



No Mere Remembrance

The Bread, the Wine
and
Christian Maturity

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Introduction

My understanding about the breaking of bread in a Christian context has developed over most of my lifetime, and I fully expect that I will continue to find more as the Holy Spirit draws back the curtain a little more. These pages are not intended as any sort of definitive treatment of the subject.

Nonetheless, I hope that they will be of some help, not in any academic way but rather to peel off some of the layers of mystery and misunderstanding to bring us to a clearer appreciation of the original intention of the Lord Jesus as he commanded his followers to “do this in remembrance of me.”

Some years ago we were part of a group who met in a friend’s house for a series of simple Bible studies exploring some of the basics of our faith. There was a young man there who had come through a fairly mixed Christian experience but who seemed to develop a hunger for whatever the Lord had for him. As we explored together and R discovered some of the richness of our inheritance, he started saying with real wonderment, “there’s always MORE!” It became his catchphrase and I have thought of him often as I have been writing these chapters.

As Watchman Nee said many years ago, “But if God gives us books they will ever be broken fragments, not always clear or consistent or logical, lacking conclusions, and yet coming to us in life and ministering life to us.”

These fragments are offered in hope.

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1. Turning Point

The trouble had started the day before, down at the harbour. The young man had been talking to a crowd down there and had said some strange things. Today, at the regular weekly religious meeting, he was saying them again and it was scandalous. This meeting was supposed to be all about the old scriptures, but he was talking about *himself* and making some really wild and offensive claims.

Everyone knew him; he had grown up not far away and worked with his father as an ordinary local carpenter, but recently he had started travelling around with an increasing number of hangers-on. Crowds of people would walk miles to hear him speak, and this latest outburst had started when he was talking with some of them down by the sea. Now he had brought it all up into the town, and even here into the meeting!

It was scandalous. If he was any sort of religious teacher he should know not to be talking about himself. Who did he think he was, anyway? The older ones remembered that his parents had got married in a hurry because his mother was already pregnant with this boy, conceived out of wedlock. What right did he, of all people, have to make these claims about himself?

It was offensive, too. Everyone knew the ancient rules¹ about what sort of meat you could or couldn't eat. Now he was telling everyone who would listen – completely against all the rules – that they needed to eat human flesh and drink human blood in order to have eternal life – *his own* flesh and blood! No wonder the religious leaders were trying to stop him.

It was too much for many of his hangers-on as well. The crowds that followed him suddenly got smaller. His brothers were definitely not interested. Even his inner circle of followers were only just clinging on. They could not understand what he meant but stuck with him because his words seemed to open up new life to them.

*So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever."*²

What could he possibly mean? Who could follow a teacher who said this sort of thing? Not surprising that the crowds had melted away. What about the inner circle? Would they abandon him too? Peter (as usual) spoke for the others when he said "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.*" (**John 6:68-69**) He didn't understand, but he had started to trust this man, as all the eleven had, and at least *they* would be prepared to go along with him – in spite of the strange things he said. They must have had some conversations about it, though, in the days that followed, trying to puzzle out his meaning.

¹ Leviticus 11

² John 6:53-58

2. Remembering

That incident at the synagogue had been in Capernaum in August or September. At the time of Passover in the following March, he came back to the same theme. The 'inner circle' were still together, still following him, and the number of other followers had increased again. He had nearly caused a riot when he rode into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. There he was, offending the authorities again by drawing attention to himself and not stopping his followers when they quoted the old promises about the coming King, God's Anointed One, – and attached them to him!

After that hectic day, now it was the evening and the inner circle had all got together quietly to celebrate the Passover. That at least was familiar! For thirteen centuries their whole nation had looked back to their ancestors' miraculous deliverance from over 400 years of slavery in Egypt, and had not just remembered it, they had re-enacted it¹, year after year. Eating as if hurrying off on a journey, walking shoes on their feet and sticks in their hands. Eating flat bread because there had not been time to let yeast rise, and with that strange instruction to kill a lamb, splash its blood on the doorposts, eat its meat roasted and burn up any remains. Somehow, all those years ago, God had been on their side and their forefathers had escaped the ungodly slavery of Egypt – and had been born as a nation! Right at the heart of that nation was **this remembrance**, a knowledge of the contract made with them by the real and living God as he had rescued them and established them for himself.

They had grown up with this, each one of them. Whether fisherman, carpenter or tax-collector, they each knew that they were part of the nation chosen by the one true God. This simple meal which had endured for centuries was the continuing evidence of that choice. Over the years as they had taken part in the Passover feast, first as children and then as young men, this awareness of special-ness had soaked deep into their being. They were each one part of God's chosen people, the people of promise, the heirs of Abraham, who had been called the friend of God. A deep and rich inheritance, fiercely Jewish and intensely personal.

But then, as they sat in this ordinary upstairs room in the outskirts of Jerusalem, the familiar Passover ritual of remembrance was shattered. Jesus changed their focus. They were shocked to hear him repeat those same offensive words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, even more as now he was attaching them to the familiar, loved and deeply respected bread and wine of the Passover feast. He said that the bread and wine represented his own flesh and blood and this was the basis of a new agreement² which superseded the one which God had made with the nation of Israel 1300 years earlier. Now, he said, instead of using this feast to look back and remember that historic deliverance, they were to use it to remember him!

We have no way of knowing how much they understood at the time; maybe very little, but they remembered his words. They would begin to fall into place very soon.

¹ Exodus 12

² Jeremiah 31: 31-34

3. A New Helper

Looking back on it later, they may have realised that those words began to fall into place the very next day but, at the time, it just seemed like the most horrible disaster had overtaken them all. Their three years with this man they now called ‘the Master’ had not been particularly easy. Yes, there had been some amazing high points when he had performed impossible miracles – healing incurable illnesses, multiplying food, calming the storm at sea, restoring dead people to life – but there had also been some really difficult times. He had nearly been thrown off a cliff, been harshly criticised by the authorities and all twelve of them had left home and lived a nomadic life with this man who said he had nowhere to lay his head.

But that Passover was different. They would certainly remember it all their lives. After the adulation of the crowd as he had entered Jerusalem a few days earlier, that same Passover night he was arrested and handed over to the authorities. One of his own inner circle had betrayed him! Out of nowhere, it seemed, he was accused and condemned to death, then killed the next day by one of the most barbaric forms of execution ever invented.

Could his words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood **really** make sense in the light of this brutality? The harsh reality of his very physical death must have pushed those words out of their minds.

* * * * *

The whole picture changed radically when the fact of his triumph over death became apparent. They had seen him die – there was no doubt about that – but here he was, back with them again! Walking, talking, eating and drinking but also appearing and disappearing and entering locked rooms. The same and yet not the same. Could everything else all go on the same as before?

Just six short weeks and he was gone again. Not dead this time, but not with them either, so they felt almost as bereaved as they had when he had been executed. Three years with him, just three days before he was alive again and now these last forty days. It had been amazing.

There was no doubt about it this time, though. He was not dead but he really had gone – up into the sky before their eyes! He had talked about going to his Father, and now he had certainly made a dramatic exit, complete with two mysterious bystanders who had promised that he would return, equally dramatically, hinting at the fulfilment of ancient prophecy.¹ They were on their own again, but there was a difference now. No despair this time but a strange hope, expecting something but not knowing what.

He had told them to wait there in Jerusalem, all together. Not just the inner circle (only eleven now) but well over a hundred of them. Just waiting. Not going back to Galilee and picking up where they had left off all those years ago. Not trying to get another job after more than three years just wandering around with this preacher. Peter was not going to say “I’m going fishing” as he had before!²

Waiting.

What for?

And for how long? Hours? Days? Weeks? Longer than that? How long could they hang on?

“Wait for the gift my Father promised,” he had said and, yes, he had talked about this gift before³. Not that they had been able to understand very much! Something about another helper, like him but different, an advocate who would be **in** them. Guiding them **into** all truth, enabling them to remember all the things that he had said, teaching them everything. A gift that was somehow a person as well - how could all this happen?

When it did happen, ten long days later, it was overwhelming. Nothing that they could possibly have expected. They were filled up, filled to overflowing! On the day itself, they knew that they had received

¹ Daniel 7:13-14

² John 21:3

³ John 14:16, 17, 26. John 16:12-15. Acts 1:4-8 5

the promised Holy Spirit. He had been poured out on every single one of them, a gift that had always been reserved for God's anointed prophets! Not just that strange ability to speak other languages, nor even the miracles that they found they could do in the name of Jesus in the days that followed. That was amazing, but there was something even deeper going on as well.

Peter had been able to bring to mind that passage in the prophets about the last days¹. Somehow, he had been able to apply it to what was happening. The effect on those listening was dramatic and soon there were many more followers of Jesus, followers of 'the Way', there in Jerusalem. The Master had told them that they would take his message well beyond the boundaries of Judea, and already it was happening! He had said that they would do greater things than he had done, "because I am going to the Father".² Now they began to see them.

There was something else, too. They began to understand some of those cryptic sayings and happenings of the previous three years. That he would rise from the dead after three days³; that he would enter Jerusalem as a king riding on a donkey as prophesied by Zechariah⁴ – and many more. He had already begun to open their minds to understand the old writings about himself⁵ but now it was happening without his physical presence. What was it he had said about the promised Holy Spirit? *"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you."*⁶ Yes, it was like having Jesus there again, but now **inside** each one, unveiling truth, whether spoken and remembered or written down in the scriptures for centuries!

¹ Joel 2:28-32

² John 14:12

³ John 2:22, 20:9

⁴ John 12:14-16

⁵ Luke 24:27,32,44-45

⁶ John 14:16-17

4. Synthetic Memory

For the twelve, the instruction to ‘remember me’ was clear and understandable. However much they wanted to believe otherwise, the Lord Jesus had spelled it out for them over the previous days and weeks; he was leaving them, he would not be around. As they celebrated the Passover with him for the last time before the coming of the kingdom (whenever that was going to be!), they knew that he would not be celebrating Passover with them next year, so remembering him was all they were going to be able to do. Literally, the Greek word translated ‘remembrance’ means ‘not forgetting’, ‘not letting it out of your mind’.

At that point – again despite Jesus’ teaching in **John 14:25-26** and **16:5-15** – all they could expect was that they would have to ‘carry on somehow’ after his departure, so remembering was about as far as they could expect to reach. No wonder that they asked him whether he was going to bring in the kingdom immediately! ¹ Little did they realise quite what a difference the coming of the Holy Spirit would make to them! The reality of the life of God **in** them (not just walking alongside them) would soon mean that it was going to be hard **not** to remember him!

* * * * *

In recent years, a phenomenon known as ‘false memory syndrome’ has been identified, in which factually incorrect information is fed to individuals, sometimes through so-called ‘therapy’, in such a way that they firmly believe the incorrect information to be true, with sometimes disastrous effects on their lives and relationships.

In their attempts to follow the instruction to ‘remember me’, many Christian believers seem to be determined to do something similar – to ‘remember’ something that they did not witness – and so they turn to imagination to try to fill the gap. Times without number, I have heard people try to picture and imagine what it would have been like to witness the crucifixion, to stir up the emotions which they think they would have felt if they had been there, and then try to use those imagined feelings as a way of ‘remembering’.

We even have songs which try to do the same, including the classic ‘When I survey (i.e. ‘look at’) the wondrous cross’ and the verse of ‘It is a thing most wonderful’ which says, “I sometimes think about the cross, and shut my eyes, and try to see the cruel nails and crown of thorns, and Jesus crucified for me.” There are several more modern ones as well, including the moving ‘How deep the Father’s love for us’, which strays into this dangerous territory in the second verse: “Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders. Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers”.

Yes, they are definitely moving and OK, this is not ‘false memory’ as such:– 1) The events really did happen and 2) The people doing the imagining do really know that they were not actually there in first century Judea. But this approach can be synthetic and artificial, trying to stir up a feeling from an imagination rather than starting from where we really are.

Yes, there are times when the enormity of what God has done for us in Christ may hit us hard, and that may include some closer, more personal awareness of the suffering that he underwent for each of us, perhaps even some sort of ‘vision’ of it. If that comes from the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, then it is exhilarating and enlightening and will lead us to worship in spirit and in truth. But we really must not try to work it up ourselves – the danger of self-deception is great.

One of the big dangers is that we can fool ourselves into thinking that this kind of stirred-up emotion is always the work of the Holy Spirit, when sometimes it can be totally man-made, perhaps to warm up an audience to listen to a speaker and respond to the message. It happens more often than we may think!

The other side of the same problem is to think that whenever the Holy Spirit is at work he will always generate those same feelings. Then, on those occasions when we do not feel those same stirred-up emotions, what do we do? Try to rekindle them by again imagining ourselves in the situation? Or feel depressed because we don’t have the same feelings any more? The lack of the same emotional

¹ Acts 1:6

response does not prove the lack of spiritual life. Please do not condemn yourself to a life of synthetic spirituality based on self-induced emotional chemistry.

* * * * *

We do not have the same personal memory as the early disciples had. We were not there to witness the events of the life and ministry (or the death, burial, resurrection and ascension) of Jesus of Nazareth in the same way so, although thanks to them we have an excellent record, we can not 'remember' in the same way. So what can we do as we seek to fulfil his instruction to "do this in remembrance of me" ?

We may not have the same history, but each believer has their own history with the Lord Jesus. We can genuinely remember what he has done for us, the transformation he has performed (and is still performing) in our lives, the way he has changed our outlook, our relationships and many other aspects of our lives, based on the fact of that central restored relationship – with God as our Father.

These things are precious and intensely personal to each of us and they could not have happened without the completed accomplishment of the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, so of course we are going to remember what he has done for us. But not in some imagined, role-play sort of way, 'as if' we had been there.

The bread and wine speak of his broken body and his poured-out blood. The key to their relevance to us is our participation in what he accomplished through them, for each one of us individually.

But if imagination and synthetic memory can't take us there, how can we truly participate in them? How can we identify with these symbols, take them to ourselves and find them a source of rich spiritual renewal?

5. Fitting Into Place

What about those things he had said about his flesh and blood, first at Capernaum and then at that last Passover together? None of the disciples seem to have talked about it very much in those early years – at least, we have no record of it.

Yes, they met together frequently, often in each others' houses and sometimes in the temple courtyards and, yes, they shared their meals together. Part of any meal was for the head of the household to break the bread and share it around, so surely they will have remembered the Lord Jesus as he had always taken that role when they ate with him. Especially those two who had met him on the way to Emmaus would have had vivid memories of him breaking bread. After all, that had been the clue when the 'stranger' took the bread and broke it – it HAD been him, after all, the way he broke the bread – it could ONLY have been him!

We have it on good authority that those very early believers certainly 'broke bread' together. But we may never know how much (or how little) they focused on breaking bread together as something other than just sharing a meal, even a fellowship meal, together. What had the Lord meant when he said "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, **whenever you drink it**, in remembrance of me."?

Did he mean whenever they took a meal together, or whenever they celebrated the Passover? – or both? Did they (especially those from a Jewish background) go on celebrating the Passover each year and incorporate a celebration of the fact that Jesus had set them free from so much more than slavery in Egypt? Or was it simply that they shared so much of their lives together that they just went on sharing meals and remembered the Lord Jesus as they did so? And what did that 'remembering' mean?

It seems to have taken the insight of that radical teacher, Paul, to bring the whole question into clearer daylight. He had grown up in strict Judaism, so the Passover was 'in his blood' along with all the other Old Testament rules and other traditions. But, with all that background, he also knew that the Lord had appointed him to take the good news of Jesus outside the tight circle of Judaism to the full range of races, lands and languages in the very cosmopolitan Roman Empire.

And where could be more cosmopolitan than Corinth? Apart from being on a busy trade route anyway, the city stood adjacent to the narrow strip of land joining the southernmost province of Achaia to the rest of Greece. Just 4 miles wide, with a purpose-built road over it so that seagoing ships could be rolled over this 'land bridge' between the Aegean and Adriatic/Ionian Seas and so avoid the long and potentially dangerous sea journey round the peninsular. Just about everybody came through Corinth and it had a pretty rough reputation!

Acts 18 tells us that the believers there were a mixed bunch, too. '*Many of the Corinthians*', Jews and Gentiles, came together as the church there, and they certainly had some problems in their midst. Nonetheless, if we did not have Paul's instruction and encouragement to those believers (and rebuke where needed), we would be much the poorer.

Not least, his instructions about the breaking of bread. It is clear from **1 Corinthians 11:23** that it was Paul who had told them about it in the first place. It also seems from **v. 33-34** that when they came together to eat, it was not just an ordinary meal. They were not eating to satisfy hunger, but to "*proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*" (**v. 26**).

More than 20 years had passed since that first 'Lord's Supper' in the upper room in Jerusalem. Here in Corinth, this was not a re-enactment of the Passover, nor was it just an ordinary meal. Now, they were meeting together on a regular basis, symbolically breaking bread and drinking wine together and sharing the gifts and ministry which the Holy Spirit brought into their midst, as we can read in the following chapters. The one leads naturally into the other.

We know this passage well. Perhaps we have heard and read it so often as we meet together that we know it by heart. But this is no mere formula, even if we sometimes treat it as one!

A key to understanding is in the previous chapter, **10:16**. “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?”

Participation. That’s what we want when we come to take the bread and wine together, isn’t it? We want to be part of it, not just to ‘remember’ in that strangely artificial way, not just to follow some well-worn ritual, however good and scriptural it may be.

We want our sharing together to be a real and valuable experience, but we know that there is no ‘magic’ here. The bread is not actually transformed into Jesus’ flesh and the wine is not blood, just wine. So how does this simple symbolic meal do anything more for us?

The word translated here as ‘participation’ is *koinonia*, more often translated ‘fellowship’. Neither English word really does it justice, though perhaps ‘participation’ comes closer! Sharing, taking part in, being part of, having in common, having ownership together, always **with others**.

Perhaps it will help us to understand better if we remove the idea of ‘receiving’ from our understanding of the bread and wine. This seems to have come from a sacramental approach, by which some people believe that the bread and wine are actually physically different after a special person has spoken some special words over them, and that now there is some special quality built into the bread and wine themselves which **of itself** can have a beneficial effect on anyone who ‘receives’ them! Sometimes these special ‘elements’ are kept aside for later use so that others can derive the same ‘benefit’.

This belief and practice are nothing less than a belief in ‘magic’ and mediaeval mumbo-jumbo, dangerous and deceptive, bordering on idolatry and nothing to do with remembering the Lord Jesus by sharing the bread and wine! As we have seen already, the bread and wine remain unchanged; there is nothing special about them in themselves.

So, by taking the bread and wine, we have not ‘received’ anything except ordinary bread and wine, so what **have** we done?

We have made a declaration of participation.

We have said with our actions that **we personally** are part of what the Lord Jesus has done, that we share in the power of his shed blood and broken body, that these things are real in our lives and that we are at least *beginning* to experience that reality.

That is quite a statement. Not surprising that Paul stresses the seriousness of making such a declaration ‘unworthily’! ¹

Before we get ourselves all hung up about being unworthy, let us hear these words from an old Bible Commentary:– “*Unworthiness in the person* is not what ought to exclude any, but *unworthily communicating*: However unworthy we be, if we examine ourselves so as to find that we penitently believe in Christ’s Gospel, we may worthily communicate.” (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown). By ‘communicate’, of course, he means ‘take the bread and wine’.

To put it another way, we all start from a position of being unworthy in ourselves. We have found forgiveness and release through the power of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. He has made us worthy! We celebrate that fact by taking the bread and wine in a clear statement of our identification with him and what he has done for us.

If this is **not** true of us, only **then** we will take the bread and wine ‘unworthily’, because then we are making a solemn declaration before the Lord and other believers and that declaration is **not true!** A very similar situation to Ananias and Sapphira², and Paul indicates that the results may also be devastatingly similar!

In **honestly** making such a declaration, we are **not** saying that we have ‘arrived’. Quite the opposite! We are saying (in the words of the old hymn) “He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:27-32

² Acts 5:1-11

prisoner free; His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.” (‘Availed’ = ‘benefited’, ‘worked’)

Let’s explore what this means . . .

6. Freedom from the Failure Cycle

The wine speaks graphically to us of blood, and we probably know (in words, at least) that the blood of Jesus speaks of forgiveness. But what is the meaning of the broken bread, symbolising his broken body?

This is a vital part of our new life in Christ, but not often talked about – not often enough!

Our first experience of believing in the Lord Jesus may well have been an experience of forgiveness, finding at last that the barrier of our failures and misdeeds has been removed, releasing us from guilt and allowing us to begin a new relationship with the God who had previously seemed remote, condemning and judgemental. When we ‘discovered’ his grace, we found our true Father who, holy as he is, loves us so much that *“he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned”*¹.

After that initial and perhaps ecstatic experience of forgiveness, did we come down with a crunch? Were we devastated to discover that, although we had been ‘born again’², we were still far from perfect and found ourselves failing badly? Worse still, having found forgiveness, we now began to find out how bad we really were! Things in our lives that had seemed trivial and OK before, now loomed large and seemed to contradict the claim that we had become children of God.³ We could see that we were definitely not worthy; perhaps this ‘new birth’ had not ‘worked’ properly with us? Was it all just make-believe?

Then maybe, just in the nick of time perhaps, someone told us about our Father’s **ongoing forgiveness**. That he was not just ready to forgive all my past failure and rebellion, but that I could come to him in repentance when I had failed yet again and I would find the same loving forgiveness, the same wiping away of guilt and the same assurance of being his child, restoration back to where I had been when I first came to Jesus.⁴ “How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed”, as the hymn says so simply.

So, was that it, then? I had thought I was starting a new life, free from the slavery to going wrong but was it just going to be an endless round of failure and forgiveness, up and down, ‘saint’ and ‘sinner’? Surely there should be more than this?

There is.

Our Father is no more content than we are with this painful cycle of failure and restoration, and he has provided us with the way out of it. The key is in that ‘forgotten’ part of what Jesus did on the cross. Not only that his blood was shed for me, but that his body was broken for me.

Peter writes: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”⁵ There is more than repetitive forgiveness here; this speaks of ‘dying to sin’ and ‘living for righteousness’. How can we experience this?

First of all, notice the past tenses! Jesus bore our sins; he did it once and does not need to go on doing it. By his wounds we have been healed, made whole.

Then, what does it mean to be ‘dead to sin’? Is it just a religious phrase?

What is sin? I am very conscious that I am using the words ‘sin’ and ‘sins’ frequently, so some brief explanation may be useful. Modern understanding of ‘sin’ tends to associate it with major moral misconduct, often sexual, but the New Testament’s use of the word is much simpler. It’s a word that literally means ‘missing the target’ and if we did not already have ‘sin’ in our vocabulary, we could easily

¹ John 3:16-18

² John 3:1-8, 1 Peter 1:3,23

³ John 1:11-13

⁴ 1 John 1:6-10

⁵ 1 Peter 2:24

translate this Greek word as 'failure'. So, when the Bible says that we sin, it is saying that we fail; when it talks about our sins, it refers to the individual events of failure in our lives and when it speaks of the 'power of sin' it means that all-too-familiar force that seems to drag us down to be less than we know we could be and should be. And of course, that failure includes the more dramatic faults which we might call 'wickedness' or 'evil', but they are all failures, missing the target of perfection, whether by a mile or a millimetre. We might not identify ourselves as 'sinners' but most of us would be prepared to admit to being failures – some of the time, anyway – and that comes to the same thing!

Perhaps it is also worth pointing out the difference between 'sins' and 'sin'. Usually, when the Bible says 'sins', it is referring to individual acts of failure or disobedience. When it says 'sin', it refers to the underlying principle of failure and disobedience, the bias that is evident in all mankind and which always seems to drag us down into those individual failures.

So, how about being 'dead to sin' – what does that mean? I remember when I was a teenager that I used to like to 'lie in' in the mornings at weekends or during the holidays, to just stay in bed, maybe to sleep a bit more but really just to be generally lazy. Sometimes my Mum would come to get me out of bed and I would pretend to be fast asleep. If my pretence was successful, she would go out of my room saying something like 'He's dead to the world'. In other words, as far as the outside world making any impact on me, I might just as well be dead. Nothing was getting through, nothing around me was having any effect on me (or so she thought . . .)

Being 'dead to sin' is much the same: that 'dragging-down' power of sin and failure doesn't get through, it doesn't have any effect on us. Is that really possible in practice? It is, as we learn to live in the fact that we have been joined to the death of Jesus. As we take our stand in that fact, as we 'abide' in what Jesus has already accomplished for us, increasingly we will experience the reality of being no longer under the control of sin and failure. As an old friend of mine has said, "It's not that it is now impossible for me to sin, but that it is now possible for me not to sin." Think that last sentence through again.

Paul, as usual, goes into greater length! In **Romans 6**, he writes about baptism as a demonstration of our being joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus, but he starts at that same point of frustration with the endless round of sin and grace, of failure and forgiveness:–

*"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?"*¹ 'Don't you know?' he asks – and the truthful answer may be that no, probably we don't! Maybe no-one has told us: there is much more to the death of Jesus than the shedding of his blood for our forgiveness – we have been 'included into' his death.

*"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his."*² The picture is graphic: going down under the surface of the water in baptism is like being buried beneath the surface of the earth after death. Coming up out of the water is like rising from death into resurrection. Again, please notice the past tenses! These are things that God has done for us in Christ.

*"For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."*³

Paul is telling us things that we can **know!** 1) our old life died with Jesus on the cross so that we no longer need to be slaves to sin and failure; 2) just as Jesus was raised from death, so we too can experience a life lived for God. Because it has been done (past tenses again!), we can count on it.

¹ Romans 6:1-3 (NIV)

² Romans 6:4-5 (NIV)

³ Romans 6:6-11 (NIV)

We don't need to try to live 'as if' we are dead to sin; our Father tells us that we can live that way because we are – he has done it!

*"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace."*¹ It is not automatic, we still have a choice as to how we behave, but now we are not blind slaves to failing and doing wrong. Knowing that we have been included in Jesus's death on the cross, we can take hold of that and offer ourselves to God as those who have passed through death and have come out the other side, with a type of life that he can use for good. More of that later.

*"What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."*² This is a different sort of slavery, the response of our hearts that not only want to serve the Lord but now find that we can because of what he has done in getting rid of our old life and giving us a new one, all because of being joined to the Lord Jesus, baptised into his death and resurrection – and his ascension, too, but we'll come to that.

In practical terms, what difference does it make for me to know that my old life is dead and gone or, in Paul's terms, that I am 'dead to sin'? Is it just words?

One key moment is at the point of temptation. We have this idea that we need to be strong and resist temptation. The result is often (usually?) disappointing at the very least. We find that we are not strong (however well we may know all the right Bible verses!) and we are back to finding forgiveness for our failure again. Our Father is gracious and forgiving, so of course we are able to be back on our feet as soon as we confess our failure.

But temptation is not a battle – or at least it does not have to be! There is an amazing promise in **1 Corinthians 10:13**. Not a promise of strength to resist temptation, but the promise of a way out, so that we will be able to 'bear' it! No pretence that it will be easy, but the promise that it will be at least possible to escape. Isn't that a relief? To know that we don't have to battle temptation and win (did you really expect to win?), but can take the escape route!

Back in **Romans 6**, Paul writes about 'knowing' that we have died to sin, and this is a key factor in learning to escape when we face temptation. It gives us something to reassure us that we are not always bound to fail, because it is God himself who has joined us to the death of his Son and taken us out of Satan's control.³ If we know this as a settled fact, it makes it much more possible for us to escape with confidence. As John also writes *"If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."*⁴ Yes, sometimes (often?) we 'wobble' and our 'knowing' is faltering and hopeful rather than confident. But our Father knows all that he has done for us in Jesus, no matter what we feel.

And then, amazingly, as we take those first faltering steps on the basis that we really **are** dead to sin, 'abiding' in what is ours in the Lord Jesus Christ, the reality begins to hit us harder: Yes, he has done it, I really am free! Hallelujah!

Then, the next time, as we learn to use this escape route – perhaps a little more quickly than we did last time – we find that we have come through temptation and are out the other side! Not by battling with our own strength to resist, but by resting on what he has already done.

Yes, of course a battle is going on, every time we face temptation. But the victory has already been won through the death and resurrection of the Son of God and now, by his grace, that same victory

¹ Romans 6:12-14

² Romans 6:15-18

³ Colossians 1:13

⁴ 1 John 3:20

has been made effective in our experience as we have been able to 'hide' from the temptation by the fact that we have been 'joined into' that death and resurrection. Our escape route is to count on what the Lord Jesus has already done for us.¹

* * * * *

So, as we take the bread, in many ways we are making again the same statement that we made when we were baptised. In baptism, we were saying "By the grace of God to me in the Lord Jesus, my old life is over and my new life has started." The act of being baptised did not accomplish that death and resurrection, but it affirmed it and declared it clearly and openly. We were making a declaration before our Father God, to fellow believers and to the world at large, saying clearly that we are identified with the Lord Jesus Christ. Not merely saying that we **believe** in him, but also that our life has been joined to his life. A clear statement of **participation**.

Again, there was no 'magic'! Being baptised did not make us children of God, did not make us believe in Jesus, did not make us his disciples or endue us with the power of the Holy Spirit. But something did happen, sure enough! And much the same happens when we take the bread together, as we make that strong statement of participating in the broken body of the Lord Jesus.

In **Romans 10:8-10**, Paul writes: "But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' – that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

Did we think that our faith in the Lord Jesus was just something internal? Just something that went on in our hearts or our heads? Paul says that there is more here. In the context of baptism especially, there is great power in our statement, our open declaration that 'Jesus is Lord'. It somehow seals the 'believing in our hearts' by making it public in front of friends, family, Christians and non-Christians alike, and also makes a strong statement to Satan, the 'prince of this world', that we are no longer part of his worldly system. Our heart belief puts us right with God (we are 'justified') but our declared profession of that faith moves us out of 'the dominion of darkness' and 'into the kingdom of the Son he loves'² (we are 'saved', rescued).

So yes, something happens as we make that declaration at baptism³ and something happens whenever we make a declaration that Jesus is our Lord. It is part of the way we are made; by taking our stand on what we believe, it somehow confirms it in us in a stronger way. We see it in other aspects of our lives whenever we commit to something: an important decision, a vote, a statement of affection, an oath of allegiance, the promises of marriage. In one way, you could say that these statements change nothing. In another way, they change everything!

So it is as we take and share the broken bread together. We are making a statement that we are joined to the death of Jesus, that our old life is over, dead and buried, and the power of that statement is what it does to us. All we have done is taken a piece of bread and yet, by doing that, we have made a momentous declaration. Not that anything in us changes 'automatically' as we share in the bread, not that the bread itself is changed in any way, but rather that the Holy Spirit uses this simple power of our declaration to confirm and somehow 'solidify' more greatly in us the reality of what our Father has done by placing us in his Son.⁴ By taking the bread, we have 'received' nothing (except a piece of bread!) and yet the power of that simple action is to further cement the reality that we are joined to Jesus. In a very real way, as we re-state our participation in what he has already done for us, we 'eat his flesh' again – it becomes part of us, just as a meal does – and we declare that reality together.

Yes, **together!** We need to come back to this, but it is good to remind ourselves now: taking the bread and wine, making these momentous declarations, refreshing our participation in all that the Lord Jesus has done for us, is not just something for us as individuals, though obviously that is where it starts.

There is more, there is always more!

¹ Romans 6:5-14

² Colossians 1:12-14

³ Watchman Nee's 'Love Not The World' has a beautifully clear working through of this whole principle.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:30

7. Constant Refreshing

The realisation, the 'discovery' of God's forgiveness, through the power of the blood of Jesus, is probably the starting point for most of us in our walk with God. If not right at the very start, then most likely very soon afterwards, we find that we need to be forgiven and – the best bit – that the price for our forgiveness **has already been paid!**

Let me say it again, just in case there is any possibility of us missing it:– God in Jesus offers complete forgiveness for any and every wrongdoing or failure and he offers it to every single person, whoever we may be and whatever our history, without any need for us to earn it.

Maybe because of this early experience of ours, we probably find it easier to understand the meaning of taking the wine than the meaning of taking the bread, at least to start with. Perhaps we even wonder why we need to take both bread and wine . . .

It was certainly several years after I became a Christian – and 'discovered' forgiveness for the first time – that I also began to see that I had been included in the death of Jesus and my old life had really died with him.

Long before that wonderful revelation, I had found the relief of knowing that I could find immediate forgiveness for any fresh sin by confessing it as soon as possible. **1 John 1:9** became a very well-used verse! On the other side was the painful experience of **not** confessing sin quickly, pretending that I had done nothing wrong, and thereby unnecessarily denying myself the peace of mind and heart that always came as soon as I eventually **did** confess.¹

In spite of that wonderful forgiveness – fresh every single time – I shared the frustration of Paul when he asked those haunting questions: *"For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?"*²

How many of us have **not** been there?

My own repeated failure, often on the same issues again and again, became frustrating and led to a very low opinion of myself as a Christian. How could God still love me when I kept on letting him down? How could I hold my head up in the company of other believers? Little did I realise that they were going through the same experiences. Were we all playing the same game of pretending to be OK in our 'personal relationship with God' – ? At the time, I thought it was just me . . .

Like so many other Christians, despite all I had heard and experienced of the grace of God, I somehow still thought that his love for me was conditional, related to my performance as a Christian! I was still 'religious' and legalistic, with idealistic notions of how I (and everyone else) ought to behave. Clear standards which I felt that I (and everyone else) needed to keep.

There was nothing much wrong with the standards themselves; it was just that I could not keep them!

Finding out that my old life really had finished, that I had 'died to sin' and that I already had a new quality of life in me that was already pleasing to God – resurrection life – came as a real revelation and marked the beginning of a new phase in my Christian experience.

¹ 1 John 1:6-9

² Romans 7:15-24

Perhaps I thought that I would be OK now, that I would not need to keep coming back for forgiveness, with that painful “Here I am again, Lord” confessing the same failures again and again. Well, yes, there was an exciting change, as I began to find that I did not need to be a slave to sin. Instead of trying hard to resist temptation, gradually learning to ‘hide’ in the fact that I am dead to sin.¹

But yes, there **was** still failure, even after coming to an appreciation of being dead to sin, so I still needed to confess, to agree with the voice of the Holy Spirit when he showed me that I had done wrong and to take hold afresh of the wonderful cleansing power of the blood of Jesus. Now, years later, although hopefully I have made some progress, I definitely still need to take hold of the forgiveness that is mine through the blood of Jesus and, yes, it is still just as precious!

Just a thought about that word ‘confess’. It sounds very religious but its meaning is simple: ‘to say the same thing’. How often have we had that nagging reminder that something is not quite right, the voice of the Holy Spirit showing us that we have gone off course, but we have pretended that nothing is wrong and have tried to ignore his prompting? Quietly but persistently he goes on reminding us of our failure, not to condemn us but to bring us back into clear fellowship with our Father by removing the ‘cloud’ of unforgiven sin. Then, eventually, we stop pretending and give in, agreeing with him at last and ‘saying the same thing’ about our failure. Result? Once again, the experience of instant forgiveness and restored open contact with Father.²

Hopefully, as time goes on, we learn to recognise the voice of God more readily and respond more quickly, reducing the time before we agree with him and ‘say the same thing’. Often, being open with each other helps this process. By encouraging one another, we help to prevent the subtle hardening process that sets in if we persist in ignoring the Holy Spirit’s reminders.³

* * * * *

If we had tried to design the breaking of bread ourselves, we might have put the ‘forgiveness bit’ first, so that we would deal with our failures, standing on the value of the blood of Jesus shed for us as we share the wine, and then move on to the gripping reality that our old life has died with Christ, taking the broken bread as a statement of our inclusion in his death. After all, that is often the order of our experience.

But no, our Lord knows what we are like and, simply by giving us the wine **after** the bread, he reminds us that, whatever our level of progress, however much we may know and experience this death and resurrection life, we will never get to the point that we no longer need forgiveness. Not until we see him face to face, anyway, when we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is.⁴ Perhaps a fresh angle on proclaiming the Lord’s death **until he comes – ?**⁵

And after that? “When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.””⁶ Hallelujah – again!

Until that time, though, whatever our spiritual progress, however much we may have seen and begun to experience the reality of being ‘dead to sin’, we will not get to the point where we have no more need of forgiveness. No, the reality of the power of the blood of Jesus for our forgiveness is ongoing and necessary for all of us, from the youngest new believer to the most seasoned spiritual warrior.

As we share in the wine together, we each individually state our dependence on the forgiveness of the Father, given to us through the willing sacrifice of the Son of God, and so we stand on level ground together, receivers of mercy and grace and heirs of the most amazing inheritance.

¹ 1 Corinthians 10:13

² 1 John 1:6-10

³ Hebrews 3:13

⁴ 1 John 3:2

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:26

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:54

8. . . . and Onward!

I suspect that we have hardly scratched the surface of the potential power of sharing the bread and wine together. A community of people, each one linked to the living God, each one declaring afresh and openly that their life is joined to the life of the Son of God, rejoicing in the freedom of forgiveness found and slavery ended, ready to respond in increasing depth to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to learn to hear and pass on what Father is saying and so contribute to the preparation of the Bride as she makes herself ready for the Day!

Do we consider taking the bread and wine as the climax of our worship times together? In reality, I believe it is more like a vital introduction, leading us in to more of life that is really shared with each other and our Lord. Do we think that when we have taken the bread and wine, that's as far as the time together can go?

Sharing together in the bread and wine 'nails down' the **basis** of our fellowship together, our individual relationship with God through the death, burial, resurrection, ascension and glorification of the Lord Jesus and so our shared relationship with each other. By refreshing our memory of what he has done for us and making our up-to-date declaration of what we are part of, surely this is potentially our 'launch pad' into worship, sharing, prayer, praise and ministry. I am reminded of the 'ski-jump ramp' used to launch jets from aircraft carriers, giving them instant lift from a short take-off. Do we get as far as breaking bread and then just fall off the end of the ramp? How sad! How disappointing! What a waste!

For all their many faults, the believers in Corinth seem to have learned (at least in some measure) to 'flow' in their meetings together. What were early church meetings like? Have you often wondered? The most detailed record of a church meeting that we have in the New Testament is right there in Corinth! In spite of their discord and immorality and even the court cases amongst them, the Holy Spirit still managed to get through and we see a meeting where **each one** had something from the Lord to share for the good of the whole church together! ¹ Yes, there were problems, but something real was happening and if an outsider happened to be there, they would see that the presence of the living God was evident among them. ²

How did that happen? Wouldn't we like to see more of that, that visitors to our meetings would go away saying something like "maybe I didn't understand all of that, but I could certainly see that God is real and he seems to be at work among those people." – ?

Do we look at the early Church and wish that we could see the power of God as evident with us as it was with them, that 'signs and wonders' would be much more in evidence than they are – further demonstrations to the watching world of people who really **are** in touch with the living God – ?

There **is** more.

Once again, the key is with both the individual believer and the Body. Too many times in church history, and certainly in the last 50 to 60 years, we have seen an unbalanced emphasis on the gifted individual, steering sometimes gullible believers towards such devotion that they elevate this leader to near infallibility – and another sect is born, usually headed by a 'Prophet' or an 'Apostle' whose blessing and direction is sought for every little detail of life!

Just because we may have witnessed, seen or heard about these excesses does not mean that there is no room for the gifts which have sometimes been demonstrated.

But is there a valid basis for spiritual gifts in the church today? If there is, what can it be?

Once again it does not come from any attempt to stir up emotions in imitation of anyone, whether that be our idea of the way the early church exercised gifts or a copy of a meeting we once went to or heard about, or someone we have read or seen on television. That would be as false as the synthetic 'memory' of the Lord's suffering at Golgotha.

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:26-33

² 1 Corinthians 14:23-25

Nor does it stem from our own attempts to conjure up abilities that we think we might have, perhaps even asking for the help of the Holy Spirit.

But we can see those gifts clearly in use and valued in the New Testament churches and no honest examination of scripture gives us any reason to believe that they were only for a limited period. So, what can be the basis on which we can see them flow again, in our individual lives, our shared fellowship and – most importantly – in reality?

* * * * *

We have begun to see already that our actual experience of the grace of God springs directly from what we **know** of what the Lord Jesus has done for us – what has become real to us by the work of the Holy Spirit in opening our eyes to truth, to real live facts. That has proved true in our experience of forgiveness as we have seen the power and effectiveness of the blood of Jesus and, perhaps more recently, has also enabled us to taste real freedom as we have learned to hide in the fact that we really are dead to sin.

The key to those historical facts becoming effective in our lives is summed up in that simple verse: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” (**1 Corinthians 1:30**)

In the original Greek, it is stronger than ‘because of’, it is ‘out of’. It is ‘out of’ him, the Eternal Father himself, that you and I are in Christ. He has done it. Yes, he has given us the freedom to prevent him placing us in his Son but, as soon as we give in to his message and ‘allow’ him into our lives, he does it, he makes effective for us what he accomplished all those years ago.

The life of the Christian believer has been joined to the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that does not stop at his death and burial.

* * * * *

You and I have been joined to Jesus, so we have been joined into the power of his blood, shed for us for complete forgiveness and a total wiping clean of our guilty record.

We have been joined to his broken body so that we are dead to the bondage of failure and sin and can experience real freedom.

But what happened next? Did Jesus stay dead after he had accomplished all this for us? Of course not! His resurrection put the seal on the effectiveness of his death by showing that he had come out the other side, that the price had been paid – **with more to spare!**

9. Much More Than Proof

If we have recently discovered that there is more to ‘the finished work of Christ’ than unending forgiveness, if we are revelling in the fresh joy of really being dead to sin and law, we may not think that we need any more at the moment!

Surely it is enough that the resurrection of Jesus sets the seal on the effectiveness of his death, proves that he paid the price and that it was more than sufficient to pay off the staggering debt of the sin and rebellion of all mankind? After all, if he had died and **not** risen again, might there have been some shred of doubt that perhaps the price had not been paid in full? That there might still be a little bit more to be paid, perhaps by us in our attempts to live good lives and serve him?

No, the price has been paid in full, there is no more debt outstanding, our account with God is clear and there is nothing that we can do to make it any more complete than it already is. The resurrection of Jesus sets the seal on that, once and forever.

But there is more, and we have already seen a few hints from Paul about being ‘joined to his resurrection’:-

“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:4-11)

What is Paul writing about? The fact that, just as we have been joined to the death of Jesus – as graphically demonstrated in baptism – we ‘*will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his*’. So, is he simply looking forward to the day when we will share in the same physical resurrection and be bodily brought back to life after our death?

Yes, it is true, we will share in a physical resurrection when Jesus returns to this earth. That is amazing and an inspiring prospect. We might have thought that was all that Paul was writing about if he had not inserted those words ‘in the same way’. In the same way as **what?**

‘Jesus died to sin, once for all’, says Paul, ‘and now he lives to God’. ‘**In the same way**, count yourselves dead to sin (yes, perhaps we are learning to do that) and alive to God.’ What does that mean? How can I ‘count’ myself as being ‘alive to God’ – ?

Here I must acknowledge a great debt of gratitude to Watchman Nee for his book *The Normal Christian Life*. (Still in print, 60+ years on!) Read it if you possibly can. So simple and so profound! In chapter 4, he writes about this passage and reminds us that the word translated ‘count’ in modern Bible versions (and ‘reckon’ in the older version he was using) is an **accounting** word, to do with recording the true and actual situation, for example in business accounts. *“Accounting is the reckoning of facts, not fancies. Even so, it is because I am really dead that God tells me to account it so. God could not ask me to put down in my account-book what was not true. He could not ask me to reckon that I am dead if I am still alive. For such mental gymnastics the word ‘reckoning’ would be inappropriate; we might rather speak of ‘mis-reckoning!’*

So, the basis of counting ourselves dead to sin and alive to God is that **we already are**. Paul is **not** only talking about our future resurrection, he is talking about the fact that we have already been joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus and so we can count on that being so – and live accordingly!

* * * * *

OK, you say, what difference does that make to me? We have already seen that we can take hold of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus, also that we can stand in the reality of being dead to sin and failure because we have been joined to his death, his broken body. What does it mean to be joined to his resurrection? Now, not just in the future?

Well, Paul says, *'count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus'*. My old life is dead, not just all my sin and failure but also all my attempts to earn favour with God, to live a good life, to build up a good score of 'Brownie points' in the hope that they might outweigh all the negative bits. All that is gone, but what remains?

'Alive to God', he says. What does that mean? It is the other side of the coin to being dead to sin. As we have seen, being dead to sin means that the power of sin no longer has us under its control, it no longer 'gets through' as it did before. Back then, our lives were full of failure and it seemed that God couldn't get through – we were 'dead' to him ¹ and very much 'alive' to failure and disobedience.

Now the position is reversed! By being joined to Jesus, not only do we share in the the power of his shed blood and broken body, we also share in his resurrection life – now! This is a life that is open to the power of God, open to the Father himself, and a life that pleases him. Paul tries to express it like this: *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*²

Let me say it again: This is a life that pleases God. Not by the efforts of religion and legalism, but by the power of the life within us. Again, Paul spells this out in **Romans 8** : *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death."*

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

*You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if **the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead** is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you."*³ Very clearly, Paul is NOT just talking about a future physical resurrection, but about 'the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead' transforming our lives, giving life to our mortal bodies by virtue of the fact that the Holy Spirit lives in us.

What the world sees as 'religion' (sadly including much 'Christianity') is sets of rules, codes and formulas which are supposed to bring you closer to God. Nothing wrong with the rules, says Paul, it's just that we can't keep them! But God has stepped beyond these external rules by placing his Spirit in us, so that the life of Christ can shine out through us, living a life that cannot fail to please the Father, simply because it is the life of his own dear Son.

Please notice that Paul makes absolutely no distinction between 'the Spirit who gives life', 'the Spirit of God', 'the Spirit of Christ' and 'the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead'. The life of the Spirit of God in us is the same thing as Christ himself living in us. ⁴ The New Testament is full of it!

¹ Ephesians 2: 1, Colossians 2:13

² Galatians 2:20

³ Romans 8:1-11

⁴ Colossians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 4:7

Perhaps we can see that baptism as the ‘acting out’ of the end of our old life is a more complete picture than we may have realised. We have not just died to our old life but we have also been raised to a completely new quality of life! Not just the doing away of the old, but a very positive new life, in the fact of the Holy Spirit resident within us, gradually transforming us so that we become more and more like the One whose life we share.¹

“Abide in me, and I in you.”

¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18

10. Beyond The Resurrection . . .

If we are honest, many (most?) of us struggle a bit with the Biblical accounts¹ of the ascension of the Lord Jesus. Did he really go straight up into the sky, as if on some invisible celestial elevator? Do we quickly move on to another passage before we have to grapple with all that this one means?

We are looking at reports that a physical man (not some sort of ghostly apparition) actually went up into the sky – and was watched as he went – until he disappeared into a cloud! Fantasy? A fanciful ending to the dramatic and all too down to earth history of an amazing life? A way of adding to the cover up of a fictional resurrection?

After all, if the resurrection didn't really happen, then the body of Jesus had to be hidden by someone. Without wishing to repeat in detail the clearly argued case of Frank Morison's classic *Who Moved the Stone*², we have only two alternatives here. Either the authorities hid the body, in which case they would have presented it to disprove the resurrection claim, or the disciples of Jesus hid it and invented a most implausible story of ascension – and were then prepared to die in support of their story. An even more implausible suggestion!

Faced with challenges to their claim of the resurrection of their Master, they would also face the inevitable question "Where is he now, then?" Did they invent the account of the ascension to conveniently avoid giving an answer?

If we are slightly inclined to follow this line, do we realise what we are doing? If we do away with the ascension of Jesus, then we face a similar question: What happened to his resurrected body? If we have no answer to that, then we face another challenge: Do we actually believe in a physical resurrection?

It is a vital question to answer. Clearly the resurrection and ascension of Jesus are inseparably linked. Just try fitting the story together without one of those elements. It doesn't work! If one did not happen, neither did the other!

Paul is very clear. If Jesus was not resurrected, the whole of the Christian faith is make-believe!³

* * * * *

Mark and Luke are also very clear. Mark was there as it all happened; Luke did very careful research a few years later. Jesus was seen going up into the sky and sat down at the right hand of God. The proof of this, says Peter on the Day of Pentecost ten days later, is that the Holy Spirit has been 'poured out' on all the 120 disciples and there is evidence of the supernatural power of God.⁴

There is a strong link between the ascension of Jesus and the pouring out of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Remember that for generations the Holy Spirit had already been poured out on God's people, but **only on a selected few** – prophets and a few kings. The promise that Peter quoted from Joel⁵ was a promise for the future, a promise that the prophetic gifts would be opened out to all mankind, sons, daughters, young men, old men, male and female servants – everyone!⁶ Now, Peter said, thanks to the ascension of Jesus and the fact that he had been given the seat at the right hand of God the Father, this promise had arrived!

The Lord Jesus had said that it was to the disciples' advantage that he went away⁷. They will have had difficulty believing that, but he spelled out the reason. If he did not go away, the new Helper would not come but, if he did go, he would send him, the Spirit of truth. Jesus going and the Holy Spirit coming are intimately linked.

¹ Mark 16:19, Luke 24:51, Acts 1:1-11

² He set out to disprove the resurrection but was persuaded by the facts of the case. Read it!

³ 1 Corinthians 15:12- 19

⁴ Acts 2:32-33

⁵ Acts 2:16-21

⁶ Joel 2:28-29

⁷ John 16:5-15

In writing his account of Jesus' ministry, John knew that link.¹ He interpreted what Jesus said about living water flowing out from inside those who believed in him to mean the Holy Spirit, who was not yet given **because** Jesus was not yet glorified. Of course, given that understanding, we can also see more clearly what Jesus was saying to the woman at the well at Sychar.²

But why is it important to know that there is such a strong link between the ascension and glorification of the Lord Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Simply that **the basis of the giving of the Holy Spirit is that Jesus has been glorified.**

Peter on the day of Pentecost used the presence of the poured-out Spirit to prove that Jesus was now seated at the right hand of God.

The link works the other way round as well. Because Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, the Holy Spirit has been poured out on those who believe in him.

Is that our experience?

If not, why not?

We have seen that our experience of forgiveness is based on the **fact** that the Lord Jesus shed his blood for us.

We have seen that our experience of death to the power of sin is based on the **fact** of his broken body on the cross.

We have seen that our experience of the empowering life of the Holy Spirit **within** us is based on the **fact** of the physical resurrection of Jesus from death.

All of these are objective facts but do not have any effect on us until they become personally applied to us. How does that happen?

Jesus shed his blood for our sins and failures (and for those of the whole world³) but we can only start to benefit from that forgiveness when two things happen: 1) Someone tells us about it and tells us that this forgiveness is available for us personally and 2) we begin to believe it. Then, and only then, the power of the historical fact becomes effective in our lives and we begin to experience the wonderful sense of freedom from guilt that only God's forgiveness can bring.

It is the same with the other aspects of what has been called 'the finished work of Christ'. . .

The fact of his broken body has no real effect on us until we realise that is the means by which we can be set free from slavery to sin and failure. Again, we need to be given the information and we need to start to put our trust in it. The historical fact alone will accomplish nothing, except perhaps triggering an emotional response to his suffering. Only when we begin to see that we have been joined to that death – and start to trust in that fact – do we experience the release of being dead to sin and failure.

Similarly, when we understand that the life of Jesus has made its home in us by his Holy Spirit, and that this is the life which will always please our Father, then we start to rely on him to produce the fruit of the Spirit in us and stop trying to please him by our own efforts and well-intentioned schemes.

And then as we seek to experience the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit poured out **upon** us as well as living **inside** us, the key revelation is that he is already poured out because Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father!

In each of these aspects, the same factors form the basis of our experience, just as they did when we first tasted the forgiveness of God.

We need the information – and then we need to start believing it. How can this happen?

¹ John 7:37-39

² John 4:13-14

³ 1 John 1:7, 1 John 2:2

Very simply! When we first heard any part of the real good news about Jesus, did we respond? Why? Because what we heard seemed to answer a need that we already felt. The question facing us was not 'Is this true and can I believe it?' so much as 'Can this possibly be true? It's what I need, but do I dare believe it?' Not so much an intellectual question as a personal one.

'Faith', writes Paul, 'comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.'¹ It comes, it is a result of hearing the message of Jesus. Not that it is automatic, as if it is something that happens to us over which we have no control – quite the opposite!

We hear the 'word', the message, the information about what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ, and immediately we are faced with a choice. We know that if this information is true (and it seems to be) it will have the most dramatic effect on our lives. Sometimes we seem to be backed into a corner where responding to the good news seems to be the only way out, but still we have a choice.

In the end, that choice is frequently not some big dramatic act of faith as we might have imagined it. Very often it seems to be just simply saying 'yes' to what God is saying to us by his Holy Spirit. Not so much stepping out into the dark unknown as responding to the invitation to step into the light.

The amazing thing is that God has a name for this giving in, this choosing to take hold of the invitation he is giving us, this end of resisting his love. He calls it faith.

Faith is not what the little boy in Sunday School said he thought it was, 'believing what you know ain't true'. Quite the opposite: it is starting to dare to believe that what you are beginning to see really is true, and then stepping out and trusting it, trusting the one who gives you the invitation.

Sometimes we take a long time to respond, to exercise what the Bible calls 'the obedience of faith'.² Maybe that word 'obedience' is part of the reason: we don't want to give in, we want our own way, our own supposed solutions to our problems and questions. So we resist. But the Holy Spirit persists. He will not force us to respond, but he will go on trying, at least for a while.

But be very careful! There can come a time, if we have resisted and gone on resisting his advances, that we have so often rejected him that we find our hearts have hardened and it seems that the door is now closed. "Could it be that I have made my heart so hard my eyes can't see?"

* * * * *

Two case histories.

When Paul found some 'disciples' at Ephesus³, there seemed to be something not quite right with them, so he asked them a question: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" Most of us would not dare ask that! We have too many theological hangups! Their answer revealed their lack of good basic information: "We don't know anything about any Holy Spirit". 'Something definitely not right here' thinks Paul, so he asks them about their baptism, only to find that they **had** been baptised, but only into the sort of baptism that John the Baptist offered: 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'⁴.

Even their information about John's baptism was incomplete, so Paul needed to update them, telling them that John had told people to believe in Jesus.⁵ As soon as they heard that, they were baptised in (literally 'into') the name of the Lord Jesus, Paul laid his hands on them and 'the Holy Spirit came on them' and they began to speak in tongues and prophesy – evidence of the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

Many years earlier, a similar thing had happened in Samaria.⁶ Philip had gone there and proclaimed the good news about Jesus. Many people had believed, but again, something was missing, so Peter and John came down from Jerusalem and prayed for these new believers "that they might receive the

¹ Romans 10:17

² Romans 1:5, Romans 16:26

³ Acts 19:1

⁴ Luke 3:3

⁵ John 1:19-37

⁶ Acts 8:1-17

Holy Spirit". This time, they had already been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus, but this was no mechanical process, so that by being baptised they automatically received the Holy Spirit. Nor, obviously, had it happened automatically when they had believed!

Reading this, I always used to think that Peter and John prayed for God to give them the Holy Spirit, but that is not what it says. It says that they prayed for them to **receive** the Holy Spirit. Receiving something is very different from being given it, though often they happen at the same time. If I give you an envelope with a £10 note in it, you may open it immediately or it may be some time before you actually open the envelope, take hold of the money and use it. The giving happens when I hand over the envelope, the receiving happens when you open it.

Back on the day of Pentecost, when Peter first spoke of the gift of the Holy Spirit in response to the crowd's question¹, he told them that they needed to do two things first, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" and then "you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit". That 'receiving' is actually another thing to do. The word means 'take to yourself' and it is very much an active word, not one that means that something happens to you.

In both of these 'case histories', the people had believed and had been baptised, but 'receiving' was necessary, too. Like opening the envelope!

As another 'case history', let me share a little of my journey with you . . .

¹ Acts 2:38

1 1. Walking Into The Light

I had been a believer for eleven years. My main expression of 'teenage rebellion' seemed to have been to develop as a Christian. I had several hobbies but, to the casual observer, probably 'being a Christian' would have been one of the most obvious.

More accurately, perhaps, 'doing Christian things'! I went to meetings, lots of them! I read my Bible, followed study notes, devoured Christian books, including many missionary biographies, and dedicated my life to 'serve the Lord' in some way. I thought that would be through being a doctor, probably in some far-off country.

While studying at college, I found the Lord starting to really open up the Bible to me in a fresh way and make my 'walk' with him more real and more realistic. I began to see that I had been joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus, that I was truly 'dead to sin' and alive to him.

My life took a new turn. I left my college studies and enrolled in practical on-the-job training in evangelism.

So now, at the age of 22, I was on the 'front line' of evangelism and training in India, where I had been for 2 years. The work was interesting, stretching and demanding. The people were often responsive but sometimes aggressively antagonistic. The country was fascinating and absorbing; in many ways, it felt like home. I had learned some Hindi and was rapidly becoming 'Indianised'.

The most recent 10 months of that time, however, had not been so positive. In January of that year, my desire for a more real experience of the power of the Holy Spirit had come to a head. I had already been pleading with the Lord for more experience of him, but then I started getting desperate. I even bound myself with vows not to take some actions until I saw a breakthrough. These included not doing any preaching or teaching, things that I was expected to do in the group I was working with.

January to November saw me mostly ineffective in the work and, to the eyes of my colleagues, probably depressed or on the borderline. They seemed to accept, though, that I was quite willing to undertake virtually any task that did not involve spiritual responsibility.

Inside, I was still aching for a real experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I had already seen the link between that outpouring and the ascension of the Lord Jesus, but somehow nothing seemed to happen. I longed for a real, face-to-face revelation of the Lord, when I would see him as he is and so become more like him.¹

Knowing a little about the power of the demonstration of baptism by immersion, and only having been 'christened' as a baby, I asked to be baptised, seeking to get any hindrances out of the way. I was baptised in the summer, hoping for the long-expected breakthrough, but it did not come.

In mid-November, I was at a mini-conference to prepare new trainees to start out into evangelism. By this time, I was functioning chiefly as a driver and would do other practical tasks, but suddenly I was called upon to speak at one of the training sessions. Remember, preaching and teaching were things I had vowed not to do before the Lord brought a breakthrough in my life, but now the conference leaders were pressing me and saying that there was no-one else who could do it.

Did somehow the Lord lead them to get me into this tight corner? What did they want me to speak about? 'The Cross in the Life of the Believer'. To me, this could only mean Romans 6 and what it means to be dead to sin! They could not possibly have known about my history with this passage!

I had no choice, it seemed, but to try to share what I knew. I cannot remember what I said, except that I tried to recycle the truths that I had seen back in college, about our old life being dead and gone and that we had been made sharers in the resurrection life of Jesus. How much anyone else got from it, I never heard. Perhaps very little.

But to me, as I spoke, one verse shone out like the beacon that it was: *"For if we have become united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."*²

¹ 2 Corinthians 3:16-18, 1 John 3:2

² Romans 6:5 (Revised Standard Version)

The divine logic was inexorable. I was caught by it! Four years earlier, I had seen that I was united with his death and resurrection but the issue for me now was his ascension and glorification and the implications of it for me. The quiet voice of God was saying to me that I had already been joined to the glorification of Jesus, just as I had been joined to his death, burial and resurrection. The challenge to me was whether I could believe it!

That evening, after the session had ended, I walked a little way off into the South Indian night and prayed something like this: “Is this really for me, Lord? Have you really already given me the gift of the outpoured Holy Spirit, just as you have forgiven me and given me death to sin and law and a share in that resurrection life in Jesus? Can I take hold of the gifts of the Spirit? Can it really be this simple?”

Again, the quiet voice of the Father, reassuring and affirming, telling me that he had placed me in his Son, that my life was joined to Jesus in every respect and everything was included with no exceptions. The supernatural power of the Holy Spirit was poured out on me; it was part of being **in Christ**. Hardly daring to believe it, I took hold of the promise and thanked my Father.

Needless to say, my life changed beyond all recognition from that evening. My petty vows dissolved and I began to find a fresh freedom to share the truth that had started to shine so dazzlingly into my life.

Nothing was different, and yet everything was different!

As time went by, I soon began to see that all my ten months of intense anguish and pleading with God had been completely unnecessary. My vows had felt tough to me but had also caused some distress to other people. They had not made any difference to my Father’s loving intentions for me. At any point during that time (or before), if I had taken hold of the promise of God I could have stepped straight into that same appreciation and experience of the gift of the Holy Spirit, poured out on me.

If those long months had any value, it had been to ‘hedge me in’, to concentrate my attention repeatedly, increasingly, almost solely, on knowing in experience what I felt sure God had for me. Like any ‘fast’, undertaking not to do certain things until I saw a breakthrough made me doggedly determined to see that breakthrough!

Everyone’s experience is personal and different. I would certainly not suggest that anyone undertakes the same sort of vows and self-denial to which I subjected myself, but I would urge everyone to seek more light from the word of God, and to receive it simply when it comes.

What made the difference to me was that the Lord spoke to me through the Bible – a text I had read many times before – and ‘shone in’ the light of revelation so that I could see the truth. As Paul writes: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ”¹. The ‘word of Christ’ for me at that time was to see that my Father had joined my life to the life of his Son, that I was truly **in Christ**, and so all the benefits of his death, burial, resurrection, ascension and glorification were mine as well. I needed the truth with the enlightening of the Holy Spirit.

I then needed to do one more thing: receive what I had been given. No effort required, no credit to me at all, just taking hold of what I had been given – and saying ‘thank you’ to the Giver!

¹ Romans 10:17

12. Stay Where You Are!

I am so very grateful to the Lord that my experience was not some inexplicable ‘bolt from the blue’, without any objective, rational basis.¹ He shone his light on **facts** and showed me what he had **already done** for me by joining me to his Son, the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps this is the most amazing revelation of all, to ‘discover’ that all of this has been done for us. Many of us, even while giving lip-service to being free and ‘not under law’, have actually been living for years with the idea that our growth as Christians believers is based on our performance, that we somehow have to do something – or at least try to live up to some sort of standard – in order for our Father to work in our lives by his Spirit.

Nothing could be further from the truth. One of the most precious facts is that our Father God has placed us in his Son.² Not that he might, or even will do it sometime, but that he already has! He has joined our lives with the life of the Lord Jesus and we draw the benefit from that fact every single day.

When Jesus told his disciples that he was the Vine and that they were the branches³, I wonder how much they understood at the time. How could they see then what they started to see later and we can see now, looking from ‘this side’ of his ‘finished work’? He was their Teacher and Master, and they had begun to guess that perhaps he really was the promised Messiah. He had puzzled and scared them by talking of his impending death, but could they ever have guessed that their future life and work were to be totally dependent on what he would accomplish through that death? That they would find themselves identifying with him in his death, resurrection and ascension? That this would be the cutting edge of their message?

All his teaching about the Kingdom of God had looked good in the expectation that the Kingdom was coming very soon. The disastrous setback of his arrest and crucifixion will have blown all those hopes away – obviously the Kingdom was not coming right now! Had it all been some ghastly mistake?

And then, suddenly he was alive again and the question sprang afresh to their minds and lips: “Is the Kingdom coming **now**?”⁴ The Kingdom had been the focus of so much of his teaching; it had been the way they had started to think.

It soon became obvious that there was much to be accomplished before his glorious return and the establishment of the promised Kingdom of God on earth. There was a message to pass on, a much more inclusive message than they had ever dreamed of in those three years of the Master’s teaching, a message that now depended on the facts of his death, resurrection and ascension. By responding to that message, thousands of people from every tribe and nation would enter into the inheritance once promised to Abraham. This was so much more than they had expected!

They told their listeners to have a radical change of mind (‘repent’) and put their trust into Jesus, whom God had made ‘both Lord and Christ’, and they would receive forgiveness from God and the gift of the Holy Spirit. As a sign of their response to the call of God and their new direction of life, these new believers were called on to be baptised.⁵ It was not very long before they got a new nickname: ‘Christ-ians’, people who belonged to the Christ, the Messiah, God’s anointed one, who was coming back to the earth to establish his Kingdom.

Yes, the Kingdom was still very much in evidence, but something else was happening: they were becoming a people who were identified with this Jesus, whom they called Lord and Christ. Having believed in him, they had become his.

¹ In practice, even ‘bolts from the blue’ normally seem to contain some factual information. Any experience is sure to have emotional impact but I would be suspicious of one that is only emotional.

² 1 Corinthians 1:30

³ John 15:1-11

⁴ Acts 1:6

⁵ Acts 2:36-39

Paul seems to have been the first one to actually use the phrase ‘in Christ’ ¹ but, having used it once, he used it repeatedly as his most usual way to describe the believer in Jesus. Consciously or not, he was echoing the Lord Jesus who had said *“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.”* ²

So what does it mean to ‘abide’ in Christ? The Greek word simply means ‘stay’, with the same shades of meaning that our own word has, so it can mean ‘dwell’ as well as ‘remain’. But ‘staying’ somewhere means that we are already there. We might invite a friend to come and stay with us in our home, but there are two invitations there: to **come** and then to **stay**. You can’t stay unless you have already come!

In just the same way, we can’t stay (‘abide’) in Christ unless we are already **in him**. Which is where that precious verse comes in again! I make no apology for continuing to quote **1 Corinthians 1:30**, because it has come to mean so much to me: *“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.”*

I always used to think that I had joined myself to Jesus. After all, I had needed to respond in faith to the message in the first place, and then I needed to go on living in relationship with him from day to day. It seemed to depend on me. So, when I was ‘doing OK’ it seemed that I was in Christ, but when I was not doing so well, perhaps I wasn’t. Up and down, always related to my performance, always subjective.

But then Father showed me that actually **he** had put me in his Son, as this verse says so clearly. Yes, he had needed me to give in to his will and put my trust in Jesus, but it was he who had placed me in him. Not dependent on how well I was doing at any moment, but secure because he **has done it!**

By the way, this verse was not written to just one person – perhaps some specially spiritual believer? – but to the whole church in Corinth, with all the problems that they had. With all their faults, Paul tells them confidently that God their Father has placed them securely in his Son, who has become their source of wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, just as he has become Paul’s own source. If it applied to them, it certainly applies to us. In many ways, they were in a mess. We may feel that we are the same, but we too are joined to the Lord Jesus because the Father has put us in him. I do like Paul’s use of ‘us’ here; he and the believers in Corinth are joined to the same source, they are all joined to the Lord Jesus, regardless of their performance.

So, says the Lord Jesus, ‘stay where my Father has put you!’ Does that sound boring, static, even just theoretical? Maybe – if you have your eyes shut!

Pretend for a moment that a rich relative has left their magnificent house to me in their will. I have been given the keys and go to move in. As I open the front door, I find myself in the hallway. It is lovely, spacious and well-decorated, so I start to live there – just in the hallway. I don’t explore the rest of the house; I don’t discover the beautiful bedrooms, the fabulous fitted kitchen, the sumptuous sofas in the living room, the games room, the luxurious bathrooms, the swimming pool, the library, the gardens or any of the other wonderful features of this amazing house. It is all mine, but I am not really living in it.

What would you say if you came to visit me and found me just camping in the hallway? You would tell me that I am being a fool. Having been given all these wonderful things, I am not making use of any of them. You would tell me to try opening all the doors and explore every detail of this mansion, to enjoy all that I have been given, to take advantage of my amazing inheritance.

We are in exactly the same position. We have been given the most amazing inheritance in the Lord Jesus, but we seem to content ourselves with just hanging around in the entrance instead of allowing

¹ Romans 6:11

² John 15:4-8

the guide to show us round the whole estate. Yes, one of the important roles of the Holy Spirit is to 'guide us into all truth'¹ and the word 'guide' means 'show the way'.

Information + inspiration = revelation! Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers to have the same experience!² Those same 'disciples' whom he had met at Ephesus back in Acts 19 were now part of the church there, perhaps by now some of them taking a leading role, and still he has the same prayer for them. That they would go on having their eyes opened to the amazing inheritance which was already theirs in Christ. To go on receiving.

So, 'abiding', remaining in Jesus is not just passively sitting around but actively exploring all that is ours in him, taking hold of it and living in the benefit of it. And, unlike someone who has been left a great mansion in a relative's will, we are able to express our appreciation to the one who has given the inheritance to us, on a daily basis, whether appreciation for being shown something new that we have not seen before or for the solid security of truths that we have known for years but still sustain us. It is called worship: appreciating and expressing his worth.

Words are not enough to express that appreciation, but all too often we are silent in worship. Not because we have run out of words and find them inadequate, but because we have not seen enough, or, perhaps more likely, because we have not kept up to date and our hearts are not stirred with the wonder of it all!

Paul also ran out of words: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"³

¹ John 16:13

² Ephesians 1:15-23

³ 2 Corinthians 9:15

13. Common Ground

So, as we take the broken bread and drink the poured-out wine, we are making most momentous statements: “I have been joined to the Lord Jesus Christ. By his body being broken, I am dead to the world system, to the tyranny of sin and failure in my life, dead to law and all my own efforts to try to please God. By shedding his blood he paid the price for my forgiveness and I continue to take hold of it, fresh forgiveness for each fresh failure.”

The statements we make are individual and personal, but this is a meal that is shared. As we declare individually that we are ‘joined to the vine’, we find ourselves in a company of others who are making the same declaration and realise that, if we are each joined to Jesus, then we are also joined to each other. Our feet are all on the same common ground.

There is no high and low, no distinction and no discrimination. Paul knew this well. Writing to churches in the Galatian region of the Roman empire, part of modern-day Turkey, where there was an ongoing effort by some to force every non-Jewish believer in Jesus to fully embrace Judaism as well, he defiantly states the fact that every one of them stands on level ground: *“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*¹

What a perfect starting point for growth! With that common understanding declared, with our shared dependence on the grace of God and the revelation of the Holy Spirit, what better situation into which the Lord can speak to his people **through** his people?

And so it is that Paul leads on from writing about the ‘Lord’s Supper’ in **1 Corinthians 10 and 11**, straight into teaching about the value and place of spiritual gifts in the church in **chapter 12**, repeatedly emphasising that any contribution to the meeting of believers is to be ‘for the common good’ and in the context of genuine love (**ch. 13**). He takes it further in **ch. 14**, where he writes about everything being done for ‘edification’ or ‘building up’ of the church. The Greek word he uses, *oikodomeo*, is the normal word for building of any sort, but it contains the word *oikos*, the everyday word for house, dwelling or household.

Paul is writing about building the house of God. Not a physical building like the elaborate tent which the LORD told Moses to build in the wilderness², nor like the splendour of the temple which Solomon built in Jerusalem³, but still with the same purpose as both of those – a dwelling place on earth for the infinite and eternal Creator!

Back in **1 Corinthians 3:16**, Paul has already reminded the believers in Corinth that they are themselves a temple, a sanctuary where the Holy Spirit dwells – makes his home. *Oikos* again! Sometimes we have tended to interpret this verse as being about the individual believer rather than the church, but the original language is clear; it is addressed to a **number** of believers in one place who make up a **single** dwelling. Yes, the New Testament is also very clear that the Holy Spirit dwells in each believer,⁴ but in this passage Paul is writing about the fact that the Holy Spirit dwells in the ‘house’ made up of a number of believers in a specific location, in this case Corinth.

As we learn to stand individually in the benefit of our inheritance in the Lord Jesus Christ, so we are able to share our growing understanding of that inheritance with our brothers and sisters who stand on the same ground and, as we do so, we grow together as a building as well as personally.

Paul uses the parallel picture of a human body alongside the picture of a building, and so brings us a striking image: the church as a group of individuals but more than that, because each one is joined to the Head, like each part of the body. And, as each part works properly, it contributes to the growth of the complete body.⁵

This is a body which goes beyond the realms of a human organisation – because it isn’t one! We are united in one body, but not because we have all joined the same club, signed the same statement of

¹ Galatians 3:26-28

² Exodus chapters 25 to 27

³ 1 Kings chapter 6, 2 Chronicles chapters 3 to 5

⁴ Romans 8:1-15

⁵ Ephesians 4:14-16

faith or even because we all meet in the same place each week. No, we are one because each one is joined to the Head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In that body, we each have some 'manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'.¹ Please notice, **for the common good**, not just for our own benefit and certainly not in order to award ourselves special recognition! In addition to the more obviously 'spiritual' gifts listed in **1 Corinthians 12**, Paul lists plenty of very down-to-earth and practical gifts in **Romans 12**.

We need to be careful here! There are two apparently opposite mistakes to avoid and sadly both of them are much too common.

The first mistake is to somehow despise the 'ordinary' gifts shown in **Romans 12**. After all, they are almost all to do with natural gifts and abilities which many non-Christian people also demonstrate in their lives, with no reference to Jesus at all. Perhaps we would like to think that we are more spiritual than that, and so want to concentrate on the more obviously supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

Don't be fooled! These gifts, humbly exercised by Christian believers as opportunities arise, have an effect which is altogether different from apparently similar actions by other people. As Paul writes, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."² Jesus himself said "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."³ Our ordinariness allows his glory to shine through.

The second mistake, more subtle perhaps, is effectively to write off any teaching about the present-day exercise of the spiritual gifts as listed in **1 Corinthians 12**. One of the sad results of the so-called 'charismatic movement' from the 1960s onwards was that eventually 'being charismatic' became fashionable, so many found themselves expected to go through all the supposedly charismatic routines, jumping through the hoops without necessarily very much reality going on inside.

Not surprising, then, to find a common attitude of 'been there, done that' as regards spiritual gifts. It is hardly ever said, but there often seems to be a feeling that many of the gifts are not real, that perhaps what we once thought were supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit were actually just 'hype', a naturally gifted person exercising merely natural gifts and manipulating other people.

Again, sadly, manipulation and control under the guise of exercising spiritual gifts has been all too common in Christian fellowship, so some adverse reaction is not surprising, especially if we have been hurt by it ourselves. But just because there has been abuse and deception in the past does not mean that all spiritual gifts are suspect. Perhaps we need to take a step back and then look again at what our Father's purposes are in giving us these 'manifestations of the Spirit for the common good'.

* * * * *

There is scope here for much more exploring, to look into the ways in which we are designed to grow together as the body of Christ, but the purpose of these pages has been to shed a little light on our sharing in the bread and wine and how our walk with the Lord is closely linked with it.

I hope that, with a growing appreciation of the fact that our heavenly Father has joined our lives with the life of his Son, we shall move forward into more discovery of our inheritance as the Holy Spirit opens up more doors into fresh revelation, understanding and reality.

*"Now we have received,
not the spirit of the world,
but the Spirit who is from God,
so that we may know the things freely given to us by God"*
1 Corinthians 2:12

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:7

² 2 Corinthians 4:7

³ Matthew 5:16

