrasting the Lord to all the other gods of the day.<sup>3</sup> The Lord is not some distant being; he created the world quite intentionally with human beings in mind. That God conversed with Adam and Eve is a powerful statement about God. Our God is not a distant god. He is a God who desires intimacy with humans. He desires conversation with us.

God has not changed; he still desires intimacy with us. Our prayer life must reflect this intimacy. We must avoid the temptation to “pray” in the sense of merely listing our desires to God. We must pray by listening, by enjoying God’s presence in silence, by telling God about our day *and* asking how his day has been. We must practice two-way conversation.

6/18/05

I was leaving for work and said goodbye to Josh. He waited until I was halfway down the stairs and shouted “da-DEE... I love you!” That was one of the most memorable and awesome things he’s done for me so far!

\* There is, of course, debate about Moses’ authorship, especially of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. My intention is not to take sides on this debate. I am using the traditional views of authorship throughout this book to simplify the point I am making. The argument still holds even if Genesis was written later in history by various authors.

## God Wants to Answer Our Prayers

I remember being downstairs in my apartment as an undergrad trying to study for an exam. I was a bit stressed out and was having a difficult time concentrating. To top it off, a neighbor who was parked right outside my window was having trouble starting his car. I kept hearing the engine turn over and over and over and over. This went on for some ridiculous amount of time. I kept thinking to myself, “Your car is dead! Give up already so I can concentrate!” But he kept trying, and the engine kept churning relentlessly. I was getting more and more frustrated and was having even more trouble studying. Finally, out of sheer desperation and annoyance, I blurted out halfheartedly, “God, *please* start that guy’s car for him!” The car started *immediately*. When I heard the car running, all I could do was pray. To say I was surprised is an understatement. I was utterly shocked.

9/4/05

I was outside talking with some neighbors today and Josh was standing there with me. I was in my usual casual pose - hands in my pockets, slouched just a bit. One of the neighbors whispered, “Look at him.” I looked over and there was Josh, hands in his pockets with just a little bit of a slouch. I’m glad I could teach him such wonderful posture without any effort!

I have heard more than one lecturer teach, “God doesn’t change our circumstances; he changes people in those circumstances.” Indeed, God does send us into certain circumstances in order to change us. But when and why did the Church stop believing that God changes circumstances?

Why when we pray do we fail to expect a response? Why do we pray the “easy” prayers (“God, please comfort Jim because he has a cold,” or “God please give the doctors wisdom to treat Maria’s cancer”) and avoid the “hard” prayers (“God, please heal Maria completely of cancer”)?

6/24/05

Katie was playing the prelude for a wedding on the piano today. She finished a song and while everyone else was sitting quietly, Josh started clapping and yelling, “Yeeeeaaaaaaa!”

Perhaps in the midst of Modernity with all its advances in medicine and science we have forgotten that

God is better at healing people than doctors. Modern medicine is a blessing; God gave us doctors, and we should certainly visit them when necessary. I suggest, however, that far too many Christians, especially in wealthy Western countries, have forsaken faith in God because we idolize science and medicine. I am not just talking about Creasters (Christmas and Easter Christians) and backslidden believers here – I am talking about a vast majority of the Church.

Roughly half a year ago I had lunch with a friend who asked me how many people I know who I would consider men or women of prayer. He wanted to know how many people I know who I would go to when I needed prayer because when that person prays I expect God to respond. These are not just people who pray; these are people who are obviously pursuing God and have prayers answered regularly. I answered that I'm sure I know a couple people who fit that description, but I would have to think about it a bit. In hindsight I did come up with two or three names, but it took some thinking. My answer, my friend told me, was much more optimistic than most people he had asked. Most people thought briefly and answered, "I can't think of anyone."

This phenomenon is, unfortunately, nothing new; even people in the early church were surprised when God answered prayer. Early in the life of the Church Peter was arrested (Acts 12). While he sat in prison, a group of Jesus' disciples gathered in a house to pray for him. Peter was miraculously released from prison by an angel. He returned to the house and knocked on the door. A servant girl opened the door and was so excited to see Peter that she slammed the door in his face! She ran into the other room and told the others while Peter waited outside. The response of these faithful prayer warriors was not rejoicing or praising God for Peter's

9/5/05

Josh grabbed the mouse from my computer and started talking into it. After a brief conversation ("Um, imagotta splacy, boogeedle. Um, ..., no. Ha, ha, ha. Emconnagooble spooga."), he handed me the mouse and said, "Talk?" I took the mouse and in all my parental wisdom explained, "Well, see, here's the thing, Josh. This isn't a phone, it's a mouse. It's for the computer." My brilliant grown-up mind decided I would explain to my one-and-a-half year-old the difference between a telephone and computer peripherals. I handed the mouse back to him figuring he would just ignore me, but instead he handed it right back to me and insisted, "TALK!" So I did.

10/1/05

I have Josh counting, but he absolutely refuses to say "one." This started way back when he first began learning numbers. Ever since he was an infant I would hold him upright on the changing table and say "One, two, ..." and then as I said "three" I would lift him up as if he were jumping up in the air. Eventually he learned to count along - I would say, "One," and that was his cue to begin counting, so he would join me on "two, three." Once he was clearly counting along I would stop him. I would say, "One..." and he would say, "two..." I would stop and say, "No, no, we start with one." And he would say, "two..." And I would say "ONE...", and he would say, "TWO!" I guess "one" to him meant "begin counting and start from two." This has gone on ever since he could first say the numbers. At this point he knows very well that one comes first and he just refuses to say it. (I can't imagine where he gets his stubbornness from.) I decided to get a bit crafty. I started saying, "Ready? One, two, three..." This way the word "ready" would cue him instead of the word "one." So I say, "Ready..." and without any hesitation he says, "Two," and smiles at me. Lately I say, "Ready..." and he says, "two," and I say, "one," he says, "two," I say, "ONE," and he says, "TWO TWO TWO TWO TWO TWO TWO TWO!" We also count when we walk down stairs together. So I stood with him on the top step and said, "Ready?" He answered, "Ready." We took the first step. Silence. Then we took the second step and he started, "Two, three..." Ugh. Apparently this past weekend he was at Katie's parent's place and without realizing anyone was listening he was quietly saying, "One, one, one..." Yep, that's my boy.

release; instead, these men and women of God explained calmly and solemnly that Peter could not possibly be outside. He is in prison, not at our door. That's the reason we're praying for him, remember?



Throughout the Bible and the history of the Church the Lord has been answering prayer. James 5:17 reminds us, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months." When encouraging believers to ask for wisdom, James instructs us to "ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven

and tossed by the wind.” James also teaches, “You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” God desires to answer our prayers. Our job is to learn what the right motives are and then ask, believing that God answers prayer and that we will receive what we ask for.

## Listen

Remember Psalm 37:4 - “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.” Our role, then, is to desire God. When we are delighting ourselves in the Lord, our very desires will be from God. We can then ask God for anything we want and God will give it to us because what we want will be exactly what he wants.

A life characterized by desiring God, however, means that our prayers are not merely lists of things we desire. Our prayers must focus on God himself. The goal is to reach a place where we desire God more than anything else. When we desire God instead of material things, we will desire to know God intimately. The more intimately we know God, the more we will realize how much more of God there is to know. We will spend our lives thirsting for more and more of God. (Recall what Jesus taught about this thirst – this thirst will be satisfied.) Our prayer life shifts from lists of requests to conversation that leads to intimacy.

Conversation, remember, is two way. To know God more fully, we must spend time *listening* to God. Listening is how we gain intimacy with God.

In a class I teach at Pillar College I require students to participate in a “listening lab.”\* Students are required to leave the classroom and

10/10/05

Josh walked up to Katie this morning and said, “I Daddy.” Katie said, “Oh, you’re playing with Daddy, huh?” “Da,” he answered. (That’s Josh-ese for “yes”.) Katie asked, “You love Daddy, don’t you?” “Da,” Josh affirmed. It felt great. Then he added, “And shoes.” “Oh, you love Daddy and shoes?” “Da.”

\* *I wish I could claim to be the creator of this exercise, but students were doing this long before I began teaching. The exercise was created and used, to the best of my knowledge, by Dr. Garland Pollard.*

find a quiet place on campus where they sit and do nothing but listen for God's voice for forty-five minutes. Students are not permitted to talk to God, listen to music, sing, read the Bible, or anything else. They just listen.



For most students this exercise is painfully difficult, at least for the first several weeks. Throughout the semester, however, lives are literally transformed. I have had the privilege of seeing dozens of students come alive simply by making them spend time listening for God's voice.

We cannot, of course, dictate *when* God talks to us. What we do in this exercise is build a discipline of listening in silence. The more we practice listening for God's voice, the more frequently we will hear God's voice. And, although we cannot force God to talk to us, God usually respects our efforts and converses with us.

## Why all the Rules?

Many students have a very difficult time with the rules of this exercise until they are explained, especially the rules about reading the Bible and talking to God. If our goal is to hear from God, why in the world can't we read the Bible? Isn't that the way God speaks to us? And if we're practicing communicating with God, why can't we talk, especially if communication is two-way? Why can't we sing or listen to music? Isn't singing a form of prayer?

1/06/06

As we expected, Josh has been having a difficult time adjusting to this new life with a new little creature around. He doesn't like Zach getting too much attention, and he's been throwing fits for no apparent reason. Today after a couple fits, Katie and I were asking him what was wrong, with no answer. Katie asked him what would help him. After thinking a bit, he answered, "I pounce Daddy." So I got down on the floor and he pounced on me, and life was good again.



Most of these questions are answered fairly easily. In general the Modern Church has lost the art of listening to God. I am not at all suggesting that any of these other forms of prayer (singing, talking, reading, etc) are less spiritual than listening or that we should not do them. What I propose is that most of us neglect listening. One effective way to regain this discipline is simply to practice. If we include these other elements while we practice, we become easily distracted and fall quickly into what we know and are comfortable with, namely talking, singing, and reading rather than listening.

Listening can be uncomfortable, especially when we do not hear anything right away. Imagine if a pastor during a church service announced that the congregation was going to sit in silence for ten minutes and listen for God's voice. After about two minutes some people would already be very antsy. After five minutes the coughing and shuffling would be overwhelming. What if the congregation spent a full forty-five minutes doing this? How many people would return the next week knowing this was a regular practice? Granted, some would *love* the experience, but many would be uncomfortable to the point of leaving.

Rob Bell released a series of short films called *Nooma*. Each film is ten minutes of teaching using various metaphors to convey a deep spiritual message. One of these videos is called "Noise," dealing with our inability to be silent. After about three minutes of this ten minute film the screen goes black, and after a few seconds of "dead air" text appears providing some statistics about how little silence we experience in our culture. What strikes me most about this film is not the film itself but that inside the packaging the Nooma people wrote that they receive constant complaints about the film. People complain that they did not get their money's worth. They were paying for a ten minute film, but the film was only three minutes. The people watching the video about noise and silence would not sit through several *seconds* of silence to realize there was more to the film!

We, as the Church, need to reclaim our ability to embrace silence.

1/5/06  
Josh is really adjusting relatively well, though the change is obviously hard on him. This afternoon he walked up to Katie and looked up at her with big, sad eyes. He held up his arms and asked, "Hold tight?"

## Interaction in the Other Garden

I already mentioned that we cannot expect God to converse with us on demand as though he were a genie. There are times, however, when God does not talk to us at all, even for prolonged periods of time. All believers must endure these times, however difficult.

St. John of the Cross wrote about what he called the “dark night of the soul.” “This dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul, which purges it from its ignorances and imperfections, habitual natural and spiritual, and which is called by contemplatives infused contemplation, or mystical theology.” He calls this the “dark night” because it involves “affliction and torment.” The soul, according to St. John of the Cross, “must of necessity have pain and suffering.”<sup>4</sup> Prayer is vital, but prayer is not easy.

1/5/06

I gave Josh a bath this morning. He was all clean and playing happily in the water. I was sitting on the edge of the tub. At one point he started splashing a bit too much, and I complained, “Ugh, Josh, you’re getting me all wet.” Well, he thought that was a wonderful idea. So he did it again. And again. And I stopped reacting, which apparently took all the fun out of it. So the persistent little monster grabbed a handful of water and slapped me on the arm, dragging his wet hand as far across me as he could manage! And then he laughed. So, being the mature father, always ready to set a good example, I splashed him. And this was even more wonderful than splashing – his new game was to grab as much water as he could and slap his hand onto me, getting me as wet as he possibly could.

Mother Teresa wrote in her journal, “There is so much contradiction in my soul, such deep longing for God, so deep that it is painful, a suffering continual – yet not wanted by God, repulsed, empty, no faith, no love, no zeal.”<sup>5</sup> Mother Teresa apparently experienced *forty years* of silence from God!<sup>6</sup> We must not be surprised if we don’t hear God’s voice. God has not abandoned us.

Before the crucifixion, the gospels record that Jesus went with Peter, James and John into the garden called Gethsemane to pray. Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.” The disciples, of course, fell asleep. Jesus confronted them, then went to pray a second time, “My Father, if this



cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.” Finally Jesus “went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more.” Just after this third prayer, Judas showed up with soldiers to arrest him. I cannot help but wonder if Jesus would have continued repeating this same

prayer had the soldiers not arrived at that moment.

Most Christians focus on the disciple’s inability to stay awake in Jesus’ hour of need. There is another detail, however, that is profound but often overlooked. Why did Jesus pray basically the same prayer three times? Why wasn’t once enough? I suggest Jesus prayed the same prayer three times because each time he prayed he heard a loud, clear silence. If Jesus heard from God the first two times, he would not have prayed again. God apparently did not answer his own Son!

Many people are aware that Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Yet not many realize there were other times in Jesus’ life when he prayed and did not hear God’s voice. And if it happened to Jesus, surely it will happen to us.

God’s silence does not imply that we are unspiritual or immature. Great men and women of faith, along with Jesus himself, have heard the silence of God. The important thing is not to avoid silence, but to embrace God’s silence. What can we learn from this silence? How do we grow during this silence? How do we respond to the silence? How do we maintain faith that we will come through the silence to hear God’s voice once again?

**2/24/06**

**At one point Josh and I were playing and he charged at me. I grabbed him and fell backward so that he was tackling me. Instead of jumping up and running like he usually does, he just lay there on top of me. Eventually he rested his head against me so that my mouth was on his cheek near his ear. So I whispered softly, “Josh, I love you.” He gently whispered back, “I tackle.”**

## God Wants to Communicate with Me

Occasionally at the college students resent the requirement to take the class I mentioned earlier. A vast majority of students absolutely love the course, but every now and then a student feels that the course is beneath him or her. The student claims to already listen to God regularly, and the academic work



seems to be mere introductory work. While I concede that this may be true for an extremely small handful of students, the students whom I regard as potentially beyond the topics we cover usually love the course even more than other students. More often, the students who resent the course are students who truly need the course.

There is one particular student who comes to mind as a perfect illustration. This student was a pastor of a church, and as such he prayed regularly and heard from God regularly. He was familiar with a good deal of the theological ideas we raised in class. Almost weekly he asked if there was some way he could test out of the class because he did not feel he was growing.

9/10/06

I was in the boys' room today looking for clothes for Zach when Josh came in holding my MP3 player. "Here, Daddy, I brought this for you." I wasn't sure why he felt the need to take it from my desk and walk clear from one side of our condo to the other to bring me something I didn't ask for, but instead of questioning him I just said, "Oh, thank you, Buddy!" He held it out to me, but as I reached for it he yanked it away from me and ran down the hall as fast as he could, laughing the entire way.

I watched this particular student closely throughout the semester and discovered two very important (and somewhat disconcerting) trends. First, because this pastor "knew the answers" already, he was unwilling to ask questions. There were some areas where I felt he had quite a bit of room to grow, but he was unwilling to ask questions or admit that he could learn. Apparently he already understood God fully. I suspect that this pastor felt that asking questions implied that he either had doubt or was not mature enough to do his job well. On the

contrary, a leader who is unwilling to ask questions will not grow and will be *less* able to lead well, not more able.

Second, and even more disturbing to me, I paid close attention to what this student shared, particularly after returning from our listening time. As most students were sharing deep, life transforming conversations with the Lord, this pastor either remained silent or shared messages God had apparently given him to pass on to other students. While the possibility exists that this student simply heard intimate messages from God that he did not wish to share with others, I had a very strong feeling that this student was unwilling to listen to what God was telling him directly. He was filled with messages from God for others, but never once shared anything that God was telling him simply do develop the student's relationship with him. Even if the student was, in fact, hearing intimate messages from God and was not sharing them, this shows that the student was not willing to participate in the greater community of believers.

The temptation for many of us will be to do the very thing this student was doing. There will certainly be times now and then where God shares intimate ideas with us that are so personal we will simply not want to share them with the larger community. Remember, however,

9/27

Katie and I were eating dinner while Josh played with toys. Josh looked in our direction and said, "Mommy?" Katie answered, "Yes, sweetie?" "Mommy?" "Yes honey?" "Mommy?" "Yes?" "Mommy?" "Yes, Josh?" He voice got softer and cuter each time, and he looked more and more affectionate. It was extremely cute. He kept this up, asking, "Mommy?" over and over as he walked to the table, looking Katie right in the eyes the whole time. When he got right next to her he cocked his head to the side with huge beautiful eyes and said, "Mommy?" "Yes, honey?" "Peacock."

God's desire for strong community. Remember how important community and relationship are to the Church and to the Kingdom of God as a whole. God will not give us exclusively, or even primarily, messages that are meant for me alone as an individual rather than messages we can share with friends and family or with the larger community.

If all I hear from God are messages for others, I need to reconsider how well I am listening. Even the prophets in Scripture wrote about

intimate things that God told them directly for their own benefit. Yet many of these intimate messages were written in Scripture for the benefit of the larger community.

God wants to talk to the community, to all citizens of his Kingdom. He also wants to talk with me. He wants intimacy with both the individual and with the larger community. He desires to strengthen the individual and the community, not one or the other.

## Pre-Cana

Katie and I were required to attend Pre-Cana before we were married. One blogger defined Pre-Cana as Latin for, “Completely useless and irrelevant torture session directed by couples that share way too much information.”<sup>6</sup> I’m not sure I’d go quite that far in my own definition, but I would certainly consider it. The experience was one that I will certainly not forget easily.

The goal of Pre-Cana is to prepare couples for marriage. The group leaders give couples topics to talk through with one another that will, in theory, help the couples to have a healthy relationship. Couples talk about finances, goals, communication, sex, and other important topics.

The event was not, I suspect, what the planners had hoped for. The session on sex, for example, moved quickly from one extreme to another. In my background, people in the Church are very hesitant at best to talk about sex. I was actually looking forward to this session. Not just because I’m male and like thinking about sex, but because I’ve never really been in a situation where I could have a meaningful conversation with other believers about sex within marriage. I was about to be married and knew very little about a healthy sex life.

10/18/06

After reading Josh a Dr. Seuss book tonight, I told him we could read one more small book before bed. He chose a very condensed version of Humpty Dumpty. That was a bit smaller than I intended, but whatever. So I read the book to him. All 26 words. When we got done, Josh asked me, “Daddy, can I read you a book?” I said, “Sure, I would love that.” So he read me the entire book. Word for word. Then we did the same with Sing-A-Song of Sixpence. He looked at the pictures for his cues and recited the entire book to me. It was great. He was “reading” - that alone is awesome for a two year old. But second, and even better, he wanted to read to me! That was absolutely incredible.

We got to the session and at first everyone just stared at one another without making eye contact. One brave guy finally spoke up. But he didn't say a word about sex; he was commenting on the previous conversation about how to communicate. "That communication thing is a load



of @\$#@#!" he insisted. "Why do you say that?" someone asked. We quickly discovered that he had previously been married to a woman with some fairly severe emotional disorders. "It just doesn't work! When your wife locks herself in a closet and is banging her head against the door trying to hurt herself, this 'parrotting' thing just doesn't work!" Silence followed. A long, awkward silence. "Uh, well, right, I guess there are times it wouldn't work." Other people started trying to convince him that it really does work. After about half the session had been spent talking about this guy's lack of ability to communicate with his insane ex-wife, the guy had obviously had enough of being lectured to. I found an appropriate time to change the subject and rescue him from his well-meaning attackers. I also desired to get focused on the topic at hand. "...Right, and good communication will lead to intimacy. And sex. Like we're supposed to be talking about now..." But the rest of the group apparently did not want to talk about sex. They went on preaching to this guy. Finally, after at least three attempts to change the topic, the leader took my cue and forced the group to discuss sex. Apparently, though, the only way she could get the group's attention was to get a bit personal. And graphic. "TMI" stands for "too much information". WWTMI. We learned in detail what the group leader likes and does not like in bed. And we learned nearly as much about other couple's preferences. (These were couples who were supposedly being encouraged to wait until marriage to learn these things. Go figure.) We went from one extreme right to the other in a matter of seconds.

**2/4/07**

**I was getting Zach into bed tonight and he was much more energetic than usual. He was babbling. Actually we were talking to each other in his language. Then I said, "Okay, Zach. It's time to go to sleep, okay?" "Yeah." "I love you," I added. He replied for the first time ever, "Yuh Yoo."**

**9/26/07**

Josh has always been Mommy's boy. I was sort of an acceptable substitute for Mommy if she wasn't there, but in general he favors her. Zach, for the most part, has been Daddy's boy. So far Tim has yet to even acknowledge my existence. This morning after an unpleasant pee incident Tim was playing with Katie, jumping up and down. I sat down and said hello to him. He stopped, shot me an annoyed look, as if to say, "What the #\$@# do you want?" Then he turned back to Katie, smiled, and started jumping up and down again. At least he acknowledged I was there. I guess that's a start.

Anyway, one primary section of Pre-Cana, the one the above man complained about, focused on communication. The leader had invited her husband to join her in this session to demonstrate effective communication. The technique, usually referred to as "parroting," is actually fairly effective. The idea is that before responding to the other person, you have to repeat what the person just said. This forces you to listen rather than simply respond. It also clears up misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

The leader told us that she asked her husband to pick some small

thing from their relationship that they could use to demonstrate communication using this technique. He picked some small issue like her response to the way he folds the laundry. Apparently they did not talk before the session about what the demonstration topic would be, because the instant he spoke, her smile changed from a very warm, welcoming, joyful smile to a fake stage smile that said, "You're lucky there are people here so I don't injure you!" Apparently this "small issue" was not so small! I felt like we were watching a soap opera. We saw firsthand how to take something seemingly insignificant and learn the deeper issues that lie beneath it.

After their lively "discussion," we were all instructed to talk together as couples about something that bothers us in our relationship. We were to practice communicating using this parroting technique that had just worked oh so effectively for the group leader.

**10/5/07**

This morning Tim was lying on the bed smiling at Katie. I came over and said "hi" to him. No reaction - he just kept smiling at Katie. So I leaned over and gave him a kiss - he looked away from Katie to shoot me a very annoyed look, similar to the look he shot me last week when I interrupted his time with Katie. At the same time, he swatted my face as though he were shooting a fly away, then looked back at Katie and smiled.



Katie and I were close friends for years before we ever dated, and during that time we had learned to communicate very well with each other. We picked some topic that was a particular struggle for us and started talking. All around us people were getting louder and more intense. There was a less-than-healthy energy in the room. Katie and I were relaxed and had a great conversation that really did help us. After a few minutes we stopped doing the “parroting” technique and just talked. The group leader was walking around trying to help the couples in their conversations. We were so engaged in our conversation that we didn’t even realize she was there listening until she told us, “You two obviously know how to communicate well already.”

Before our wedding, I heard all the standard jokes about the “ball and chain” and the suffering that follows the wedding. One person happily announced, “Welcome to our misery!” Another gave me some advice, “A happy husband is a happy wife. A happy wife is... a happy wife.” Another warned, “Don’t do it!” Yet after ten years of marriage we still love being married. Marriage has never been misery. In fact marriage has been incredible. Difficult, yes, but incredible.

Part of the reason my marriage has been so wonderful is that my wife is a particularly special woman. Another reason is that we have always communicated well. I don’t just say things to Katie. I focus more on listening to Katie than talking to her. And she does the same for me. This does not mean we always agree, but when we disagree we still

**1/22-24/08**

**I ended up with a nasty stomach bug this week. I quarantined myself to my bedroom in hopes that somehow the boys would avoid getting it, so I didn’t really see any of them for a few days other than a couple seconds here and there as they peeked their heads in the door before Katie yelled at them to get out. So after three days I finally felt well enough that I figured I could come out of the room at least for a few minutes. Katie was carrying Tim. I came over and said, “Hello, Timothy.” He got a huge smile on his face, his eyes lit up, he bounced up and down, and then he leaned over toward me with his arms out. That’s the first time in the eight months since his birth that he desired to leave Mommy to be with Daddy. What a feeling! That moment made having this stomach bug entirely worthwhile. [In hindsight, Tim is very much Daddy’s boy these days. Ever since I had that stomach bug Tim absolutely loves to be with me.]**

know we are loved and respected. And we know we are being heard. When we talk, I don't just tell her what I want her to do for me. In fact I usually don't do that. Instead, I try to discover what she wants me to do for her, and provided my poor memory doesn't attack again, I do it. She does the same. Most important, our communication does not focus on things that bother us. Our communication is about enjoying one another and getting to know one another.



People change. Katie and I have both changed a great deal since we were first married, and if God grants us another fifty years of marriage we will both have changed a great deal more. We need to continually enjoy one another.

## ***Listen and Play***

Part of a thriving, healthy relationship with God must be the ability to communicate well. We must avoid the temptation to think of

**4/24/08**

Today is my birthday. As usual, the boys were awake before me. Katie told Josh that she was going to take him out to get a gift for me later in the day but that he shouldn't tell me because it would be a surprise. When I got out of bed, Josh ran over all excited and shouted, "Daddy! Happy birthday!" Then he added in a very enthusiastic voice, "Daddy, I'm not going to tell you..." I could see the wheels spinning in his head, and after a long pause he finally finished his sentence, "...something. I'm not going to tell you anything." And he walked away.

prayer as talking to God or asking God for things, even righteous things. We must think of prayer as interaction with God, the same type of interaction that keeps a marriage healthy. We need to listen to God more than we speak. We need to be playful with God. We need to be silent with God. We need to be intimate with God.

Learning to achieve such interaction with God takes time. In our Pre-Cana class, a vast majority of couples just weren't getting it. The same communication that seems so easy for Katie and me felt nearly impossible to other couples. The

“parroting” technique of communication is not necessary when both partners listen thoroughly to each other. But until a person is able (or willing) to listen to the other and is able to ask appropriate questions to be sure he or she understands the other person, “parroting” is a very helpful exercise. Likewise, there are exercises we can do, such as the “Listening Lab,” to help us learn to communicate with God. Take forty-five minutes each week (or better yet each day) to sit and do nothing but listen to God.

Learn to listen to God. Learn to play with God. Do not settle for one-way prayer. Do not settle for a wish-list. Do not think of God as a genie who will give us all our desires, no matter how righteous our desires are. Instead, listen to God’s desires. Let God give you a wish list for a change. Don’t complain about your day, your finances, your relationships, and your friends who are sick and need healing. Instead, ask God what is wrong in the world that he would like to empower us to fix. Most of all just enjoy spending time with God. Strengthen your “marriage.”

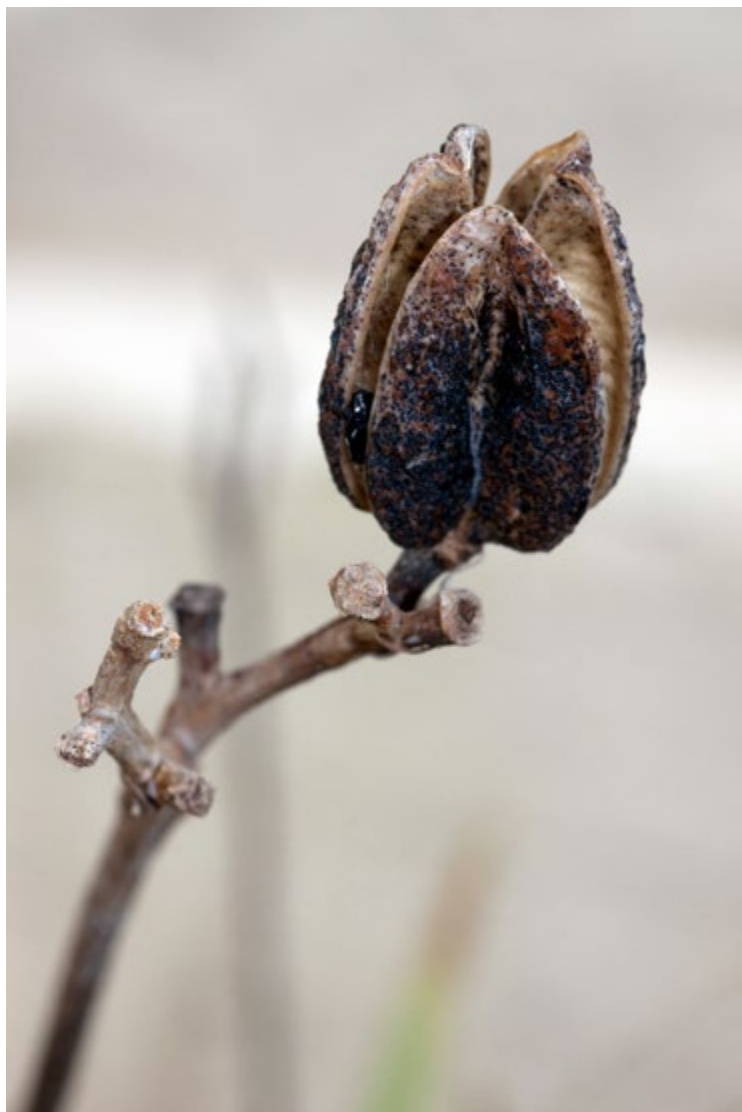
Pray, or more appropriately “interact with God,” without ceasing.





# THE ART OF **SHALOM**

CHAPTER 7: SIN AND OBEDIENCE



## Chapter 7: Sin and Obedience

Some people may argue that because numerous commandments are given throughout the Old and New Testaments, obedience to God's commands must be included in these elements of life. I have chosen to include the idea of obedience as a separate topic instead of directly as an element of life primarily because obedience does not directly lead to life in the same way as the other elements. Granted, Scripture teaches that if you obey the commands you will live, disobey and you will die. Yet obedience is not one of the elements that *create* life; rather, obedience *prevents* death and suffering. A vaccine does not make a person healthier; a vaccine helps to prevent deadly illnesses. Disobedience hinders life; obedience keeps us from hindering our lives.

In addition, many Christians focus far too much on sin. Focusing on sin prevents us from focusing on the Lord. Yes, we must repent of our sins, and yes, we must do all we can to avoid sin. On the other hand, focusing on the Lord will keep us from sin. Focusing on sin (even when we're avoiding sin) will not necessarily lead us to the Lord. In junior high school I went through a phase where I swore constantly, to the degree that I could not stop. Every thought that went through my head had a swear word in it. For some reason I became determined to stop swearing. It took quite some time, but I accomplished my goal – I stopped swearing. Yet I was still not following the Lord, nor did I understand what Christianity was about. I was free from that particular sin, but I was no closer to the Lord. Too often we are so concerned about avoiding sin that we forget God.

For these reasons I do not include obedience in the list of elements



that create life. I do, though, feel that the topic is important enough to earn a chapter in the book. If sin destroys Shalom, the Church should certainly consider obedience in her quest for abundant life.

## Are We Forgiven?

Along these lines, I suggest that some Christians, perhaps even *many* Christians, do not truly believe we are forgiven. Some believers and denominations have built entire doctrinal systems around a mistranslation (or perhaps a misunderstanding) of a Bible passage. According to 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (NIV). The way this verse reads in contemporary English implies a chronology: our sins are forgiven after we confess them. *If we confess, then God forgives us.* This, however, is not what the passage means.

11/11/04  
 Josh loves to do things that could hurt or kill him. In a way, I save his life over and over and over again day after day after day. And he has absolutely no clue it's happening.

The NASB reads, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Similarly, the King James Version reads, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” This is a very subtle but important difference from the NIV. The NIV and several other translations say “will forgive” while the King James and other translations say “to forgive.”

The problem here involves grammatical forms of Greek verbs that do not exist in English. The word as written in Greek is meant to communicate the idea of the verb without implying a tense. In other words the focus is on the meaning of the verb itself without implying past, present or future tense. *Tense Voice Mood* explains, “...the concept of the verb is considered without regard for past, present, or future time.”<sup>1</sup>

We unfortunately have no simple way to translate such words into English. Some translators feel that future tense is an acceptable translation (“will forgive”), while other translators simply



use the verb itself (“to forgive”). The important thing to understand, however, is that this passage is not telling us *when* we are forgiven; rather, the passage is reinforcing that God is just *to forgive us*, regardless of *when* the forgiveness takes place. We are to confess our sins and God forgives us, but not necessarily in that chronological order.

## When Are We Forgiven?

While Jesus hung on the cross, just before he died, he shouted out, “It is finished!” *What* is finished? Jesus came announcing that the kingdom of God is at hand. The ushering in of the Kingdom is finished, including the forgiveness of sins as well as the defeat of sin and death.

The book of Hebrews teaches that Jesus’ death atoned for *all* sin, past, present and future. Forgiveness of sin was accomplished outside of time as we know it. Every sin we have ever committed and ever will commit is forgiven.

12/3/04

“Josh, do you know why you’re in timeout?”

“I yeah.”

“Why are you in timeout?”

“I out.”

“Josh, tell my why you’re in timeout.”

“I out.”

“Josh, did you hit daddy in the face?”

“Okay, yea.”

“Is hitting daddy in the face good?”

“Yea, okay, yea.”

“No, Josh, hitting daddy in the face is bad.”

“Okay, yea.”

“So no more hitting Daddy in the face.”

“Yea.”

“And no more hitting Mommy in the face.”

“Mommy.”

“Right. No hitting Daddy in the face and no hitting Mommy in the face, okay?”

“Mommy.”

“No hitting anyone, okay?”

“Yea.” [pause] “Mommy.”

“Can you say ‘I’m sorry for hitting you in the face, Daddy?’”

“I sorry.”

“Okay, let’s get out of timeout.”

“I Mommy. Mommy. MOMMY!!!!...”

Suppose for a moment that we are not forgiven until after we confess. I live a very righteous life, and on the rare occasions I actually do sin I confess immediately and receive forgiveness. One day while crossing a busy city street I see a beautiful woman and lust after her. I am so busy gazing at her that I fail to notice the bus speeding toward me. I get hit by the bus and die immediately before I confess my sin.



2/1/06

I took Josh out with me to a bookstore tonight. We talked on the way there and he had a great time in the store, especially when he learned to knock a dozen or so DVDs off a shelf with one sweep of his hand.

Josh started crying on the way home for no apparent reason. I asked him what was wrong, and he just cried harder. No matter what I did, he just kept whining and crying. Then he coughed. Then he burped. Only it didn't really sound like a normal burp. It sounded... well... very wet. And he coughed again and "burped" again, and the light bulb went on in my head, "Ooohhhhhhhh..." I was experiencing Josh's first stomach virus. More accurately the entire back seat of my car was experiencing his virus.

When I was a minute or so from home, I called my wife to ask her to meet me downstairs and help us. I pulled up and she was there. She looked in the window and hesitantly asked, "What would you like me to do?" Inside I was thinking, "I want you to tell me to go upstairs and have a drink while you take care of all this." I opened my mouth to say this, but out came, "Could you get me some paper towels and hot water so I can clean this up?" Whoa, where did that come from? What did I just get myself into?

I did everything I could to pick Josh up without getting any puke on me, but at some point I just accepted the inevitable and carried him upstairs. He needed to be held more than I needed to keep my shirt clean. Next I stared at the mess in the car, wondering how I was going to do the job without getting it all over me. I still have no idea. I didn't figure it out that time. I probably won't figure it out next time.

Before I had kids I could never understand how parents do these things. And nobody could really explain it to me. They always just said, "It's all worth it." And I always replied, "I'll believe it when I see it." And now I've seen it and I believe it. It broke my heart seeing Josh sick, and getting some vomit on me was nothing compared to the way I longed for him to be well again.

Have I died without being forgiven? Am I condemned? Of course very few people would actually say that yes, I am condemned in this circumstance. Yet for some reason people cling to the idea that we are not forgiven until after we confess.

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians at a time when the people of Corinth were immersed in sinful behaviors, especially but not exclusively sexual immorality. The Christians in Corinth were so notorious for their sinful practices that word got back to Paul, who wrote 1 Corinthians, at least in part, to rebuke them for their rampant sin. In this letter, Paul wrote, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived;

neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9-10). Paul then went on to make an amazing statement to people who were still practicing most, if not all, of these particular sins. “Such *were* some of you; but you *were* washed, but you *were* sanctified, but you *were* justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (6:11, italics added). These sins, Paul taught, *used to be* your identity. This is no longer your identity. Your identity *used to be* a sinner. Now, although you are still committing sins, your identity is not a sinner, but a forgiven child of God. Therefore, stop committing these sinful behaviors. You are a forgiven child of God – start living like it!

Confession is very important, but we do not confess *to obtain* forgiveness. We are *already* forgiven. We confess our sin, at least in part, to maintain and strengthen relationships, both with God and with others. Confession helps lead to Shalom.

Sin is no longer what separates us from God. Well, sort of...

## So Why Should I Worry? What is Sin?

People offer many different definitions of “sin.” The most literal meaning of the word is “missing the mark” the way an archer misses a target.<sup>1</sup> Some people call sin “anything that separates us from God.” I question this definition. According to Paul in Romans 8 *nothing* can separate us from the love of God, while Psalm 139 affirms that even in the depths of hell God is there. God spoke to Adam and Eve face to face even *after* they sinned. The literal definition of “missing the mark” seems to be a much more accurate definition to me.

I suggest that sin could be defined as anything that prevents us or others from experiencing Shalom. Sin is the poison that destroys life.



Some see sin as a type of magical entity that immediately destroys life. Sin, however, is usually less mystical and tends to work at a more practical level. Sin prevents us from living out the elements of life and/or hinders others from experiencing Shalom.

## Individual Sin

Modern Western culture places such emphasis on individualism that we often fail to realize that our individual sins actually affect others. What difference does it make if I get drunk as long as I don't drive or hurt anyone? What difference does it make to anyone else if my girlfriend and I sleep together as long as we're in love?

In many cases our individual sins actually destroy another person's abundant life instead of or in addition to our own. Lying and gossip quite often lead to broken relationships. This hurts *all* of the people in the relationship, not just the liar. Community is broken, subsequently breaking down Shalom for all, not just for the sinner. Drunkenness affects a person's ability to think clearly, leading people to do and say things that break down relationships much like lying and gossip. In addition, when we practice listening for the voice of God, we realize that God often calls us to do or say certain things all times of the day and night. If God calls when we are drunk, we are less able to respond. Materialism often leads to coveting (longing for something

that someone else has<sup>2</sup>). What will we do to get that thing? How much will we hoard our wealth at the expense of other people's needs to save enough to buy the thing? How much will we overwork, neglecting our friends, family, and God to earn overtime pay so we can afford things we don't really need? Other people suffer for our sin, often in ways we don't realize or ways that make no sense to us in the present.



## Sexual Sin

Sexual sin, especially fornication, is an important example of how sin affects the wider community. As a young (and then not-so-young) single man, I heard far too many bad sermons about the evils of sexual sin, and probably far too few good sermons about the topic. As soon as my hormones kicked in, sexual sin was among the hardest sins to avoid. In fact, sexual sin was among the things I desired most. I had a very difficult time understanding the taboos about sex. I did not understand why it was so horrible – it only affects me and the woman I am with. As long as we both want it, what's the big deal? What cosmic problem would it create? How would it affect anyone other than the two of us? And, quite honestly, I did not find any answers that satisfied me.

It was not until long after I was married that I began to understand just how evil sexual sin really is. Sexual sin actually does affect more than just the two people involved. And it does so in ways that affect the entire culture.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Christians includes a rebuke to men who were visiting prostitutes. Paul suggests in that context that the evils of sexual sin transcend that of other sins. He writes:

3/31/06

Josh was in time-out again today. Surprise, surprise. Something silly – he kept screaming real loud while we were playing, and Zach and Katie were trying to nap. And he knows he's not supposed to yell inside. I hadn't planned on putting him in timeout. I just warned him. And immediately after I warned him, he looked me square in the eyes and shrieked again. So off we went into time out. I came back a few minutes later and we went through the usual conversation. "Josh, do you know why you're in timeout?" "I sorry." "Okay, that's good that you're sorry. But why are you in timeout? What did you do that was bad?" "I sorry." "That's good, but why are you in timeout?" "I down." "Josh, why are you in timeout?" "I out." Then, after this conversation went on as usual for a bit, I realized that his thumb was in his mouth. I had taken away his binki and he needed to let me know that this wouldn't hinder him. There was a sort of innocent rebellion in his eyes that made me start laughing. I tried to stifle it, but once he saw my face it was all over. Next he took his thumb out of his mouth, and put an index finger from each hand into each side of his mouth at the same time and pulled as hard as he could. It was the first time I saw him make a funny face that way. And I did all I could to not laugh but failed. I had to say something profound like, "You think about what you did..." and I left the room.

Flee immorality [sexual sin]. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body (6:18-20).

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the temple represented the presence of God, the dwelling place for the glory of the Lord. If our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, then our bodies represent the presence of the Lord.

At the same time, the Bible frequently uses marriage, including sexual union, as a metaphor for the intimacy God desires with his people.

Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 both demonstrate this metaphor in passages that are unfortunately misunderstood and abused. Paul writes, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” People teach that this verse commands us to have certain roles in marriage where the man is superior to the wife in that the wife is the one who submits to her husband, not the husband to the wife. The context of these (and other similar) passages is that we should each be submitting to everyone else around us. The passage in Ephesians is prefaced by, “Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.” In addition, men are commanded to, “Love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Men, therefore, are to sacrifice our very lives for our wives. This is the ultimate act of submission! Women are not to be in a role of submission while men lead; rather, women are to submit to their husbands, while men are to make the ultimate act of submission to their wives.



In other words, marriage is designed to model the relationship between Christ and the Church.

If marriage, and therefore sex within marriage, is designed by God to model



water will come out of it, that the people may drink” (17:6). Moses obeyed, and the people drank water. If the Lord stood before him “on the rock” as Moses struck the rock, Moses was living out a prophetic message - God (Jesus) would be struck down to provide life for his



people. Paul affirms this metaphor in 1 Corinthians 10:4, suggesting that the people “were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.” When Moses struck the rock, he was showing the people God’s salvation through the crucifixion of Christ.

A similar incident appears in Numbers 20. This time, however, the Lord tells Moses to “speak to the rock.” The rock, Jesus, has already been struck down. This needs to happen only once. Because Moses has already struck the rock, he is now free to “speak to the rock” and God will respond. Moses, however, “struck the rock twice with his rod.” The Lord then condemned Moses, saying, “Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.” Instead of continuing this metaphor, teaching that God (Jesus) will be struck down once in order to provide living water for all time, Moses struck the rock again in anger, changing the metaphor from depicting the provision of Jesus through his death into a picture of anger and wrath, with the rock being struck repeatedly in anger. Misrepresenting God’s metaphor resulted in God denying Moses entry into the Promised Land.

If we are temples of the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God, and we desecrate

5/24/06

I said another one of those things today that I never thought I'd hear myself say. “Josh, please don't draw on my guitar case with yogurt.” A few years ago I'd have hurt someone for less. Mess with my guitar and you're in deep trouble. Kids have brought me to a point where it barely phases me. I guess if he painted the guitar itself with yogurt I'd have had a different reaction. But even then, there's Windex. Wow, I've come a long way!



this temple by destroying the metaphor God created to represent his covenant with us, we are not only damaging ourselves and our lovers, but our entire culture. We, the Christians, are supposed to represent the presence of God.

Sexual immorality destroys the metaphor we are presenting to our society about God's relationship with us by ignoring the covenant. Sex outside of marriage pictures a relationship with God outside of the new covenant.

With the sexual revolution of the sixties came a deterioration of the Church. I'm not sure whether the sexual revolution played a part in the deterioration of Christianity within the United States or whether a lack of faith in the Covenant opened the door for the sexual revolution. Either way, the two went hand-in-hand. As our society accepted sex outside of the marriage covenant, this metaphor of the covenant between God and his people was destroyed, and our society as a whole began ignoring this covenant between God and the Church. We are (coincidentally?) now known as a "post-Christian" nation.<sup>3</sup>

## Sins of Parents

Jesus called God "Abba" (Mark 14:6, for example). "Abba" is an Aramaic word meaning "father."<sup>\*</sup> Just as the Bible uses marriage and sex within marriage as metaphors of our covenant with God, the Bible uses a parent/child relationship as a metaphor of the Church's relationship with God. God established parent/child relationships as a metaphor to teach us about God's love for us and our proper response to God. This metaphor teaches several things.

First, as a parent of three young boys, I *want* my children to play and have fun. Life cannot always be fun, and there are certainly many situations where I need to make them stay quiet and sit in one place, but in general I encourage them to play. The "work" they do for me is

<sup>\*</sup> *There is some debate about whether the word may actually be a word that small children would call their daddies.*



serious business to them, but to me it is an opportunity for them to have fun and for me to interact with them.

They often make “snacks” for me. Any object, I’ve learned, can become ice cream, a sandwich, even a full steak dinner. (It may taste like a Lego, but it’s really a cracker!) Their imaginations are wonderful. I don’t want food. And quite frankly pretending to eat Lego dinners over and over and over and over without end gets old quickly. But it’s still fun, because they’re having fun. I often wonder how much of the work we do for God is about as significant as my boys feeding me plastic hamburgers. On one level it’s play, not real work. On another level, the boys are learning, they are giving, they are creating, they are growing, they are interacting with me, and our love is growing.

The following is an entry from my journal:

Josh found a power cable to a computer I had lying on the floor. Since the cable wasn’t plugged in to anything I let him play with it. He dragged this stupid cord all over the house for a good hour. He looked as though he was on a mission with this cord, very intense and very motivated. A couple times the cord got wrapped around something and got stuck; he nearly flipped out. There was no letting go of this cord. Instead he pulled as hard as he could to the point that he was shaking. He refused to give up on his mission. Once or twice I freed the cord for him, and he happily went on “working” with the same intensity. Other times I just watched to see what he would do. He fought with the cord and with the furniture, screaming at it and sometimes crying until it either came free or he retraced his steps to free it. Every time, though, he went on like a man (a very little man) on an important mission. He stopped by one of his toys to babble and move all the knobs and dials, all the while holding this cord in his other hand. Then, when he was done pressing buttons on his toy, he would move on with the cord to the next part of the mission.



Is the important work we do for God as important as this mission was to Josh? Telling him to stop this silliness and do something useful never crossed my mind. This type of play is what kids are supposed to do! I *love* to watch it, and I love even more to be part of it.

Second, when they “sin,” I do not stop loving them. Ever. In fact in hindsight I even laugh at some of the things they did wrong. Recently Katie sat at her desk and discovered scribble all over the desk surface in black permanent marker. Tim ran right over to her, pointed at his beautiful artwork on the desk and proudly announced, “T’ – T’ – M’ spells Tim!” He was so cute and we were so amazed that he could spell his name at a year and a half (how amazing is that?) that neither of us cared about the permanent scribble on the desk.

Then there was the time Timothy wanted a bath so he snuck into the bathroom and bathed in a dirty toilet. (We learned that day that he can open the bathroom door by himself.) It was disgusting, yes. And very wrong. But kind of funny. (Especially for me, since my wife cleaned up that particular mess! I have, though, cleaned a fair share of similar messes and still find them funny.)

I certainly do not mean to trivialize sin as though it’s a joke. The diaper metaphor may not be too far off, though. God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the people about their corruption by eating food baked

8/31/06

We had another nightmare of a poop incident again today. Zach hasn’t had one of those up-the-back-and-everywhere-else type diaper problems in awhile, so I didn’t really think to check for problems. That was my first mistake. My second, and much bigger mistake, was to change him on the rug instead of on a towel or changing pad. Yes, it went everywhere. The instant I realized there was poop on the rug I lifted Zach off the ground so only his shoulders were touching and called for Katie to help me. She ran in and started, looking a bit scared, and asked what I needed her to do. I didn’t really know. All I knew was that there was poop on the rug, Zach was about to squirm out of my hands, and I couldn’t hold him and wipe him at the same time. So I had Katie hold his legs while I wiped him the best I could, then I carried him (at arms length) directly into the bathtub. I gave him a bath (which he thoroughly enjoyed because he got to splash Daddy and everything else in the bathroom), then gave him to Katie while I cleaned the rug every bit as thoroughly as I cleaned Zach. This was not fun.

over human dung (4:12). God sees our sins as downright disgusting, as disgusting as human excrement.

When Zach, my second son, was born I had been used to changing his older brother's diapers. The following is another blurb from my journal:

I changed Josh's diaper today for the first time since Zach was born. My mom had Josh ever since we went to the hospital, so the only diapers I changed were Zach's. At the hospital I opened the drawer where they keep all the diaper stuff to get a diaper for Zach, but I couldn't find them. I looked behind the formula, under the wipes, and behind a pile of tiny cushiony things, and suddenly I realized these tiny cushiony things were the diapers! They were so small I didn't recognize them as diapers. I was so used to Josh's diapers that these little things looked way too tiny to be diapers. Over the next two days I got very used to changing this seven-pound infant with these little tiny diapers. Today I changed Josh's diaper. I was so used to changing infant diapers now that changing Josh was like changing a full-grown boy; it was disgusting! I went to lift up his leg and his leg was huge! I thought, "Ugh, this isn't a baby's leg, this is a boy's leg. And this isn't a baby's butt, it's a boy's butt." This was just not right. What a shock. After being with an infant for two days, Josh suddenly became a grown boy practically overnight.

This new diaper changing experience was truly gross. Luckily Josh is potty trained now. I'm still changing plenty of diapers, though, and it's gross. But a dirty diaper, or even an accident where the diaper leaks all over the place (literally) never makes me stop loving them. It gets me cranky at times, but even the worst accident never changes my love for them. I've cleaned them when they were covered in their own filth from

9/06/06

Coming home from Katie's parents' place, I was carrying my guitar, Zach in his car seat, Zach's blanket, my laptop bag, and two bags full of diapers all at once. Josh decided he wanted me to carry him up the stairs as well. I told him my hands were full, but he persisted. He was looking at me, so I sarcastically asked him, "Which arm should I hold you in?" Kids, of course, have no clue what sarcasm is, so he pointed to the arm carrying the most stuff and said, "That one." I said, "Josh, no, my hands are full. Go upstairs please." So he turned around and started going up the stairs holding his blanket in both hands. I said, "Josh, hold the railing please." And he quickly replied, "No, Daddy. My hands are full."

head to toe, and as much as I didn't like the job, I never stopped loving them. In fact I cleaned them *because* I love them.

Third, we can learn a lot about God by being a parent. Likewise, we can learn a lot about parenting by seeing how God treats us. This point leads back to the sins of parents. Since God created the parent/child relationship as a sign of God's relationship with his people, being a bad parent is misrepresenting God to your children.

10/18/06

I was sitting on the floor with my legs out tonight talking with Josh while he played. He decided he wanted to be on the other side of me, so he walked right up to my legs and commanded, "Move!" I shot him "the look" and firmly said, "Josh, you don't talk to people that way." I didn't even get the words out before his face changed into a look that said, "Uh oh, I shouldn't have said that." So he quickly looked me in the eyes and very seriously said, "No, don't move."

Very often children who had bad relationships with their fathers grow up struggling in their relationships with God. Children who were beaten or abused often grow up thinking of God as a foreign being who is waiting to strike them down. Developing faith in this God is difficult at best for children of abusive parents. Children whose parents ignored them or were absent for much of their childhoods often see God as a distant being who couldn't care less about them. The way a child's father treats his children is quite often how the children view God later in life.

Children are extremely smart – they know how we feel about them.



The way we see our children is often the way our children will grow up thinking God sees them. If we see our children as burdens, if we fail to spend time with our children, if we have unrealistic expectations of our children, and especially if we neglect or abuse our children, we could be injuring or even destroying our children's future or present faith in God. And remember what Jesus said about the one who causes a child to stumble!

On the bright side, however, when we are good parents, we will be living out the model of God's love for our children. When we fail, confession and repentance are particularly important. When we succeed, we will be rewarded as our children mature and, God willing, fall in love with our Lord.

Paul's instruction in Ephesians 6 is almost an understatement, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Compare this with Jesus' teaching about children and to God's instructions through Moses in the Law and the importance of good parenting shines.

Finally, like it or not, our children will imitate nearly *everything* we do as parents. I always think of the commercial where a father finds drugs in his son's room and demands to know where he learned to behave like that. After an awkward pause, the child shouted, "I learned it from you, dad!"

Numbers 14:18 warns that God will visit "the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations." This hardly seems fair to us in our Modern individualist mindset, but in that culture the people did not question the fairness of this statement. The people did not view themselves as individuals, but as a family and a community. If one person sinned, the family was guilty. This is hard for us to understand, but our individualist way of thinking would be every bit as hard for them to understand. The important thing to note here is not the fairness of God's warning, but that our sins as parents affect our children.

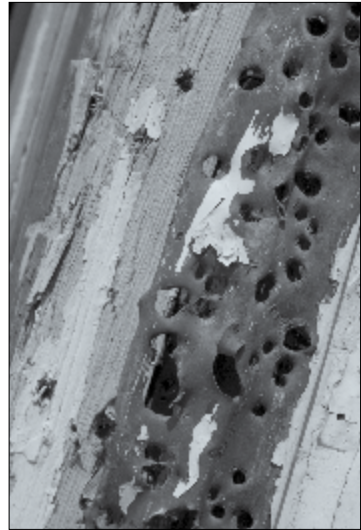
I was at the park one day with Josh and my camera. There was a nice background behind him, so I got down on one knee to be at his level and held my camera to my eye. I called out, "Josh, look this way and smile." Instead of smiling, he looked

**2/07**

**I was doing some work at my desk enjoying the quiet. Suddenly an intriguing thought occurred to me. "Why is it quiet?" Zach was napping, but Josh was awake. Things should not be quite this quiet. So I got up to investigate. I went into the boys' room, and there was Josh sitting on top of his dresser. The drawers were out a little bit. Apparently he used them as a ladder. A new game. Wonderful.**

at me, got down on both knees, looked down at his knees, looked back at me and saw that I was only on one knee, and then picked up one leg so he was posed in exactly the same position as I was.

I have noticed by watching families I interact with frequently that those parents who swear, even if they are careful not to let their kids hear them, have young children who swear. Those who don't swear have young kids who rarely, if ever, swear. Kids do what their parents do. They catch *everything*, no matter how hard we try to hide it.



The word disciple literally means “learner”. In Jewish culture, some people would become disciples of a rabbi. These disciples, however, would not merely learn from the rabbi. The disciples would study the rabbi closely enough to become just like the rabbi.<sup>4</sup> The goal of a disciple is not just to learn information, but, in a sense, to become a replica of the rabbi. (This, by the way, should change many of our views of what it means to “make disciples of all the nations!”)

4/19/07

Katie's grandma passed away and we were at the church for her funeral today. Zach was quietly walking back and forth in our pew. He was too little to really grasp what was happening, and Katie's grandma would have wanted him to be having fun, so I let him play quietly. At one point, though, he stepped out of the pew into the aisle. He turned around and looked me in the eyes. As I realized the look on his face meant trouble, he shouted as loud as he could in the echoey sanctuary, “Bye!” and he ran as fast as he could down the aisle.

Children are our disciples – their goal in life is to become *just like us*. And they will succeed, no matter how hard we hide our sins.

Our children will learn our sins. Our children will suffer not just because our sins have consequences, but also because they will commit our sins, even our well hidden sins, and will suffer the consequences of their own sins that they learned from us.

We will, unfortunately, sin. But there is a difference as a parent between a pattern of sinning, confessing, and repenting versus living a sinful lifestyle. Swearing in front of your kids, confessing your sin to them, and avoiding that swear word is much better than continually swearing and trying to keep your kids from hearing you. The former teaches children to repent when we sin; the latter teaches children to try to hide our sin or that sin is okay as long as nobody is around to witness the sin.

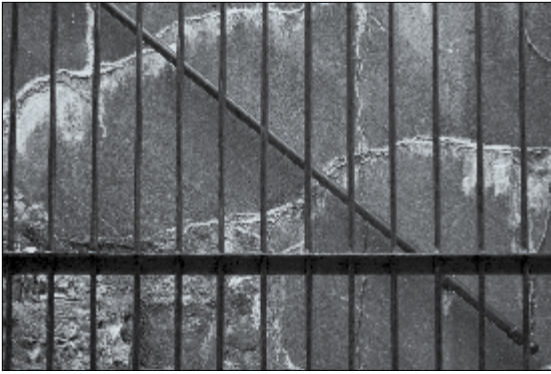
The way we handle our sins will affect the spiritual (and sometimes physical) health of our children.

## Corporate Sin

The concept of “sin” is not limited to individual sin but includes the sin of groups, communities, industries, governments, and other corporate entities. In Ephesians 6, Paul warns the church at Ephesus against the “schemes of the devil.” He instructs believers to put on the full armor of God, in other words prepare for battle. Who are we battling against? We are at war “against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” I had been taught in my early years as a Christian that these were all different classifications of demons. Further study has convinced me that these things should be taken more literally. “Spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places” certainly sounds like it could refer to evil spirits. The other items in the list, however, are “world forces” – rulers, powers, and other world forces that destroy Shalom.

6/7/08

I woke up this morning to Zach climbing up into my bed. I said “hi” and then realized he had his binki in his mouth. He is only allowed to have his binki in his bedroom these days, so I asked, “What are you doing with your binki in here?” He laughed. I took it away, and he started whining and complaining, but it was his fun whining – he was just playing. He grabbed his blanket and started walking into the other room. What I didn’t see, however, was that he had quickly and sneakily grabbed his binki back. As he climbed down from the bed he asked, “And you know what?” “What?” I asked. He moved farther away and repeated, “You know what?” His smile got bigger. “What?” I asked again. As he got near the door he started running, held up the hand with the binki, smiled, and yelled, “I am going to have my binki inside!” Then he ran down the hall laughing.



Financial success in this country, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, comes much more easily to white men than to women and minorities. The Church, according to Ephesians 6 (and much of the Bible) should be at war with such systems. The fact

that twenty percent of the world's population controls eighty percent of the world's wealth<sup>5</sup> is almost as appalling as the idea that some Christians support this imbalance of power and wealth. When rulers and governments refuse to allow aid to starving citizens, the Church should be outraged and should stand against these world forces. There are Christians who support deforestation and fight to *prevent* corporations from being forced to stop releasing pollutants into the air causing asthma and other health problems for local residents. After all, as some of these Christian leaders say, the Lord is coming back soon and the earth will burn anyway. Why preserve something that is destined for destruction? Especially when preserving the earth will cause discomfort and higher financial cost for our lifestyles. Yes, I have actually heard such comments from *several* Christian leaders, many of whom I respect deeply outside of these issues.

My wife and I went on a cruise to the Western Caribbean for our honeymoon. One stop was in Haiti. A tour guide in Haiti told us about the lives of the locals. These people had spent years feeding their families and making their living by fishing. In more recent years, deforestation caused massive mudslides which in turn sent dirt and who knows what else into the water. As a result, there were no more fish. The people were literally starving to death because of the number of trees cut down. The families were too poor to buy boats, so they found boards. Men paddled at least four miles out into the ocean on thin pieces of wood so they could catch as many fish as they could fit on these boards and bring them back home. My wife and I were out in kayaks when some of these men were on their way back from the deeper ocean waters. We saw them paddling on their boards, and they



smiled at us, welcomed us, and portrayed more authentic joy than I saw anywhere on the cruise ship. A couple hours later we got back on the ship, a huge floating city, where people almost literally put food in our mouths for us. I felt sick to my stomach. For the first time in my life I felt like a fat, rich American. This is not right! This is not what God intends for people. We, the wealthy in the Modern Western world, are hoarding the wealth of the world while others are literally starving. And we don't do anything about it, largely because we would lose our material comforts. This is corporate sin.

## Liberals and Conservatives

In case you couldn't tell by this point, I come from a fairly theologically conservative background. I purposely attended a very liberal seminary, mostly to get a different viewpoint on the things I had been taught most of my Christian life. I have heard the arguments of liberal theologians and I have studied scholars on both sides of these debates. One thing I have found is that those who are theologically conservative tend to focus on individual sin, often to the exclusion of corporate or systemic sin. Similarly, the theologically liberal focus on corporate and societal sin, often at the exclusion of individual sin. (I do not mean this as a hard and fast rule, but I find it true in general.)

The Church needs to address both personal and corporate sin. If I rid myself of lust, control my language, refuse to get drunk, do all the right things and avoid the wrong things, but I contribute to a corporate model that insists that only white men can succeed, something is very wrong. This abuse of power, along with idolatry, is the type of sin that led to

Fall 2008

Zach has been in a long phase where he refuses to poop. He waits a week or more and still tries to hold it in. We finally had to use an enema, which became labeled "the bad medicine." A few days later I went to CVS with him and he asked if we were getting more bad medicine. I had to calm him down and explain that I was not getting more bad medicine. One time more recently Zach had gone another full week without a BM and I was preparing an enema. Zach ran into the room with his big playful smile and jokingly asked, "What do you have for me, Daddy?" And I answered, "Well, buddy..." He heard the tone in my voice and then saw what was in my hand and immediately started crying. Ugh, it broke my heart.



the overthrow of Israel and Judah. Individual sin affected the nation, but social/corporate sin led to the nation's overthrow. The Bible warns against both, not one or the other.

Joshua took over as the leader of God's people after the death of Moses. Joshua showed great courage and faith, and led the people to an incredible and miraculous victory at Jericho. God caused the walls of the city to fall, and the Hebrew people marched in and wiped out their enemies.

In the very next battle, these now-confident people experienced a tragic defeat. This battle should have been an easy victory, especially after the great victory at Jericho. Yet, "The men of Ai struck down about thirty-six of their men, and pursued them from the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them down on the descent, so the hearts of the people melted and became as water" (7:5). This was a devastating blow to Joshua and the Hebrew people.

The writer reveals that a man named Achan took some items as spoil in the battle at Jericho that were forbidden by God. Achan lived through this battle. But thirty-six other men, men who had obeyed God, died. Why did these men die and Achan live? How is this just? How would a righteous God allow this?

One thing that strikes me about the passages is that the writer of the book of Joshua, along with the men and women he wrote about, did not seem at all upset by this apparent injustice. When Joshua cried out to the Lord about the situation, the Lord answered somewhat harshly, "Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face? *Israel* has sinned, and *they* have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded *them*. And *they* have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, *they* have also put them among *their* own things" (7:10-11, italics added). One man

took things that were forbidden, but God saw the situation as though the entire nation had committed the sin.

We read this text through a Modern Western lens, a lens focused primarily on the individual. We are “self made” men and women. *I* achieve success. *I* sin. We focus on *my personal* relationship with God. Everything is me and God. If I have faith, I am able to do anything through God. If I sin, that sin is between God and me.

10/08

Tim has developed a wonderful sense of humor already. One day recently we were leaving Katie's parents' house (“Gamma” and “Pop Pop”). Katie's dad said goodbye to Tim and I prompted him, “Say, ‘I love you.’” He responded, “I yuv you...” There was a slight pause, just long enough for Pop Pop's face to light up, then Tim lowered his voice and added, “Gamma.”

This was not the worldview of the ancient Christians and Jews. This individualistic mindset was not the norm until several centuries ago. Before the Modern era, people were very *community* centered. Everything revolved around the family and the society. In this community-centered mindset, people understood that an individual's sin affected the person's family, community, or even the entire nation. This is difficult to understand, let alone embrace, in our individualistic worldview, but this is the way the Bible presents sin.

I suggest, therefore, that we should lose at least some of the distinction between individual and corporate sin. Sin, according to the Bible, destroys Shalom, both for the individual and for the surrounding community. All sin destroys Shalom, whether it's me doing something alone in my home or whether it's a major corporation dumping chemical waste in a lake where people survive by fishing.

If I destroy Shalom only in my own individual life, I become ineffective at helping to restore or strengthen Shalom in another person's life or in my community. Sin almost always has some repercussions that we may never even be aware of.

Our sin is all forgiven. Sin will not separate us from God. Salvation is accomplished. Period. But sin still affects our world.

## Confession

If our sin is already forgiven, why does the Bible command us to confess our sins? James 5 and 1 John 1 are the only passages after the resurrection that command believers to confess our sins. Nearly all other instances of the word “confess” are used in the sense of making a confession that Jesus is Lord.

We cannot, however, discount these two passages; believers do need to confess our sins. The fact that confession is not mentioned often in the New Testament does not render confession unimportant. Confession is vital to Shalom.

1 John 1:9 assures us that if we confess our sins Jesus is “faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” As I already mentioned, this verse does not imply that we are not forgiven until we confess. It almost gives the feeling that we must confess *because* we are forgiven.

James 5:16 is in the context of healing the sick, saying, “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.” There is some connection between forgiveness and physical healing. Physical health, remember, is part of the holistic well-being that is one of the key elements of life. Confession leads to life.

When we confess our sins “to one another” we are also restoring relationships. Confession repairs broken relationships among people. Confession also heals our relationships with God. Our relationships with God are not broken in the sense that God cannot be in the presence of sin. God stood face to face with Adam and Eve immediately after they sinned. God does not leave us when we sin. We, however, have a tendency to pull away from God when we sin. After Adam and Eve sinned, they hid from God. We do the same thing. Confession brings us back to God and restores relationships within our communities.



## Repentance

While believers are only commanded to confess our sins a couple times in the New Testament, we are commanded to repent dozens of times. Strong's Concordance defines the Greek word for "repent" as "to change one's mind."<sup>6</sup> "Repent" could mean simply changing our mind the way we use the phrase in contemporary English (I was going to have a hot dog, but I changed my mind and I will have a hamburger.) In most cases, however, the word means a complete change in our thought patterns (I've stopped thinking about hot dogs and hamburgers and I'm thinking about cleaning the kitchen instead.) The idea of repentance is to make a 180-degree turn from the direction in which you were going.



In Christianity, repentance does not just mean that a person stops committing a particular sin. Cutting a particular sin out of a person's life is often quite difficult, especially in the case of habitual sins and addictions. Very often when we make up our minds to never again commit a particular sin, we end up breaking our commitment and repeat the sin anyway. This experience results in guilt and frustration, and over time the person will be tempted to give up, feeling completely trapped by the actions. We must stop our sinful actions, no matter how difficult, but there is more to repentance than just this.

Instead, repentance means specifically turning instead *toward* Christ. When I repent, I literally change the way my mind works. Paul gives us a clue as to how this works in Romans 8:5, "For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit." In other words, when I repent, I don't just stop doing some sinful action; I literally change the way my mind is working. I set my mind on "the



things of the Spirit.” Modern psychology echoes Paul’s teaching. William James suggests, “The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitude of mind. . . . If you change your mind, you can change your life.”<sup>7</sup> When we consciously begin focusing our mind on Jesus and the things of the Spirit, we have begun the process of repentance.

One serious mistake many Christians make regarding repentance is to forget that our sin is already forgiven. We focus too much on turning away from sin and not enough on turning toward Christ. If we turn toward Christ, we automatically turn away from sin. Our struggle in repentance should be to turn toward Christ and continue moving toward Him rather than focusing on avoiding sin. Avoiding sin does not imply moving toward Christ – we could simply move from one sin to another. Moving toward Christ, however, always implies moving away from sin. This change may not be immediate, but it will happen.

We do not repent to get God’s forgiveness – we repent to experience Shalom.

Just as sin occurs at both a personal level and a corporate level, so must confession and repentance happen at both the personal and corporate levels. In addition, just as there should be little or no distinction between corporate sin and individual sin, there need not be distinction between individual and corporate repentance. An individual may repent of a group’s sin.

Daniel was taken captive by Babylon as a child. He was separated from his parents and trained in the ways of Babylon. Yet

**4/20/09**

**I put Tim in the crib tonight, tucked him in, blessed him and kissed him. Then I repeated the ritual for each of his brothers. When I finished, something caught my attention that didn’t seem quite right. I looked in the crib and there was no sign of Tim, just a mound of blankets. Tim learned to climb silently out of his crib and had gone back inside to see if he could watch a movie before I noticed. Life just got more difficult.**

Daniel refused to forsake the Lord; he served God passionately, risking his life at times in faithfulness to his God. Daniel is certainly a man worth modeling our lives after. The exile was a result of Judah's sin, and Daniel was only a child when Judah was taken by Babylon. Surely Daniel, a mere child who followed God, had nothing to do with the sin that led to the captivity.

Yet take a look at Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9. "We have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled..."

"We have not listened to your servants the prophets..." "Open shame belongs to us... because we have sinned against You." "So now, our God, listen to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplications, and for Your sake, O Lord, let Your face shine on Your desolate sanctuary." Daniel's journal continues, "Now while I was speaking and praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel..."

Daniel, an individual, was confessing the sin of his entire nation. Daniel, along with a select number of Israelites, had confessed and repented on behalf of an entire nation. According to the rest of the chapter, God seems to have honored Daniel's prayer.

Several people, myself included, compare our post-Modern Western culture to the culture of Babylon.\* Like Daniel and his fellow Jews, Christians today have been thrust into a post-Christian world. This is a very spiritual world, yet Christianity is often shunned. Polytheism and idolatry are rampant. The Christian church is, in far too many cases, more of a social club than an instrument for social reform and justice. The history of the Christian church is blemished, and the present state of the Church is not shining the way the bride of Christ should be. We as a corporate entity have quite a bit to confess and repent of.

\* *I list several negative elements of post-Modern culture here. Be aware, however, that I am certainly not against post-Modern culture. There are many elements of post-Modernity that Christians should embrace, and the Church has an unbelievable, probably God-given, opportunity to thrive in this new world. The evils of Modernity are too often overlooked while the evils of post-Modernity are often over-emphasized.*

5/1/09

I was in the shower this morning and Zach came into the bathroom to announce, "Daddy, Timothy went outside and I didn't want him to." "Thank you, Zach," I answered, "Please go tell mommy." I got out of the shower as quickly as I could but Katie already had Tim by the time I was dressed. Thank God she was home! Who knows how far Tim would have gotten...

5/28/09

Katie has pinpointed the exact personalities of the boys. They will all be off playing and we will call them, "Come here please, boys!" Josh will drop what he's doing and run right to us. Zach will keep running in circles as though he never heard us. Tim will drop what he's doing and run in the other direction. So far they have lived up to this assessment very well! It's absolutely stunning how different three brothers can be.

The discipline styles we use with the boys also vary quite a bit. Once when Josh was little he kept reaching for a power socket in the wall. It had childproof caps, of course, but we didn't want him to think it was okay to play with it. I took his hand and said, "No, Josh." He gave me a nasty look and did it again. I said again, "No, Josh." So he did it a third time. This time I raised my voice. I wasn't yelling or anything, just very firm. I said, "Josh, NO." He looked me in the eyes, his bottom lip drooped and started quivering, and then he started bawling. That was all it took, and to this day that's often all we have to do.

Zach, on the other hand, generally responds to timeout. The main problem we have with Zach is that he completely ignores us. And I mean completely. To the point that I was convinced for awhile that he had a hearing problem. All kids ignore their parents, but Zach took this to a new level. I could get practically in his face and he wouldn't blink or acknowledge that I was there. I could sneak up on him from behind while he was doing something he wasn't supposed to do and yell at him as loud as I could and he would not react at all. He wouldn't flinch, wouldn't blink, wouldn't turn, nothing. I had literally spent a week seriously considering calling the doctor to have his ears tested - I genuinely thought he was partially deaf. One day on the way inside from the car he took off running across the lawn. I said, "No, Zach, go upstairs please." Nothing. He just kept running. "Zach, come here right now or you will go to timeout." Nothing. Then, as loud as I could, "ZACK! COME HERE RIGHT NOW!!!" Nothing. Not a flinch, not a hesitation. He just kept running. My first thought was, "That's it, I'm calling the doctor." But for some strange reason I tried one last thing. A bit softer, I called, "Zach, do you want a cookie?" He paused, just for a millionth of a second, then kept running. I have since confirmed that his hearing is absolutely fine. He is just a natural actor, and he learned within his first two years of life to anticipate what we will do so that it will not surprise him. That way he doesn't flinch and he doesn't have to acknowledge us. Once I realized this, timeout has been very effective.

Tim, however, had us baffled until quite recently. Timeout does not work for him, though sometimes we use it anyway. He will look us right in the eyes and do something he knows very well he's not allowed to do. So we put him in timeout. Then it's a game for him to try to get out of timeout by being cute. "Tim, why are you in timeout?" "Because." "No, Tim, why are you in timeout?" "Because." "Tim, what did you do that made me put you in timeout?" "Because." "Tim! You did something you're not supposed to do. What is it that you did that you're not supposed to do?" "I sorry." "What are you sorry for?" "Because." "Tim, what did you do that you're not supposed to do?" "I sorry." "Tim, do you want to stay in timeout?" "I out." "No, you're not getting out of timeout until you tell me why you're here." "I sorry." Ugh! I almost reach the point of being convinced that he has either forgotten or just plain does not understand, but my stubbornness makes me try one or two



more times and he caves. "I take it out Zach's hand." He's just been playing me all this time and he finally got bored. Then very often he'll finally get out of timeout and go right back and do the very same thing again. Sometimes a third time. Katie and I occasionally call him "Little Irish." After a couple months of this, we tried spanking him, especially when he does something potentially dangerous. This backfired, because he had already learned about hitting his brothers. "Hitting" at his age is really slapping, and he's too little to discern between slapping and spanking. So he just figured when someone does something bad, hit him. So we stopped that pretty quick. Especially after the time I warned him that if he did not do what I was asking he would get spanked, and instead of complying he held out his hand for me and invited me, "Spank." What then? The times I have spanked him he just stares me right in the eyes and I see him struggling to hide any ounce of pain. He is so utterly stubborn that I decided more recently to use it to our advantage. He wants to do everything himself. So now he climbs out of his chair during a meal just like he always has. Timeout doesn't work, spanking doesn't work, so we warn him, "Tim, will you climb back into your chair by yourself or do I have to come and put you in your chair?" He ignores us until we stand up. Then he gets a panicked look on his face and runs back to his chair shouting, "No! I do it self! I do it self!" Wow, that's it? Punish him by doing things for him? Who would have thought?

Christian individuals must not wait for group confession. We must each, like Daniel, begin now, confessing the sins of the Church and repenting as individuals while praying for massive revivals, group confession, and large-scale repentance. Individuals must step up and live out Shalom. When the individuals in the Church come alive, the Church will come alive. Revival will happen. People who are not following Christ will repent (change their minds) and follow. There is hope for the Church and for our post-Christian world. This hope is not found in politics, wealth, or even Christianity. Our hope is in Jesus and in the reform that Jesus desires to do in those individuals and communities who confess and repent of individual as well as corporate sins, change our thinking, follow him, and live a life of Shalom.

## **Resurrection**

The effects of sin hinder us from experiencing Shalom. The sin that affects us may not even be our own. People living in poor economic conditions or third-world countries often suffer from the sin of the wealthy and powerful. Children grow up hindered by the sins of their alcoholic or abusive parents. People get sick and become crippled or

even die young, not because of their own sin but because humanity fell from Shalom.

There is, however, a greater hope of resurrection. In his book *Surprised By Hope*, N.T. Wright suggests, “God is utterly committed to set the world right in the end.... And that setting right must necessarily involve the elimination of all that distorts God’s good and lovely creation and in particular of all that defaces his image-bearing human creatures.”<sup>8</sup> Wright reminds us that we anticipate a physical resurrection.



Many Christians recite the Apostles’ Creed, stating our belief in “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” Daniel prophesies, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). Matthew’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus adds a puzzling detail, “The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many” (Matthew 27:52-53). This scene is a foreshadowing of what is to come: a physical, bodily resurrection. Paul writes of Jesus’ resurrection:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

When Paul says that we, those who are “in Christ,” will be made *alive*, he is speaking of the resurrection, when we will live in the fullness of Shalom. All things will finally be as God intended them to be.

Our job in the meantime is not to simply wait longingly for this resurrection, but to *live now*. We may not, because of the effects of

sin, experience the fullness of perfect Shalom. Even in the midst of a fallen world, though, we as Christians must realize that this world is not the kingdom of our citizenship; we are citizens of the Kingdom of God.

When we pray, “Your kingdom come,” we are praying for God’s reign as king to come into this world. Our bodies, Paul teaches, are temples of the Holy Spirit. God dwells in us. We represent the very presence of our king in this world! When we pray for God to bring his kingdom to earth, we are praying for God’s presence on earth; God accomplishes this by sending his temples (us) into the world to bring this kingdom. We are, as Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians, the ambassadors of Jesus our king.

We are to bring God’s Shalom into the world while we anticipate a full resurrection and eternal Life. We can only bring this Shalom into the world if we are living in Shalom. Through the resurrection of Christ, we can have Shalom in this world; our job is to bring it to others.

Our Shalom does not depend on our abilities or our circumstances. Jesus is our Shalom. When he rose, he appeared to the apostles and announced, “Peace [Shalom] be with you” (John 20:21). Micah prophesied of Jesus that he “will be our peace [Shalom]” (Micah 5:5). We have Shalom in Jesus, even in the midst of a fallen world.

Heaven, as wonderful as it will be, is not our goal. Our goal is abundant life, and we should experience this life now. We should be living as the Lord’s temple, the presence of God in this world, in order to bring the Shalom of God to this world, to lead people from this world into God’s kingdom. Our hope is in something better than heaven; our hope is in resurrection in God’s kingdom where Jesus reigns as king in the fullness of Shalom.

Jesus *is* our Shalom. Our hope is Jesus.



# THE ART OF SHALOM

CHAPTER 8: SHALOM IN A POISONED WORLD



## Chapter 8: Shalom in a Poisoned World

It's May 2012 already. Quite some time has gone by since I finished this book the first time. I'm always amazed at how time flies. Josh is now eight years old and in second grade. Zach is six and in kindergarten. Timmy is not quite five and is very upset that he'll be going to pre-K again in the fall instead of kindergarten.

I've had plenty of time now to sit with these ideas about Shalom and to live them out in real life. Living consistently in Shalom is difficult to say the least. Knowing these things is quite different from living them. It's the old raging battle between head knowledge and heart knowledge.

At this point in my journey I'm extremely busy and I haven't been taking care of my body like I proposed earlier in the book, and I feel it. Fatigue has set in. I don't have the close community I know I need. I haven't been spending as much time listening for God's voice as I want. Life is taking its toll on me, and getting out of this rut is much easier to learn about than to actually accomplish.

5/14/11

Katie was reading a book about a kid named David who was constantly wound up and getting into trouble. At one point in the book David threw a ball in the house after his mom told him not to. On the next page, David was sitting in a corner next to a broken vase. Katie, seeing a good teaching moment, asked, "Should David have been playing ball in the house?" All three boys answered together, "Noooooooooooo!" "And what happened when David played ball in the house?" All three answered again, "He broke the vase!" Tim, however, saw the event a bit differently than Katie and his brothers. "But he got really good at baseball!"

Caring for a family with three boys is not easy. I often don't do the father role very well. I love each my children more than words could say. Yet I still have a very hard time in the role of a father. Katie has told me she would love to have another child. I always tell her we can once I turn twenty again.

One morning early this month Katie climbed back into bed and was acting strange. Very similar, in fact, to the times



she found out she was pregnant with Zach and with Tim. Children are a blessing; I truly believe that with all my heart. But the first thing to go through my head when I realized she was pregnant again was something along the lines of, “Oh, crap, we’re starting over again?” I didn’t say that, of course. After three pregnancies I knew better. I feel absolutely horrible for thinking that way. And it was not all negative for me; I was able to authentically celebrate with Katie. But four? Really? Now? I’m past forty and already exhausted! How will I handle this?

Some of the things going through my head were exhaustion, money, and exhaustion. We’ll need a van. Or a bus, whatever. Unless Katie drives and I ride in the trunk, we won’t all fit into a car. We barely fit into my Corolla as it is. And we’ve given away all our baby stuff. Not to mention milk. I’m not sure my current salary is enough to buy milk for all these children. A car will be cheaper.

It did not take too long to calm down. God has provided beyond belief up to this point. Not always the ways I had expected (or wanted), but we have always had everything we’ve needed and we’ve usually had much, much more. I’ve been able to continue working at the best job in the world doing what I love, what makes me come alive. He won’t stop providing now. I need to trust him instead of my income, finances in general, or anything else.

The more I’ve prayed and thought about it, the more I’ve relaxed. A fourth child will be a good thing. A great thing. And

**5/3/11**

**Katie’s parents brought the boys back home from a visit and Tim fell asleep in the car. Josh and Zach ran in the house. Josh spelled, “T-I-M-M-Y I-S S-L-E-E-P-I-N-G.” Zach became indignant and insisted, “No, Josh! I am not hungry!”**

I've been praying for years that if God does surprise us with another child that he'll allow us to have a girl. And although it's too early to find out, I am convinced that this baby is a girl. Our track record isn't promising, but that's okay. I'm still convinced.

6/15/11

**Tim:** What does four and four and four and four make?

**Zach:** Uhhhhmmmm....

**Tim:** I'll give you a hint. It starts with a "w".

**Zach:** One hundred?

**Tim:** Yep.

Katie and the boys were thinking recently about names for the baby. Katie has only been thinking about boy's names for now, because she doesn't want to get her hopes up for a girl and be disappointed. Josh suggested right away that since all three of their names are from the Bible, the baby's name should also be from the Bible. So he ran and got his Bible, then started looking through for names. Moses came up quickly in the list, though Katie wasn't too fond of that one for our baby.

Meanwhile, Timmy came up with the perfect name: Batman. Katie gave him a middle name – Batman Frederick Wills. When he gets in trouble, we'll yell, "BATMAN FREDERICK, GET OVER HERE RIGHT NOW!" We'll introduce them to people saying, "These are my children: Joshua Joseph, Zachary Thomas, Timothy Benjamin, and Batman Frederick."



I was talking with Timmy about the new baby while I took him to school one morning. I asked whether he thought the baby is a boy or a girl. "He's a boy," Timmy insisted. He sounded very sure of himself. "How do you know that?" He told me very plainly, "God told me." We'll see. Timmy also has very vivid memories of things that have never happened. Once on the way home from watching a minor league hockey game he asked, "Remember a long time ago when I used to play ice hockey, and I got



9/17/11

Overheard:

**"Mommy, do you see my butt?"**

**"No, I don't see your butt. It's not very nice to ask people that."**

**"Mommy, now do you see my butt?"**

**"Oh, Timmy!!! No! Pull your pants up!!!"**

into a fight, and the guy punched me in the head and it hurt me?" I responded, "No, Timmy, I don't remember that." Zach corrected him, "Tim, you never played ice hockey." Tim insisted, "Yes I did!!!" Anyway, I'm not so convinced that he's hearing from God about this one.

Katie, meanwhile, has been hearing something different from God than Timmy apparently heard. Since she found out she was pregnant she has refused to even consider that this might be a girl so that she is not disappointed. Since then, however, Katie has had a bunch of experiences that truly appear to be subtle and not-so-subtle signs that this will be a girl. Katie, however, was still very reluctant to believe these are signs lest she become very disappointed later on. So one morning while Katie was praying she asked, "God, if this is a girl please give me a sign." Instead of lights from heaven, she immediately heard God asking, almost sarcastically, "What kind of sign do you want?" She told me this and then asked me, "So what do you think of 'Abigail?'"

We've asked friends for some of their baby stuff when they're done with it. Everything is coming together. My attitude has changed drastically. I'm really looking forward to having a fourth child. I'm already in love with her.



But then we lost the baby.

## Big Questions

In less than two months I've gone from not wanting another child to grieving the death of a child I've never even met.

This is not the world as God designed it.

Why? Why give us a baby knowing Katie would miscarry? Why change me to love this unborn child so much knowing I would hurt so much more?

Truthfully I don't want these questions answered. I've been studying the Bible and theology for years, decades even. I know the answers. They don't help.

I don't need answers; I need community. I need to be surrounded by people who will just sit with us and let us laugh, talk, and cry. I am extremely grateful for these people, more than words can express.

I don't need to know why God does or does not do things a certain way. I need to know God is here with me when he does them. The two greatest commandments according to Jesus are to love God and to love our neighbor. Katie and I need, more than anything else, the love of God and the love of the people around us.

In Philippians, Paul mentions peace "which surpasses all comprehension." In other words, there is Shalom beyond anything we can understand. We don't grieve like those who don't have the hope of the resurrection (1 Thes 4:13). We still grieve, often deeply. But we grieve in the midst of Shalom, not in the absence of Shalom.

There is Shalom within suffering. There is Shalom in a poisoned world. This is not the fullness of life the way Adam and Eve experienced it before the fall. We will experience that once Jesus returns as the glorified king and sets the world right. Meanwhile we are children of Life living temporarily in the midst of death. We are ambassadors of a perfect King to a fallen and broken world. We are given the gift of the fullness of Shalom in an environment that strives to destroy Shalom

3/4/12

Zach and Tim were with their grandma today. At one point Tim was alone with her and proudly announced, "Grandma, I love Zackie soooooo much that I'm not going to be mean to him."

the way water puts out fire. Yet forest fires, once they are strong enough, can burn through rainstorms. In fact, forest fires sometimes get worse during storms because the winds fan the flames more quickly than the raindrops can hinder them. Our poisoned world tries to extinguish the fire of Shalom, but the “ruach”, the Spirit/Wind/Breath of God, can strengthen Shalom even in the midst of the worst situations, often because of those situations.

Still, knowing these facts does not always help. We cannot merely know these things – we need to live them.

2/20/12

The boys were spies today, but they didn't realize I knew that they were spying on me. At one point they snuck quietly past me and then ran downstairs and starting talking about what a close call it was, that I almost saw them. I walked into the kitchen for a glass of water. On my way I glanced down the stairs to the playroom and there was Zach. The moment we made eye contact he froze, got a guilty look on his face, and his eyes got real big like a deer caught in headlights. He quickly composed himself, relaxed, and told me, “I am just a waiter. May I take your order please?”

## What Now?

To live in Shalom is not to create a checklist of the five key elements I suggest throughout this book. This cannot be a formula. There will be times, possibly even painfully long times, when there is no community or where health breaks down or where opportunities to do the work we are called to do are scarce. There will be times we feel distant from God instead of enjoying intimacy. At times all of these will disappear simultaneously. This is true not only of us, but of a great many of the men and women in Scripture and through the history of our faith who are (or should be) our role models.



We should not chase after the five steps to Shalom; we should chase after Jesus. We should not be after our own well-being; we should be setting out to serve our King. Striving to live out the elements of Shalom

as I suggest in this book is drastically different from replacing our pursuit of Jesus with a checklist.

When our primary goal is to experience Shalom, we are after our own well-being. According to Jesus, we find life only after we lose it. Is our own peace the goal, or is Jesus our goal? This question is vital not only to each of us individually, but also to each of our church communities.



I desperately hope that this book does not end up as a best selling self-help book. I do not want this book to just be about each of us as individuals experiencing more fulfilling lives. I would prefer that three people read this book and experience the fullness of Shalom rather than millions of people reading the book and merely becoming happier. Although I would love for millions of people to become happier, Shalom is much greater than individual happiness. Shalom is about Jesus, his kingdom, and his bride.

## What About Me?

Does this mean losing a baby is insignificant in the grand scheme of things? No, not at all. The pain my family, along with the countless others, is experiencing matters to Jesus.

This pain is not okay with Jesus. Jesus is not just patting our shoulders from heaven and saying, "That's okay, your baby is in a better place now." When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, Jesus saw the people's pain and, for the only time recorded in the Bible, Jesus wept.

5/22/12

Timmy (reading): "On the way up was a bridge. And under the bridge lived a great ugly troll, with eyes as big as saucers, and a nose as long as a poker." [pause...] "Is this a true story?"

Jesus does not just send the message that our suffering will end, that things will work out for the best, and that this is all in his perfect plan. A baby dying is

his perfect plan? Really? Absolutely not! His perfect plan is nearly complete, but will not be fully complete until he returns in glory. Meanwhile, we await this perfection while experiencing Shalom in the midst of a poisoned world. And this poison still causes suffering.

Shalom is not the absence of suffering.

If God's goal were to get us all to heaven, we would be happy when people die. When a woman loses her husband in a car accident or when a child dies of cancer, the very last thing we would ever think to do is laugh and yell, "Congratulations!" No, this is not God's goal. The Bible never says that God created people so that they will die and be happier in heaven. The Bible teaches the very opposite – one of the blessings God offers people in Scripture is longer life in this physical world.

People will certainly be happier in heaven, but God embraces the physical world as well. We grieve because we were not created to deal with death. As I mentioned, we do not grieve as the world grieves because we possess hope of Jesus, but we do grieve. Our hope of resurrection shines in the midst of our grief.

God's goal is not that we die and go to heaven. His goal for us is life - the fullness of life, both now and at the resurrection. We will not experience Shalom as Adam and Eve did before the fall. Yet there is Shalom. This is true Shalom, not just a mystical shadow of the real thing. This is where we experience the very real tension between what Jesus called abundant life, available to us now, and the reality that we are still living in a world that is poisoned by sin.

Our pain in this poisoned world is very real. We grieve. Our bodies suffer. We suffer as the bodies of our loved ones suffer. Right there in the midst of our suffering



we find Shalom. To thrive in our grief does not necessarily mean we will experience happiness. Joy is different from and greater than happiness. Happiness and sadness conflict, but joy can exist even while we are sad. Even in our most painful suffering there is Shalom.

We are living within God's Story. God created life and called it "very good." There was intimacy with God, interaction with God, work, community and food. Adam and Eve sinned and Shalom deteriorated. God named Abraham as his instrument to restore the world to Shalom. The Torah outlines steps to restore intimacy with God as well as laws governing our work, our communities and our food. But the Law could not force people to receive the breath of God. Later the prophets announced the coming of a king who would restore the world to Shalom. The prophets mention each of the elements of Shalom, including the breath of God, so conspicuously absent from the Torah. Jesus came claiming to be that king. We crucified him, but he defeated both sin and death, rising from the dead to bring us the fullness of life. He promised to return and restore the rest of this world to Shalom. We, therefore, are waiting for the climax of God's Story, the restoration of Shalom. The wait is long and often painful, but there is joy and life within our chapters of this amazing Story.

Our job as individuals and as communities, in times of grief and in times of great abundance, is to live in Shalom. We are not waiting for some future peace; our God is offering us this peace now. Sure, Shalom will be more comfortable after the world is finally free of the poison of sin, but meanwhile we still have Shalom. If we know this, but do not live it, we are not experiencing the life that Jesus wants for us. We must not let our grief or our suffering overwhelm us to the point that we give up our Shalom. Rather, in good times and in bad, we must follow Jesus.

**7/2/12**

**We were at Hershey Park for vacation. I was explaining to the boys that if they get lost, there are people all over the park they should go to for help. After making sure they understood what to do if we get separated, Zach happily announced, "But we won't get lost." I answered, "I know you won't get lost, because you are all very good listeners and you all do what your Mommy and Daddy tell you." "Right," answered Zach. "And do you know why we're good listeners? It's because you trained us." After a pause, he added emphatically, "Like dogs! You trained us like DOGS!"**



We can have the breath of God merely by asking.

We can have intimacy with God by talking with him. And I mean “with” him, not “at” him. Take time to converse. Listen to what God says, even when it takes a long time before you hear anything from God.

We must maintain strong relationships. Be part of some sort of community of people who love Jesus. Forgive one other. Love one another. Love friends, neighbors, enemies, and anyone else whom God loves. When people fail us, do not give up on them. Strive for the community that Jesus desires.

We must do the work that God has given us. When, for whatever reason, we are unable to do that work, ask God what other work he might have for us. Work could be world changing, like curing AIDS or feeding the hungry. When we are laid up in bed do to illness or injury, work may mean praying for people or communities. If the work we think God wants us doing isn’t working out, we must ask God what he wants us doing in the meantime.

We must take care of our bodies. Eat right, exercise, and enjoy the physical world. God created the physical world and declared it good. This world was part of God’s perfect plan. Yes, the world has been poisoned by sin, but God has left us here for a reason. Enjoy it. God created the trees to be “pleasing to the eye”. Enjoy beauty. Even when our physical bodies are failing us, God gives us beauty. Beauty is not evil; God created beauty at least in part for our pleasure. Enjoy the physical world with all five senses.

Each of these elements of Shalom is, at some level, available to us.

**8/3/12**

**I had a nice conversation with the boys this morning about why we should always take things off the top of the toaster before making toast.**

Most importantly, we must never forget that Shalom is not about us. When it comes down to it, each of us as individuals and as communities must be willing to give up everything for the sake of God's kingdom. Shalom is about Jesus, and Jesus is Shalom.

## The Hope of Shalom

On and off lately an image has popped into my head of entering heaven and seeing a beautiful, smiling young girl running at me while yelling, "Daddy!" and jumping into my arms. I look forward to this. The thought of this brings tears to my eyes. I mean that very literally. In the midst of trying to keep things together, especially for Katie and the boys, the thought of meeting our baby at the resurrection breaks me down with a very hopeful sadness.

We lost our baby. But not really. She's not dead; she's more alive than I am. We will, without any doubt, meet at the resurrection.

Yes, the situation sucks. Yes, it's hard. Yes, there are questions. And yes, there is hope, even in the midst of our grief. There is Shalom that surpasses comprehension.

Jesus will complete this Shalom. Jesus is this Shalom. I say this not as the right answer or as head knowledge. I say this from my heart. Jesus is our Shalom.

I hate to end this book with something as cliché as "Jesus is the answer," but even though the statement is a bit oversimplified and is often thrown around carelessly, the phrase contains some tremendous truth. I do not ever want to reduce Jesus to "an answer" – Jesus deserves much more reverence than this. Yet the statement affirms that





8/2012

Timmy has taken to pushing on Katie's stomach. For awhile it was just an entertaining new game. But finally curiosity got the best of Katie. She asked him why he was doing this. Timmy told her that he was trying to push hard enough that a baby would come out.

Christianity should not be our focus and will not bring us peace. Jesus is our Shalom. Jesus (a person, not merely an "answer") is what Christianity is all about. Jesus, not our own happiness, success, or even our own spirituality, is what this life is all about. Ultimately this book is not really about Shalom, but about Jesus.

Jesus, our Shalom, desires his Bride. Each of us together in community make up the Bride. I hope the Church desires her Groom as much as he desires his Bride. I desire that the Bride of Jesus be fully alive as we wait for our Groom, the King, to return and establish his Kingdom.

Let us each strive for Shalom, not merely for our own benefit, but for the benefit of our Lord, Fiancé, King, and God, Jesus.

***The LORD bless you, and keep you;  
The LORD make His face shine on you,  
And be gracious to you;  
The LORD lift up His countenance on you,  
And give you Shalom.***

***-Numbers 6:24-26***



# Appendix A

## **The Story**

To supplement this book, I plan to offer audio books explaining the Story. I recommend at least downloading and listening to the free version, a short (30 minutes or so) overview of the Story. This audio is available as an MP3 at <http://www.russwills.com>.

In addition, I will offer two other more in-depth packages. The first will be equivalent to a Bible survey course covering the entire Bible. These will contain teaching on some of the key passages of the Bible similar to the way I teach them in my Old and New Testament Survey courses at Pillar College.

Finally, a longer-term project is in development where I will research and teach the Bible more thoroughly, usually verse by verse. This teaching will become available gradually over roughly ten years.

These resources should be considered a supplement, not a replacement, to reading the Bible both alone and in community. They will be designed to help people better understand the Scriptures, but it is the Holy Spirit through the living Scriptures who will change lives.

I will post updates to the book, particularly new suggestions for living out these ideas. A forum will be available for people to help one another by posting ideas and sharing what works and what does not work.

Face-to-face community is preferable in striving for Shalom. For those who are unable for various reasons to practice these ideas in a face-to-face community and for groups that desire more interaction than they are able to have in a face-to-face group, social networking technologies will be available. Groups may utilize these resources and individuals may participate online by potentially connecting with people all over the world.

To find any of these resources, please visit <http://www.russwills.com>.

# Appendix B

## Endnotes

### Chapter 1: Introduction

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