

For Everything Else

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Peter Walker

www.1peter1three.weebly.com

To my brother, Keith Jones

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On Love

When I think of God's judgement, I kinda think of him overlooking stuff. I mean, on the one hand I'm worried that God will see through me, the 'good' me, to my heart, my thoughts, my secrets, and actually nail me on who I really am. So in this regard God is not overlooking nothing! But on the other hand, I think of God looking almost over the heads of people, a type of checked-out smile and gaze, and people of faith just getting a pass into glory, all little things dismissed. In fact, all 'big' things dismissed - pornography, adultery, even abuse ('indecent liberties'), excused away with a golden sunset and a wind of *'all things new.'*

I've always wondered at God's judgement. I mean, there is powerful, clear teaching in Scripture about Jesus as the only true 'door' to salvation, the only way of God to God. This is clear. This is compelling. The call of Christ to his followers is to take his name, his message of forgiveness and hope, to the nations. All nations. And yet, God has no favorites. He has made this clear in teaching, in action, from Genesis to Revelation. We also know and believe that God is just, and he says clearly, **'How will they believe unless they hear?'** (Romans 10:14) No favorites, all people made in God's image, no one able to know Christ without first hearing of Christ, and God is just. God will condemn no man or woman or child for rejecting something they never knew. Correct? Yes, correct. Undeniable if we know and believe the Scriptures. So how do we then explain judgement? We don't. Don't dare. It is above us and beyond us, even after the deepest of treatises on the matter: ***'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and***

knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out!
(Romans 11:33-36)¹

We have profound and mysterious passages, such as Jesus in his death descending to spirits in limbo, on hold, on pause, to preach to them what they could not – did not – hear while alive.² If Jesus did that for them, does he do that for people now? We are also told that people will be judged by what they do know, at least with regard to sin, because even in what people do know naturally they do not hold to, do not honor, do not live by. People without the ‘Law’ can be, will be, judged according to the Law written on their hearts.³ Did they, in breaking this Law, lift their eyes, their hearts, to a Creator God and cry out? We are also told that ***‘what can be known about God is clearly seen, being understood by what has been made.’*** (Romans 1:19-20) All people, of all nations and eras, have been made by God with a compelling, eternal spirit that presses the soul to ***‘reach out for God, and find him.’***⁴ Do I? Do they? Did they?

So this brings me to the topic of love. A most powerful passage in the Bible – one used by believers and unbelievers alike in ceremonies – speaks of love. What arrested me recently is the actual breakdown, the definition, of what love is, what it looks like. It arrested my attention because I realized that love can be at work – *must* be at work – in *all* people of all creeds and nations and epochs, as dictated by the soul cut in the image of God, and

¹ John 10:9, Luke 24:47, 2 Peter 3:9, Matthew 18:14, 1 Timothy 2:4, Genesis 1:27

² 1 Peter 3:19-20 & 1 Peter 4:6

³ Romans 2:12-16

⁴ Acts 17:25-27, Ecclesiastes 3:11; 12:1,7

wired with eternity.

And before I break it down even further, and at the same time close this reflection, I wonder is judgment going to be much less of an 'overlooking' and more of an incredibly deep scrutiny. Did I love?

I'm told in 1 Corinthians 13 that even faith without love is nothing, prophecy without love is nothing, sacrifice without love is nothing. I'm told that when put side by side with 'hope' and 'faith', love is greater. And then it is broken down into things that all people do – or should do. And I do wonder if judgement will hinge on this. If Jesus – his gospel, his true gospel – will be bound up in this. Does his name matter? It is all that matters. Because his name is the very expression of love. It is love in the flesh. It is God.

'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.' (1 Corinthians 13:4-8,13)

'Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.'
(1 John 4:7-8)

Evidence for Life on Earth

We believe in life on earth only because we experience it. But we can't prove it.

Consider a person who is blind, let's call him Tom. You have no way to prove to Tom that sight exists, is a reality. You could, over time, and using many different situations and factors and sensations and correlations, lead Tom to believe in this reality you describe as sight. Tom may even believe strongly. But a strong belief in itself does not mean something has been proven. If someone were to ask Tom, now a strong believer in sight, if he had ever actually experienced sight or had seen anything, he would say no. He has a strong belief in 'sight', but he has no way to prove it. He has never seen sight, nor has sight been shown to him.

However – and here is the key point: Tom can't prove 'sight', but 'sight' proves to Tom so many other realities in life that otherwise cannot be explained. Such as, how his friends can cross a room and come back with something they could have had no way to find. Or how people can get in a car and drive without hitting things, etc. Tom can't prove sight, but without the reality, the 'truth' of sight, very little else about life's realities can be explained – things that *need* explaining.

In the Declaration of Independence (1776), there is this line: '**We hold these truths to be self-evident...**' And then it goes on to say things such as the equality of people, the right to life and freedom and happiness. Most of us agree with these 'truths'. And yet no one can prove them. They must be held

as 'self-evident', as it were. Interestingly, however, though most of us believe that all people are equal, some of us have used our inequalities of strength or other advantages to bully or take advantage of others – those same people we consider in truth to be 'equal'.

How is something, by the way, 'self-evident'? And if 'self-evident', what is this other reality, other truth, by which we can choose *not* to comply? - e.g. bully another we consider to be 'equal'. Or put another way, how can we go against something we believe to be true? Again, interestingly, we hold people's 'equality' to be 'self-evident' – i.e. something we all inherently know to be true even if we cannot prove it – and yet people treating each other as 'unequal' we have hard evidence for, we see its proof every day in every human being. So why do we hold something to be true and 'self-evident', if the only real evidence we have says the exact opposite?

If everything in mankind and human history demonstrates that people do not treat each other as equal, why do we assert that there is a moral reality, truth, that people should consider others as equal? Our actions say this is not what we do, so obviously it is not a natural way to behave. What, therefore – or who – says it is what we *should* do? How can we say this is a 'self-evident' truth?

So we see a war waging in the soul – a desire and outworking of taking advantage of people, and yet a conviction that this should not be. This 'war' can be seen in myriads of dynamics including guilt, regret, apologies, confessing, and even moments of deep conflict in the soul where despite a strong conviction,

almost desire to not do something, we do it anyway.

Paul the apostle put it this way: ***'I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.'*** (Romans 7:15-20)

Now someone might ask of me – like I asked of Tom – if I can prove a moral of people being equal, if I have evidence of this value, this spiritual truth that we call 'self-evident'. I would have to say no. When I look at this truth itself, I cannot prove it. But when I look through the lens of this truth I can *understand* many other dynamics in life, that otherwise cannot be understood.

Now we're not talking about explanations for the sake of cerebral satisfaction or pride. We're talking about things – serious realities – that need an explanation or they may be rejected, and people will die. Again, we're talking about things we say are 'self-evident', and even with that 'self-evidence' there is a daily battle to comply with the evidence. We have evidence. Now where is it from? Because if it is not from something with authority, with judgement, with consequence, then maybe we're making a big deal about nothing? Maybe there is no 'evidence' for people's equality, other than a pesky sense of right and wrong, which is from who-knows-where?

Problem here is that so much is at stake. Where the conscience is seared, murder, rape and abuse run riot. No one reading this essay is OK with things that we hold to be 'self-evident' being discarded and

disdained. We know in our gut that this light of the conscience, although sometimes dim and flickering, is holding the gates of hell closed to this world.

We can't prove sight to a person who is blind, but for their good, and for the sake of truth, we strive to help them believe that it is a reality. Because it is. We can see this, they can't. And yet their understanding of life itself, and how people and things work, depends on them accepting this reality by faith. Is it wishful thinking on their part? Is it 'blind faith'? No. They are not wishing for something to be true that everything in their heart and mind says is not true. That is wishful thinking, that is blind faith. But this is not the same as believing in that which gives understanding to everything else.

Sometimes the evidence for a truth that we cannot see and prove, is the meaning it gives to something we can see and prove.

'The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.' (Colossians 1:15-20)

Violent God in the Bible

Violence is a spirit, not an action. For example, when a man kills another man. It could be that he shot him by accident. Zero 'violence', as it were, in the spirit of the action, but nonetheless the same action, same result, as if done in anger, in cruelty.

Or another example might be when doctors are literally holding down a patient in order to extract something or do something that is painful but saves life. The action looks like torture, and is essentially the same as torture, but the motive and the outcome is life and not death, care and not cruelty. Same action, even same pain, but different spirit.

One thing that has often stood out to me in the Old Testament of the Bible, is the *nature* of the violence that God commands. For example, when he sends the Israelite people – the people he has chosen to use for his purposes – to attack and kill another group of people, he often commanded them to completely destroy, and not take any spoils for themselves – not people, not things:

‘The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord (i.e. completely destroyed)... Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury.’

When the trumpets sounded... everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with

the sword every living thing in it — men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys. (Joshua 7:17-21)

This is just one point that is noteworthy. You see, if you turn on the news, even now the wars that rage across the world in the bright light of day, soldiers are often cut loose to rape, rob and do what they want. It's part of the attack, and part of the remuneration for the soldiers. This, my friends, is commonplace across our beautiful world right now. I'm not talking about wars unseen in the jungles, but those covered by the news and reporters every day.

So when there is a people group commanded to *not* touch or take anything for themselves – not people, not articles of value – this is different. And if you read on in this account in Joshua 7, you have the famous story of Achan, the one man who did *not* obey this order, stole some money, and paid for it with his life, and that of his family. Can you imagine if every soldier who stole money from people while on tour, was punished by death – him and his family? I think war would look very different.

Now, this is not the full story. There are other things to consider, primarily, which I will share shortly, what I believe to be the very framework of this 'violent God' – like, what's going on with God getting people to kill other people? But first, another incident I feel is noteworthy:

So in Numbers 31 the Israelites defeat the Midianites, and kill all the men, and take the women and children captive. Moses gets angry at the commanders, saying that they should not have let the

married women live, only the unmarried, the virgins. Now, this whole situation is horrific, the result of a world full of sin and death. But given the reality of war, there is incredible and uncommon accountability in this particular instance.

What is *not* going on here is a salacious and cruel treatment of women, with celebration and sexual assault in the camp – which we see to this day across the globe in war. There is a purging, an extinguishing of people, not with personal and cruel motive, but with a fear of God and a fresh start commanded. Unmarried women are kept to be married, not thrown to the dogs, as it were. Yes, it is a horrific situation indeed, but does not have that spirit of evil that exists where a man is the commander and not God. It is clean cut. The army comes in and kills, but does not rape and pillage.

We've been considering the different spirit of war, or of 'violence', that we see in the Bible, as compared to what we see on the news today, and throughout history. Now, we're talking about what we see in the *Bible*, not what we've seen in history in the *name* of the Bible or of God, Crusades and witch hunts. Of those so-called 'holy wars' I think of what Jesus said:

'There will come a time when people kill you and think they are offering a sacrifice to God. They do this because they do not know me or the Father.'
(John 16:1-3)

And again on this note, Jesus said there will be people who do things in his name, but do not know him, and he will cast away from his presence for all eternity. (see Matthew 7:21-23)

In Scripture we see again and again that people who did not carry out the commands of God in battle were themselves punished, and in fact the people of Israel were punished severely as a whole people group – again and again over many years – for failing to keep God as God in their daily lives, which was based on loving God and loving people.

‘You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.’ (Amos 3:2)

This is a key segue to the bigger picture of God and violence in the Bible. Let’s consider that...

We often refer to the fact that sin entered the world and human history by chapter 3 of the Bible. But it is also noteworthy that by chapter 6, God decided to destroy the whole world and everyone in it – except Noah and his family. This was the great flood, and was due primarily to heterosexual immorality. (see Genesis 6:1-2)

So God creates the world, and then because of mankind’s sin God destroys the world. Then we move into the next chapter, so to speak, of this history of the world. In this next chapter, God decides to use man to deal with man. God no longer swoops in and destroys everything and everyone with rain or fire. He expects man to be part of the salvation plan, to do the dirty work. You made this mess, you are going to be part of putting things right.

So God chooses Abraham to use as his person, the father of his people group.

‘Through you all nations will be blessed.’

(Genesis 22:18)

God names and claims a people group, to carry out his own revelation and work through history. God uses them to punish evil nations, and God punishes *them* by other nations for their own evil. And so little by little, revelation by revelation, God makes himself known to the world, and he prepares the way for himself to step *into* the world and pay the ultimate, the last, sacrifice for sin and death through Jesus Christ.

Rather than God flooding the world, he used a specific people group – sinful as all people are – to wield war and changes across the face of the earth and prepare his own way. The wars are not *of* God, but used *by* God, for people to correct people and carve out a landscape and history for ultimate salvation. The wars are of God, but any spirit of violence or avarice is of man.

Even when God used a people to punish another people, he would not allow personal and human gloating. God despised this. We see in Ezekiel that God punished those nations that he used to punish Israel, because their own hearts were impure. Note this:

‘The Lord says: Because the Philistines acted revengefully and took vengeance with malice of soul to destroy... I will stretch out my hand against the Philistines.’ (Ezekiel 25:15-16)

Again, about Egypt who God used to punish Israel at times, God notes:

'When they grasped you with their hands you tore all their shoulders...' (Ezekiel 29:6-7)

God is punishing people that he used to punish other people. Why? Not so much because of their actions, like taking the Israelites captive, but because of their hearts and spirits in their actions. God is about the heart. Again, in Ezekiel 9:4 God looks for people who ***'grieve evil'***, and spares them. He does not just want people that 'do' right, but that have hearts for righteousness.

Have you ever seen a child punished for something they did wrong, but then as they are being punished or scolded, other children are looking on and laughing at them, pointing and humiliating them?

Where is the real wrong here? In my experience even as a child when I saw this kind of thing happen, those delighting in the downfall and humiliation of the child seemed so much darker than whatever it is the child did.

'Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them.' (Proverbs 28:17-18)

After the flood God chose to use people to carry out his history and revelation, right through to the appearance and ministry of Jesus. And he continues to use people for his ministry and mission since then. But the people he uses are no better than those he is trying to reach. If the people he uses grow prideful or envious, God will punish them as he will judge and punish anyone else. In fact, God warns that those

who have been given a trust will be judged more strictly.

‘The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.’ (Luke 12:47-48, and see James 3:1)

And things have not changed since the coming and going of Jesus Christ. We see the continued mission of God using people front and center – even ahead of angelic intervention and revelation. Read Acts 10 and note how angels prepare the way for the appearance of people, not the other way round.

So the violence we see in the Old Testament, is God’s way of making people deal with people, instead of just flooding the earth again. But God did not tolerate his soldiers, so to speak, to allow personal and sinful appetite and behavior into their service on the battlefield. In a sense, God did not allow a spirit of *‘violence’* into his battles, or a spirit of *‘malice’*. And when God punished his own army, Israel, through the might of other nations, these other nations were also punished if their dealings with Israel were of the flesh and not the spirit, as we’ve seen from the prophecies of Ezekiel.

‘God does not show favoritism.’ (Romans 2:11)

On Singing to God (Worship)

Worship is of the heart. And from an adoring heart, worshipful actions flow, such as singing, bowing down, obeying.

Worship music is singing *to* God. It is not singing *about* God. Singing about God is wholesome and uplifting. But singing to God is direct relationship. The difference is the same as that of talking about a friend and talking to a friend. Now the whole purpose of talking about a friend, is to actually be with the friend and talk to the friend. Togetherness is the ultimate purpose of any knowledge of a person.

And this is God's ultimate purpose for us, too. It is not to know about him; but rather that knowledge about him would lead us to him.

'God made all people so that they would seek him, perhaps reach out to him and find him.' (Acts 17:25-27)

Jesus spoke a powerful word to the scholars of his day, pointing out that their knowledge about God was without true meaning if they did not actually come to God:

'You search the Scriptures... but you refuse to come to me to have life.' (John 5:39-40)

To worship, to sing to God, is to arrive. It is higher than belief. It is the purpose of belief. Belief is to point us to the presence of God; worship is to be in that presence. Singing 'to', and not 'about'.

I'm reflecting here on worship in the form of singing to Jesus. However, worship is more than singing. Worship is a heart disposition. A worshipful heart is one inclined toward the light and face of God. It is seeing. It is loving. Any action that comes from this place is worship.

But there is something about singing – where the heart comes forth in words and music. The whole book of Psalms in the Bible is a collection of poetry and song.

'Sing joyfully to the Lord... it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.' (Psalm 33:1-3)

There is something about speaking out what we believe in our hearts, and singing does this. We are told that God himself is **'Word'** and this word became flesh in the man of Jesus Christ.⁵ Word matters. What we speak out – or sing out - matters.

'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' (Romans 10:9)

Music and song can release gifts in people. When the prophet, Elisha, was asked to prophesy, he asked for a musician to be brought. And we are told, ***'While the harpist was playing the hand of the Lord came on Elisha.'*** (2 Kings 3:15)

⁵ John 1:1-5,14

Singing to God is an act of speaking truth about God directly to him – ‘*You are true, you are good, you are holy.*’ Singing to God is an act of hearing truth about yourself directly from him – ‘*I love you, I forgive you, I am with you always.*’

Talking about God, even believing in God or believing things about God, can be done at a distance. This is true of any relationship. But worshipping God, singing to him, this is can only be done in the very presence of God.

The highest point of ‘arrival’ in this life, is to find God and stay with him. No matter what the circumstances, to know that Jesus is with you. His very name, Emmanuel, means, ‘God with us.’ (Matthew 1:23) To see Jesus, and enter through his door, and stand there by faith every day despite circumstances, this is life’s highest spiritual place.

So when you experience hard times, and you find yourself able to whisper a song, to praise, worship Jesus, you are standing on the highest ground that God has given us, and mighty is your reward!

***‘Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.’***

(Habakkuk 3:17-18)

***'Here is a trustworthy saying:
If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with him.'***

(2 Timothy 2:11-12)

Guilt, Shame, Regret and Redemption

'The Lord said, 'I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten...''

(Joel 2:25)

Do you have regrets? Do you have guilt and shame that lurk in your soul? Thoughts, memories, that are never quite gone, but sometimes excruciatingly present?

GK Chesterton defined 'ecstasy' and 'bliss' as simply 'forgetting'. Do you ever wish that you could fully forget your past, or even better, have a *new* chance at the past, a *new* chance at life?

When God stepped into the world he created, he searched for you, found you, and asked: ***'Are you weary?'*** He left the crowds in search of you - even the church meeting, the mission conference - and found you. He found you thinking, remembering, deep in thought, deep in feeling. He sat down beside you there, and stayed with you.⁶

This is the true gospel – ***'God with us.'***⁷ Jesus said, ***'How I have longed to gather you to myself as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing.'*** (Matthew 23:37)

This picture and truth of Christ with you, is not just for the 'first meeting.' It is also for when we have strayed from him, squandered some of what he has given us, and then started walking home. When we turn to walk home, he runs to meet us. (Luke 15:1-7) The

⁶ Matthew 11:28; Luke 15:1-7; Psalm 139:7; Psalm 17:8

⁷ Matthew 1:23

disciple, Peter, had denied Christ, but his heart broke at what he had done. He **'wept bitterly'**. Jesus met him later and **'reinstated'** him, put him back on his feet and back in the battle for the Kingdom of God.⁸

'My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, God, you will not despise.'
(Psalm 51:17)

So when we turn to God, whether that first time we met him, or here today afresh, anew, his love and gospel and reach are the same. **'His mercies are new every morning.'** (Lamentations 3:23)

'Though the righteous [i.e. believers in Jesus, you!] **fall seven times, they rise again.'** (Proverbs 24:16)

Maybe you struggle with a sense of guilt and shame from *before* you came to Christ. Maybe you struggle with something done *since* you came to Christ. My friend, the message and the power of Jesus comes to you here and now. The message is this:

Jesus – God with us – took our sin on himself. The prophecies said he would. Not only did he 'claim' our sin, but he **'became sin for us.'** Then he died. Our sin died with him. Death itself died with him. Then Jesus rose again and came to find you, to find me, and offers us this new life – free of sin, free from our past, free from death, free from guilt and punishment.⁹

Do you want this today? Do you want a new measure

⁸ Luke 22:62; John 21:15-17

⁹ Isaiah 53:5, 2 Corinthians 5:21, 2 Timothy 1:10, 2 Corinthians 5:17, John 5:24

of this Spirit of God poured over you today?

Just like the first time we turned to see Jesus – turned away from our sin to see him – so today we can turn *again* to see him. We can turn our hearts away from sin, from worry, from fear, and look towards Jesus. We can gaze on Jesus.

‘One thing I ask of the Lord... that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, and to seek him...’ (Psalm 27:4)

When we see him, we **‘gaze’**. When we lose sight of him, we **‘seek’**. One way or the other, gazing or seeking, we are safe within his house. We are in the palm of his hand.

Let’s lay hold of these four verses below, gazing on them, walking in them, building on them:

‘Jesus said, ‘All those who come to me, I will not turn away.’ (John 6:37)

‘And if we do sin... we confess our sins, and he is faithful and just and will forgive our sin, and purify us from all unrighteousness.’ (1 John 1:9)

‘And when our hearts condemn us [guilt, shame, accusation] God is greater than our hearts...’ (1 John 3:20)

‘Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and LEAVES NO REGRET, but worldly sorrow brings death.’ (2 Corinthians 7:10)

I end with this: Satan is an accuser. He is not just a liar, but an accuser¹⁰ – i.e. whispering to us things that we actually *have* done, and saying that we are ‘accused’, we are in trouble.

We’re told in Revelation chapter 12 that the devil does this – accuses Christians - night and day before the throne of God. He does this *to* you and *about* you. But we are also told about this incredible truth, this faith-filled, Spirit-filled release of power. We are told the saints, the believers, ‘**overcame the accuser**’, defeated him, by these two things:

(1) ‘The blood of the Lamb.’ i.e. the death of Jesus, dying for our sin; and

(2) ‘The word of the believers’ testimony’. When we believe in Jesus, the power of his blood, and we speak it out, the devil – and his accusations over our lives – are defeated.

Our faith in what Jesus has done, brings it alive in our lives, and silences the devil.

This is a life-long, spirit testimony.

Can you whisper this in your soul today? Can you claim and speak the blood of Jesus over your guilt, shame and regret? This honors Jesus. His blood, we are told, speaks a more powerful word than the blood of murder. (Hebrews 12:24)

Speak it. Make it your soul’s language. Let it be your mantra, your song. In doing so you make Christ’s sacrifice worth it. He died to set captives free, and so when we walk free in spirit he is honored. His death is vindicated. God is pleased.

¹⁰ John 8:44; Revelation 12:10-11

Where Things Land

‘The lips of a forbidden woman drip honey... but in the end she is bitter as wormwood... Her feet go down to death.’ (Proverbs 5:3-5)

I’m sitting here looking at a vase of flowers that are withering. They’re not fully gone, but they’re going. Not to be morbid here, as I truly believe that a morbid spirit misses the truth. But there is a careful and close consideration of our *‘numbered days’* that is truthful and even called-for in Scripture.¹¹ And this consideration of where things end up – or ‘land’ – is critical in knowing truth and falsehood in our everyday decisions. Let me explain...

So take the strong verse that we opened with – Proverbs 5:3-5. We see here that the dripping honey, the sweet taste, is not what’s actually ‘real’. I mean, it’s real – powerfully real in the moment – but it leads to something bitter, even to death. Now, there is honey that simply remains honey, right? Then there is that which drips honey, but leads to death. So we look not just at what we see – taste and crave – in the moment. But we look at where this craving leads. Where does it land? And this is how we do life. Well, it is how we do that ***‘life which is truly life.’*** (1 Timothy 6:19)

So these withering flowers in the vase... well, that’s OK. Their beauty a few days ago was true. Their withering does not mean they were lying to us about their beauty. But the honey that drips from the forbidden woman’s lips is not true. It is honey, it is sweet, but it goes somewhere that true honey does

¹¹ Psalm 90:12

not go. True honey nourishes the body, gladdens the heart and mind. This honey – the honey that drips from the forbidden woman’s lips – it looks the same as true honey, tastes the same at the starting point, but when it goes down it does not nourish the body nor gladden the heart. It lied. It was not ‘true’ honey. It promises the same happiness as honest honey, but it lied. It took your soul to the grave.

Sometimes – maybe most times – the false is something that looks true at the outset, but leads elsewhere. We’re told that even the devil dresses up to look like a true angel of light, because he knows we will trust the look of an angel of light.¹² Then he leads us elsewhere. Most deception comes ‘dressed up’ as something honest. It hijacks our trust in something we think is good. We all know this story, this lesson. In fact, usually we sense the false even when we choose it. How often have you heard, have you said, *‘I had a sense from the beginning that it wasn’t good.’*?

Now the *inverse* of this principle is also true. Again, we usually know it, just don’t really want it. The principle of something not looking or even tasting like honey, but ultimately will yield sweetness, profit, peace. For example the principle of sacrificing pleasure in the moment for a longer-term gain.

‘The root of the righteous will never be moved... the root of the righteous bears fruit.’ (Proverbs 12:3,12)

Here we see a root of truth, so to speak. Something down deep, unseen, not beautiful or notable, but

¹² 2 Corinthians 11:14

strong and forever. This is the essence of God's truth, Spirit and wisdom. It is a 'root'. It will bear fruit, and the fruit that comes forth will be true, beautiful, established. But its origin is down deep.

'Truthful lips endure forever.' (Proverbs 12:19)

Truthful lips often incur rejection and mocking – in the moment. They often result in being alone, away from the group. And yet, truthful lips are forever. When the group disperses, and its members even come to distrust each other, and you realize there is no actual 'group', never was, well, the truthful words, they stand. They still establish your reputation, your integrity, your sweet, guiltless sleep. And ultimately, your truthful lips honor God and he will judge your words spoken that day, *their* words spoken that day.

'Jesus said, 'I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.' (Matthew 12:36-37)

So although in that moment your 'truthful lips' may not have looked pretty to the masses, or sounded harmonious to the crowd, they were forever. They were roots of truth. Their fruit comes forth even now.

God is unseen, and he is the God of the unseen. Jesus tells us, ***'Your Father who sees in secret, will reward you.'*** (Matthew 6:18)

I end this brief reflection with another verse from Proverbs 12, the last verse:

'In the path of righteousness is life... there is no death.' (vs.28)

Universal Damnation

I've met some true Christians who say they just don't know if they are saved, safe, and going to heaven. They believe in their hearts that Jesus is Lord, and have repented of their sin. But they just don't *feel* safe, saved.

This goes against what they read. Jesus promised salvation, and as God, surely this assurance, this promise, should resonate in the soul.¹³ God promised the deposit of the Holy Spirit, '**guaranteeing**' our inheritance, so if they don't feel it, is the Holy Spirit failing to make this guarantee known in the soul?

If I've complied with what Christ calls for, but his peace I do not know, well, how can I know?

And how can you know that the peace *you* say you feel, is God's peace? If I don't feel it, you *do* feel it, well, who's feeling is true?

And when you consider the call of Jesus – '**Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect**'¹⁴ – well, are you? Is the sanctification work of Christ – you being a '**new creation, the old gone...**' – well, is the old gone?

Last I looked in my soul's mirror, there was a lot of darkness blowing like the wind. Lust, judgment – the former of which Christ equated with adultery, the latter of which he equated with murder.¹⁵

¹³ John 5:24; John 3:16; Ephesians 1:13-14

¹⁴ Matthew 5:48; 2 Corinthians 5:17

¹⁵ Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28

Have I changed? Have you? If Jesus said more people choose the road of destruction – more than those who find the narrow path – it would seem I am still on the road of destruction: sin coursing through my veins, no assurance of my salvation. And if this is me, and Jesus said that he did not trust any man for he knew all men, then this is you, too.¹⁶

My conclusion: Christ will judge all. And all will be guilty. Universal damnation.

What we have above looks complex, but really is not. We just need to take a deep breath, and understand this simple truth: Our hearts and minds are imbued by sin.

This means our thinking cannot be fully trusted, and our feelings cannot be fully trusted. Remember, we ate of the **'tree of knowledge'**, and at that point lost the capacity to trust our 'knowing'.

'Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror... now we know in part, but then we shall know fully even as we are fully known.' (1 Corinthians 13:12)

There will be times we *do* feel guidance and confirmation in our 'hearts' (whatever exactly that is), and it is true. There are other times our **'hearts will condemn us'** when they should not, and we have to hold to the report of the Lord over the report of our hearts.¹⁷

One time Paul felt such a discomfort, a **'torment'**,

¹⁶ John 2:24

¹⁷ 1 John 3:20

and asked God to remove this torment. God challenged Paul at that time to deal with the pressure, the opposition, by holding to God's grace. This is deep. This is powerful. If we access God's grace as a sure foundation – his report and his Spirit over our understanding and our feeling – we cannot be stopped. In this place, God tells Paul, our strength is even increased, '**perfected**', stronger than if operating in comfort and 'understanding', as it were.¹⁸

So despite our feelings about our salvation, well, God has promised it. If you believe, receive, you are a child of God – whether you feel it or not. The teaching is clear. The promise is clear. Yes, the Holy Spirit *has* been given to you and *does* guarantee your inheritance. It is because of our sin (not just yours, but mankind's, the world's) that we are cracked, broken vessels. We cannot even retain and feel all that *is* true and real. So here we stand on God's grace, and despite the discomfort or the torment of our doubt, we stand. We believe his report and listen to his Spirit. We walk on.

The opposite is also true regarding universal salvation.

Universal salvation says everyone will ultimately be saved by God - despite the words of Christ himself that he will judge all nations, separate them into 2 groups, save one and sentence the other to an eternal consequence of destruction. (Matthew 25:31-46) This is not even a parable. This is Jesus saying, '**When the Son of Man comes and sits on his throne...**'

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:9-10

Jesus warned people who sin against the innocent that it would have been better for them to have been drowned in the depths of the sea with a millstone tied around their neck. (Matthew 18:6) Does this language shock you? It is not mine. It is the language of Jesus himself.

Jesus did not forgive Judas. He said, ***'Woe to him! It would have been better for him to not have been born.'*** (Matthew 26:24)

Jesus said we would be accountable for every word we have spoken – all of us! (Matthew 12:34; 2 Corinthians 5:10)

Jesus warned us to fear him who could cast into hell (again, his words – Luke 12:4-5) He said he who did not acknowledge him publicly, he would not acknowledge in heaven. (vs. 8-9)

Now, there are many Scriptures about God's love, God's forgiveness, his reach. But it is untruthful, and a mishandling of the Word (2 Timothy 2:15), to overlook the jarring warnings of Christ regarding judgment and eternal consequence. I mention but a few above. There are so many more. Indeed, it is a consistent motif of Scripture through every one of the 'books' in the New Testament. People talk about the upsetting theme of judgment in the Old Testament, but I find more about it in the New Testament. It is clear and undeniable.

Now, I say 'undeniable', but everything *is* deniable! That is why we read and heed the Scriptures. Yes, we can pick and choose ones we like, and then build philosophies around those – tight and consistent

philosophies, according to our systems. But our thinking and reasoning systems are no longer pure. (since Genesis chapter 3) For this reason Paul writes (and this is one to learn by heart, and really chew on):

‘See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophies that depend on human traditions and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.’ (Colossians 2:8)

The very nature of the revelation of God is ‘revelation’, not reason. Especially not human reason. Our reasoning is broken to the core, has death in its veins. (Again, since Genesis 3). Look at this amazing passage in 1 Corinthians. Paul is outlining here that the truth of God is in the sphere of ‘revelation’, not mankind’s reason. Full truth is Spirit – as Jesus said about his own words, and his true worshippers.¹⁹

‘For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews

¹⁹ John 6:63; John 4:24

demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

(Note: For a more general understanding of above passage, try switching out the word 'Jews' for 'people who want signs' and 'Greeks' for 'people who want clever reasoning'.)

Throughout the ages, through the prophets and the writings that make up the Bible, God has 'revealed' his truth. It is higher than our reasoning. It has undeniable and unfathomable grace, love and forgiveness. It also has undeniable and unfathomable judgment and justice. The judgment aspect is so deep and beyond us that we are warned to not judge before its time (1 Cor 4:5), to not judge who is a believer and who is not (Mt 13:24-30), and to not even judge ourselves. (1 Cor 4:3-4) And yet we are called to '**make sober judgement**' (Jn 7:24), to judge and expel the immoral believer from among us (1 Cor 5:9-11), and discern and weed out false teachers. (Rev 2:1-5)

So are we told to *not* judge? Yes.
Are we told *to* judge? Yes.

If we want to really understand God's ways and teachings, we have to mature. We have to understand that true understanding, as Paul writes,

comes in and through **'Spirit-taught words explaining spiritual realities.'** (1 Corinthians 2:13)

The truth is not somewhere in the middle. The truth is in God's Spirit. So we learn from his ways, histories, teachings – i.e. his Word. And we also listen to the Spirit, who **'teaches us all things.'** (John 14:26)

When it comes to universal salvation, the same as universal damnation, neither are true because God's Word is so very clear that neither are true. We cannot park our theology on verses we love about God's all-abounding love, and then branch off into **'philosophy that depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.'** True theology holds all teaching together in harmony – not by reason, but by God's Spirit and grace. No need to understand every aspect. No need to be able to explain how God's judgment reconciles with God's love. The question is, **'What is actually taught?'**

This expression of Paul is significant not only because of *what* it says, but *where* he says it. Romans is a detailed book about some deep issues. But here at the end of chapter 11, Paul feels the need to make the point of how little we really do know. This should calibrate our type of 'thinking' when it comes to understanding God's teaching.

**'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!**

**Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?
Who has ever given to God, that God should
repay them?
For from him and through him and for him are all
things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.'**
(Romans 11:33-36)

We need this same humility. We know God's teaching – about both love and judgment – and we learn to walk by his Spirit to know when it is a time for the truth and Spirit of love, and a time for the truth and Spirit of judgment. This is God's way. A humbling walk in spirit. But here is the freedom. Here is where God is. This space of boundless freedom and truth is what he died for.

'We live by faith, not by sight.' (2 Corinthians 5:7)
In other words, we live holding to what God has shown us and told us, rather than by what makes sense to us, or what philosophy or outcome we think would be preferable.

'Jesus said, 'He who holds to my teaching... will know the truth, and the truth will set him free.'
(John 8:31-32)

5 key verses to know about universal salvation, and why salvation is not universal:

- 1. Matthew 25:46** (Good to know about the passage starting in verse 30, but verse 46 is clear)
- 2. Matthew 7:23** (Good to know from verse 21, but verse 23 is clear)

3. Luke 16:26 (*Good to know the content of the whole parable, but note verse 26*)

4. Revelation 20:15 (*And note from verse 11 the judgement of all people*)

5. Malachi 4:1 (*But if you have it in you, learn verses 1-3*)

Note: Above verses are carefully selected to indicate where in Scripture it refers to the eternal 'ending', so to speak, of God's judgment. There may still be discussion about what hell actually looks like, or what judgment actually looks like, but the eternal, irreversible nature of salvation and condemnation is clear in these verses.

Here are a few other verses that don't spell out the ending so clearly, but do indicate that judgment is coming. The reason I don't include them above is because someone might believe in judgment and even punishment, but just not in the eternal, irreversible nature of it. For that, there are the above verses.

Matthew 18:3

Luke 12:4-5, 8-9

Hebrews 9:27

2 Corinthians 5:10

Women in Leadership in the Bible

When we talk about women in leadership in the Bible, we are often talking about the role of women in the church today. And that is what this short essay is about.

In Dostoevsky's *'Brothers Karamazov'* (1880) a conversation takes place about God and the problem of evil. One person sets the terms of this discussion saying that no real consideration of this issue can happen if not in the context of an *actual* event and example of evil. He then goes on to detail a current affair, a harrowing event of abuse. His point was that we can only address things about truth and God and his teaching, in the context of real life. Truth is not, cannot be, a solely theoretical conversation. It was never like this in the Old Testament, never like this in the New. I believe these terms of Dostoevsky can also be applied to the teachings of God. In other words, let's look not just at what was said but *why* it was said, to *whom* it was said, and what we've seen God do in history related to this topic.

Let's look at the role of women in the Bible, and in the church today, according to these same terms. Let's take one 'real' example, and then consider the teaching.

So two days ago I was asked by a sincere Christian woman, recently graduated from college and now striking out to Asia to serve in missions, this sincere question: *'What do I do if I see opportunity to start a Bible study or house church, but there is no Christian man to lead it?'*

The 'woman issue' in the Bible is *not* clear and consistent from Genesis to Revelation. It does not either have a moral status or standing, such as the issue of sexual immorality.

We see in the Old Testament women in leadership, both explicitly (Deborah) and implicitly (Esther).²⁰ If women in leadership – or rather not in leadership – was a timeless command and truth of God, we would *not* have examples of women leading in this way. We would not have the influence and commendation given to the 'prophetess', Anna, in Luke 2. We would not have the influence and spiritual gift of prophecy given to all four of Phillip's daughters in Acts 21. Prophets, we're told in 1 Corinthians 14, are gifted by the Holy Spirit to instruct the church. How can they instruct the church if they can only ask to be instructed by their husbands at home? Perhaps the Holy Spirit made a mistake in gifting Phillip's daughters with prophecy? Or perhaps the Holy Spirit made a mistake through Paul in saying this gift was of the most important given to and for the instruction of the local church?²¹ One of these 2 things must be wrong, if women cannot be leaders in and through their gifting in the church.

If women in leadership – or not in leadership – were a timeless, moral matter to God, we would not have one example of it where God endorses it, wills it, blesses it. But we have many, and in many different ways. So it cannot be a timeless, moral matter.

In Acts 18 we are told of a man named Apollos: ***'A learned man with a thorough knowledge of the***

²⁰ Judges 4-5; Esther

²¹ 1 Corinthians 12-14

Scriptures.’ And yet, a couple, both wife (Priscilla) and husband (Aquila), instruct this man more ‘adequately’ about the gospel of Jesus: **‘Priscilla and Aquilla invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.’** (Acts 18:26)

Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath and famously says that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.²² And here we are 2000 years later, saying that the **‘helpless and harassed, sheep without a shepherd’**²³, should not be, cannot be, served and fed the living Word of God by a woman. The woman might be equipped and anointed and called, as were the daughters of Phillip, as was Anna, as was Deborah – and we are told that the Spirit has been poured out and **‘your daughters will prophesy’**²⁴ – and yet we still elevate a few culturally-weighted passages of Scripture above the very heart, love and example of God from Genesis to Revelation. We say to women, *‘No. You cannot feed these sheep.’*

I think there is a strong parallel here from the teaching on the Sabbath. We can focus on the written Word and miss the Living Word, and block people from coming to Jesus. The Pharisees were told directly that they were doing this, and they were also told that they had their noses so deep in the Scriptures that they would not even come to Jesus of whom the Scriptures taught. That is what we are doing with the woman issue, and a few other issues.

²² Mark 2:23-28

²³ Matthew 9:36-38

²⁴ Acts 2:17

‘Jesus said, ‘You diligently study the Scriptures which speak of me... but you refuse to come to me and have life.’ (John 5:39-40)

One time Paul perceived actions by Peter, James (Jesus’ brother), and his own partner, Barnabbas, to be **‘not in line with the truth of the gospel.’** (Galatians 2:14) Interestingly he was not putting his finger on an *actual* command that they were breaking (because we have no teaching from Jesus that formally did away with God’s command regarding circumcision) but rather he was highlighting that the commands they were so committed to were in the wrong spirit, and were now hurting and not helping people. This observance of the Law was wrong. This was not in keeping with the gospel – which is God’s power for salvation, and all things must be ‘read’ through it.²⁵

If we have the example of even one female leader raised up and commended by God, then we can never again believe that teaching about women in a local church context is God’s voice about women for all local churches in all times. Lucky for us, however, we don’t have only one example of such a leader, but many.

This same principle – which is the Holy Spirit himself and the consistent Word of God – can be applied to baptism, communion, and more. We need to know both the ‘power’ of God and his teaching and histories, or we – like the Sadducees – will be in error on these matters. (Matthew 22:29)

²⁵ Romans 1:16 & 1 Timothy 1:11 – *‘sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel.’*

Paul was very committed to the local church dynamic being a good testimony in the society in which it found itself. Paul himself says about his own behavior and ministry in many different towns and amidst many different people groups: ***'I am taking pains to do what is right not only in the eyes of God but also in the eyes of man.'*** (2 Corinthians 8:21)

Look at Paul's heart and ways here:

'I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.'
(1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Paul also admonishes slaves to obey their masters with integrity.²⁶ He gives them a very specific reason for this: ***'so that our teaching may not be slandered.'***²⁷ Now for this reason we do not endorse the system of slavery in our society today. But why not? If there was this type of acceptance and even guidance for that system, and instructions for Christian slaves, why do we oppose slavery? Well,

²⁶ Ephesians 6:5-8

²⁷ 1 Timothy 6:1

because Paul was working *within* a system – not ideal, because he tells slaves to get their freedom if they can²⁸ – but because there was a societal ‘order’, Paul did not want Christians to be seen to be a rebel group, and so distract from the gospel. Jesus himself told the people that Moses gave them a command about how to navigate divorce, not because divorce was OK with God, but because in the system and reality of their hard hearts, a command – or rather guidance – was a necessary evil, so to speak. (***‘Moses permitted you to divorce because your hearts were hard...’*** Matthew 19:8)

‘I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God... A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.’ (1 Timothy 2:9-12)

‘Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.’ (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

Women today are educated. They do not need to ask the husband questions about theology. Often men need to ask their wives about theology. So this has

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:21

changed. Society has changed. I believe – taking this context and Paul’s *real* concern – today he would not be admonishing women to submit their intellectual and theological questions to their husbands, but rather he would be admonishing both husband and wife to keep debate and personal questions to ‘home’ rather than disrupt a local church gathering. It was disorder generally – and therefore a poor testimony to society – that was Paul’s main concern.

‘Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head — it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head... Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?’ (1 Corinthians 11:4-7)

Men’s long hair today is not a sign of disgrace. Many a male church and/or ministry leader, both in the US and across the world, has long hair, or teaches (prophesies) with a cap on. Many women have short hair. And their short hair and uncovered heads are not signs of licentious living. So would Paul admonish women to cover their heads today in the West? I believe not, and for this reason: A woman’s covered head in church no longer signals to society propriety and respect, but oppression in a chauvanistic religious system. If this is what it means today, would Paul insist on this? Of course not! His whole command to cover the head was because he

was ***'taking pains to do what was right in the eyes of society'***²⁹, so that the gospel would not be associated with rebellious living.

Terms have changed. So would Paul's mind and word. I believe he would be disappointed with us for not seeing this ourselves: ***'I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly — mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly.'*** (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

We as people are addicted to idolatry. *Addicted!* That is why it is one of the Ten Commandments: ***'You shall not make idols...'*** (Exodus 20:1-17) If there is something other than Spirit, we crave it. Symbols throughout the Bible – true symbols for particular purposes – became idols. The bronze snake to give a focal point for faith, became a bronze idol that the people worshipped, and a good king had to eventually destroy it.³⁰ Circumcision, a sign for people being set apart for God, became a 'dividing wall' between people set apart for God, and Paul had to get almost violent in his language to distinguish between the symbol and the Spirit.³¹

Paul appeals to the people of the time to not let braided hair, socioeconomic status, uncovered heads, greed and disorder in their local gatherings distract them from the gospel and its advance.

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 8:21

³⁰ Numbers 21:4-8; 2 Kings 18:4

³¹ Genesis 17:10, Galatians 5:1-12 (and yet see Acts 16:3); 1 Corinthians 7:19

And yet now we are the ones, 2000 years later, doing exactly what Paul was speaking against: using gender roles, covered heads, socioeconomic differences, etc. to distract from the gospel and its advance. We search the Scriptures and dismiss the Spirit of Truth.

'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3:28)

'Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.' (Colossians 3:11)

So to answer Delaney's question, as to what to do if there is spiritual need among a people but no man to lead them?

The question is not whether there is a man to lead or not; the question is whether God has equipped and called a particular person to lead. And if this person God has called is a woman, so be it. There could be 10 godly men at the ready to lead, and yet God is calling none of them, but rather a daughter of Phillip. We have ample precedent in Scripture for women to lead, as well as men. So who is God calling?

Contradictions in the Bible

The Bible is a collection of writings (letters, prophecies, poems, history) that are considered inspired by God. Sixty-six writings (or 'books'), written by over forty different people, three languages, over two thousand years. When you are holding all these 'books' in your hand together, you are holding a collection of writings called the Bible.

God himself only wrote about one page of it, when he wrote the Ten Commandments directly onto stone tablets. The rest of it was written under the inspiration of God (not the 'dictation' of God) through people. Some were educated, some were not. Some thought they were writing sacred truths, some did not. But after many years and events in history, people considered all these writings to be under the hand, the guidance, the Spirit of God. Not word for word, not dictated like a teacher in a classroom, but rather under the pure and true revelation of the one and only God.

So when we talk about the Bible being 'inspired by God', we mean it in a very broad and powerful way. We are thinking of this power of inspiration more like many different writers at many different times getting caught under a fifty-mile wide, dark storm, and writing about it, writing under its influence, with lightning and thunder cracking and striking in different ways at different moments and all the writers going through different things and seeing different things... the one storm, the one truth, but many inspired people catching glimpses of it in different ways at different times.

From the beginning of the Bible to the end, God uses people to communicate his truth. He uses people to do his miracles, to speak his prophecies, to write prayers, to build his temples, etc. Despite people's brokenness and even sin, God uses people to make himself known to other people. Always.

God used people to write down what they saw. He did not dictate how they wrote, but rather showed them inspiring things, let them hear inspiring words, and let them write it. This writing was inspired by God. Perfect inspiration through imperfect people = the writings of the Bible. Because God always uses people.

Now let's skip forward to the very end of the story, if you know what I mean. We now have the sixty-six books, and the Bible in our hand. What do we mean when we say, *'The Bible is God's inspired Word'*? Does this mean there will be no contradictions in it? Well, that depends. If we are talking about tiny points, tiny details, that have no impact on the main points, there will be some contradictions. Why? Because God uses people – their imperfect hearts, minds, perspectives – to write his story. Let's try to understand this a little better by drawing a parallel from current news:

Suppose three journalists went into a dangerous place to report on a hostage exchange – two countries at war, making a midnight exchange of hostages and prisoners. Three very sincere journalists who are risking their lives to make this situation known to the world. They come back and they report under pressure – no editors, no support staff, and putting their own lives at risk for even

identifying themselves. Two of the journalists write that 15 hostages and 42 prisoners were exchanged. The other journalist says 13 hostages and 42 prisoners were exchanged. They all confirm completely and categorically that the exchange took place, no doubt there, all in agreement.

The world rejoices because the exchange took place. The world rejoices because there is a break in the weather, there might be avenues for more peace. Everyone was holding their breath to see if it would happen. And it did!

But then suppose some people came together and said, *'Hold on, the numbers of the journalists do not line up. There is contradiction there. We cannot, therefore, trust the report at all!'*

I think you would agree – and everyone would agree – that the main point was being missed. The great truth, the history-changing fact, was being missed for a minor point. The bigger point – the only point – was clear from the fact that they all agreed on the miracle, the moment – the exchange did happen! The exact numbers will come clear over time. Let's not miss the big point by getting distracted on a point that does not matter at all!

Jesus turned to the people at one point and said they were missing the point. He put it this way: ***'You strain out a gnat, and yet you swallow a camel!'*** (Matthew 23:24)

Jesus also warned a whole city that they had actually missed him. He wept looking over the city and said, ***'If you had only known what would bring you***

peace! But you did not recognize me when I visited you and now destruction will overtake you! (Luke 19:41-44)

Jesus warned the people again through a parable, saying that people would come to him on Judgment Day with excuses, with philosophies, and he would see through them all and say, ***'Actually, you were just wicked!'*** (Luke 19:22)

I personally have met people who say the Bible contradicts itself, and therefore they reject its authority. However, in my experience, these same people have never actually read the full Bible. The only parts of the Bible they actually seem to know, they have taken out of context to use for another agenda, another religion or belief.

This is what the Bible calls ***'mishandling the Word'***. (2 Timothy 2:15) It is also 'Misusing God's name', which is one of the Ten Commandments that God himself warned us not to do - and God himself wrote that down on stone. (Exodus 20:7)

I have met people who reject the Bible's authority saying it has changed over time, is no longer authentic, but the exact same thing is at play. These people have never actually read the Bible, and usually do not realize that the prophecies written six hundred years before Christ in the book of Isaiah, and many others, all come true in the story and identity and teaching of Jesus – and hold consistent through the rest of the New Testament, i.e. Paul's letters, Peter's letters, that of James (Jesus' own half-brother), etc. These people are simply saying the Bible is corrupted because they already have another

belief that needs the Bible to be corrupted. They have an agenda, and so are misleading people and speaking about what they do not know. Look what the Bible warns about people who do this:

‘There will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.’ (2 Peter 2:1-3)

The contradictions in the Bible are simply evidence that God uses real people, genuine people, to do his reporting. Everything serious and deep and necessary is consistent all the time, over time, in every book of the Bible – like the identity of Jesus, his forgiveness, God’s judgement, his promise of eternal life, his healing, his love for you. These things are never contradicted.

‘Jesus said, ‘Unless you change and become like a child, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.’
(Matthew 18:3)

For Everything Else

Life just happens to us. We find ourselves here. A few years after depending on it completely – food, drink, warmth, shelter, care, kindness, smiles, words, meaning, understanding, communicating – we then begin thinking about it. We start to notice those things we're depending on, like oxygen. We begin to notice the very faculties that allow us to notice, like thought and reflection, awareness and analysis. We begin to question, always humbly aware of the ability to question. I have been given life, and the ability to question this same life. And where is all this happening, exactly? Where is this expanse of unseen thought and perspective and feeling and conviction and emotion?

I mean, I can see a mile up ahead, and then my eyes draw a line. But this expanse of the unseen seems to have no limit. It goes on and on – and has been going on and on for years now. I don't see the parameters of this space in my soul. Is it soul? I don't see the borders of this spirit space. Is it spirit?

If I look back on my few years, so much more fills the unseen than the seen. Memories, feelings, relationships, hate, joy, regret, love, peace, lack of peace, anxiety, secrets, hope, anticipation, fear, confidence, insecurity, reassurance... It is as if life that I can see is just a small footing, a place for my spirit world to soar. Life that I can see is but a metaphor, a placeholder, for all that is real beyond.

'Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls. All your waves and breakers have swept over me.' (Psalm 42:7)

To feel safe in this physical world, the one I found myself in by no choice or design of my own, I go small. I can see expanses all around me, so I reach for a 2x4 and build a cabin. In that small cabin I make a smaller room. I put a door on it to go smaller still. I put a lock on the door. In that small room I build a bed and curl up in it, and pull a blanket up over my head. I close my eyes and go deep into my mind, somewhere else, somewhere far away. I go small. I go tiny. And then in the recesses of my mind I hide. Am I safe here? Am I real here? Is that still me somewhere in my mind? And if so, is that the real me? A type of spirit deep within the body, not even in the body? Is this why when we see a dead person we feel the real person is just not in the body anymore? We don't believe they are gone, but gone away. We actually do not have the capacity to feel or believe someone is no more. A person is a spirit light that God switched on and we cannot switch off. The light moves out of our vision at a certain distance and experience, but it cannot be extinguished in our own minds and spirit. It would be like trying to switch off the reality of a mountain because we see it no more, or the reality of a historical event because it is over. It was not ours to turn on, and it is not ours to turn off. We can only grieve that he or she is out of our present realm.

'God has put eternity in the hearts of all people.'
(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

We see more space than things in that space. I sit in this room and see things. But between where I sit and the lamp, is a room full of air and light and meaning and heat and time ticking and temperatures changing and memories and thoughts and worries. I

look out the window at a neighbor's house, and even more spirit fills the space between me and them. And with it, wind and dawn and dusk and history and family stories and kids and their paths up ahead and choices and changing minds and hearts. And then there's the moral history. Families getting closer, a husband drifting, a wife wandering, lost love, lost loved ones...

Suddenly all that I actually do see with my eyes seems like a very simple 2-dimensional, 1-color maze. Houses, cars, clothes, colors... these are all just the walls and corridors of real life, real spirit, coursing through them.

It's been said that the eye is the window to the soul. Amazing to me that no two people are the same, not even close. I mean, in some respects 99% the same, but in essence 1000% different. Look into their eyes. They glisten with unique spirit, history, soul, eternity, identity, future, image of God, worth, wonder.

Jesus said of every child – and you are one - ***'Do not despise one of these little ones. I tell you, their angels in heaven always look on the face of my Father in heaven.'*** (Matthew 18:10)

This is the reality Jesus sees: You, made in the image of God, eternity in your heart, your angels looking on you and looking on God at the same time.

Jesus and his words and ways and call to faith resonates with all that is unseen, but known. He stepped in to fill all truth, all space, all soul and spirit, past and future. He stepped in to complete and restore loss and evil, sorrow and justice. He only fills

everything, not just some things.

'So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.' (2 Corinthians 4:18)

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