

Christian Odyssey

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Exploring Life and Faith

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INSIDE

Christian living

Lazarus, come out! —Page 3

The radical consequences
of justification —Page 5

Church history

'I cannot and will not recant'—
Martin Luther —Page 9

Odyssey interview

Exclusive interview with Robert
F. Capon, author of *Genesis: the
Movie* —Page 10

Lessons from Mark

Lesson 25: A lesson about
lessons: Mark 4:30-34 —Page 12

Book Review

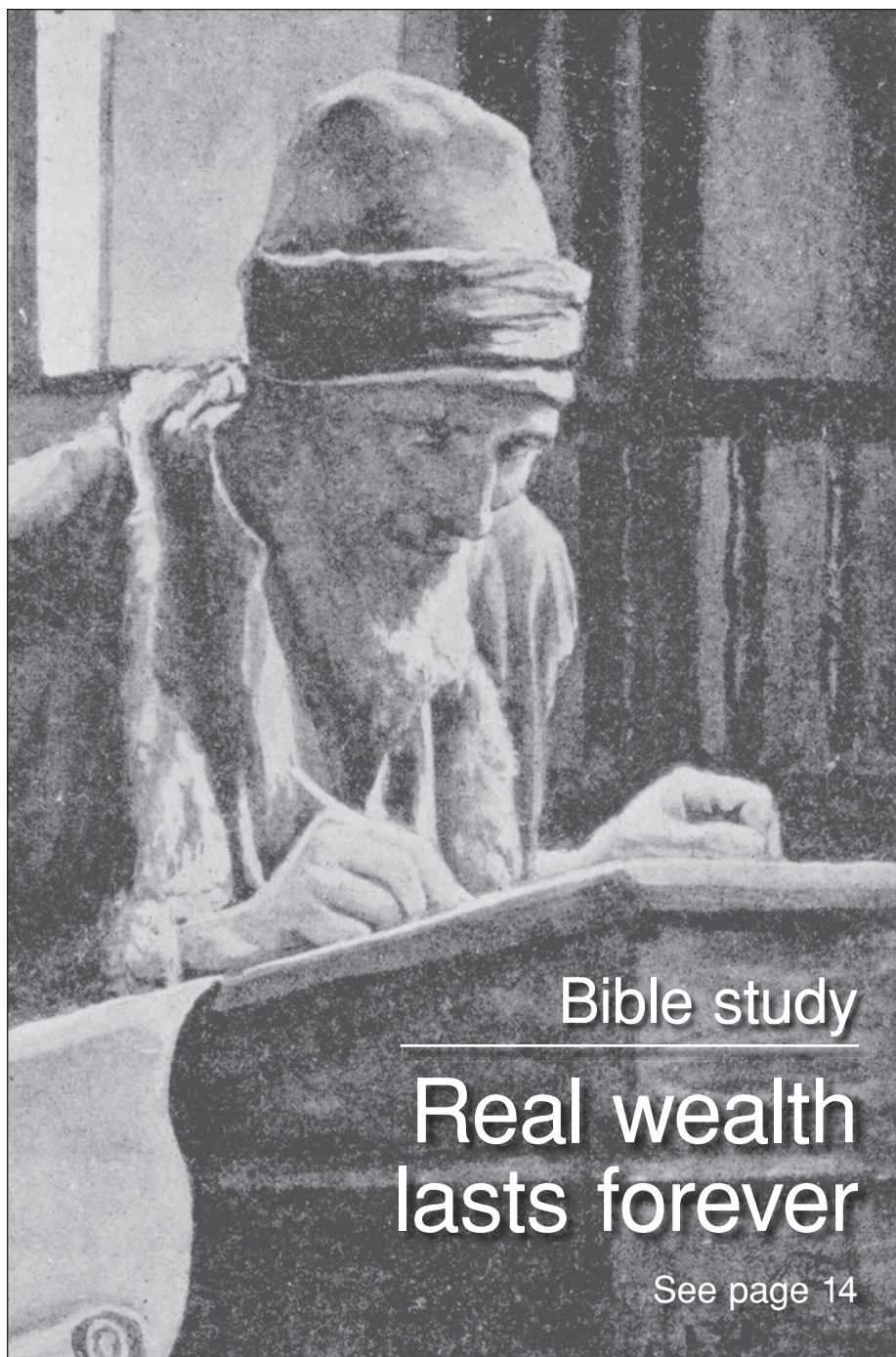
The Return of the Prodigal Son—
Henri Nouwen —Page 13

Lectionary

Readings for April —Page 16

Cover

The apostle Peter wrote a letter to
several churches in areas that are
now part of Turkey.



Bible study

Real wealth
lasts forever

See page 14

We like to hear from you

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Letters to the Editor

Born to Be Free

I showed the DVD *Born to Be Free* in one of my Sunday evening services.

To order copies of *Born to Be Free*, the story of the miraculous transformation of the Worldwide Church of God, visit the web site of Living Hope Video Ministries at www.lhvm.org

What a wonderful miracle that God performed! When I previewed it, I wept openly for a long time. Tears of joy and sadness mixed. Thank you Jesus!

So happy for you guys. What you have gone through will in the end save many!

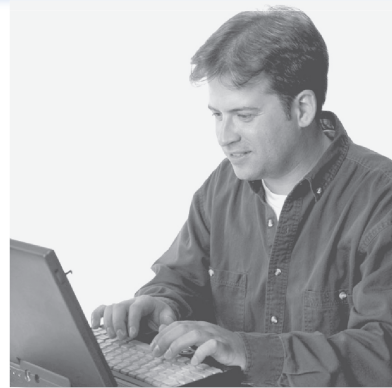
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Lazarus, come out!

By Joseph Tkach

Most of us know the story: Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. It was a tremendous miracle, showing that Jesus has the power to raise us from the dead, too.

But there is more to the story than that, and John includes some details that may have deeper meaning for us today. I pray that I do not do injustice to the story as I share some of my thoughts with you.

Notice the way that John tells the story: Lazarus was not just a random resident of Judea—he was the brother of Martha and Mary, the Mary who loved Jesus so much that she poured perfume on his feet. “The sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick’ ” (John 11:1-3). To me, that sounds like a request for help, but Jesus did not come.

Delay with purpose

Does it ever seem to you like the Lord is slow to respond? It surely did for Mary and Martha, but the delay does not mean that Jesus doesn’t like us. Rather, it means that he has a different plan in mind, because he can see something that we cannot.

As it turns out, Lazarus was probably already dead by the time the messengers reached Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus said that the sickness would not end in death. Was he mistaken? No, because Jesus could see beyond death, and he knew that in this case, death was not the end of the story. He knew that the purpose was to bring more



glory to God and his Son (v. 4). Nevertheless, he let his disciples think that Lazarus would not die. There’s a lesson there for us, too, for we do not always understand what Jesus really meant.

Two days later, Jesus surprised his disciples by suggesting that they return to Judea. They did not understand why Jesus would want to go back into the danger zone, so Jesus responded with a cryptic comment about walking in the light, and the coming of darkness (vs. 9-10), and then telling them that he had to go wake Lazarus up.

The disciples were apparently

that you may believe” (v. 15). Jesus would do a miracle that would be more astonishing than if he had merely prevented a sick man from dying. But the miracle was not just in raising Lazarus back to life—it was also the knowledge that Jesus had of what was going on perhaps 20 miles away, and the knowledge of what would happen to him in the near future.

He had light that they could not see—and this light told him of his own death in Judea, and of his own resurrection. He was in complete control of the events. He could have avoided arrest if he wanted to; he could have stopped the proceedings with a simple word, but he did not. He chose to do what he did because that’s what he had come for.

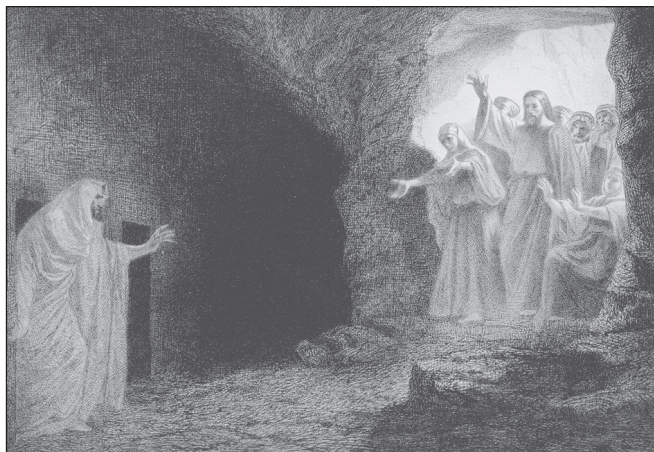
The man who gave life to the dead would also give his own life for the people, for he had power over death, even his own death. He became mortal so that he could die, and what looked on the surface to be a tragedy was actually for our salvation.

I don’t want to imply that every tragedy that happens to us is actually planned by God, or is good, but I do believe

that God is able to bring good out of evil, and he sees realities that we cannot.

He sees beyond death, and his mastery of events is no less today than it was back then—but it is often just as invisible to us as it was to his disciples in John 11. We simply cannot see the bigger picture, and sometimes we stumble

See Lazarus, page 4



Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. It was a tremendous miracle, showing that Jesus has the power to raise us from the dead, too.

used to the mysterious nature of some of Jesus’ comments, and they had a round-about way of getting more information: They pointed out that the literal meaning didn’t make sense. If he’s asleep, then he’ll wake up by himself, so why do we need to risk our lives to go?

Jesus explained, “Lazarus is dead” (v. 14). But he also said, I’m glad I wasn’t there. Why? “So

Lazarus

Continued from page 3

in the darkness. We have to trust God to work it out in the way that he knows is best. Sometimes we are eventually allowed to see how it works out for good, but often we just have to take his word for it.

Martha's faith

Jesus and his disciples went to Bethany and learned that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. The eulogies had been given and the funeral was long over, and the doctor finally shows up! Martha said, perhaps with a little exasperation and hurt, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 22). We called for you several days ago, and if you had come then, then Lazarus would still be alive.

But Martha has a glimmer of hope—a little bit of light: "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask" (v. 23). Maybe she felt that it would be a little too bold for ask for a resurrection, but she hints at something.

"Lazarus will live again," Jesus said, and Martha responded, "Yes, I know that (but I was hoping for something a little sooner)." Jesus said: "That's good, but did you know that I am the resurrection and the life? If you believe in me, you will never die. Can you believe that?"

And Martha, in one of the most outstanding statements of faith in the entire Bible, said: "Yes, I believe that. You are the Son of God" (v. 27).

Life and resurrection can be

found only in Christ—but can we, today, believe what Jesus said? Do we really believe that "whoever lives and believes in me will never die?" I wish we all could better understand that, but I do know for sure that in the resurrection, we will be given a life that will never end.

In this age, we all die, just like Lazarus did, and Jesus will have to "wake us up." We die, but that is not the end of the story for us, just as it was not the end of the story for Lazarus.

Martha went to get Mary, and Mary came to Jesus weeping. Jesus wept, too. Why did he weep when he already knew that Lazarus would live again? Why did

John report

this, when John also knew that joy was just around the corner? I don't know—I don't always understand why I weep, even at happy occasions.

But I think it does tell us that it's OK to weep at a funeral, even if we know that the person will be resurrected into immortal life. Jesus promised that we will never die, and yet death still happens.

It is still an enemy, still something in this world that is not the way it's supposed to be in eternity. Even if eternal joy is just around the corner, sometimes

we have times of great sadness, even though Jesus loves us.

When we weep, Jesus weeps with us. He can see our sadness in this age just as well as he can

see the joys of the future.

He stinks

"Roll away the stone," Jesus said, and Martha objected, "There's going to be a bad smell, because he's been dead for four days."

Is there anything in your life that stinks, anything that you don't want Jesus to expose by "rolling back the stone"?


There is probably something like that in everyone's life, something we'd rather keep buried, but sometimes Jesus has other plans, for he knows things that we do not, and we just have to trust him.

So they rolled back the stone, and Jesus prayed, and then he called out, "Lazarus, come out!"

"The dead man came out," John reports—but he wasn't really dead. He was wrapped up like a dead man, but he was walking. "Take off the grave clothes," Jesus said, "and let him go" (vs. 43-44).

Jesus calls out to spiritually dead people, today, too, and some of them hear his voice and walk out of their graves—they come out of the stench, they come out of the self-centered way of thinking that leads to death. And what do they need? They need someone to help them unwrap the grave clothes, to get rid of the old ways of thinking that so easily cling to us.

That's one of the functions of the church. We help roll back the stone, even though there may be a stench, and we help the people who are responding to Jesus' call.

Do you hear Jesus calling you to himself? It's time to walk out of your "grave." Do you know someone Jesus is calling? It's time to help roll back their stone. That's something worth thinking about. 

Jesus calls out to dead people today, and some of them hear his voice and walk out of their graves—they come out of the stench, they come out of the self-centered way of thinking that leads to death.

In this age, we all die, just like Lazarus did, and Jesus will have to "wake us up." We die, but that is not the end of the story for us, just as it was not the end of the story for Lazarus.

The Radical Consequences of Justification

By Thomas F. Torrance

Justification means justification by Christ alone—that is the reference of the expressions *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, used in Reformed theology. Justification means that we look exclusively to Christ, and therefore that we look away from ourselves altogether in order to live out of Him alone.

That radical nature of justification is expressed and its radical

The article “The Radical Consequences of Justification” is Part III of Thomas F. Torrance’s longer article “Justification: its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life” published by The Scottish Journal of Theology (1960), Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 225-246. Part III is found at pp. 237-246.

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Thomas F. Torrance was born in Chengdu, China, in 1913 to missionary parents. He was professor of Christian Dogmatics (“Systematic Theology”) at the University of Edinburgh for almost 30 years until his retirement in 1979.

From 1976-1977 he was Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

In a lifetime of scholarly work he published more than 650 articles, papers and books, including Kingdom and Church (1956), The School of Faith (1959), Theological Science (1969), God and Rationality (1971), Theology in Reconciliation (1975), The Trinitarian Faith (1988) and The Christian Doctrine of God (1996). In 1978 he was the recipient of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

consequences drawn by the Scots Confession: “We willingly spoil ourselves of all honor and glory of our own salvation and redemption, as we also do of our regeneration and sanctification.”

This is something that very badly needs to be reiterated today within the Churches of the Reformation. Justification by Christ alone means the rejection of all forms of self-justification and all forms of justification



by anything or out of any source other than Jesus Christ. Let us consider what this means in several areas of doctrine and life.

Natural goodness

(a) At the Reformation, Justification by the Grace of Christ alone was seen to set aside all natural goodness, and all works-righteousness; but this applies to all goodness, Christian goodness as well, that is, to “sanctification” as it came to be called.

This is powerfully driven home by the Scots Confession in several articles, such as the twelfth and the fifteenth. All that we do is unworthy, so that we must fall

down before you and unfeignedly confess that we are unprofitable servants—and it is precisely Justification by the free Grace of Christ alone that shows us that all that we are and have done even as believers is called in question.

Justification by Grace alone remains the sole ground of the Christian life; we never advance beyond it, as if justification were only the beginning of a new self-righteousness, the beginning of a life of sanctification which is what we do in response to justification.

Of course we are summoned to live out day by day what we already are in Christ through His self-consecration or sanctification, but sanctification is not what we do in addition to what God has done in justification.

And yet that is the tendency of the Westminster Catechisms, where we have a return to the Roman notion of infused sanctification that has to be worked out through strict obedience to legal precepts—hence the exposition of the Ten Commandments takes up the greater part of the Catechisms.

But the Scots Confession laid the axe to the root of any such movement when it insisted that we have to spoil ourselves even of our own regeneration and sanctification as well as justification.

What is “axed” so radically was the notion of “co-redemption” which in our day has again become so rampant, not only in the Roman Church, but in Liberal and Evangelical Protestantism, e.g., the emphasis upon existential decision as the means whereby we “make real” for ourselves the kerygma [proclamation] of the New Testa-

See Justification, page 6

Justification

Continued from page 5

ment, which means that in the last resort our salvation depends upon our own personal or existential decision. That is the exact antithesis of the Reformed doctrine of election, which rests salvation upon the prior and objective decision of God in Christ. It is Justification by Grace alone that guards the Gospel from corruption by “Evangelicals,” “Liberals,” and Romans alike.

Natural knowledge

(b) Justification by the Grace of Christ alone calls in question not only all natural goodness but all natural knowledge. Natural knowledge is as much the work of the flesh as natural goodness; it is a work of the natural man.

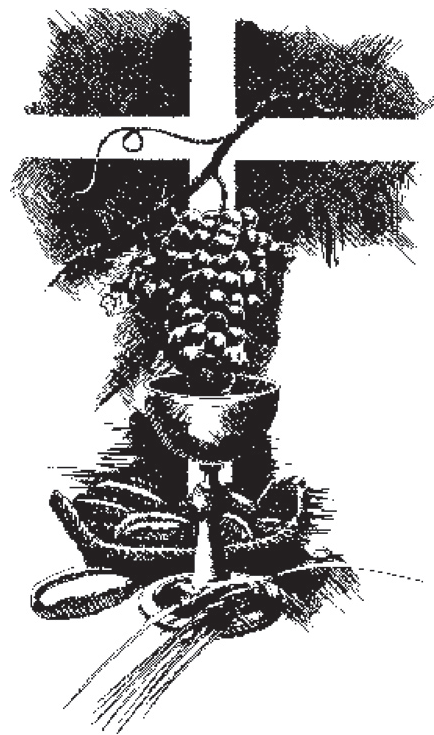
It is at this point that Karl Barth has made such an immense contribution to the Reformation. We cannot separate knowing and being for they belong to the same man, and it is the whole man, with his knowing and his acting, with the whole of his being, who is called in question by Justification. Justification puts us in the right and truth of God and therefore tells us that we are in untruth.

Now, let it be clear that Justification by Grace alone does not mean that there is no natural goodness in man, but that man with his natural goodness is called in question. Jesus Christ died for the whole man (with his good and his evil) not for part of him, the evil part, but for the whole man. He died for all men, the good and the bad, and all alike come under the total judgment of His Death and Resurrection; all alike have to be born again in Him, and made new creatures.

That is the radical nature of the Gospel, which becomes so clear to us when we communicate at the Holy Table in the Body and Blood of our Lord, for there we feel ashamed for

our whole being, for our good as well as for our evil. But the same applies to our natural knowledge.

Justification by the Grace of Christ alone does not mean that there is no natural knowledge—what natural man is there who does not know something of God even if he holds it down in unrighteousness or turns the truth into a lie? But it does mean that the whole of that natural knowledge is called in question by Christ, who when He comes to us says: “If any man will come after me, let him



deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.”

The whole man with his natural knowledge is there questioned down to the root of his being, for man is summoned to look away from all that he is and knows or thinks he knows to Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one goes to the Father but by Him.

The theology of Barth can be described, then, as the application of Justification of the whole realm of man's life, to the realm of his knowing as well as the realm of his doing. In that, he has sought to follow through the radical conse-

quences of the Reformation from which our forefathers resiled (def: recoiled, withdrew) led when they took refuge again, like the Romans, in the works of the natural man, for justification.

But if we are to take the Scots Confession seriously, then we have to apply this not only to natural knowledge but to all Christian knowledge; we have to learn to spoil ourselves of our own vaunted knowledge, we have to let our own theology be called into radical question, by Christ.

If we translate the word “justification” by the word “verification,” we can see the startling relevance of this to modern theological and philosophical discussions. Justification by Grace alone tells us that verification of our faith or knowledge on any other grounds or out of any other source, than Jesus Christ, is to be set aside.

Justification has an epistemological as well as an ethical reference—epistemologically it insists that the only legitimate demonstration of Christian truth is that which is in accordance with its nature, which is Grace, and that to seek justification of it on any other ground is not only fundamentally false in itself but to falsify the Gospel at its very basis.

But apart from the contemporary debate on “verification,” Justification means that at every point in our theological inquiry we have to let our knowledge, our theology, our formulations, our statements, be called into question by the very Christ toward whom they point, for He alone is the Truth.

Justification means that our theological statements are of such a kind that they do not claim to have truth in themselves, for by their very nature they point away from themselves to Christ as the one Truth of God. Therefore whenever we claim that our theological statements or our formulations have their truth in themselves we

are turning back into the way of self-justification.

Out of sheer respect for the majesty of the Truth as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, we have to do our utmost to speak correctly and exactly about it—that is the meaning of orthodoxy and the way of humility—but when we have done all this, we have still to confess that we are unfaithful servants, that all our efforts fall far short of the truth.

Far from seeking justification on the ground of our “orthodoxy,” we can only serve the Truth faithfully if we point away from ourselves and our statements to Christ Himself, and direct all eyes to Him alone. He who boasts of orthodoxy thus sins against Justification by Christ alone, for he justifies himself by appeal to his own beliefs or his own formulations of belief and thereby does despite to the Truth and Grace of Christ. Once a Church begins to boast of its “orthodoxy” it begins to fall from Grace.

Tradition

(c) Justification by the Grace of Christ alone calls in question all tradition. The radical consequence of Justification was keenly felt in this direction at the Reformation. Concentration upon the Word of God, the self-utterance of the Truth, and the acknowledgment of its primacy, cut the strings of prejudice and prejudgment and made clear the path of faith and obedience.

Justification here meant that faith is determined by the objective Word of God as its ultimate authority, and so it was freed from the shackles of every lesser authority, for devotion to the Truth of the Word (the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth) inculcated a readiness to rethink all preconceptions and to put all traditional ideas to the test face to face with the Word.

In other words, sheer attachment to the Word of God as the real object of knowledge meant detachment from all other sources

and norms of knowledge, and the demand that all traditional ideas and notions had to be tested at the bar of the Word. That did not mean that tradition was to be despised, but that it was to be subjected to the criticism of the Word and the Spirit, and corrected through conformity to Jesus Christ.

The Reformation stood, therefore, for the supremacy of the Word over all tradition, and for theological activity as the repentant rethinking of all tradition face to face with the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

But that applies no less to the Reformed and Evangelical tradition; to our Presbyterian tradition as well as to the Roman tradition.

When we examine our own position today, it is astonishing to find how close we have come to the Roman view even in the Church of Scotland.

How frequently, for example, we find that appeal is made to “Christian instinct” or to “the mind of the Church” over against the plain utterances of Holy Scripture, and often just at those places where the

Word of God offends our will, opposes our habits, or cuts against the grain of our desire!

And how massive is the effect of our several traditions upon the interpretations of the Bible! How easy it is to allow the Presbyterian tradition to determine our reading of the New Testament, especially when it is a question of justifying our tradition before the critique of others!

There can be no doubt that every one of the great Churches of the Reformation—the Lutheran, the Anglican, and the Reformed—has developed its own masterful tradi-

tion, and that that tradition today exercises massive influence not only over its way of interpreting the Bible and formulating its doctrine but over the whole shape and direction of its life.

Those who shut their eyes to this fact are precisely those who are most enslaved to the dominant power of tradition just because it

has become an unconscious canon and norm of their thinking.

It is high time we asked again whether the Word of God really does have free course amongst us and whether it is not after all bound and fettered by the traditions of men.

The tragedy, apparently, is that the very structures of our Churches represent the fossilization of traditions that have grown up by practice and procedure, have become so hardened in self-justification that even the Word of God can hardly crack them open.

There is scarcely a Church that claims to be *ecclesia reformata* [church reformed] that can truthfully claim to be *semper reformanda*

[always reformed].

Systems and orders

(d) Justification by Christ alone calls in question all systems and orders, and calls them in question because Jesus Christ alone is central and supreme in the one Church of God. In any true theological system, Justification is by reference to Christ alone, for conformity to Christ as the Truth of God for us is the one ultimate principle of unity.

Likewise Justification in ecclesiastical order or polity ought to

See Justification, page 8 

Sheer attachment to the Word of God as the real object of knowledge meant detachment from all other sources and norms of knowledge, and the demand that all traditional ideas and notions had to be tested at the bar of the Word.

Justification

Continued from page 7

be through appeal to Christ alone. Our quarrel with the Church of Rome in doctrinal matters concerns the centrality of Jesus Christ, the primacy and supremacy of Christology which is so obscured and compromised by Roman doctrines of merit and tradition, and above all by Mariology.

In our debate with the Church of England over questions of order, we are also concerned with the centrality of Christ, and the primacy of Christology—and therefore the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ is in the forefront.

It is Justification by Christ alone that makes it so, for He alone is the ground and Head of the Church, and in Him alone is the Church's unity constituted and its order maintained. But for that very reason Justification by Christ alone disallows any appeal from one Church to another for recognition of its orders, as it also rebukes the self-justification of a Church in calling in question the orders of another Church.

Justification by Christ alone means that we renounce the way of the flesh in seeking honor from men, or justification from one another; and therefore Justification by Christ alone means that in any movement for reconciliation between Churches, the question of the recognition of orders cannot have priority without radical betrayal of the Reformation, nay, without radical betrayal of Christ for He is thereby ousted from His place of centrality.

It becomes more and more clear that in the ecumenical movement it is the doctrine of Justification by Christ alone that is at stake, and that it can just as easily be sinned against by those who shout loudest that they are upholding the Reformation tradition as by those who make no such boast. He is truest to the Reforma-

tion tradition who is always ready to subject it to the ruthless questioning of the Word of God.

Ministry and worship

(e) Nowhere does Justification by Christ alone have more radical consequences than in regard to the pastoral ministry. Justification by Christ is grounded upon His mighty act in which He took our place, substituting Himself for us under the divine judgment, and substituting Himself for us in the obedient response He rendered to God in worship and thanksgiving and praise.

In Himself He has opened up a way to the Father, so that we may approach God solely through Him and on the ground of what He has done and is—therefore we pray in His Name, and whatever we do, we do in His Name before God. Thus the whole of our worship and ministry reposes upon the substitutionary work of Christ.

Now the radical nature of that is apparent from the fact that through substituting Himself in our place there takes place a displacement of our humanity by the humanity of Christ—that is why Jesus insists that we can only follow Him by denying ourselves, by letting Him displace us from a place of centrality, and by letting Him take our place.

At the Reformation this doctrine had immediate effect in the overthrow of Roman sacerdotalism—Jesus Christ is our sole Priest. He is the one and only Man who can mediate between us and God, so that we approach God solely through the mediation of the Humanity of Jesus, through His incarnate Priesthood.

When the Humanity of Christ

is depreciated or whenever it is obscured by the sheer majesty of His Deity, then the need for some other human mediation creeps in; hence in the Dark and Middle Ages arose the need for a human priesthood to mediate between sinful humanity and the exalted Christ, the majestic Judge and King.


There was of course no denial of the Deity of Christ by the Reformers—on the contrary,

they restored the purity of faith in Christ as God through overthrowing the accretions that compromised it; but they also restored the place occupied in the New Testament and the Early Church by the Humanity of Christ, as He who took our human nature in order to be our Priest, as He who takes our side and is our Advocate before the judgment of God, and who once and for all has wrought out

He is truest to the Reformation tradition who is always ready to subject it to the ruthless questioning of the Word of God.

atonement for us in His sacrifice on the Cross, and therefore as He who eternally stands in for us as our heavenly Mediator and High Priest.

The Church on earth lives and acts only as it is directed by its heavenly Lord, and only in such a way that His Ministry is reflected in the midst of its ministry and worship. Therefore from first to last the worship and ministry of the Church on earth must be governed by the fact that Christ substitutes Himself in our place, and that our humanity with its own acts of worship, is displaced by His, so that we appear before God not in our own name, not in our own significance, not in virtue of our own acts of confession, contrition, worship, and thanksgiving, but solely in the name of Christ and solely in virtue of what He has done in our name and on our behalf, and in our stead.

Justification by Christ alone
See Justification, page 11 

‘I cannot and will not recant’ — Martin Luther

By Paul Kroll

On April 16, 1521, Martin Luther (1483-1546) arrived at a formal assembly or Diet in Worms (pronounced “Vorms”), Germany, to which he had been summoned.

Nearly four years earlier, on Oct. 31, 1517, Luther had nailed 95 Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. He had hoped to create an academic debate over a number of issues, most notably the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were certificates, issued by the church, which supposedly allowed a person to bypass purgatory on the way to heaven, thereby avoiding the need to suffer for unforgiven sins. Luther believed that this and other practices of the church trampled on the Christian doctrine of the free grace of God. He was especially galled by a Dominican monk named Johannes Tetzel, who was selling indulgences authorized by Pope Leo X. Tetzel promised, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

The pope’s primary purpose for stepping up the sale of indulgences was to raise funds to build St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. Thus Luther, perhaps without realizing it, had put himself squarely against the plans of the papacy, and as it turned out, against the political might of European kings and the Holy Roman emperor.

For his part, Luther had no intention of creating strife or even a public debate in the church, and certainly no intention of questioning the authority of the pope. He wrote the 95 Theses in Latin, a language understood only by the scholars and theologians of the church, and he posted the document as a call for reform from within the duly organized structures of the church.

But then something happened that Luther did not expect. His theses were translated into German, and copies were widely distributed. In a short time, Germans everywhere were reading what Luther had written. Since his theses questioned the practices and theology of the church, the inescapable public conclusion was that Luther was positioning himself against the authority of the church and the pope.

This unexpected development set the stage for an es-

calating struggle between Luther (and a growing body of supporters) and church leaders, and ultimately with the pope and the emperor. The conflict reached a new level in June 1520, when Luther was sent a Papal bull, an official letter from the pope, in which he was told he had two months to recant his writings or be excommunicated. Luther burned the bull publicly, along with books sanctioned by the church that he considered unscriptural.



Martin Luther

Luther arrived at the Diet of Worms in danger of his life. He had not been called to a dialogue, debate or a judicial hearing, but simply to admit to doctrinal error and to recant. One hundred years earlier, John Hus had been burned at the stake for refusing to recant similar objections to church theology and practice.

The Diet was impressive. The Holy Roman emperor, Charles V, was seated on a raised platform, flanked by his advisers and prelates of the Catholic Church from Rome. Spanish soldiers stood as sentries around the hall. In the middle of the hall was placed a table with various books that Luther

had written about theological matters. The representative of the archbishop of Trier came forward, waved at the book-laden table and asked Luther whether he had written these books and whether there was anything in those writings that he wished to recant.

Luther responded by saying he had taught the faith in a Christian manner. He seemed to be avoiding the direct question, so he was told to answer yes or no. “Will you recant or will you not recant what you have written in these books?”

Luther responded in words like the following (accounts and translations vary slightly): “Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments . . . I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience.”

Then, it is thought that Luther may have ended his defense with the statement: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.” The sentence, if not strictly historical, is certainly true to the situation and

See Martin Luther, page 16

Exclusive interview with

Robert Farrar Capon, author of *Genesis: the Movie*

Part Four

Creation and Redemption

Tim Brassell: How would you describe the unpardonable sin?

Robert Capon: I figure there isn't one. Or do you mean to sin against the Holy Ghost?

TB: Yes, that's what I mean.

RC: When you say sin against the Holy Ghost you've got to mean the turning of one's back on the Holy Spirit, who takes of what is Christ's and shows it to us.

If you are unwilling to take that, to be open to what the Spirit shows about Christ, then that cuts you off automatically.

It isn't that you get punished. It means that you have blinded yourself to the Spirit's communication to you about who Christ is for you from the foundations of the world.

TB: That reminds me of what C.S. Lewis was saying in his last Chronicles of Narnia book, *The Last Battle*.

RC: Yes—a wonderful book.

TB: The dwarves, they just refused to see it.

RC: That was a wonderful image.

That was one of the big strokes of genius in *The Last Battle*.

TB: Who are some of your favorite Christian writers?

RC: Let me give you some of my history. When I was 17, it was C.S. Lewis.

And then he led me, because of his kind words, to G.K. Chesterton. Read his book, *Orthodoxy*. It's a wonderful book. There's one chapter in that book called "The Ethics of Elfland." Elfland is the land of the fairy tales and the nursery tales—and all those stories that the human race has made up, and he says something I think that applies to miracles.

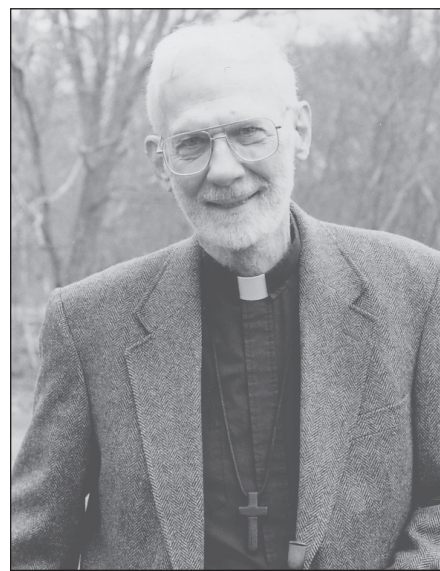
Miracles are not what we think they are. Apples are gold in Elfland only to refresh the forgotten moment when we first found that they were green. In Elfland the rivers run with wine, only to remind us for one wild moment that they run with water.

Creation is just as miraculous now as it was at the beginning, because redemption is present at every moment and every place throughout every part of creation. The creation and redemption are one act, not two. There is not one without the other, and it has never been otherwise from the very beginning.

In the moment Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree, they are redeemed. Not by that act but by him who made them. And therefore everything that happens after that is a proclamation of the gospel.



Tim Brassell



Robert F. Capon

The angel with the flaming sword is a proclamation of the gospel because it says, look, in your shape I wouldn't even think of letting you try to go back on your own. You cannot go back, you can only go forward into the mess you've made, but I will follow you every step of the way.

To go back to the analogy of the Bible as a movie, you see these events as a movie, and what do you think about? Well, at first it's not clear, but you know it's going somewhere. Then, once you see Christ on the cross and Christ risen and Paul writing about the mystery of Christ—wow! Now you know what's been behind everything in the movie from the beginning.

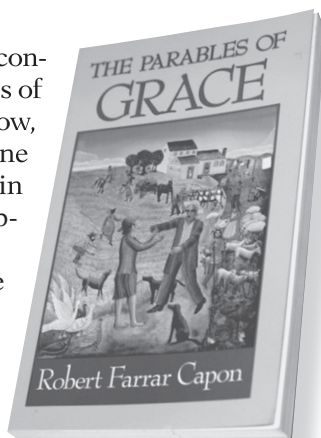
That's the reason why the greatest help in the interpretation of scripture is a concordance. And preachers are good to the extent that they

have in their minds a concordance for the passages of scripture. And that's how, for example, Augustine worked—he had it all in his head—all the scriptural references.

You have to see the Bible as one complete story, with redemption in Christ as the underlying theme and plot, the whole point of the story from the first scene.

You know what's fun? When you watch a movie, try to identify the Christ figure. I mean the figure who makes the plot work.

It doesn't even have to be a



human character. It's the one who does for the plot of that particular film what Jesus Christ does for the world.

There's a movie by Woody Allen called *September*. It's about an extended family in a New England summerhouse—a wonderful luxurious summerhouse. It had been in

the family for years and years.

Now, this is the most dysfunctional family you could possibly find anywhere. They're all sniping and they're falling apart and everything else. Since everyone is

so rotten, where do you find the Christ figure? Well, what holds them all together? It's the house. The house is the Christ figure in that movie. It was already in all their lives before the story began. It was part of their history. It was part of their formation. It was doing the work of Jesus in the terms of that story. 🦋

Robert Capon Books

Autographed copies of Robert Farrar Capon's books are available from the author by clicking on the Amazon.com "used and new" button and going to seller "quietchina" for your purchase.

Justification

Continued from page 8

means that from first to last in the worship of God and in the ministry of the Gospel, Christ Himself is central, and that we draw near in worship and service only through letting Him take our place.

He only is Priest. He only represents humanity. He only has an offering with which to appear before God and with which God is well pleased. He only presents our prayers before God, and He only is our praise and thanksgiving and worship as we appear before the face of the Father. Nothing in our hands we bring—simply to His Cross we cling.

But what has happened in Protestant worship and ministry? Is it not too often the case that the whole life and worship of the congregation revolves round the personality of the minister? He is the one who is in the center; he offers the prayers of the congregation; he it is who mediates "truth" through his personality, and he it is who mediates between the people and God

through conducting the worship entirely on his own.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of the popular minister where everything centers on him, and the whole life of the congregation is built round him.

What is that but Protestant sacerdotalism, sacerdotalism which involves the displacement of the Humanity of Christ by the humanity of the minister, and the obscuring of the Person of Christ by the personality of the minister?

How extraordinary that Protestantism should thus develop a new sacerdotalism, to be sure a psychological rather than a sacramental sacerdotalism, but a sacerdotalism nonetheless, in which it is the personality of the minister which both mediates the Word of God to man and mediates the worship of man to God!

Protestant Churches are full of these "psychological priests" and more and more they evolve a psychological cult and develop a form of psychological counseling which displaces the truly pastoral ministry of Christ. How frequently, for example, the minister's prayers are so crammed with his own personality (with all its boring idiosyncra-

sies!) that the worshipper cannot get past him in order to worship God in the name of Christ—but is forced to worship God in the name of the minister!

How frequently the sermon is not an exposition of the Word of God but an exposition of the minister's own views on this or that subject! And how frequently the whole life of the congregation is so built up on the personality of the minister that when he goes the congregation all but collapses or dwindles away!

There can be no doubt that the whole concept of the ministry and of worship in our Reformed Churches needs to be brought back to the criticism of the Word of God in order that we may learn again the meaning of Justification by Christ alone in the midst of the Church's life and work.

Jesus Christ must be given His rightful place by being set right in the center, as Head and Lord of the Church, as its sole Prophet and Priest and King, and that means in the midst of our preaching, in the basic notion of the ministerial office, in the fundamental mode of worship, and in the whole life of the congregation as the Body of Christ alone. 🦋

A lesson about lessons

Mark 4:30-34

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

By Mike Feazell

What is the smallest seed in the world?

If you said, "The mustard seed," you wouldn't be alone. That's a pretty common belief among Christian Bible readers. But, as surprising as it may seem, it's not true.

"Wait just a minute," you might be tempted to say. "Doesn't the Bible say that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the world?"

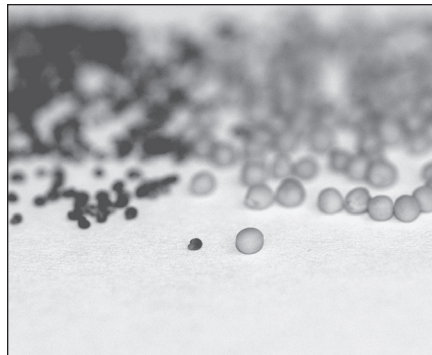
No, it doesn't. I used to think it did, just as many people still do.

Missing the point

A little study into horticulture will show that the mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world. Poppy seeds, for example, are smaller than mustard seeds. For some people, those are fighting words, because they think it means that someone is calling Jesus a liar.

But Jesus did not say that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the world. Jesus was giving a parable, and just as it has always been with his parables, the typical human response is to miss the point.

The point of the parable is not mustard seeds; the point is the kingdom of God. Mustard seeds are only part of the stage decoration Jesus used in getting across the point he was making about the kingdom. Parables use imaginary scenarios involv-



A little study into horticulture will show that the mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world. The photo above shows the lighter colored mustard seeds to the right and poppy seeds to the left.

ing mundane things to make a point about something else—something spiritual and unseen.

Parables are not literal, historical stories. That's what makes them parables. They are imaginary stories created to help listeners or readers understand a deeper concept about something else. The teller expects his listeners to know that parables should be understood as beginning with: "Imagine this."

In Jesus' case, he told parables to give insight into the kingdom of God. In this parable of the mustard seed, he is asking the listeners to imagine a mustard seed that is smaller than all other seeds, but then that tiny, insignificant seed grows into something so big that it can provide shelter for the birds.

Jesus was not saying that mustard seeds are the smallest seeds in the world. He was saying that the kingdom of God can be likened to a mustard seed, an imaginary one (remember, it's a parable), that is the smallest seed you could possibly plant, but then it grows to become the largest plant in the whole garden. He was talking about the kingdom of God, not giving a science lesson.

Miraculous and amazing

Jesus wanted us to know that the advance of the kingdom of God begins in a small, practically unnoticed way with a baby born in a stable to a poor woman in an occupied country. That baby grows up to be rejected and despised by the leaders of his own people and crucified like a criminal on a Roman cross. But despite that weak, apparently insignificant beginning, he was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God the Father as Savior and Lord, both Creator and Redeemer of all the universe (compare Colossians 1:15-20).

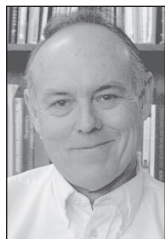
Speaking of both his death and his resurrection, he said, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32). From smallest seed to sheltering tree.

See Lessons, page 16

The Return of the Prodigal Son— Henri Nouwen

By Terry Akers

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), a Dutch Catholic priest, psychologist, professor and author of more than 20 books, was well-loved and widely received in ecclesiastical and secular spheres alike.



He was best known among Protestant pastors for *The Wounded Healer*, a theology of service expressing the theme of living our brokenness under God's blessing. His writings and lectures inspired millions with Christ's message of unconditional love and hope, emphasizing our common woundedness and how our sufferings can serve as a source of strength and healing for each other.

Nouwen invited believers to enter a deep, internal relationship with Jesus Christ where inner healing and disposal of psychological and emotional baggage become real possibilities.

He once observed that many people do not think they are loved or held safe. When suffering comes, they see it as an affirmation of their worthlessness. He then offered Christ's peace through learning to live our brokenness under God's blessing, or in new creation, as opposed to remaining largely in the misery of the curse.

He taught that it takes enormous energy to keep saying "no" to the world's powers. Our hope lies in finding something so real and attractive that we can devote all our energies to saying "yes." That "something" is the fact that we are loved by God, even in our brokenness.

In *The Return of the Prodigal Son: a Story of Homecoming*, Nouwen develops a chance encounter with Rembrandt's painting of the same title into a personal spiritual odyssey. Inspired by the painting, he skillfully

dissects each section of the powerful gospel drama in the light of his own life journey.

From the back cover: "The themes of homecoming, affirmation and reconciliation will be newly discovered by all who have known loneliness, dejection, jealousy or anger."

The *New Oxford Review* says, "*The Return of the Prodigal Son* is a beautiful book, as beautiful in the simple clarity of its wisdom as in the terrible beauty of the transformation to which it calls us."

Drawing on years of pastoral experience and insight, Nouwen passionately reflects on his own spiritual journey as he became "more and more aware of how long I have played the role of observer." For years he had tried to get students and parishioners to see the importance of actually living the spiritual life, "but had I, myself, really ever dared to step into the center, kneel down, and let myself be held by a forgiving God?"

As the painting took on a personal resonance, he began to see in it the heart of the story that God wanted to tell him. The Prodigal Son became, for Nouwen, a mysterious window that exposed the kingdom of God in an inti-

mate way. He was now able to see the fallen world through the eyes of God's redeeming love. This introspection as he pondered Rembrandt's portrayal eventually led him to living with and ministering to the mentally disabled.

In the prologue, Nouwen relates: "Each little step toward the center seemed like an impossible demand, a demand requiring me to let go one more time from wanting to be in control, to give up one more time the desire to predict life, to die one more time to the fear of not

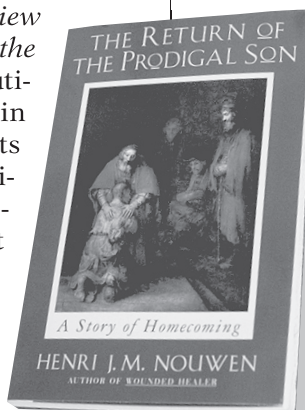
knowing where it all will lead, and to surrender one more time to a love that knows no limits. . . .

"I would never be able to live the great commandment to love without allowing myself to be loved without conditions or prerequisites."

"Herein lays the essence of the gospel: God is for us! It confronts us

with the fact that ... 'truly accepting love, forgiveness and healing is often much harder than giving it. It is the place beyond earning, deserving and rewarding. It is the place of surrender and complete trust.'"

The Return of the Prodigal Son expresses Nouwen's personal "homecoming" journey that answered his lifelong question of identity. He discovered that he is the one Jesus loves unconditionally. His book carries the hopeful message that God's healing love for us is always available—all we have to do is receive it—in believing prayer. 🦋



Real wealth lasts forever

a study of 1 Peter 1

By Michael Morrison



The apostle Peter wrote a letter to several churches in areas that are now part of Turkey. He greets them as **“God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood”** (1 Peter 1:1-2, TNIV throughout).

In this introduction, Peter mentions that the readers are strangers in the world. They are spiritually different than the people who surround them, and they may be ethnically different, too. If they feel socially isolated and insecure, Peter’s words will help: God chose them long ago. They are not an accident, and they can feel secure in knowing that God has a plan for them.

God has foreknowledge of everyone in one sense, but for reasons we do not fully understand, he chooses some for a special relationship. This choosing is done through the Holy Spirit, and the purpose is that we obey Jesus Christ and are cleansed by his sacrifice.

An eternal inheritance

Peter begins with a doxology: **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!”** The reason for this praise? **“In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”** (v. 3). God’s grace has given us a

new start in life—a life with confidence in the future, for the resurrection of Jesus has given us evidence that we will also be resurrected into glory through him.

Our new birth also gives us **“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade”** (v. 4). Because of persecution, the readers could not count on an inheritance in this world, but Peter promises them an even better inheritance—preserved in a safe place: **“This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time”** (vv. 4-5). God protects us, and we will inherit his glory when our salvation comes (v. 9 describes salvation as something we are already in the process of receiving).

“In all this you greatly rejoice,” Peter says, **“though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials”** (v. 6). As strangers

in the world, we have trials and persecutions, but we can rejoice in knowing that God has something far better already prepared for us. Even if we enjoy many blessings in this life, we should focus our hopes on spiritual realities rather than the approval of society around us.

Why does God allow these trials? **“These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed”** (v. 7). Even the best gold eventually perishes, because it will have no value to us after we die. But the value of faith continues forever, and it brings better rewards, so it is worth much more than gold.

Trials can demonstrate that our faith is genuine—that we put more stock in the future life than we do in the present. This kind of faith will bring us praise, glory

and honor when Christ returns. Though we may be despised now because of our faith in him, we will have eternal honor because of that same faith.



The apostle Peter wrote a letter to several churches in areas that are now part of Turkey. If the recipients feel socially isolated and insecure, Peter’s words will help: God chose them long ago. They are not an accident, and they can feel secure in knowing that God has a plan for them.

We have not seen Jesus personally, but we love him and believe in him. This faith fills us **“with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for [we] are receiving the end result of [our] faith, the salvation of [our] souls”** (vv. 8-9). Our difficulties are not worth comparing with the indescribable joy that Christ is giving us.

This message of salvation was not a recent invention—it was predicted in the Old Testament, and **“the prophets ... spoke of the grace that was to come to you”** (v. 10). However, the prophets did not understand how it would all happen, and they **“searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow”** (v. 11). They knew that glory would come only after sufferings, but they did not know when it would be.

“It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things” (v. 12). Some of the prophecies were for the prophets’ own day, but some were for the time of Christ, and the prophets realized that they were writing important messages for a future generation. And since Christ has been revealed, the prophecies can now be understood more clearly.

Peter is here explaining that the gospel message is of tremendous value. If we think we are poor, we are mistaken, for the message is precious, and our faith is better than gold, and the promises will never perish.

Holy life

Since we have such a great reward, Peter exhorts us: **“Set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming”** (v. 13). God has already shown us grace, but he has even more for us when Christ returns. We should set our sights on that, not the things of this world.

“As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance” (v. 14). When we come to trust Christ, our behavior should change. When we have faith in the promises God has given us, the temporary pleasures of sin lose their appeal. As children of God, we imitate our heavenly Father: **“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’ ”** (vv. 15-16, quoting Lev. 11:44). Our ethics are based on the character of God himself.

When we realize what a sacrifice Jesus made for us, we will also begin to understand what a tremendous reward awaits us, for Jesus didn’t pay his huge price just for a small benefit.

“Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as strangers here in reverent fear” (v. 17). We should respect and honor our Father, not the changing standards around us. Why?

“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (vv. 18-19). The values of this world will pass away, but we were purchased with something of much greater value: the blood of Christ.

When we realize what a sacrifice Jesus made for us, we will also begin to understand what a tremendous reward awaits us, for Jesus didn’t pay his huge price just for a small benefit. When we see the price that was paid, we will value the result even more, and that encourages us to live holy lives.

“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (vv. 22-23). Our new life

is based on permanence, not temporary pleasures. So we obey the truth, and follow Christ’s way of life—love.

Why? Because **“all people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever”** (vv. 24-25, quoting Isa. 40:6-8). Things of this world are temporary, but the things of God last forever, and we live for eternity. We see our identity and importance from that perspective, not the temporary values of this world. 🦋

Questions for discussion

- Do I feel like a stranger in this world, or do I feel right at home? (v. 1)
- When I have trials, do I have joy in the promises of God? (v. 6)
- What “evil desires” have I grown out of? Which ones do I still struggle with? (v. 14)
- Do I have “reverent fear” for God as the Judge? (v. 17)
- Does Peter mean that we can purify ourselves by obedience? (v. 22)

Lectionary Readings for April 2005

Lectionary Readings for April 2005

The season between Easter and Pentecost is called the Easter season. The first day of the Easter season is Easter itself; April 3 is called "the second Sunday of Easter," April 10 is the third, and so on.

April 3
Psalm 16
John 20:19-31
Acts 2:14a, 22-32
1 Peter 1:3-9

April 10
Psalm 116
Luke 24:13-35
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
1 Peter 1:17-23

April 17
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10

Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 2:19-25

April 24
Psalm 31:1-16
John 14:1-14
Acts 7:55-60
1 Peter 2:2-10

May 1
Psalm 66:8-20
John 14:15-21
Acts 17:22-31
1 Peter 3:13-22

Martin Luther

Continued from page 9


Luther's feelings and convictions at the time, as Phillip Schaff notes in his monumental *History of the Christian Church*.

Surprisingly, Luther was allowed to leave a few days later under a safe conduct pass, perhaps because of public sentiment in his favor, but with a warning from the emperor to stop preaching and writing. While traveling back home, he was kidnapped for his own protection by

armed horsemen who took him to the castle of a local prince. While in hiding at the castle, Luther translated the New Testament from Greek into German, thus making a translation available in a language other than Latin, which common people could not read. Later, he also translated the Old Testament into German.

A month after Luther left the Diet, he was declared an outlaw by the Edict of Worms. But pressing threats to the empire and because of political concerns of the emperor and the pope, the edict was not enforced. Luther and his supporters and colleagues, such as Phillip Melancthon, continued the

struggle for reform. Luther's followers developed into an independent church body, known as Lutherans, and the movement continued to grow. Local German princes generally protected them from imprisonment and execution. Luther continued to preach, write and teach until his death in 1546.

Luther's refusal to recant at the Diet of Worms set in motion the Protestant Reformation. The lines between Luther and the pope were hardened, and the reformers could take only one path—to form their own church, free of the abuses in doctrine and practice from which Luther had sought reform. 

Lessons

Continued from page 12

Look for the lesson

Jesus built his parables around common, ordinary things that people knew about. Farming, business, poor people, rich people, powerful people, weak people. But parables have a point, a lesson, that goes beyond the mere details of the story. And the lesson is usually made through a surprising twist, an unusual aspect that lifts the details of

the story from the ordinary to the amazing.

No wonder Jesus used parables. The kingdom of God and the grace of God are amazing. But if we spend our time trying to turn the details of Jesus' parables into science and history textbooks, we will miss the lesson.

After reading *Animal Farm*, would we argue over whether pigs could really talk? After reading *Les Misérables*, would we scurry to French prison records to find whether there really was a Prisoner 24601? Do we get hung up on whether

it was scientifically possible for things to turn to gold when King Midas touched them? Or do we simply think about the stories, ponder the analogies and learn the lessons?

Jesus told stories, good ones, that illustrated important aspects of the kingdom of God. Truth has to do with communicating a true message, and often that is done with creative stories, analogies, metaphors, similes, poems and songs. And Jesus was a master at it.

Imagine that. 