

# **Jesus Is Still a Human: Interviews With Gerrit Dawson**

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## Introduction

This is a transcript of four interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 100 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at [www.gci.org/YI](http://www.gci.org/YI).

Please understand that when people speak, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at [www.gci.org/donate](http://www.gci.org/donate).

Our guest in these interviews is Gerrit Scott Dawson, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He received his D.Min. degree in 2002 from Reformed Theological Seminary. He is the author of:

*Called By A New Name: Becoming What God Has Promised*

*Discovering Jesus: Awakening to God*

*Given and Sent in One Love: The True Church of Jesus Christ*

*Heartfelt: Finding Our Way Back to God*

*I Am With You Always: Meeting Jesus in Every Season of Life*

*An Introduction to Torrance Theology: Discovering the Incarnate Saviour* (editor)

*Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation*

*Responding to Our Call, Participants Book, Vol. 4*

*Writing on the Heart: Inviting Scripture to Shape Daily Life*

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## Jesus Is Still a Human

**JMF:** Thanks for joining us on another edition of *You're Included* – the unique interview series devoted to practical implications of a Christ-centered Trinitarian theology in today's complex world. Our guest today is Gerrit Scott Dawson, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Dr. Dawson is author of *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation* as well as *An Introduction to Torrance Theology* and *Discovering Jesus, Awakening to God*.

Gerrit, it's a pleasure to have you with us today.

**GSD:** Thanks, Mike, it's great to be here.

**JMF:** Let's begin by talking about Jesus' incarnation and especially, his incarnation after his death and resurrection – a lot of people think of Jesus as being God in the flesh while he's here on earth walking and talking and breathing, but once he's crucified and resurrected and ascended and at the right hand of God, we don't think of it quite the same way. We think of him, now he is fully God again, but not fully human as well. What's wrong with that?

**GSD:** You're right, Mike. A lot of us have a kind of “drop-in theory” of the incarnation – that the eternal Son of God came down among us and for 33 years he was with us, but it's kind of like he was slumming, and when he got that done with, he went back up to heaven and unzipped the skin suit and was just God again. It's hard for us to imagine how this could happen, that Jesus could go up to heaven and still be in our flesh. We almost get a kind “Monty Python” cartoon feeling of Jesus going up on the clouds like a Rembrandt painting, waving his hand and saying, “goodbye” and taking off on a heavenly space ship. We know in our bones that it can't be that, so we just wonder how could Jesus still be in the flesh and have gone to heaven to the right hand of God. And yet, if we have this drop-in view of the incarnation, we miss out on so much of the good stuff. We miss out on the rest of the story.

**JMF:** What are the implications of that? If Jesus continues to be God in the flesh for us now, how does that change our life as a Christian?

**GSD:** It's really important. The first thing to think about is that it means that Jesus' history goes on. It's not just that he died and he rose and that's it. But by ascending into heaven, he is still continuing to be the God-man. He's still holding our humanity, next to his God-head, he's still uniting himself to us. That has huge implications for us.

On one hand, you think about our eternal life. Paul writes in Philippians 3:20 and 21 that he

will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body. The Christian hope of resurrection in the body, of eternal life to come, that you still get to be you, and I still get to be me, is all grounded in the fact that Jesus retains his body – resurrected, transformed, glorified – but still, as John Knox said, the self-same body in which he was crucified, dead, buried and risen, is the same body he ascended in. In terms of what happens to us in the future, that’s really important.

Another implication is that it has to do with our salvation. Often we think of our salvation as simply a transaction that occurred on the cross, and that’s true – Christ took our sins upon himself, particularly on the cross when the sin of the world was upon him. But a deeper understanding, a full biblical understanding, is that Jesus himself is our atonement, he is the one who reconciles God and humanity by being, in himself, the one who brings those two together. So our atonement continues because Christ’s incarnation continues.

**JMF:** We’re having a moment-by-moment, everyday, continuing, intimate relationship with him, and the implications of that for how we live...

**GSD:** It’s wonderful to think that we have a man in heaven, because Christ has gone up to enter the holy of holies to the Father’s right hand, but he hasn’t gone just as a spirit – he’s gone taking our humanity, like Star Trek used to say, “To boldly go where no man has gone before” – he’s really done it. As the ancient fathers used to say, “Now dust sits on the throne of heaven.” Jesus has gone to the Father’s right hand taking us with him. In his person, we have direct access to the throne of God.

**JMF:** You mentioned the holy of holies, and you’re referring to ancient Israel and to the Tabernacle at first and then later the Temple, and once a year, the High Priest (only once a year, the High Priest) is able to go in there. In your book, you draw an analogy between that and Christ’s ascending. Can you elaborate on that?

**GSD:** Sure. The ritual of atonement on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would prepare to bring a sacrifice on behalf of all the people. As you look at the details of that in Exodus and Leviticus, you note that the High Priest would get dressed with a breastplate that has inscribed upon it the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. That, in a sense, meant that he was writing onto his very heart the names of God’s people and he was, in a sense, bearing all of Israel with him as he prepared to go in to the holy of holies.

He would go in on that day, he would first prepare himself by washing, putting on the ritual garments, and then by offering a sacrifice of sin for himself and his family and then finally

offering a sacrifice of sin on behalf of the people and he would bring the blood of the goat into the holy of holies, sprinkle it on the mercy seat and thereby make intercession, confessing the people's sins, acting in their name and on their behalf. When it was done, he would come out and place his hands on the scapegoat – the other goat that carried away the sins of the people, and he would bless them and declared them to be forgiven. In that one day, the High Priest enacted an atonement that God had provided for the people by acting on behalf of the people bringing their sins to God and acting on behalf of God, the Lord Yahweh, bringing his forgiveness to the people.

The parallels with Jesus are almost breathtaking to think about. The idea is that Jesus, in fulfilling the office of our High Priest, got dressed in a garment, and that garment was our flesh. He dressed in our humanity, and just as the High Priest carried the names of the people over his heart, Jesus, in wearing our flesh, wrote the name of all humanity into himself. He bore us in himself. He didn't have to go into the Temple, but in going to the cross, Jesus became both the priest and the victim. He was the offerer of the sacrifice, but that sacrifice was himself. And so Jesus, in making that perfect atonement, then was able to go into the holy of holies bearing our humanity.

Now, the priest would come out from the holy of holies and bless the people. Jesus has not yet returned from the Father's immediate presence, he is in heaven and we are waiting for his return. Nevertheless, he's blessed us because he sent the Holy Spirit of the Father, passed to him the Blessed Spirit, whom he poured out upon us, who unites us to Jesus and causes us then, in him, to have direct access to the throne of God.

**JMF:** What are the implications of the ascension in terms of Jesus being Lord?

**GSD:** In his ascension Jesus has triumphed, in his resurrection he broke the power of death. But if it just ended there, Jesus would have had to either die again, like Lazarus did, or he'd still be somewhere in the world that we could go to him and talk to him, but we'll have to journey to him and he would only be limited in the access that people would have. The ascension is necessary to complete that story: that Jesus rose went up to heaven, and that signals his triumph as Lord and King of all. He is now the one, as Revelation tells us, who holds the keys of death and Hades in his hands, he is the Lord of the kings of earth – as Revelation tells us. He is the ruler of all things. That means that we have a pretty high claim on who Jesus is and an understanding that all knowledge of God now centers in the person of Christ. All truth about who

God is, is shown to us in the face of Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** You mentioned the clothing that he takes as being our humanity, as a high priest going into the holy of holies in the ascension, returning to the right hand of the Father. Are you implying that he's taking sinful human flesh, that he didn't take perfect, sinless flesh, but our actual human condition on himself?

**GSD:** In the incarnation, Jesus was born of Mary, and received in that, since he came from the seed of Adam's race, the race that had fallen. Within the Virgin's womb, he was joined with the Holy Spirit to become both God and man. So he took to himself that which we really are, it was a real humanity. He took it in union with the Holy Spirit, so it was a humanity he wore sinlessly. But often, we tend to think of Jesus as a kind of superman – that he wasn't really touched with mortal frailty like the rest of us are, that he didn't really know what it's like to live in this broken world, to live among people who feel like God has forsaken them, to know the difficulty of temptation. But Scripture teaches that Jesus truly was tempted in all points as we are. He really could have gone into sin. He really knew what it was to wrestle against temptation. He knew how it is to be with us in a lost and forsaken humanity which he wore in perfect holiness and sinlessness.

**JMF:** The fact that he took on a real humanity, our real humanity, how does that speak to an individual who is a sinner, like you and me and like everybody else listening to the program, at our worst moment when we want to go to the throne of grace, but we feel so unworthy that we'd rather just go bury our head in the pillow, how does that speak to us?

**GSD:** The implications are very strong, for we are the lost and wandering sheep, we're the prodigal children and feel that we've wandered way outside of the Father's grace and care. But the good news in the incarnation is that our Father loved us so much that he sent his Son all the way into the world, all the way into our humanity where we are, sent to find us in our lost and forsaken condition and to join himself to us in the midst of our brokenness, our lostness and to heal us from within. He didn't just come to tell us that we ought to be better, he didn't even come just with news that God sort of likes us, he came to say, "I love you so much, I will become what you are and heal that from the inside out by joining it to myself, by cleansing it, by offering to God the obedience that you owe to him but you can't give on your own – I will do that from inside your humanity. I will live the relationship of love and fidelity that I have with my Father from all eternity, I'll do that now from within your midst, and if you are then joined to me

partaking of me, you can have that intimacy too.”

So the comfort there is, often people think that Jesus is so far above me, so superhuman that we look for another mediator, we look for another advocate. We might pray to a saint, or ask someone that we know as holy to try to help us. In reality, we have the most wonderful human being of all. A man who was touched with our infirmities, who knows in his own flesh and bone, how it is us who says, “I am taking your cause even now to my Father. I love you so much that I not only became what you are and healed it, but I kept it joined to me into eternity.” I think Barth says that in the ascension, we realize that Jesus’ flesh is a garment which he does not put off. It’s a choice that God made to hold us to himself that he will never let go.

**JMF:** Don’t a lot of us want to wait until we are behaving better and we feel better about ourselves before we’ll go to the Father, go to prayer... in other words, we put it off until we can just get a little bit more righteous. With the idea that if we are a little more righteous, God is more likely to hear our prayer.

**GSD:** Sure. Our adversary wants to keep whispering to us that you’re not worthy yet, you’re not ready yet, God doesn’t want you yet. We feel like we have to compose our own righteousness. The news about that is both horrible and terrific. The horrible news is, if I had all eternity in myself to try to get myself together, I couldn’t do it. I cannot, on my own, ever be worthy of God’s love. I can never have a claim on him that says, “Now you must bless me and pay attention to me because I have achieved righteousness.” It’s not just in me. My sinful nature brings me down and will forever.

But the terrific news is that Christ has done what I could not do for myself. He’s lived that life of obedience and communion with the Father and joined to him, in him is the most marvelous acceptance in worthiness. Calvin and the Reformers always tell us, “Don’t look at yourself, look away from yourself and look to Jesus.” My standing with God is never in myself, it’s in Christ. He’s the worthy one, he’s the righteous one. The news is, as we hear the word proclaimed, the Holy Spirit joins us to Jesus so that all that is his becomes ours, and we can rejoice in that. When the accuser comes and says (as our friend Baxter Kruger likes to quote), “You’re not worthy, you’re not good enough, you’re not smart enough.” We don’t answer him and say, “Oh yes, I am. Look at this day, and that day.” We answer him by saying, “Look at Jesus, look at my advocate – he is worthy and by the power of his Spirit, I am in him.” That’s a huge comfort to me.

**JMF:** So in one sense, he is even more ready to hear us and wanting us present when we feel the worst.

**GSD:** Absolutely. You know the wonderful Christmas hymn “Joy to the World” says he comes to make his blessings known as “far as the curse is found.” Jesus has come to dig underneath the thorn of the curse that came upon us when Adam and Eve were cursed, to dig it out and remake our humanity, and when we are in the far country, we may know that we have one who’s come on the great search and rescue mission for us. He’s come to find his lost sheep, to carry us on his shoulders all the way back up to his Father’s throne.

That’s where the ascension ties this all together. He didn’t just restore us to kind of a neutral place to say, “I took care of your past sins, now you’ve got a clean slate, try to do as well as you can.” He says, “I want to take you beyond this earth all the way into the heavenlies, where you can be seated with me, and all that I have is yours.” The great church fathers have said that, “What we lost in Adam, we’ve gained even more in Christ.” In taking our humanity back to the Father, he’s given us every spiritual blessing.

**JMF:** We don’t have a lot of confidence in that, especially as a pastor you will know that often what we do is think, “If I could get enough people praying for me, especially righteous people – people I consider to be pretty good standing with God, if I could get enough of them praying for me, then God would finally hear those prayers and move on my behalf and do something to help me in my situation.” We discount the fact that our prayers matter because we know our situation, our sins, and our weaknesses. We figure our prayers don’t matter, so we want to amass prayer, like you mentioned prayers of saints, if we believe that saints pray for us, who are dead or just people we know – our other pastors. We’d like to go to the church and ask, “Could you get the congregation to pray for me?” Or in the case of a denomination, you want the whole denomination praying for you. As many righteous voices as possible. What could you say to someone to help them understand that God wants to hear from them?

**GSD:** The most important thing to say is, from 1 John, that we have an advocate before the Father, even Jesus Christ the Righteous One. Or go to Hebrews chapter 7, to realize that Jesus ever lives to intercede for us. We have an advocate who is praying for us right now. He’s gone into heaven to prepare a place for us. And part of that preparation is, he’s constantly presenting our case before his Father, saying, “Father, this one is in me and I have cleansed him and I am laboring with you and the Blessed Holy Spirit to conform him more and more to our image. But I



present my righteousness on his behalf.”

**JMF:** So there is no such thing as us praying on our own by ourselves.

**GSD:** That’s correct. Calvin was very strong on this. If we think we can approach God in our own strength, we are lost. But in Christ, when we come in Christ, we are immediately in the presence of the Father.

**JMF:** Tom Torrance talks about how our prayers are a participation in the prayers of Christ on our behalf. It’s not us praying that God the Father is going to hear a prayer from us, because we know our prayers are kind of poor prayers most of the time. But we can have confidence that our prayers being taken up by Christ redeemed and healed and presented to the Father as *his* prayer.

**GSD:** Absolutely. The Torrances were strong in saying, we want to pray, we try to pray, but we can’t pray and we despair. But when we look away from ourselves to Jesus, we see that he is praying in our name and on our behalf. He’s taking our pitiful prayers, he’s cleansing them and making them as his own, offering them to his Father, and the Father who delights to answer the prayers of the Son, he has been blessing us back through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. So our prayers are getting a whole lot farther than we might ever think if we just came on our own righteousness or worthiness.

**JMF:** As a pastor, there are things you want your congregation to hear about, know about. If there were one, let say, piece of advice or let’s say, maybe even a wish list that you could give all pastors, that you wish everybody could hear from their pastors from week to week, what would it be?

**GSD:** The concept of the wonderful exchange that Calvin spoke about is something that always moves me, particularly when I meet my congregation at the communion table. In a sense, speaking in Christ’s name as we offer the bread and the cup which become, through the Holy Spirit, his body and his blood, we’re saying to our people, “Here is the great exchange.”

In some sense, God is the all-time most extravagant and worst trader. Because what he does is he says, “I want to swap you, trade me your sin and will trade you my holiness. Trade me your anxiety, give that to me, and I will give you back my peace. Trade me your doubt and I will give you my faith on your behalf.” We come to that table of grace, and the wonderful exchange occurs whereby Christ asks for what is ours – pitiful, sin-stained, lost, confused, doubting – and he takes it all to himself as precious. He drinks it in that cup of wrath that he drank on our behalf

and then slides the cup back to us and we find that it's filled with the wonderful wine of communion. He gives back to us forgiveness and grace and healing. If our people could understand that when we meet Jesus, he is trading his life for our death, his forgiveness for our sin, I think we'd be transformed.

**JMF:** Most of the time when people go to church, they're coming away with the idea that I'm not good enough, I'd better behave better or God is going to reject me.

**GSD:** Often that would be the sin, in some sense, of the conservative churches – which would be to pile upon us more “shoulds” and “oughts” that only make us cast back upon ourselves, and we can't bear that up. If we could hear how Christ has taken our burdens from us and taken all of that away from us, and that living in him we may leave the church skipping and dancing and rejoicing – that the word from the Lord is, “I have included you in my grace, I have included you in my fellowship, I want you to rejoice in the eternal life I have for you.” Church might be a very different place.

The other thing that happens is the opposite, and that's that we come to church hoping to get a little help so we can continue to manage God on our own terms and be comforted in the life we've chosen for ourselves. A lot of mainstream America wants to view God as the one who's supposed to help me live out the life I've dreamed for myself.

**JMF:** Kind of a health-wealth gospel approach?

**GSD:** In some sense, or just that my high achievement, my constant business, my pressing... is really what counts. And God must be pleased with me if I'm living the good life.

**JMF:** So you're looking at a validation of whatever your lifestyle happens to be.

**GSD:** Exactly. There's a sense in which coming to hear of the all-embracing grace of Jesus de-validates the list that I've stacked up to say, “Look, I'm a good person, I live the good life, I got educated, I travel, my house is looking prettier. You should value me.” And the gospel says, “None of that matters.” Not only does your sin not keep you from God, but your righteousness also doesn't count before God. It's all in Christ.

In that sense, the news of the ascended Christ who has this new humanity for us is a challenge to contemporary American life. Because it says, not only are you relieved of the burden if you can't get there by yourself, but you are commanded to stop *trying* to get there by yourself. Our idolatry, that I'm the one who achieves, and makes, and creates my life, is torn down by a Lord who says, all of the grace is in me. You've got to leave off yourself and find it in

Christ.

**JMF:** Is there also a sense that God is blessing me and must be with me, since things are going well for me. Since I'm making enough money and I'm doing well and I've accumulated physical things around me and a certain amount of security and so on, therefore, I must be doing something right. I hear this, if things are going well, you must be doing something right, since God is bringing these blessings to you.

**GSD:** Sure. It's a very easy way to think. In my heart of hearts I probably think that, too. If I'm healthy, it's because God has favored me, and if I have means, it's because I must be living a pretty good life...

**JMF:** And the opposite is, if something bad happens, or a loss or a tragedy of some kind, I must have done something wrong, because God has brought this upon me to punish me.

**GSD:** Exactly. As we're talking, our nation is in some pretty uncertain economic times, and people are being drawn up short, realizing maybe I'm not favored after all, is God against me, have I somehow sinned? In the Western church, we've got this all confused. We don't expect that suffering is the normal state of life in this world. But the fact is, we are called to join the fellowship of Christ's sufferings as well as the fellowship of his resurrection.

When we are fulfilling the mission in the ascended Christ held on to our humanity, which means this is the world that he loves and died for, it also means he's sent the church into this very same world to give our lives the way as he did, to care for his poor, to bring about justice for the oppressed, to share this gospel even when sometimes people are hostile to it. We often think, my job is, I've been blessed and I've been saved and I know this grace, so I just get my little pile of blessings and withdraw and be comfortable and suffering should never touch me. But the truth is, all of God's greatest servants suffered not because he was cursing them, but because they joined the fellowship of love's suffering. Love suffers for the sake of the least and the lost, and we're called to that.

**JMF:** We've got about ten seconds left, so could I ask you to just give our viewers one thing you'd like them to know about God in that ten seconds.

**GSD:** The greatest thing to know about God is that he loves you enough to become what you are and to hold that in himself forever. The incarnation goes on and on, which means Christ has a hold of you into eternity.

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## Challenges for the Church Today

**JMF:** What are the biggest challenges facing Western Christianity today?

**GSD:** I think the challenges are huge, because the church in the West has been on the decline for some time. Theologically speaking, one of the challenges that we face is a kind of prevailing pluralism – that [although] most people in America still believe in God, they figure that there are many paths to get to that one God. One of the biggest negatives about Christianity [in their view] is our insistence that salvation is in Christ alone, and that Jesus uniquely shows us who God is. People almost instinctively see that as mean-spirited, exclusive, harsh and forbidding.

**JMF:** How do we balance that with the fact of the wideness of the grace of God and his desire to include and bring to himself every human being?

**GSD:** That's the challenge – because we have the most all-inclusive love story of any religion that's ever been on the face of the earth – the news of this wonderful world-reaching embrace of our God coming to us in Jesus Christ, and yet we are saying that because God has shown himself to be *this* way – this is who he is – so we have an *exclusive* revelation that has an *all-inclusive* embrace. As we face those challenges, we've got to be sure that we communicate the love, even as we are insisting on the truth.

**JMF:** God loves everyone – he sent Christ because he loves the world, and Christ says, if I'm lifted up, I'll draw all men to myself, and God does not let anybody slip through the cracks, and he's fully interested in every human being – and yet we have a role to play. How do we balance the fact of our call to evangelism, to call people to faith in Christ, and the fact that God's better at that than we are, and isn't going to abandon someone because we don't get to them in our evangelistic efforts... How do we balance that?

**GSD:** That's a wonderful question, and it has far-reaching implications for the mission of the church as a whole – because the ministry is not my ministry or your ministry, it's Christ's ministry. The world is going not where *I* make it go, but where the Lord Jesus makes it go. So on one hand, we relax, in that we realize that God is working his purposes out – that even if I can't figure out a perfect answer to the question of “what about the person in the farthest reaches of the earth who's never heard of Jesus – does he, or does he not make a profession of faith?” – the impossible theological questions like that, we trust that God has a plan for it. God who loved us enough to join us to himself forever to die for us, as you said, is not going to let anyone slip

through the cracks accidentally. No one's going to be left out by some kind of divine amnesia.

At the same time, we know that Christ sent the church into the world. He said, "all authority has been given to me, now therefore *go* and make disciples of the world." We know that not everyone accepts this message, tragically. The mystery of iniquity is that, faced with the most wonderful news in the universe, we sometimes turn from it.

I guess that because of Christ's sovereignty and the reach of his grace, the burden is not on me to try to convince you to believe. My task is to bear witness, to say, "This is who I've seen Jesus to be, and this is what he has done in me. This is who Christ is according to the Scriptures; this is who he's been in our lives. Now I hope the Holy Spirit is creating faith in you. I hope that you want to embrace that." Then I leave it, with all prayer and sincerity, in the hands of the Holy Spirit to create that faith in the listener – because that's his work.

**JMF:** Sometimes our presentation of the gospel, of who Christ is and what he's done for us, is poor. Sometimes it's very good, other times it's pretty poor. Some of our presentations are downright nasty and leave a bad impression. Is it fair for us to think that a person who doesn't respond to the gospel, even though they've heard it, and perhaps sometimes very badly and they're put off by it because of the behavior, the approach of us evangelicals sometimes... (For example, surveys have shown that people would rather live next door to a used-car salesman, or a drug dealer, let's say, than an evangelical Christian, simply because they'll get less pain from the others. That doesn't speak well of the way evangelicals are perceived, in terms of judgmentalism, pushiness, and so on. That isn't a correct, right picture of Christ, it isn't a proper presentation of the gospel.) But are we saying that God has a way, because his goal is to draw everyone to himself, of overcoming our short-comings and weaknesses in evangelistic presentation?

**GSD:** There's a lot in that, and it ties back to this difficulty that we have with an all-inclusive love of Christ who's revealed himself exclusively in Christ Jesus. Much of that depends on our realizing that our job is not salesmanship to religious consumers. Our job is to love in Christ's name, and to bear witness to what he has done. That changes the whole dynamic. There were times in my early life as a Christian when I felt like it was my burden to share a tract with every person I met, and if I didn't do that, they might be going to hell and it would be my fault. That was a very young faith that didn't have much trust in the sovereignty of God.

Maybe the sharing of those tracts played some role in someone's salvation. Maybe it became

a roadblock for some that the Lord had to overcome in different ways. The point is, I don't have to try to convince perfectly content pagans that they should buy my religious product. The reality is, is that hurting and broken people – all of whom are facing mortality and frailty, broken relationships, a sense of guilt, a sense of not being able to measure up even by their own standards – to them I'm sent with marvelous healing news that calls people out of darkness and into light. It's much different than trying to sell a religious product.

**JMF:** Henri Nouwen wrote a fascinating book called *The Wounded Healer* in which he helps pastors see past the need to feel that they're perfect, in presenting some kind of perfection to the people they're trying to help, but identifying with them on a level of realizing that they are as broken as the people they're trying to help – isn't that true of the church as well, in terms of evangelism?

**GSD:** It certainly is. I worked for a pastor who used to pray to the one who took his thorns and wore them as a crown – the idea that Jesus who ascended gloriously, as we've been talking about, yet, as the hymn says, "has rich wounds, yet visible above." Christ understood our humanity and he was pierced for our iniquities and he is constant unto our suffering. He is a ready friend to us as we recognize that we're not perfect.

If you look at the ministry of Jesus, you know that towards the Pharisees and the scribes, he was often very hard – that was toward those who felt like they were sufficiently righteous, who would not reveal their weaknesses or admit their sins. But to the broken, to the outcast, to the disgraced who were penitent and longing for his forgiveness, he came with all grace and acceptance. The Lord is ever enfolding our woundedness into his healing. What that means for ministry is that we minister, as Dan Allender has said, as "*those who lead with a limp.*" We don't have to hide our faults because we've been taken up by the one who has taken our humanity, embraced it and healed it. So we trust in that compassion of Jesus Christ.

My friend Andrew Purvis, who was a student of Tom Torrance in Edinburgh, likes to talk with his ministerial students about this subject. He'll often get a student to stand in front of him with his arms out as if he were preaching the gospel and he were conducting ministry. Andrew comes up behind him, he usually takes a rather robust student, grabs him by the shoulders and shoves him out of the way, and says, "Look, buddy, it's not your ministry, it's Christ's ministry. If I'm representing Christ, come here and I'll put my arm around you and you can join me in what I'm already doing." That's a graphic, but apt illustration for how ministry is done. As the

church, we want to find out what Jesus is up to. How is he working, and do we participate in that? Not, “What great things can I design for the Lord to tell him how to reach the world better than he can?”

**JMF:** On one side we have an enthusiasm for doing the work of ministry and for getting involved in what we perceive Christ is doing, and on the other side, isn't there a sort of a rest, or a peace – in other words, not a sense of frantic busy-ness in order to get the job done, but more of a peaceful entering into the work of Christ?

**GSD:** That's a good way to say it. It's a peaceful engagement. The church is often been prone to a couple of errors. One error is to withdraw from the world, to say, “We have been saved and called apart and we don't want to be stained by the world and we're waiting for Jesus to return, so we'll just separate ourselves.” That takes us out of being any good to anyone else, takes us out of sharing the love of Christ with others and basically sidelines the church.

But another error the church has made is to say, “We will make the kingdom happen on God's behalf. If the church can triumph, then God triumphs.” Instead of serving, we start dominating. Instead of giving, we start lording it over, and that has only created resentment for us. Sadly, there's a third error that the church has made, which is a capitulation with the world. We have our religion and we like it on Sundays but generally, we're not very distinguished from the world.

Where the gospel sends us in this kind of peaceful engagement that you brought up, is to a place where we are for the world by being different from the world because we belong to the Lord Jesus and different values. We're against the world, by being for the world, because we're bringing the all-inclusive love of Christ to them, even in their sin and rebellion.

Douglas Farrow is a wonderful professor at McGill University. He talks about how the church is in a wrestling match with the world. Because Jesus hasn't given up on the world, he hasn't given up on humanity, because he took our humanity in his ascension and bears it, we as the church, never give up on the world. We can't simply be dissolved into it, nor can we withdraw. We have to engage the world with this servant, wounded love of Christ.

**JMF:** You're the editor of a book called *An Introduction to Torrance's Theology*. How did you come to be associated with that project?

**GSD:** It was lots of fun. I've been a follower of both Tom and James Torrance for years, and it was their work that really changed my life and re-ignited my ministry. When I moved to



the church in Baton Rouge, I came to a church that has a wonderful devotion to the incarnate Savior, that loves the Scriptures and always wants to go deeper into Christ. Since I was new, they were willing to hear some new ideas, and I suggested that we have a conference, and that we call it *Discovering the Incarnate Savior of the World* – a chance to bring in some scholars to talk about this kind of theology – about the Father who loves the Son, after he sends his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem us and to saves us.

They went for it, and so we were able to contact a number of scholars in the Torrance tradition from around the country and even around the world, to come to Baton Rouge and talk about this theology. It was so much fun because I think it was the largest assembling of scholars in the Torrance tradition that had ever occurred all in one place. We spent a couple of days with about 200 participants studying and discussing and rejoicing in the incarnate Savior of the world.

**JMF:** How did that lead to the book?

**GSD:** After the conference, we realized that we had heard some really wonderful presentations, and the participants agreed to let us publish those, if we could find a publisher. I was able to ask a couple of others who weren't at the symposium – including Baxter Kruger, whom you had on this show as well – if they would contribute essays to the project. We submitted that to T. & T. Clark, who'd published most of Tom Torrance's major work, and I'm delighted to say they were eager to publish it. We ended up with a pretty good book that takes a look at Torrance's Christology.

**JMF:** What are some of the major themes in the book that you felt best about when you saw it finally published?

**GSD:** The focus was on Christology, which is the study of Jesus Christ and who he is. Each of the participants from different angles was looking at the bigness, the hugeness of what it means that God came to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. I took a look at the atonement and the wonderful Torrance emphasis on the fact that the atonement is not just an external transaction where God pays the tab for our sins – and he certainly does that. He does legally take away the burden of our sins. But it's deeper than that – the atonement is the way in which God reconciles us to himself by healing our humanity from the inside out. We all emphasized that and rejoiced in it.

**JMF:** Speaking of the idea of payment for sins – isn't that where most people tend to stop?

**GSD:** We do stop there. We figure that my sins are like a financial debt. I've accumulated

this amount of obligation to God, and I discover that my creditors are calling my hand, and I don't have enough spiritual capital to pay my debt. I'm in over my head, and so Jesus on the cross has paid the bill, he's picked up the tab, so to speak.

That's wonderful in the sense that he brings us back to neutral – the penalty is paid. But what that doesn't deal with is the fact that I'm a profligate spender. Pay my bills today and if I don't change from the inside out, I'll be in debt again in a week. In the spiritual sense, it means that Jesus takes away the legal problem of my sins, but it doesn't change my heart or my humanity that's sinful, then I haven't really been touched. Then the curved-in self, the darkened heart, the clouded mind – all of that are still there untouched. I'm not really redeemed from the inside out.

**JMF:** So we keep working on the effects rather than the cause when that's your primary focus?

**GSD:** I keep trying to work harder so I don't get into more debt, but I find that I'm inevitably behind. If *I* have to be the one that ultimately proves my worth to God and even if the external part of my sins has been paid for, I still am lost.

**JMF:** I've worked with many people, as I'm sure you have as a pastor who find themselves in that spiral – it's a constant focus on remembering what all your sins are in order to get them all repented for, because there is this fear that if I don't repent for every single sin, if I leave one out, God won't forgive me for that particular one and therefore I've got to continually be rehearsing my tracks, looking over my shoulders, figuring out what to repent of and make sure I... It becomes a legal exchange as the focus of my whole relationship with God – just find a way to get this debt off my back ...

**GSD:** It's terribly burdensome. It's full of guilt and it also tends to make a constant self-focus, "How am I doing? How am I doing?" What we need is the news that all of your sins – past, present, and future – have all been paid for in Jesus Christ. But even more, your humanity has been re-made in him. In Christ you and I can become a new creation. In Christ, he sets his own Spirit within me that causes me to want to live in communion with him. He puts his life in me so that I begin to think and act and live in wonderful communion with the Lord Jesus Christ – not by looking more and more at myself and try to make myself better, but by looking to Jesus, trusting in him to be a new creation, to participate in his new humanity, and thereby, in one sense, to live free from the burden of sin.

Not that I stop doing good things. No, he sends me on a mission to love and care for the world even to the point of laying down my life. But not to justify myself. I'm already justified in Christ. Not to try to fix my rotten heart, which in itself is always rotten, but simply to receive the new heart, the new life that he's given me.

**JMF:** I'm often asked, if what you're saying is true that God has made me a new creation in Christ and that my sins are forgiven (past, present, and future) and there's a new heart, then if that's true already, then what's my motivation for wanting to go out of my way to live like a Christian, because after all, isn't it easier not to live like Christian than it is to live like a Christian?

**GSD:** It is difficult to live as a Christian and difficult to live in that knowledge. But the motivation is love. It's the fact that you know different kinds of people that you meet in your life – some who are critical and judgmental and quick to point out your faults and others – you don't tend to want to visit with them as much as when you know there's someone who wants to embrace you and welcome you, to host you and to bless you – you tend to want to be with them.

When we truly understand that the Lord Jesus is blessing us with his forgiveness and his new humanity, that's where I want to be – I don't want to live stuck in myself. My sins are really my attempts to try to find a better life than the one God has for me. Sin isn't really fun in the long run. It's destructive. Living apart from the graciousness of my Father doesn't really get me where I want to go.

**JMF:** So it's actually easier to live in Christ, than it is not to live in Christ.

**GSD:** It's certainly more peaceful – there's always a struggle between my old self and the new self in Christ to try to get my mind to look away from my inner self and look to Jesus. It's not simple, but it's much more joyful.

**JMF:** Walking with Christ is, after all, walking with Christ. If we're a new creation and we belong to him, then the issue is a relationship with him – a relationship of love. It isn't even a question, is it – of what is my motivation – because when you are in a relationship of love with someone, you're in relationship of love with someone – that is the motivation in itself.

**GSD:** Exactly, and love and communion is what I'm seeking – it's what all of us are seeking in our deepest hearts – this relationship of total acceptance and forgiveness, purpose, delight and everlasting life.

**JMF:** So to ask the question is to misunderstand the point.

**GSD:** Exactly. You don't ask that question if you're experiencing the communion.

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## The Eternal Incarnation

**JMF:** In your book, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation*, what is Christ's continuing incarnation, and what was the need for such a book?

**GSD:** More than a decade ago, I had become fascinated with the person of Jesus Christ, partly through being reintroduced to the theology of Thomas and James Torrance, and I found myself yearning more and more to explore the bigness and the wonder of the Savior that we have. I was drawn then to try to find out which angle would be best for exploring Christ, and I realized that the ascension of Jesus provides a fresh look at the very ancient story.

The ascension of Christ is a kind of hinge on which the entire story of the mediator turns. For instance, we think of Jesus as being our Prophet, our Priest, and our King. When he was among us and in his days in Nazareth and Jerusalem, he was a prophet speaking God's word to us. It was after his ascension though, when he withdrew from us, that he became a prophet in a different way. Now by the sending of his Holy Spirit, who caused the apostles to write down the words of the New Testament, and through living in our hearts, Jesus continues to speak, but not just out of his location in Jerusalem, but from heaven to us.

In his role as a priest, Jesus fulfilled that in his death on the cross, dying to take away the sins of the world, but after his ascension, he became a priest in a new way. He appears before the throne of the Father to intercede for us and to offer his life on our behalf and to continue to prepare a place for us.

Third, as the King, when Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he had conquered death, but it was with his ascension that he was truly honored as the Lord of all. So all the work of Jesus hinged on the ascension.

**JMF:** As individuals 2000 years later, we relate to the ascended Jesus. How is that connected with his time on earth in terms of how it affects us today?

**GSD:** That's where the fact of the continuing incarnation is so important. As we've mentioned, people think that God only became a human for a little while he was with us those 33 years that Jesus was here. But in fact, Scripture and traditions of all believers have taught for centuries that Jesus *remained* incarnate. He did not kind of unzip his humanity and take it off, he remained wedded to our humanity.

That's wonderful news for us because it means that the same Jesus who gathered the little children in his arms and touched them and blessed them, the same Jesus who accepted the tears

of the sinful woman and pronounced forgiveness to her, the same Jesus who was willing to touch someone with a terrible disease and to heal them, that's the same Jesus that we relate to now. He still has the memory of walking among us on this earth. He still has our flesh. He's still the Jesus that we meet in the Gospels.

**JMF:** How does that impact us when we're in the depths of our own humanity and we're feeling like we're not connected with God, where do we find the wherewithal to go ahead and take the step of returning to God, like the prodigal son, as opposed to the fear that most of us feel when we feel disconnected because of sin?

**GSD:** To know his true humanity, that he is both fully God but fully human in the way that we are human, that when the Son of God came to us, as the Torrances love to say, he penetrated into our lost and forsaken condition, or as Douglas Sparrow says, he pursued us all the way to the place of our fallenness. Not just abstractly in some philosophical sense—he did it by becoming what we are, taking up real humanity, he truly embraced us.

Because he keeps that humanity, he remains the one who knows what it's like to be tempted. He knows what it's like to have suffered. He knows what it's like to have struggled in our humanity. So we can trust him that he's no stranger to what we're feeling. But also because that redemption was real, because he truly became what we are to renew us and to save us in our real humanity (not some abstract kind of superman humanity), then we don't have to be afraid that he's so disappointed in our sin or so surprised by it that he's ready to cut us off. He knows how it is with us. What he has redeemed is what we really are.

**JMF:** There's a memory passage a lot of people have in Isaiah that "your sins have separated you from me." How do you relate "your sins have separated you from me" with what you're just describing in terms of our relationship with Christ through the ascension?

**GSD:** A helpful distinction here is between union and communion. A great theologian from the 17th century, John Owen, talked about this. Our union with Christ was established first in Christ's union with us. As we've said, he took up our humanity and joined himself to it. Our union with Christ also includes the way in which the Holy Spirit joins us to Christ so that we are united inseparably with him.

**JMF:** That includes every human being.

**GSD:** It does, and it doesn't, in the sense that Christ's union with our humanity causes him to extend to all human beings his great welcome and redemption of love. The union that we have

with Christ through the Holy Spirit comes as the blessed Spirit awakens us to life, creates faith in us, and joins us to Jesus. That happens at different stages along people's lives. When you've been united to Christ in the Holy Spirit, that union is forever. We are included in all that he has done for us. Our sins are removed, we can't surprise God by our sin, we can't mar his redemption, we can't change it.

But experientially speaking, we can affect our *communion* with him. Our union is untouchable. Christ has established that, in his union with us, in the great work of his redemption. It's all done. But my communion with him, it's affected if I wander into the far country knowingly and willingly, then I close off my relationship with the Father and I get miserable. When I fail to pray to him or fail to read the Scriptures or partake of the sacraments or join in the fellowship of the believers, I get lonely and miserable. It's not because my union has been affected, but my sense of communion.

The way back from the far country isn't to think, I've got to get saved all over again. I'm already saved in Christ. I simply need to remember that my Father is waiting there, watching down the foreign road with arms open wide for me to return to the awareness of what he's already given me in Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** So the continuing incarnation has many implications for us as individual believers.

**GSD:** Sure. One of the most important ones is to realize that God is not done with us yet or with this world. The fact that he still holds our flesh in eternal union with himself indicates that this is not a throw-away world. This is the world that he loves. We are the people that he died to redeem. This is the field where he is working.

Thinking of field, there's a wonderful passage in Jeremiah where on the eve of the destruction of Jerusalem, when the Babylonians are coming to conquer the people, the Lord tells Jeremiah to purchase a field. Now talk about a bad real-estate investment, right before your country is about to be overrun, you go and buy land that's about to become worthless. But it was a sign that the Lord was still invested in Jerusalem, still invested in his people. Jeremiah bought that field against the day or in hope for the day when the people would return.

There's a sense in which Jesus bought the "field" of our flesh. He holds it now in heaven for the day when he will return and this world's redemption will be fully worked out, and the world will be made new and set right. Tertullian talked about the double pledge that the ascension gives us, and most of us who have studied the New Testament know about Ephesians 1, where the

Spirit in our hearts is the guarantee or the down payment for our hope that we have of being united to Christ in heaven. Tertullian adds that the body of Jesus in heaven is the partner pledge – that because he’s holding our flesh in heaven, it’s the down payment that we will not live some airy spiritual existence only, but we will be embodied in a full glorified resurrection body. Jesus is the pledge of that.

**JMF:** We go to church and hear things like this preached, and it sounds exciting and wonderful, and yet deep inside we’re feeling, yeah, but I’m pitiful and I’m still a sinner, and where does that leave me? We want to throw our hands up and say, if God’s so great and all this is still wonderful, why do I feel so rotten?

**GSD:** Exactly. For us as preachers and theologians, the bigger a picture we paint of Jesus, then the more accountable our people hold us to say, why isn’t this working in my life? Why isn’t this transforming me? We have to ask, what is blocking my experience of this reality that Christ has already established? What keeps me from it, besides that fact that we’re tired most of the time and we’re mortal and we have all kinds of mood swings, and that’s just normal.

We can think about it along two lines, succinctly, ignorance and obstinance. One: I don’t experience enough of God because I don’t know enough of who he is, I have a distorted view. The other is: in spite of the fact that I’ve been redeemed and included in Christ, I still have my old will. I still have the part of me that wants to run away and try to be God myself or run away and do what I want to do like a petulant child. So between these two, of not really expanding my mind enough to see who Christ is, and then of still clinging to self-will, I tend to fall into missing the treasure that I have.

So what can be done about that? It’s wonderful that the Lord did not call us in abstraction or as isolated individuals. We are called the body of Christ for a reason, and we are joined to his body and we are connected to one another and we need each other. I have a guy that comes to a Bible study on Tuesday mornings. He goes to several studies, and he says, “I know that if I don’t get with other Christians, I won’t pray and I won’t read my Bible. I’m not here because I’m so holy, I go to all these Bible studies because I’m *not* holy and I need the encouragement.”

The Lord left us the sacraments, particularly regular Communion, and the Lord’s Supper is a means of grace, churches classically called it, a means whereby he particularly helps us experience what he’s done for us. It says the bread is broken and the cup is passed that I tend to get a fuller sense of the wonder of my forgiveness.



One other piece to this concerns the way in which we express the love of Christ in the world. I don't experience so much of God inside me if I'm not moving out to share his love with others through works of love and through sharing the gospel. It's like a river that gets dammed up, and if that water has no place to go, it gets stagnant. So too, Christians weren't meant to receive all these blessings just for ourselves to stop, we're meant to go on. So, often I experience spiritual growth by doing service for others.

**JMF:** You mentioned a distorted view of God that we can have as individuals. In your book *Jesus Ascended*, on page 91, you mention the doctrine of the ascension keeps us from collapsing our understanding of the person of Christ into any of the Christological distortions of the present age. What are some of those Christological distortions of the present age?

**GSD:** The current Christological distortions are just the ancient distortions returned. From the beginning, people have wondered, who is this Jesus who was among us who did things that no one has ever done, who taught like no one had ever taught, who even rose from the dead? As we have struggled to say how he is both God and man, we've tended sometimes to get a little out of focus.

One of those heresies was called Docetism, and that's the idea that Jesus wasn't really a man, he was just *appearing* to be a man; he was like a ghost, almost like a holographic projection of God. The church continually had to say, no, this really was a man come among us. Docetism tends to be the Christological distortion that occurs often among more conservative believers today. We have such a high view of Jesus that we almost forget that he was really a man. We think of him as a superman, as Jesus who didn't really touch our lives, and we tend to see him as disconnected from who we are. We're always combating that in the church to remind people that no, this is a God who is fully human who really knows who and how we are.

Another Christological distortion from the ancient days that has recurred is called Adoptionism. That's the idea that Jesus was a great guy, God the Father looked down and said, "You're so good, I think I'll adopt you as my special son," so that Jesus was just a man who kind of got promoted. He wasn't really God come among us, the real God in our midst, he was just a guy who happened to access the God within him more than usual. That's a distortion we see today a lot more among liberal Christians. It's the idea that Christ is more of a principle or a spiritual idea and Jesus just got it better than most, and if we try to get it like he did, we can become spiritual.

**JMF:** The idea there, as far as it affects us, is how do we achieve the same thing Christ did by following his example, and we turn the gospel into that.

**GSD:** Exactly. That puts the full burden and weight on me again. Instead of having a Jesus who is God among us, who can lend me his aid and work to transform me, I've got to try to be like Jesus, which is impossible even in the best of circumstances.

**JMF:** Backing up to the ghostly Jesus that conservatives tend to see, doesn't it result in the same thing? Kind of an... I need to emulate Jesus, I need to measure up to what he did, and that becomes how we relate to God, instead of in terms of the real ascension that you were talking about?

**GSD:** Yes. We get disconnected from Jesus. If he just *appeared* to be a human, then he never really became what I am. He never really redeemed what is my humanity. He's so much God, so high above me, that I can never attain to it. I can try, but I'm reaching up for him, I'm grasping for him, but it's an impossibly high standard, because he never really was human in this heresy, he just appeared to be. That happens when we think of Jesus as so superhuman that we no longer realize how closely we can relate to him.

The doctrine of the continuous union with our humanity that the ascension gives us reminds us that not only did he become fully human, but he *remains* fully human, as well as fully God, still able to connect to us.

**JMF:** In *Jesus Ascended*, you use the example of *Les Misérables* of Jean Valjean and Marius as an illustration of the ascension.

**GSD:** That was in the section on Jesus as our High Priest and thinking through how in his ascension, Jesus is taking our humanity up to the Father, and how he's continuing to intercede for us. If you saw the stage adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel or maybe you had to read it in high school when you were younger, you remember that it's a story about Jean Valjean, who was a kind of every-man character who, though he had been wrongly accused of stealing in his youth, is set free and rises to become the mayor of a town and actually adopts a young girl named Cosette because her mother has died of an illness.

He's this wonderful father figure concerned to care for her, but because of his shadowy past he doesn't want anyone to know about her, and he keeps her cloistered away till he realizes one day that Cosette has fallen in love with a man she met out in town named Marius. Jean Valjean realizes that his daughter's happiness lies in communion with this man that she has met. Well, as

things happen, the ill-fated French Revolution occurs and Marius has gone to fight and in the process of that fight, he is severely wounded.

Jean Valjean is there at the barricades, and in a very poignant scene you see him pick up the wounded Marius, put him on his back, and then open up a grate and descend into the city's sewers. There, he escapes from the soldiers who are coming after them and he strides through the filth and the wreckage that is floating in the sewers of Paris in order to rise up in another place and bring Marius to a physician who can heal him and ultimately restore him to Cosette, his love.

It struck me what a wonderful example that is, and in some sense an allegory of Christ's priesthood for realizing that we are mortally wounded as humans by our sin and our estrangement from the Father. Jesus, in a sense, came down to where we are and picked up our humanity as he took it as his own and he made his way against the filth and the sewage of this world, striding against the sin and the violence and the anger and the distortions, he carried our ruined humanity all the way up to the healing place, into the heavenlies, where now he is preparing a place for us where we can be in communion with him.

**JMF:** Having a sense of the ascension and where Christ is now at the right hand of the Father, ascended, taking our humanity as it really is with him, having healed it and redeemed it can't help but bring a great hope to us as sinners if we are able to face it and recognize ourselves as sinners.

**GSD:** It's a wonderful hope, because our life is in heaven with Christ and God. Now obviously, you and I are not yet in heaven, as nice as this place is, we haven't quite arrived. Yet spiritually, the Scripture says we're located in heaven with Christ. So we're living now our days among earth as citizens of heaven. There's a sense in which we take great comfort from the fact that our heavenly hope is secure and we're making our way through this world as his agents, as those who are bringing the news of another life and another country to a very weary and broken world.

**JMF:** Most of the time, many of us feel like Marius on Jean Valjean's back. We don't feel like Jean Valjean, we feel wounded and near death, spiritually speaking, and helpless.

**GSD:** Sure. That's where it's so important that as we hear the wonderful story of the gospel and all its grandeur all the way through from his birth to his ministry to his death, resurrection, and ascension, we find ourselves located in the life of Christ. The Holy Spirit's job is to come and fill us to give us the life of Christ in our presence and experience, so that we live now with

the life of heaven to come flowing through us in the present moment. That's a weird kind of time-warp thing to say, but the goal that we're on our way to, actually becomes present in our experience through the work of the Holy Spirit.

How does that happen? How do we experience that? That's where our participation and our faith makes a big difference. We can't simply sit here like rocks and say, "Okay God, now give me the joy of heaven." But as we worship, as we pray, as we faithfully study, as we fellowship, as we serve, and as we ask for the Holy Spirit to keep doing his work of, "Bring the heavenly life of Jesus into my present experience, Lord continue to transform me," he promises that he will do that. He will pour out his Spirit upon us.

**JMF:** So our life in Christ is not something that we're always going to feel some kind of glorious heaven-opened-light-shining-down wonderful moment. It's actually lived out in the midst of the struggles of day-to-day life and the messiness of real relationships and the ups and downs.

**GSD:** Absolutely. The fact that we have this joy, Jesus said in John 16, "In a little while you will see me again and my joy will be with you and no one can take that joy from you," the joy of the fact that he overcame death. It didn't mean the disciples weren't going to suffer. As much as we know from history, they all died pretty miserable deaths and lived under a great deal of persecution.

But our joy is not dependent on circumstances. It's not even dependent on our moods and feelings. There's a sense of joy that I have in the knowledge of all that Christ has done on my behalf, that is a constant peace that underlies circumstances of life even if I have to go through physical suffering, even if I have to go through broken relationships, even if some tragic accidents happen to those whom I love. Even in the midst of wars and tumults, the difference for the Christian is this deep, deep peace and recognition of what Christ has accomplished. Even when I'm not feeling it, not feeling happy and lighthearted, that's where faith believes and it clings to the fact that this is reality. The world's reality, its brokenness, is not the truest thing. At the deepest levels, all is well.

**JMF:** That makes such a huge difference for believers who are serious about their Christian lives, because we don't experience great highs all the time, and we can go around trying to pretend that we do, to appear righteous and close to God, thinking that that's what should be happening, so we can put on a façade as though everything is wonderful and everything is great,

when everything isn't and there are tragedies and sorrows and pains. But this deeper level you're talking about is something that we're able to see more clearly when we better understand Christ as a real human who has taken a real life up in his ascension to the Father.

**GSD:** When Paul commands the Philippians in chapter 4 to rejoice, it's not about a feeling, it's about an activity. Rejoicing in that sense means saying to myself or saying to others even in the teeth of suffering and even in walking through the valley of the shadow of death saying, "Nevertheless, Jesus reigns." "Nevertheless, Christ is Lord, nevertheless, he has gone up into heaven and is there in my name and on my behalf. My sins are forgiven and I cannot be taken away from him, so I rejoice and praise you even in the midst of my tears."

The phrase that you often hear young people saying today, "whatever," is their way of detaching from something that they don't like that happens to them. They say, "It doesn't matter. Whatever." John Calvin had a wonderful sermon where his refrain wasn't "whatever," but "what of it," and the fact that while we care about what's going on in life, there's something so much truer that we can face circumstances and say, "What of it?"

In this sermon I'm thinking of, which happened to be an ascension sermon, Calvin was saying, "This world is filled with troubles and the devils assault us at every moment, but what of it? Christ Jesus reigns in heaven and sends me his power now. This world is full of temptations and often I am weak, but what of it? Christ is in heaven and he is strong and he is strong on my behalf." I think when we realize that we can replace the "whatever" or even the crushingness of life with the, "What of it? No matter what is thrown my way, Christ reigns and he holds me, then I know at the deepest levels all is well and all will be well."

**JMF:** In the couple of minutes we have left, let's talk about how that affects mission. Our sense of being able to have joy in the face of whatever we are facing, how does that affect our responsibility in terms of Christian mission?

**GSD:** In the same way that the ascension gives us the joy when things are going wrong to know that Christ is reigning, the fact that in his ascension Jesus holds onto his humanity indicates his great concern for this world and for his little ones. It's the ascended Jesus that gives the church her mission. He's the one who sends us into the world and says, "What you do to the least of these, you have done to me."

Augustine has a wonderful quote where he says, "Christ is in heaven glorious as God, but here he is needy and is poor. So worship him as God in heaven, but love him by loving his poor."

Isn't that wonderful? There's the church's whole mission. Worship above to Christ who is God, serve Christ in his poor, Christ who is man here below.

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## Jesus Is Always Ahead of Us

**JMF:** I have your book here, *Discovering Jesus, Awakening to God*, and on page 19 you said, “You have dared to hope that the real God is more than an angry rule-giver or some benign force of positivity. Our hearts long for...” You list a number of things and one of them is, “A God who knows us utterly, loves us passionately, and transforms us continually.” I had to think how freeing it would be if everyone knew God that way.

**GSD:** We all have a yearning to know God. It’s in us from the very beginning, but a lot of us have had some bad experiences in churches and with God’s people, and a lot of us have some distorted views about God. Some of us think that God is always out to get us and that he’s just never pleased with anything that we do. Others of us think that God is no bigger than what I can find inside myself. Both those conceptions of God leave us still yearning for a real experience of the real God.

**JMF:** Don’t many people feel like a God like you’re describing and bringing out here in *Discovering Jesus: Awakening to God* (and you’re writing to Christians, for the most part) – don’t people feel that a God like that is too good to be true?

**GSD:** I think we do. Some of that’s from our upbringing, where being a Christian is more about being *good* than it is about being in a relationship with God. When we read the New Testament and go to the Gospel stories, we see this God who comes among us and knows us utterly. Think of Jesus meeting the woman at the well, and her response is, “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did.” Not that Jesus gave her a chronological list of all the events in her life, but that he so spoke the truth of who she was, in love, that she felt as if she were utterly and finally, finally known.

**JMF:** In this book, you go through Gospel story after gospel story to help illustrate that Jesus is presenting us with the kind of God that you’re talking about. He knows us completely and thoroughly and loves us unconditionally in spite of what he knows about us, which is far more than even the worst we know about ourselves, and he loves us unconditionally anyway.

**GSD:** Absolutely. That’s the God we meet in the Gospels. Encountering Jesus freshly, really picking up the Gospel stories again, and saying, “Who is this Jesus who was encountering people? How did he meet them? How did he touch them? Is it possible that that could also happen to me?”

Our belief as Christians is that the Scriptures are not a dead document, but they are a living

witness to the person of Jesus Christ. Because we believe that Jesus is still alive, that he's even now at the right hand of the Father praying for us and interceding for us, we believe that he still speaks to us. Often not audibly, but through his word. When he sends his Spirit, and the word is read, and we see that these Scriptures were written not just for the people then, but for us today, it gets exciting because we realize maybe God will meet us in the same way that he was meeting others when he came to us as Jesus.

**JMF:** Being encountered by a God who knows us thoroughly, loves us unconditionally, but he doesn't leave it with just that. He does love us in spite of what he knows about us, and that love is unconditional, but he doesn't leave us in that sinful condition – he also is the God who transforms us continually.

**GSD:** Absolutely. We see that in Jesus, in the way he called people to himself. For instance, in this book we talk some about the calling of the first disciples, where Jesus asked these fishers who fished all night long and are tired and they haven't caught anything and they're putting away their nets, he asked them, "Could you put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch?"

All the fishers knew that the fish were caught in shallow waters and they were caught at night, not in the day. But Peter says, "Well, all right, at your word I'll do what you're saying even though you're not a fisher." Suddenly, they catch so many fish in those nets that the boats are threatening to be swamped. It's a moment where the dreams of a fisherman are all coming true. What does a fisher dream about but the great catch?

What's so striking about this Gospel story is that Peter, in the midst of the biggest catch of his life and career, doesn't care a bit about it. He falls down on his knees in the boat and he says, "Depart from me, oh Lord, for I am a sinful man." What happened to Peter is he suddenly realized he was in contact with someone more than a man. Someone who was God himself come among us. He had that problem that we often have, and that's realizing that if I'm in the presence of the Holy One, I'm in a lot of trouble because I'm sinful, because I'm weak, because I've done wrong things.

But it's right here that Jesus meets him, and the first words out of Jesus' mouth are, "Do not be afraid." He doesn't reject Peter, he doesn't deny the fact that Peter is a sinner, he knows that we're sinners, but he's not there to condemn Simon Peter, he's there to say, "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people." And from that moment, Peter left his nets, left the



greatest catch of his life on the shore, and went off and followed Jesus.

So Jesus met him where he was, told a sinner that he was forgiven, and then moved him on into a greater adventure. He said, “I can fulfill all your worldly dreams of a great catch, but I know what you’re really after, something of greater significance. Come follow me, and let’s see what happens when we bring this love and this grace to sinners.”

He still does that for us today. We have times, perhaps, in the middle of our lives where we’ve achieved highly in our careers, and we realize, “This is not what I want to do. I need something more.” Christ might say, “Come follow me.” Not that you necessarily leave your job, but that the focus of your life changes and he calls us to something more.

**JMF:** The beauty of this story that speaks to everybody, whether you’ve been successful in life or whether you’ve been a complete washout, or, as most people, a pendulum between the two, when Peter recognizes that this is something greater than he’s ever seen before, God has encountered him in some way and he immediately sees himself as a sinner and admits that: “Depart from me – I’m a sinful man,” he doesn’t really mean “depart from me” – he means “I’m not worthy.”

But Jesus immediately tells him not to be afraid and immediately takes up fellowship with him, and that speaks so much to our human condition at every level, whether we’re experiencing a wonderful thing or whether we’re experiencing a very fearful thing or we’re walking through a period of facing our sinfulness for whatever reason.

Sometimes in the middle of a tragedy, where we feel like, this came upon me because of my own stupidity and my own selfishness and I’ve been going the wrong way and I’m going to reap the fruit of that...even at that kind of a moment to realize that Christ is coming to us, extending his fellowship to us, that makes life something new and different from what it was, or would be, without him.

**GSD:** It does. To say, do not be afraid. We think about that wonderful story where Jesus comes walking on the water to the disciples in the middle of the night, and they’re terrified (even though they’ve been longing for him) because they think he’s a ghost, because, after all, who’s ever walked on water?

The first words out of his mouth are, in Greek, *ego emei*: “I am. Do not be afraid.” That’s really an emblem for the presence of God with us in Jesus Christ, is he arrives in our midst with all of this power and all of his revelation and speaks first to say, “I’m here, do not be afraid.” It’s

not, “I’m here, get worried because I’ve come to condemn you,” it’s not, “I’m here, you aren’t adequate, you’re going to be kicked out,” but, “I’m here, be at peace. In me you have forgiveness and grace.”

**JMF:** Many people have the idea that Christianity is about a relationship with the law or with rules, that it’s about not doing this but doing that and praying so many hours a day or minutes a day, whatever the case may be in terms of rule-keeping. And then to find out that Christianity really is about a personal relationship with somebody who already loves you and has already done what is necessary to save you from all those things that destroy and hurt you, it changes the whole complexion of what being a Christian is all about. All of this judgementalism toward one another, and all the burden of rule-keeping that you can never measure up to, is transformed in one instant when you see God for who Christ reveals him to be.

**GSD:** It’s incredibly freeing. Maybe we can talk about another Gospel story that illustrates that. Remember in Luke 7 where Jesus has been invited to dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee? In those days those dinners were kind of open affairs. People from the city would come and almost watch a prominent dinner unfold. The Gospel story tells us that a woman of the city who was a sinner, which means she had done some notorious sin, came and stood behind Jesus, and she brought with her that alabaster flask of very expensive ointment. She broke the flask open and began to pour it on his feet and too she began weeping, and the tears and the ointment mingled together, and she wet his feet with her tears and she wiped them with her hair.

**JMF:** Just to make it clear to people who might be listening, they would have been reclining on a bench so that he could be propped up on an elbow facing the table...

**GSD:** Right. With his feet out to the side. She didn’t have to crawl under the table ...

**JMF:** As a kid I always imagined it that way and thought, “how could that work? She’s crawling under the table?”

**GSD:** But still, it would have been a scandalous act, because a woman had her hair uncovered, and it’s quite distracting if somebody is weeping behind you. Simon the Pharisee is indignant about this, and he says, in his mind, how could Jesus accept the love of such a sinner? If he knew who she was and realized she’s awful?

Jesus gives a little mini-parable to this teacher of the law, a parable so obvious as to have been insulting to him. He says, Simon, if two men had a debt and one owed the equivalent of \$50 and one owed the equivalent of \$500 and you forgave them both, who will be the more grateful,

who will love you more?

That's so obvious anybody could get that, and Simon says begrudgingly, "I suppose the one who owed the most," and Jesus says, "Exactly. This woman loves so much because she's been forgiven so much." And we note that he's never spoken a word to her before. He simply declared her forgiveness already.

Simon saw her and wanted to remind her of all her sins and all the laws that she had broken. Jesus saw her and just by his presence was accepting her and forgiving her. Not that her sins were excused, but that he was recognizing her need and that he loved her.

He then lifts her up and says, "Go your way, your faith has made you well." He didn't have to say to her, by the way, "sin no more." She understood that. He had forgiven and accepted her, and so she loved much.

So too in Christianity. When we leave off legalism, the idea that we have to appease an angry God or somehow have enough achievements to impress God, and enter into a relationship of a God who already loves us and has already forgiven us in Christ, then it becomes not about law, but about love. We are ardent and desirous to come to him and unburden ourselves, even to weep over our mistakes and our sins not out of fear, but out of desire to have him heal us and reconnect us.

**JMF:** It even affects the way we view the events that happen to us in the course of life. If something good happens we think, "God must be blessing me because I did something good." Or if a bad thing happens, we think conversely, "God must be punishing me because I did something bad." And because there's always something bad that we've done, we're always waiting for the moment when the bad thing will happen that God will punish us with.

**GSD:** Right.

**JMF:** It prevents us from being able to think of a relationship with God where we can meet every circumstance with "Christ is with me in this present moment and I can proceed knowing that he is with me, that he loves me, and even if I bungle it, he will love me anyway, and I may have to struggle my way through it, but he's not going to leave me or forsake me." Even as we go through it, he will continue to love me and he will continually help me to become more like him in the course of it.

**GSD:** The problem is, even though we're Christians, we live as if we're living by karma, the idea that if you do something bad it's going to come around and get you in equal measure. The

rock singer, Bono, from the group U-2 that's so popular, noted that it was a transformation for him when he realized that the universe works not by karma but by grace. That the God of Jesus Christ, Jesus himself, is not about karma, making sure everything is handed out according to what we deserve, which would be bad news, but that it's about grace. Because one person has taken our sins upon himself, has paid the price not only at the external level, but in the depths of the depths he's taken our lost and forsaken condition, made it his own, and healed it so that he can return to us grace in exchange for our letting go of our sin and our guilt. It's fabulous.

**JMF:** As you go through the various Gospel stories in here that you cite as you walk through the four Gospels, is there one that stands out particularly that really touched you in a special way?

**GSD:** I wanted to talk some toward the end of the book, bringing up the story of Peter's reinstatement. We talked about Simon Peter, who was called to Jesus when he was fishing. After the resurrection, when Jesus wasn't with them all the time, and at the end of John's Gospel, Simon Peter and his friends have gone fishing again. Jesus is on the beach cooking them breakfast.

He tells them, he calls to them to put their nets over on the other side and they catch, the Gospel tells us, 153 large fish. Suddenly they realized, this is déjà vu! We've been here before. This must be the Lord. And they come running in with great joy to see the Lord.

That's when we have this encounter between Simon Peter and Jesus that's recalling his terrible denials. Peter must have still be smarting over that, that the night of Jesus' betrayal, three times he denied knowing him after promising he'd die for him.

So Jesus pulls him aside and he says, "Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me?" Peter says, "Well, Lord, you know I love you." And he asks him again, "Do you love me?" A third time, "Do you love me?" Simon Peter says, "Lord, you know all things, you know I love you." Jesus says, "Then feed my sheep."

That story is the background for one of the most beautiful chapters, to me, in all of Scripture, which is in Peter's first letter, chapter 1, where he's writing to Christians who are under persecution, have been scattered, and are having a difficult time. He says, "In this hope you rejoice, even though you've been suffering for a while, but that the genuineness of your faith might be proved. For though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of joy."

A long time ago, when I was struggling a lot with guilt and legalism, I was reading that passage and I was thinking, how does Peter know that? He'd never met those people. He's never met me. How can he declare, "Though you have not seen him, you love him"?

Then it occurred to me. It was like the scales fell off. What if I simply accepted that I *am* what God declares me to be? What if I simply accepted that I *have* what he's declared that I have? And I thought, I *do* love him. I don't have to fish around inside myself for my feelings, to see if I've done enough good works, to see if I've prayed enough and had enough quiet times. It's a fact. I *do* love him. His Spirit is within me. It's a fact. He's given himself to me, and I believe in him.

So for me, that was transformative. To realize that it wasn't about my achieving anything, but my receiving what he had already declared to be true about me. It changed my life.

**JMF:** To accept what he has already said about you is true, this is something that's a fact whether you believe it or not.

**GSD:** The beauty of it for me was to realize that. In Peter's words, he declared to these people he'd never seen, "Though you have not seen him, you love him." He was describing a reality that they could simply receive and live into. To know that, even before I have turned toward Jesus Christ, he has already turned toward me. Even before I've confessed my sins, he has already atoned for them in his cross and resurrection and ascension. Even before I have grasped ahold of him in faith, which I must do, he has already grasped ahold of me.

It's the most marvelous and freeing experience to realize that even the faith that I have in him is his gift. He's supplying everything to me. I grow and change and obey and live now based on what he has done, not on what I'm able to whomp up as my own spiritual experience and hope that if I really worship hard enough or pray hard enough I'll get some kind of spiritual experience. Rather, this is a resting in what he's already provided, and receiving it.

**JMF:** There's a real *you* that he's already made you to be, that you really haven't even seen yet in its fullness. Isn't it Colossians that speaks of the fact that we are already sealed with him in heavenly places. That new creation that we are, is not something that we see every day. We see...

**GSD:** The glass darkly.

**JMF:** Yeah. The down and dirty that we know we are.

**GSD:** I like 1 John 3, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet

appeared to us. But we know that we will be like him, for then we will see him just as he is.”

**JMF:** That’s when we can see ourselves as he’s actually made us to be.

**GSD:** Right.

**JMF:** And not only ourselves, but we can see others as he’s made them to be as well. This is something that we struggle with, isn’t it, that we see others as people who are in our way and people who are causing us trouble? We don’t see them as the new creation in Christ he’s made them to be.

**GSD:** Exactly. C.S. Lewis talks about the fact that if we could see others as what they will be when they’re fully glorified, the new lives in heaven, we would be tempted now to fall down and worship them. He says we’re surrounded by people who would potentially be gods and goddesses to us if we saw them as they really are. My sight is so poor that now I see you as the guy who cut me off in traffic, and what I need to do is see myself and to see you in Christ as one who’s been redeemed and transformed, glorified, and is on his way to full realization of that.

**JMF:** That is a source of great hope, when we realize that the future we have when we are actually glorified and with Christ, the relationships that we will be able to have that now are so strained (and in some cases even broken) can be completely renewed and made fresh and be good and real.

**GSD:** Which is a real incentive now, because if I’m going to have to deal with you for the rest of eternity, I might as well start forgiving you and loving you and getting along with you now, because we’re going to have a lot of time together.

**JMF:** Or stay away from you now, since we’ll be together for a long time (laughing).

**GSD:** That’s right. We’ll have plenty of time for that later (laughing).

**JMF:** Is there a project that you’re currently involved in that you can tell us about?

**GSD:** I’m working a bit on this whole question of, if Jesus is so great, then why am I so pitiful still? It occurs to me the more I probe and consider all that Christ is, and the more theology tells us how great is his salvation and how wonderful are his ways, I want to know why is it that I am, and people whom I pastor, are not seeing more transformation? Why are we not more vividly alive and joyous with this reality? Is it because the reality isn’t true?

I don’t think that’s the case. I believe it with all my heart that this is who Jesus is. Something is happening that is causing a clog in the pipeline. It’s keeping us from living out, living in, the reality of what Christ has achieved for us.

**JMF:** Can you give us any clues as to how you're going to resolve that?

**GSD:** I wish I could tell you how exactly how to do it, we'd all be more successful. But it's a real question where we turn to the ancient traditions of the church of Jesus Christ and the whole concept of spiritual ascension. How is it that I live now with the hope and the power of what is yet to come? I think that we'll find that it's as devastatingly simple as asking the Lord to do in me all that he has promised, and offering myself as a living sacrifice to him, not to gain his merit, not to win his approval, but to be available for his use.

**JMF:** Like you were just talking about, you're really asking to be able to live in the reality of who he has already made you to be in Christ.

**GSD:** Exactly. One of the ancient spiritual masters talked about how great a ship is moored at a dock by such a thin rope. For us we have this great ship, the hope of the gospel, but these little pieces that we refuse to release, often wanting to hang onto my own little bit of righteousness, my own achievement before God, or my own pet sins, can kind of hold back the whole ship from leaving the harbor and sailing the seas.

The ancient paths have always been about affirmation and negation. Negatively saying no to the old life and positively saying yes to the new life. I think John Calvin encourages us to direct all our attention away from ourselves and toward Christ. The surest way to sink my ship is to take a look at myself, either to consider how great I am, which is false, or how wretched I am, which in Christ isn't so, and get caught in that web of self. But the discipline of knowing about, looking at, and worshiping Jesus, I think is what seems to lead to transformation.

**JMF:** We've been talking with Dr. Gerrit Dawson, pastor of First Presbyterian church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Thanks for being with us. I'm Mike Feazell for *You're Included*.

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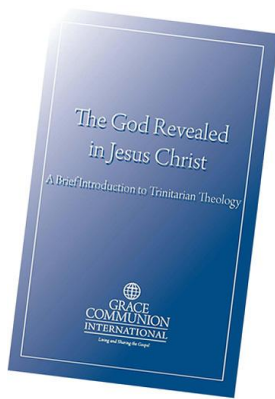
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