

Jesus the Christ

Symbol and Portal



Devotional Guide for the Pilgrim Band

Jesus the Christ

Symbol and Portal

**Where have we come from?
Where are we going?
And where is Christ in the midst of it all?**

Thomas G. Bandy

Excerpted from Fellowship of Prayer, Lent 2007.
© 2007 Christian Board of Publication. Used by permission.
www.ChalicePress.com”

About Spiritual Discipline

Philippians 3

The wisdom of the ancients is that *discipline* is about *desire!* It is not about knowledge. Knowledge is for Gnostics and scientists, who want to control things, manipulate events, rationalize mysteries, condescend to the ignorant, and lord it over life. Desire is for Christians and other spiritual pilgrims, who yearn to value creation, discern divine purpose, submerge themselves in grace, give hope to the oppressed, and surrender to the Lord of Life.

Therefore, *discipline* is about *discipleship!* It is not about agreement. Agreement is for Stoics and educators, who want to analyze things, separate fact from fiction, and maintain a critical distance from the truth. Discipleship is for Christians and other mystics, who ache to participate in life, cross the boundary into the infinite, and merge themselves with Truth.

Therefore, *discipline* is about *courage!* It is not about certainty. Certainty is for pagans and Hollywood stars, who want guarantees for the future and instant gratification in the present. Courage is for Christians and other martyrs, who risk everything, change anything, and step into the arena to face lions with only one word on their lips: *Jesus!*

Engage *spiritual discipline* in the spirit of St. Paul. He counted whatever comforts he had as so much rubbish, for the sake of know Christ Jesus. He desired to merge with Christ, and touch the Holy, that by sharing in Jesus' sufferings he might participate in Christ's resurrection (Phil. 3:7-11). Jesus the Christ is both symbol and portal. He is the reminder of God's truth and purpose. He is the bridge over turgid existence, across which the infinite touches our lives, and the finite can penetrate into the heart of God. The experience of Christ is the way to abundant life.

TGB

The Discipline

Jesus is the Christ, fully human and fully divine, infinite paradox, and crucial for salvation. That is the essence of the most ancient Chalcedon Confession. Jesus has gone before us, and is going before us. He faces ... and slays ... our demons of anxiety: emptiness and meaninglessness, fate and death, guilt and condemnation. He has broken the gates of our personal hell and given us hope. This is his story. This is our story.

6 The Six Experiences of Christ

7 Our Spiritual Quest

8 Life-in-Between

10 JC and the Anxiety of Emptiness
11 JC and the Anxiety of Meaninglessness

12	Jesus the Spiritual Guide (4)	12	From the Mountaintop
		13	Mission Harvest
		14	Lost Sheep Found
		15	Hosanna
16	Christ the Perfect Human (4)	16	Living Word
		17	First Fruits
		18	Seeker in the Night
		19	New Adam
20	The Courage to Participate (2)	20	Clay Jars
		21	Legion

22 Life-on-the-Edge

24	JC and the Anxiety of Fate		
25	JC and the Anxiety of Death		
26	Jesus the Promise-Keeper (4)	26	Sparrows Numbered
		27	Justice Coming
		28	Harvest Ripe
		29	Plan Working
30	Christ the In-Breaker (4)	30	Lazarus Raised
		31	Conflict Overcome
		32	Sorrow Turned to Joy
		33	Consuming Fire
34	The Courage to Separate (2)	34	Go Now
		35	Armor of God

36 **Life-at-Peace**

38 JC and the Anxiety of Guilt
39 JC and the Anxiety of Condemnation

40 Jesus the Healer (4)

40 Amazing Faith
41 Coming Kingdom
42 Sleeper Wake
43 Working Still

44 Christ the Vindicator (4)

44 Least of These
45 God is Love
46 Forgive Much, Love Much
47 Fullness of God

48 The Courage to Accept Acceptance (2)

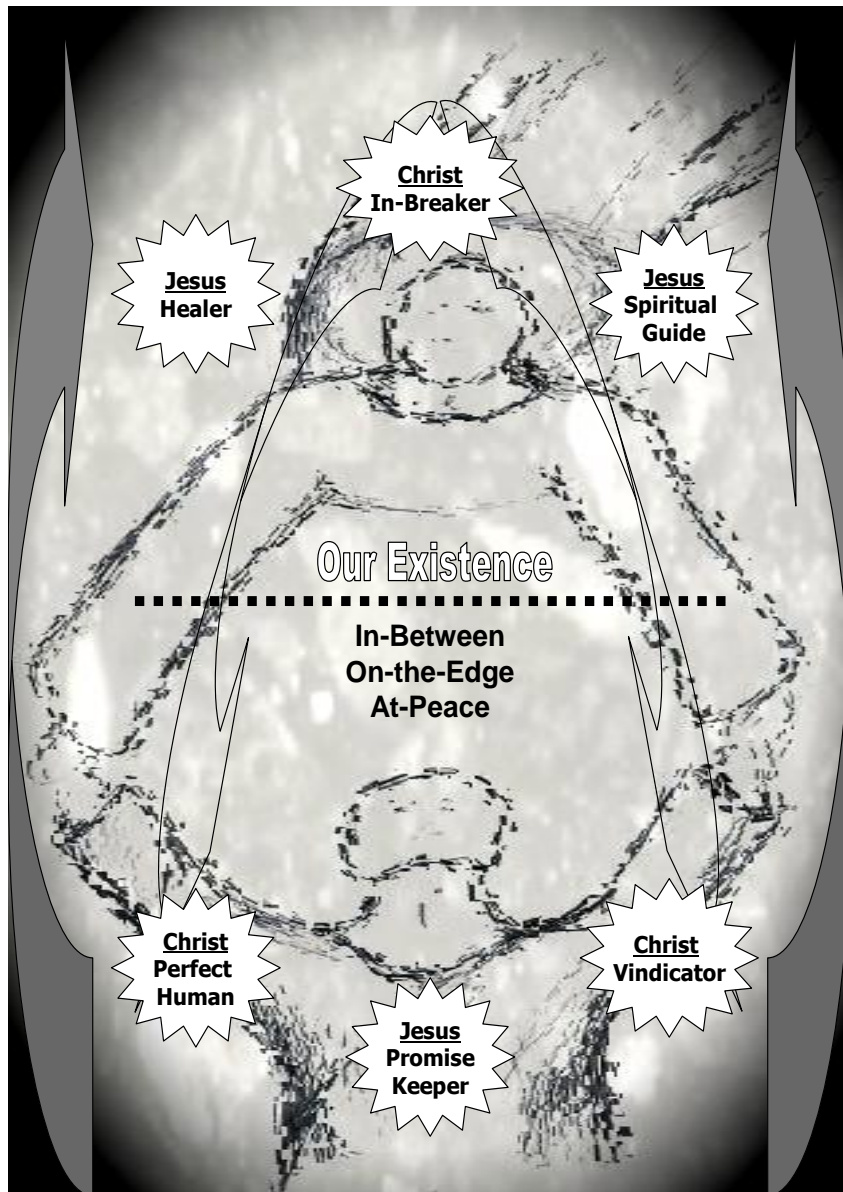
48 Great Banquet
49 New Life

50 **Countdown to Your Future**

52 My Journey
53 My Relationships
54 My Worry
55 My Struggle
56 My Agony
57 My Wait
58 My Resurrection
59 My Hope

The Six Experiences of Christ

This Spiritual Discipline is an extension of my book *Talisman: Global Positioning for the Soul* (Chalice Press, 2006) that describes the discipline that interfaces personal lifestyle with the six experiences of Jesus the Christ. The diagram below is the guide. It gives coherence to the discipline, but more importantly it gives insight into our life process. These are the timeless and timely questions every Christian will ask:



**Where have we come from?
Where are we going?
And where is Christ in the midst of it all?**

Our Spiritual Quest

Seekers experience the real presence of God in one or more of six basic ways. We can say this a second way from the point of view of church insiders. When seekers overcome their skepticism of the institutional church, and arrive as newcomers on Sunday morning, they are motivated by one or more of six urgent yearnings.

<u>Spiritual Yearning</u>	<u>Experience of Incarnation</u>	<u>Hope for the Future</u>
Broken Lives	Jesus the Healer	Wholeness and Health
Lost Souls	Jesus the Spiritual Guide	Moral Compass and Direction
Despairing Hearts	Jesus the Promise Keeper	Reassurance and optimism
Addicted Lifestyles	Christ the In-breaker	New life and a Fresh Start
Lonely People	Christ the Perfect Human	Friendship and Healthy Intimacy
Victimized Individuals	Christ the Vindicator	Justice and Self-Esteem

Of course, all people are beset by these yearnings at different times in their lives, whether they are church members or not. Part of being human is being a seeker. This is because we are always caught up in three “existential anxieties” from birth:

<u>Existential Anxiety</u>	<u>Experience of Incarnation</u>	<u>Act of Courage</u>
Emptiness and Meaninglessness	Spiritual Guide & Perfect Human	Courage to Participate in Life
Fate and Death	Promise Keeper and In-Breaker	Courage to Separate from Comfort Zones
Guilt and Condemnation	Healer and Vindicator	Courage to Accept Acceptance for Oneself

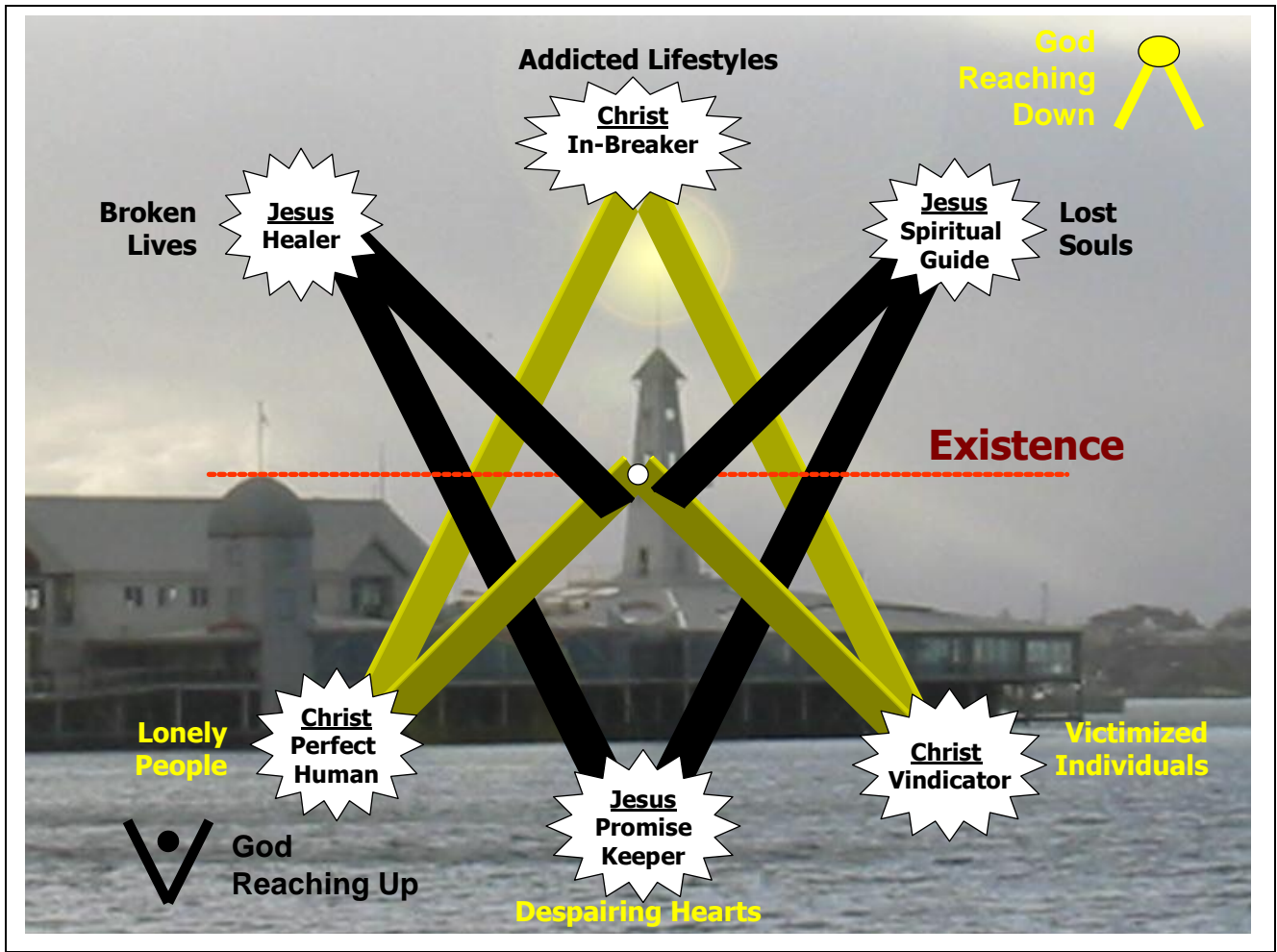
Just as the circumstances of our living precipitate changes to our lifestyles, so also these constant existential anxieties stress our inner spirits. Try as we might, no mental attitude or spiritual state lasts forever this side of heaven. We experience life in three ways:

<u>States of Mind</u>	<u>Experience of Incarnation</u>	<u>Spiritual Yearning</u>
Life-in-Between	Spiritual Guide & Perfect Human	Looking for Wisdom to Make Choices
Life-on-the-Edge	Promise Keeper and In-Breaker	Looking for Courage to Change Reality
Life-at-Peace	Healer and Vindicator	Looking for Serenity to Accept Reality

This is why the “Serenity Prayer” has become the second most popular, commonly memorized prayer in the world (second to the “Lord’s Prayer”):

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
 the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.
 Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,
 accepting hardship as a pathway to peace ...
 Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it ...
 Trusting that you will make all things right, if I surrender to your will ...
 So that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with you forever in the next.

Life-in-Between



**God, rescue me from the anxieties of
Emptiness and Meaninglessness;**

Grant me the Courage to Participate;

**And help me experience Jesus the Christ:
Spiritual Guide
And
Perfect Human**

Life-in-Between

Read Job 19:1-27 (especially 23-26)

What is “life-in-between”? It is life in transition and in stagnation. It is all that happens after birth and before death. It is the days that fly by between marriage and children, and between children and retirement. It is the time required to blink, sleep, commute, stand in line, prepare, de-brief, relax, and focus again. It is the anticipation of something beginning, and the anticipation of something ending, but *it is definitely not “something”*. It is waiting, yearning, trying, working, surviving, growing, grasping, wondering, and speculating. It is not how we spend our time. It is how time spends us.

We are Job. Job is us. We point out “Violence!” and are not answered. Victimized every day, we demand justice that rarely happens, and when it happens never lasts. We are reactive, and defeated. We are pro-active and blocked. Our parents are too busy repairing their marriage, and our children are too busy finding themselves, and our friends too busy telling us to get our act together while their act is falling apart.

We could opt out. Go to Vegas! Renovate the kitchen! There’s always some substance to abuse, some planet to waste. If we are repulsive, let us glory in it. If we win, let us hoard it; if we lose, let us blame God, bad government, and religion. Yet the pain won’t let us. God won’t let us. God is in the pain. God *is* a pain! God won’t let us stop waiting or stop hoping or stop yearning. Inside you intuit that our redeemer lives, and one day ... one day ... one ...

Prayer

God, make it stop! God, make it start! Use every moment that I waste! Infuse every incremental second that I invest in something of little importance ... with a hidden purpose. Amen.

JC and the Anxiety of Emptiness

Read Mark 10:17-27 (especially 13-15)

Modern life is de-signified. It “signifies” nothing. There is no sign that points to anything transcendent. It is a world de-populated of intimacy and re-populated by sexual objects; de-mystified of wonder and re-constructed by logic. It is “*de Void*”. If only life *were* a desert! At least there would be wind to sing, and sand to etch, and stones to cut, and the tears would be *real!* Alas! Passion is but a fashion, and tears are for manipulation rather than compassion. Power to the people! We control it all now ... and God help us.

The first inkling of JC is a child’s giggle. It echoes in *de Void* like a gong. It doesn’t really belong. It’s inappropriate and irritating. There is no profit in it. There is no ends policy associated with it. It mocks our control and self-confidence. God’s giggle is the most significant nonsense we have heard in a long time. You either drop everything to enjoy it, or slap the child as hard as you can to hush it up.

Emptiness worries us. That the emptiness might be filled worries us more. If God were to move in, our egos would be greatly constricted. God might decorate the planet in ways that offend our taste. Our priorities for self-advancement might be turned upside down. We might (gasp!) lose control and do something altruistic.

There’s that giggle again. *Will someone shut that kid up!* Laugh ... giggle ... snort. *Are you mocking me! I’m gonna kill that kid ...* multiple giggles, bigger laughs ...

Prayer:

God, I’m depressed that life is so empty ... and terrified it might be filled. Modernity is just one prolonged mid-life crisis. Help me out, kid! Amen.

JC and the Anxiety of Meaninglessness

Read John 4:1-42 (especially 25-26)

In the absence of truth, routine is all we have left. We've remarried and relocated, changed jobs and diet plans, switched churches and allegiances, doubted so much, and compromised so often, that "truth" is a joke. Different strokes for different folks. You can say "tomato", pray to whatever, and "get high" any way you want.

Consider the Samaritan Woman currently residing in Minneapolis. No *real* husband; no *real* vocation; no *real* thirst; no *real* water; no *real* faith. The only anchor in her existence is the routine of commuting to the well at 6am and returning home to watch "Wheel of Fortune" at 6pm. When what you do and why you do it is all relative, how you do it is all there is. She doubts God, but is fanatical about furniture. She wouldn't recognize Jesus if she met him in the supermarket, but wages holy war on the proper method of communion. And deep inside, she aches for grace that is absolute.

JC is absolute truth waiting for us to buy him coffee at the diner. In a matter of seconds, he cuts through our dodges, excuses, relativistic nonsense, and obsessions with trivia. He shows us what's *real*. He reveals the painful and provocative truth. He reveals himself. He *is* reality. He is the one and only absolute. In his presence, chaos becomes order and brokenness is healed. Soda pop, alcohol, espresso and sports aide, and even milk and bottled water, won't quench our thirst for meaning. Only Christ.

Prayer

God grant me the courage to break my routine and stop ranting about stupid things. You've been asking me to sit down and buy you a coffee for a long, long time. Here it is. Talk to me!

Jesus the Spiritual Guide (1)

Read Matthew 5:1-12; 7:24-29 (especially 7:28-29)

The best guide is one who has already explored the territory. They have been there, done that, and returned to tell the tale. More importantly, they are ready to go again and take you along. Their authority lies in their authenticity.

Why is the Sermon on the Mount so impressive? It is a kind of “powerpoint” show of life in the Spirit. This is it, Jesus says. This is what it looks like. Sure there is much more to say, much more to see, more places to explore, but these are the highlights. Some of it sounds pretty bizarre, like weird shadows in the Amazon jungle. Some of it looks awfully dangerous, like scaling Mount Everest. And some of it seems too good to be true, like gardens in the desert. This is life in the Spirit. Jesus has been there. He can take you there.

You know you want to go. The “Spirited” life! Life infused day and night with God’s Spirit! What’s holding you back? Debts to collect? Unfinished business? Loved ones to feed, graduate, or bury? Still seeking spiritual vaccinations so that you won’t catch something and die on the way? Tomorrow will be too late.

Maybe you don’t really want to go. Life in the Spirit is pretty rigorous. There are plenty of Pharisees urging you to slow down, play safe, invest wisely, retire early, give charitably, redecorate tastefully, and wear neutral colors because they go with everything. You can always buy roses. Why venture forth to smell the wildflowers?

Prayer

God, I want to go! Sign me up! Register me early! It’s the trip of a lifetime. Help me sell my possessions, reconcile my relationships, say goodbye to the past, shut the front door, step onto the subway, and go where you lead me.

Jesus the Spiritual Guide (2)

Read Luke 10:1-37 (especially 21-22)

The maze of life starts innocently enough. Mother sends us to school chiding “Take care of yourself!” Then it’s “Be nice”; “Let your sister play”; “Do good”; “Help those less fortunate”; and “Help those less fortunate *who don’t even know it yet*”. Save the cat. Save the family. Save the nation. Save the world. Overwhelmed yet?

We know the harvest is ripe and the laborers are few ... and we are ready to work. But where? How? Doing what? For how long? At what cost? With which partners? To achieve which success? The minute we start, somebody tells us we are doing the wrong thing, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and aren’t we stupid, insensitive, or faithless. Eventually we ask the big questions: *And who the heck is my “neighbor” anyway?* Help one victim here, but what about the zillions of other victims there? Try to help a zillion, and nobody gets saved. *Is there a priority here? Is there a divine triage for emergency room earth? Is it worth it? Does it really matter?*

Jesus guides the frantic philanthropist and the muddled missionary. Keep it simple. Do one saving act at a time. Keep focused. Enter just one micro-culture a day. When in doubt, always show mercy. Let judgment day happen on judgment day, and let old news be old news. Stay with today. Leave the rest of the asylum to God and to helpers you will never meet. An oh yes ... pay the bill.

Prayer

Lord, show me the person nearby that I like the least. Now show me how to help them; give me courage to do it. Now help me not care whether I succeed or fail, receive a reward or get kicked for my trouble. On the path of compassion, help me carry no purse, no bag, no sandals ... and no ego.

Jesus the Spiritual Guide (3)

Read Matthew 18:1-20 (especially 7 and 20)

Temptation! There's no escaping it. Television food commercials begin at 10pm because *they know we are hungry*. They always know. The world is a perverted Santa Claus, uncaring whether we are naughty or nice, but profoundly aware of what we want for Christmas and what price in sacrificed integrity we are prepared to pay for it. Even if we stop playing the game, avoid TV, internet, reading, human conversation, every luxury, and live in a cave, it finds us. Ask any medieval hermit. The temptations are worse: the lustful thoughts, hunger pains, and (most precious of all) the arrogance. The really good thing about Lent, for example, is telling everybody what you have given up for it.

If life is appetite, and appetite is life, there really isn't much point to living. The only way to make it endurable is to make the most of it. Capitalism is organized temptation. It brings people together in an endless cycle of tempting and being tempted. We can do it, and make a living off it, all at the same time. It works perfectly right up to the day you commit suicide.

There is another way. All that is required is two or three believers, and Jesus the Spiritual Guide will be there in your midst. Jesus will help you break free from organized temptation by holding you accountable to a higher purpose. Mutual accountability will be hard. It will require interventions to help you break free from addiction to temptation. It is only possible because Jesus will show you how.

Prayer

God, we're hopeless! Our guiding principle is "Where two or three are gathered together, there is a sales opportunity." Show us the way to break free. Let it start with gathering in your name.

Jesus the Spiritual Guide (4)

Read Luke 11:1-13 (especially 9-10)

The great quest of the postmodern world is to have a conversation between seekers and mentors. The search for that conversation is what makes Sunday morning, amateur sport, coffee break, and car pooling among the most treasured moments in culture. Unfortunately, the seekers are many and the mentors few. It doesn't take long to discover that the most articulate preacher, talented athlete, popular television hostess, and opinionated colleague is just as lost as we are. They just don't know it.

So what's a seeker to do? Look to yourself (you haven't found any answers so far); look to your friends (like asking your drinking buddies for advice on sobriety); look elsewhere (Asian fields look greener today, but who knows about tomorrow?). Looking to established religion is a long shot; looking to the school board and the university is highly doubtful; looking to science is barren; and looking to public leaders is a joke. Maybe there are no mentors and we should just give up. If you can't find anybody to answer questions, find hope, or open doors maybe there aren't any answers, there is no hope, and there is nothing beyond the door anyway.

Look to Jesus. He is the mentor. Best of all, he is readily available. Ask, and he can provide answers. Seek, and he can give hope. Knock and he can open a better future. Sure, it may take time, you will have to pay attention, and you may not like the answers. But who said the conversation would be easy?

Prayer

Lord, give me bread. Forgive my sin. Rescue me from temptation. We're asking, seeking, and knocking. Your Kingdom come. Bring it on. I'm ready. I think.

Christ the Perfect Human (1)

Read John 1:1-5 and 29-41 (especially 29-33)

Deeper than guilt, the human condition is stained by shame. Deep in our hearts we know. It is not that we have done a bad thing, but that we are a bad thing. Flawed; blemished; damaged goods. If it were only our deeds that condemn us, we could pay the price and walk free, but there is a more ineradicable problem. Even the saints have seen it and are humbled. In the face chronic human victimization, the humanist conviction in the essential goodness of humanity is a sham that cannot be sustained.

We are *not* good ... but we long to be pure. We long to erase the stain that colors our world gray. Even John the Baptist was a “stained man”, but he baptized hope: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” This is the pure one, the Perfect Human, an oxymoron if there ever was one. Yet he exists. He is the divine peroxide that can make us clean.

“Perfect Human” is another way of saying “incarnate God”. He is eternal word articulated into the brief sentence life, transforming it from resigned gibberish to exclamation of hope. The ancients were right about purity, but had the wrong sacrificial lamb. This one really is perfect. He is the only sinless human being. The blood of his heart will wash away the blood on our hands.

Prayer

Doomed to impurity, we had given up the hope of every being clean. Then came Christ. Wash us clean with the living water of your Spirit!

Christ the Perfect Human (2)

Read I Corinthians 15:12-33 (especially 12-14, 20-21)

Human life begins when innocence ends. Perhaps newborns know this, and that is why they cry the very second they leave the womb. Innocence is over and real living has begun. The crying will continue for however long accident and human ingenuity permit, hopefully interrupted with moments of laughter and joy, and then there will be casket and crematorium and tears again.

The intrusion of the Perfect Human into real living changes that doom. The Sinless One removes the stain of impurity that taints our lives; and the Deathless One removes the curse of death that haunts our living. His presence changes everything. One day there was no hope, and the next day there is every hope. This is no “divine zap” that will reward perfection with eternal life. Only pagans believe such silliness. This is the divine touch that overlooks imperfection by absolute love.

The Perfect Human is the perfect love. It is the love that wipes away every tear because suddenly there is nothing to grieve and everything to celebrate. Forevermore, sorrow will be only the interruption of happiness. This is the cornerstone of all our hope. If Christ were not deathless, then Jesus would not be sinless. The Perfect Human would be merely a *better* human, and that is no hope at all.

Saints have come and gone. The best leaders have purchased only a temporary peace. Superman cannot be everywhere at once. No one can do more than postpone the inevitable. Only a Perfect Human can emerge smiling from the womb, and laugh at death.

Prayer

God, every funeral, every sorrow, and every tear begs us to answer the question. Is it true or not? Is Jesus the Christ or not? It is the fork in our road. Beckon us in the right direction.

Christ the Perfect Human (3)

Read John 3:1-21 (especially 11-15)

We have all been bitten by a serpent, and the venom is coursing through our veins. Moses' desert solution was to make a fiery serpent and raise it on a pole, so that any serpent-bit traveler could look on it and live. God's more permanent solution is to raise the Perfect Human on a cross, so that any desperate person could look upon him and live.

Unfortunately, the metaphor is not quite adequate. Moses serpent allowed an otherwise healthy person to continue on their way. God's Perfect Human transforms an essentially unhealthy person into a new being. It is like climbing back into the womb again, so that *this time* you can emerge with joy rather than tears.

Birth and death are the defining moments of human-ness. Christ has re-defined them. We are born anew so that we might live forever. In-between we will live a different way, see things with a different perspective, walk with different friends, and pursue a different purpose. The Perfect Human models the perfect life. The sign that we are born anew is that we imitate that perfect life. We abandon the old addictions; reject the old cynicism; say goodbye to the old drinking companions; and forsake the old selfishness. We aim for perfection.

It is going to take more than seeing the cross. We are going to have to carry it, too, and go even further. One day we will let go of the cross, as Christ was raised from the cross, and follow him to heaven.

Prayer

My friends may not know me, my spouse may not recognize me, and I may weep to see myself in the mirror ... for I am no long my own, but thine. Make me a new person!

Christ the Perfect Human (4)

Read Romans 5:12 – 6:11 (especially verse 6:11)

Reality is whatever you are used to. We grow so accustomed to tears, sorrows, victimizations, selfishness, war, disease, hunger, poverty and betrayal that we assume it to be normal. “Welcome to reality!” “Just wait until you experience the real world!” Yet from the perspective of Eden, that memory eternally latent in our hearts where God walks among his people on the other side of sin, existence is un-reality. It is the photo negative of reality, with every color precisely reversed, and every nuance upside down, and every purpose turned in the opposite direction.

The Perfect Human is the “new normal”. This is reality ... not the insipid reversal of truth, beauty, and goodness in which we live. The problem is not that God is our fantasy, but that our existence is God’s nightmare. The Perfect Human appears in our nightmare as an alien creature, yet somehow very familiar. He is the photo positive of our lives ... what we are “in reality” if only reality could be restored.

Only by entering the nightmare can God return us to normal. We awaken to see things in the real light of day. We are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Suddenly truth, beauty, and goodness color our formerly negative lives. What was ambiguous becomes clear. We are awash in color, right side up, and going in the correct direction. All our lives we have tried to live down our shame. Now ... live it up!

Prayer

God lift the veil before our eyes, and dispel the fog that turns our world into dismal gray. Take away our sin, and remake us the way we are supposed to be. We yearn to be normal once again.

The Courage to Participate (1)

Read II Corinthians 3:12 – 4:12 (especially 4:8-10)

Goodbye emptiness! Say no to meaningless! Our need is not for knowledge, but courage. We require the courage to participate in the world ... to throw ourselves into the service of others ... and to engage wholeheartedly in the eating, working, loving, labor of life. It is not important that we know the why, the how, the “wherefore”, and the “what now” of existence. It is important only that we act for goodness sake!

Life in the Spirit is existence “in spite of” and “as if”. In spite of the disgraceful, underhanded, cunning of the world, we act as if people were honorable, honest, and trustworthy. Jesus the Christ, Spiritual Guide and Perfect Human, will not let our courage fail. Afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, nevertheless we shall never be crushed, despairing, forsaken, or destroyed. We can light up the world, because God has lit up our hearts.

We do not lose heart. True, we may not be able to explain evil, guarantee health, win every battle, or solve every problem, but neither will they overwhelm us. We do not lose heart. We will not resort to the lottery, contemplate suicide, escape into alcohol, run away, or give up. We will continue to participate in God’s world, but more importantly, in God’s plan.

It is so easy to drop out of life! We could invest in stocks, renovate the kitchen, retreat to the cottage, take care of our own, and hunker down until the rain of terror stops long enough to go shopping. We will not do it. We are the vessels of God’s transforming power carrying hope to the world.

Prayer

God grant the courage to face the emptiness of life-in-between. Let us not lose heart, but guided by your companionship, and rescued by your perfection, bring us back to the real world of your intention.

The Courage to Participate (2)

Read Mark 5:1-19 (especially 18-19)

Eventually life-in-between comes to this. Either we will beg Jesus the Christ to leave us alone; or we will beg Jesus the Christ to allow us to accompany him. Either way, we are in the posture of supplication. We are essentially powerless to accomplish the one or the other. This is the point of absolute powerlessness to which life-in-between inevitably leads.

Choose your supplication. Are you in or out? Stay behind or go with? And now beg for it, because only God can make it happen. Only God can make life happen. Only God can make meaning happen. Only God can fill the void. Once the demons have all been destroyed, what is left? There is *nothing*, except you, still breathing, but powerless to do more than inhale and exhale. What will you beg God to do with you?

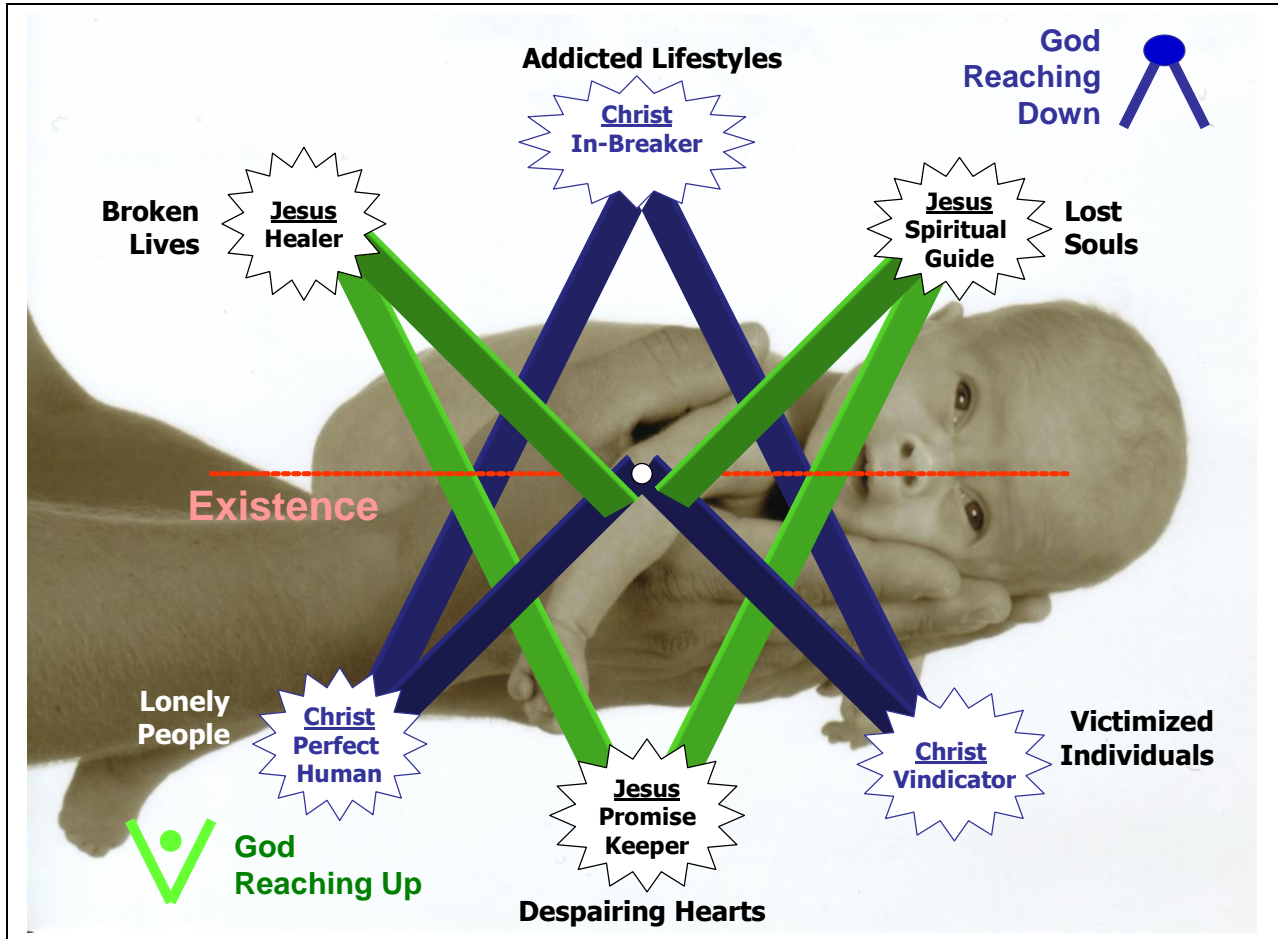
The beginning of life is the courage to opt in and go with. Don't be a coward and stay home, or the demons will come back. Go with. Follow. Participate in Christ. Walk where he walks. Love those whom he loves. Opt into his mission.

God's grace creates a third option for life-in-between: send forth. You will not be left behind, yet it is not the right time to go with, and so you must go forth. Go forth again into life-in-between *and tell your story*. Tell how the Spiritual Guide led you to out of emptiness, and how the Perfect Human gave you meaningfulness, and why this day, this hour, and this minute, you have one supremely good reason *not* to surrender hope: Jesus the Christ.

Prayer

God grant me the courage to face the meaninglessness of life-in-between. Let us opt in. Let us go with. Include us in your journey. In your greater purpose lies our hope for fulfillment.

Life-on-the-Edge



**God, rescue me from the anxieties of
Fate and Death;**

Grant me the Courage to Separate;

**And help me experience Jesus the Christ
Promise Keeper
and
In-Breaker**

Life-on-the-Edge

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14 (especially 13-14)

What is “life-on-the-edge”? It is life on the brink of crisis and opportunity. It is the peril that precipitates change. It is the new job; the new relationship; the new location; and the next stress. It is the intentional choice to stand out, move to the front, expose yourself, and be yourself. Life-on-the-edge is about doing something and being someone. Shake your fist at fate, turn your back on genetics, and seize the day.

New meaning emerges from life struggle. It is like arising from the grave and reconstructing the dry bones, or exiting a dark tunnel and breathing fresh air. Every victim is a potential entrepreneur. Life has shattered our illusions, and now we make sense out of life. We create. God creates. We participate in God’s creating. We expand our logic and extend our imagination.

This frenzy of creativity ... a skyscraper, an idea, a just war, an equitable peace, a theology, or a clever new widget ... is it God? Is it me? Is it God in me? Is it me in God? We glory in infinite possibilities and dread infinite risks. What a rush! Isn’t this where we are supposed to be, all the time, at the extreme? X-treme sports, X-treme affluence, X-treme intelligence, X-treme religion, X-treme benevolence, and X-treme ecstasy? Take care on the edge! You may fly ... and you may fall.

The question that lingers is this. God is there, all right, but is God there to catch you or push you?

Prayer

Faster, God, faster! Slower, God, slower! God harness my ego to your divine will. Align my imagination to your divine vision. Use my strength to achieve your purpose.

JC and the Anxiety of Fate

Read John 9:1-12 (especially 3-5)

We are doomed ... maybe. What dooms you? Perhaps it is genetics, or social conditions. We are doomed by poverty, upbringing, a 10% chance of being killed in an accident, a 40% chance of cancer, a 50% chance of divorce, and a 100% inevitability of an eventually ignominious death. We are subject to relentless logic, cause and effect, chains of events, chaos theory, little things, big things, the will of the gods, and the Will of the God. We are a tragedy on wheels, and running out of gasoline.

We are doomed ... probably. It is that nagging uncertainty which causes even more anxiety. If we could be certain of our fate, at least we could roll over and die. You could do it nobly, and I could do it selfishly, one being as good as another. You say "tomato" and I say "tomato", but we'll both get squashed. But maybe not. What if nobility or selfishness makes an eternal difference?

No, let's face it. Life is an eternal night. We can light a fire, but it will burn out. The sins of the parents will catch up with their children, just as the sins of their parents caught up with them. They migrated, we pay the litigation. We pollute, our children will gasp for air. If only there were a light in this darkness that would never go out! If only we could believe our fate was God's opportunity! If only we could hope that inevitable doom would turn out to be absolute grace! Well ... probably not ...

Prayer

God, we're dying here. Can you do something about it?

JC and the Anxiety of Death

Read Mark 4:35-41 (especially 39-40)

Whichever philosopher said “*you are only truly free when you have faced your own death*” must have already gotten tenure at the university. Nobody really faces their own death. Death is that-which-cannot-be-faced. Therefore, nobody is really free. Even when you have faced the possibility of death ... the wartime crisis, near-miss accident, or close call in surgery ... the moment you realize you *survived* you fabricate illusions again. The only people who genuinely do not fear death are dead people.

We are scared to death of death. Every appointment with the beautician or the doctor; every fashion statement; and every purchase of even the smallest item; the entire consumer industry is an attempt to avoid death. Every wrinkle, every sneeze, and every need can signal an abyss from which there is no escape. We run and dodge and rationalize and laugh, but inside there is the gnawing anxiety that turns our latte sour. The wind suddenly rises, the waves pound, and our little lifeboat fills with water. Where’s Jesus? Is he asleep or something?

It’s not about facing your own death. It’s about believing in God’s control over your life. It’s not about your power over death, but Jesus’ power over death. It’s about faith. At the very instant of death, when you are scared out of your wits, do you believe? Will God be on the other side? Yikes! Maybe it’s easier to talk to that philosopher fellow ...

Prayer

Death is not the end, because God is not done. It’s easy to say now, but hard to believe tomorrow. Speak, Lord, and the storm and sea will obey you!

Jesus the Promise-Keeper (1)

Read Matthew 10:26-42 (especially 37-39)

Jesus' basic promise is the he will come ... he will be there ... at the right time, in the right place, with the appropriate grace. What happens after that is less clear. He will come from within history, to change history, and all we really know is that the course of history will never be the same.

It is comforting to think that his promises will always be favorable to our personal lives. It's nice to know that hairs of our heads are numbered, no matter how few or how grey, and that we are of more value than sparrows. It is less comforting to know that when he comes our deepest secrets will be revealed, and our most profound loyalties will be tested. Our self-worth is not intrinsic, but borrowed, and the degree to which we follow Christ matches the extent to which we are blessed by God.

God does not promise peace, nor does God promise judgment. God simply promises himself ... or herself ... what do we really know about God? We know God is revealed fully in Jesus. But what do we really know about Jesus? We know that he hates what we are, and loves what we once were and what we might become. We know that he knows us. Jesus *really* knows us: every hair; every secret; every motive, bias, excuse, dream, and action. If there is any priority in us that is higher than absolute loyalty to God and God's purpose, he will know. Come, Lord Jesus, come! But beware what you ask for ... you might receive it.

Prayer

God, keep your promise to be with us ... and help us keep our promise to be with you. You are the promise-keeper, and we are the promise-breakers, and both fear and rejoice that you will hold us to our word and your Word.

Jesus the Promise-Keeper (2)

Read Luke 4:16-30 (especially 18-21)

The promise of Jesus is a “good news – bad news” experience. The good news is that Jesus will bring abundant life for the poor, sight for the blind, rescue for captives, and justice for the oppressed. The bad news is that Jesus is coming for the rest of us as well. The question in each individual’s mind is whether this promise is good or bad news *for me*. Jesus’ comment that the first shall be last, and the last first, is downright alarming.

Some people are clearly poor, blind, captive, and oppressed. They know it. The world knows it. God’s knows it. Jesus will help them

Some people are poor, blind, captive, and oppressed, but they don’t know it. The world doesn’t recognize it. However, God knows it. Jesus will reveal it.

Some people are very rich, see clearly, are free to do whatever they choose, and enjoy enormous power. They know it. God knows it. Jesus will deal with it.

After all, poverty, blindness, captivity, and oppression are relative terms. “Compared to what?” The standard of comparison is not a statistic, but a person. We measure ourselves *compared to Jesus* ... and since Jesus included as kin the *least blessed* and *most needful* people of the world, we compare ourselves to them. You are “some people”. Know it or not, like it or not, you are poor, blind, captive, and oppressed. Know it or not, like it or not, Jesus is coming for you.

Prayer

God, today I am poor; tomorrow I will be blind; the day after captive; and next week oppressed. By the end of the month, I will be poor again. Despairing, I try to climb out over the other bodies in the pit, as they do over me. Reach down to all of us, Lord, and let us go free.

Jesus the Promise-Keeper (3)

Read Matthew 21:33-46 (especially verse 42)

Jesus will come at harvest time. Whenever the mission field is ripe, expect him.

One dilemma, of course, is to discern when it is “harvest time”. Shall we define it socially, whenever the world is yearning for God? Shall we define it culturally, whenever a certain nation, demographic, or affinity group is ready to listen for God? Or shall we define it personally, whenever your own heart is open to God? Or all of the above?

The other dilemma is that it is Jesus who will determine if the harvest is ripe ... not us. His appearance may be unexpected. It might go hard on church members and leaders who were supposed to be missionaries amid the harvest, if Jesus finds us arguing in the bunkhouse about musical styles and administrative polity.

God promises to lay a new foundation for individuals, cultures, and the world. The cornerstone is Jesus. Everything will connect to Jesus, and be held together by Jesus, and Jesus will bear the weight of the entire mission that is built on top of that foundation. The problem is that everyone wants to be a “cornerstone”, and nobody wants to be a “building block”. We have founded our churches, and our lives, on every conceivable cornerstone except Jesus, and the whole structure creaks in imminent collapse.

The promise is always ironic. The religious institutions which claim to expect Jesus, have the most to fear when he arrives; and the publics that reject Jesus have the most to be gained when he appears.

Prayer

God grant that when the Lord of the harvest arrives, whatever the hour, wherever the need, that Jesus will find me and my church *in the mission field* rather than in the board room.

Jesus the Promise-Keeper (4)

Read Mark 14:43-52 (especially 48-49)

The promise is that there is a plan. It is an intervention plan, not a strategic plan. We all know that time goes fast, life changes, and revolutions are a daily occurrence. The tactics that worked yesterday must be replaced by new ones tomorrow. My own needs are unpredictable enough. Imagine the complications of four billion constantly changing lives.

Yet God has a plan of intervention. There has always been a plan, from the beginning of time, which will determine the outcome of history at the end of time. Jesus is the crucial part of the plan. Nothing about his birth, life, or death was an accident. At the right time, in the right place, and in the right circumstances ... the right man, did the right thing, for the right people. The plan was ambiguous at the time, and it's ambiguous today, but the plan is working.

How do we know the plan is working? Because God's plan is to render us naked as the day we were born. We can follow the plan just so far, and then we are swept up in the plan, stripped of all our excuses and illusions, and absolutely vulnerable to God's will. We who sought God's mercy are suddenly at God's mercy, and never have we felt so naked and alone. That's the plan.

The next part of the plan is that God will forgive us, claim us, embrace us, transform us, and send us to join Jesus at the next point of intervention.

Prayer

God, strip me of all illusions. Let me be absolutely dependent on your grace. Clothe me with the real truth, and use me for your divine purpose.

Christ the In-Breaker (1)

Read John 11:1-44 (especially 43, 44)

“Lazarus, come out!” The word of command breaks into our world unexpected and in power. Of all the things his disciples thought he would do, this was not one of them. Surely he came to Bethany as a therapist to console, grieve, and reassure; or he came as a priest to perform the ritual and burn incense; or he came as a teacher to explain the pain; or he came as a prophet to risk his life for a principle of hope. Yet he comes with few words, weeping eyes, stern warnings, brusque commands, with urgent movements. “Come out!” And Lazarus comes out! And nothing is the same again.

He intrudes. His whole entrance is an offence to the delicacy of the moment and the fragility of emotion. The family called for mourners and received a tornado. He is an elemental force, greater than death. He astonishes. He upsets the logical balance of the world. The inevitability of death has not been replaced by the *possibility* of life, but by the *inevitability* of life.

Even now we can list our rationalizations. Lazarus was not *really* dead, we think. There was a tragic error, and Jesus corrected it. We cannot allow ourselves to imagine that Lazarus was *really* dead, and *really* raised, and that Jesus *really* commanded it and that it *really* happened. Yet it is true, and we have to re-think the universe. Faith is not an educational discussion anymore. It is a life-and-death matter. Will we rot or will we rise? Make up your mind.

Prayer

Lord, inside our tombs your cry is muffled. What? What’s that you say? “Come out?”
Can we yet come out of our personalized sepulchers to breathe fresh air?

Christ the In-Breaker (2)

Read Romans 7:14-25 (especially 24-25)

How many self-destructive habits, chronically denied, can one individual fit into any given day? Unfortunately, there are more addictions that we think. These are the demons that have taken up residence in our minds. They are killing us mentally, emotionally, physically, and relationally, and even if we realize what is happening we can't seem to do anything about it. Wretched people that we are, who shall rescue us from this body of death?

Christ is the devouring fire, the whirlwind, the tsunami of grace that can purge our lives, blow away the dirt, and wash us clean. He comes at the moment of our deepest despair and greatest shame. He comes to free us from the prison of our desires and from the isolation of our egos. He empowers us to be what we were meant to be, and what deep inside we want to be, but which for long years we never thought possible.

Prophetic power is not enough. God has warned us, and even when we listened, and repented, and tried our best, even then we could not break the chains that held us to sin. So God comes in apocalyptic power. The macro-cosmic Christ comes to burst our micro-cosmic obsessions.

Make no mistake: this sin that besets us is "original". We were born in self-centeredness and live in self-centeredness, and we shall never be free without God-centeredness. Original sin demands an original Savior. He is the first, the best, and the last Savior we will ever need.

Prayer

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! I was dead, and am alive again! I was lost, and am found! I was trapped, and now I am free!

Christ the In-Breaker (3)

Read John 16:16-33 (especially verse 33)

Total joy. Absolute peace. These moments of ecstasy are the marks of Christ's presence. Now they are unpredictable and temporary, a taste that fades, leaving a memory and a yearning for more. Christ has passed by, stood in the room, touched a relationship, caused a smile, calmed a spirit, and slipped away. His scent lingers. It is an aroma that clings like incense, and others can smell it on our breath and in our clothing and take heart. Christ has moved on in mission, breaking into another moment, another prison, and another life.

The world seeks to pollute his memory. The stench of evil deadens our senses and camouflages Christ. Strife, hunger, poverty, and disease diversify into a myriad social pathologies, and we strain to find that joy and peace once again. There it is! Do you see it? Can you feel it? In the end, nothing can hide it. The world cannot stop it. Yet it comes again from unexpected directions. Christ is tricky. He weaves and dodges between the barriers between God and humanity, sifting into the corners of our minds.

One day our joy will be complete and our peace will be fulfilled. Yet there are miles to travel, and challenges to face, and threats to overcome. We may even be driven to deny Christ, doubt victory, and run for our lives. Still he is there, working, moving, freeing, and saving; an relentless force for good. The world has innumerable threats. Christ has unimaginable power. He overcomes the world.

Prayer

God, restore our sense of smell. It is nearly overwhelmed by the pollutants of the world. Helps us smell the aroma of Christ. Let us recapture, even for a moment, the joy and peace of God. And let others smell it on our breath.

Christ the In-Breaker (4)

Read Hebrews 12:1-29 (especially 25-29)

The frown of the Cosmic Christ portends a shake-up in the world order. We like to think of his smile. He is the “friendly” Christ, the approachable, laughing, generous, easygoing, beneficent brother. Or he is the paternal Christ, the kindly, gentle, courteous, expectant, benevolent grandfather. His frown surprises us. We did not imagine him to be a consuming fire. He is going to shake us, shape us, and send us.

God comes to shake the sin out of the world, but also to discipline his sons and daughters. This is no 20th century discipline that is all gain and no pain. It’s not just positive reinforcement, “time out” in the corner, and “no sweets for you today, young man!” This is “spare the rod and spoil the child”, Old Testament discipline. If God let his own Son suffer on the cross, it is unlikely he will let off all his adopted children with a mere scolding. Let the church beware!

God’s gonna shake the world, and you with it, in order to establish a realm that cannot be shaken. The silliest question of all is to ask when. Children, the shaking has already begun! What do you think conscience is all about? Already the cracks in civilization are widening. Beware lest you fall through the cracks!

Yet it is not punishment. It is discipline. Unlimited love expects unconditional service. You are not called to wait for it, but to step forward, risk all, and live as if “Kingdom come” has already arrived.

Prayer

Discipline hurts, Lord, and your discipline hurts the most. Remind us of the love behind the frown. Show us the love extending beyond our pride. Send us to love the world as ferociously as you love us.

The Courage to Separate (1)

Read Luke 9:57 – 10:12 (especially 10:2-3)

In times of trouble the price of gold goes up. Our natural reaction to the threat of fate is to save, stockpile, hoard, and maximize non-taxable benefits. This primordial instinct for self-preservation is rooted in human nature, yet, from divine perspective, is only another fruit of original sin. It is instinctive selfishness, so different from the way God wanted us to be. God assumes that the basic instinct of humanity should be self-sacrifice. That is how God is, and we were originally created in the image of God.

It takes courage to separate oneself from the entanglements of the world. God sends us: take no suitcase; leave behind your wallet and credit cards; empty your bank account; forget spare shoes. God wants us to be as ascetic as monks and as mobile as pilgrims. Separate from the world ... from the *things* of the world ... even from the *instinct for self-preservation* that is the norm of the world. Jesus demands the disciples speak to no one on the road. He knows them too well. He's afraid if they speak to anyone, they'll be talked out of it.

The radical expectation of Christ makes it clear that Christians are distinguished, not by denominations, but by degrees of cowardice. Jesus says *follow me*, and we say "Be right with you, Lord, but first ..." Our conditions for service seem quite reasonable ... family responsibility, duties of friendship, etc. Yet God's demand for separation from the world, and allegiance to mission, is uncompromising. After all, God has a lot more on His eternal mind that you and me. He has a world to rescue.

Prayer

It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord! Standing at the mall in the need of prayer!

The Courage to Separate (2)

Read Ephesians 4:1-16 and 6:10-20 (especially 6:19-20)

So often the earliest apostles addressed the church as a whole. When they say “you”, they mean everybody. Yet there comes a crucial moment when they say “you”, and mean you personally and in particular. It is one thing to walk in company, and quite another to stand alone.

There is a difference between “all are called” and “I am called”. You step up, step out, and stand all by yourself. When the ecclesiastical body is making excuses, you stand apart. When the army is retreating, you step forward. When the enemy has you (plural) surrounded, you (singular) stand firm. It is the courage to risk martyrdom every day at the office, at school, on vacation, or on the playground. Be who you are. Be what you are. No matter what happens.

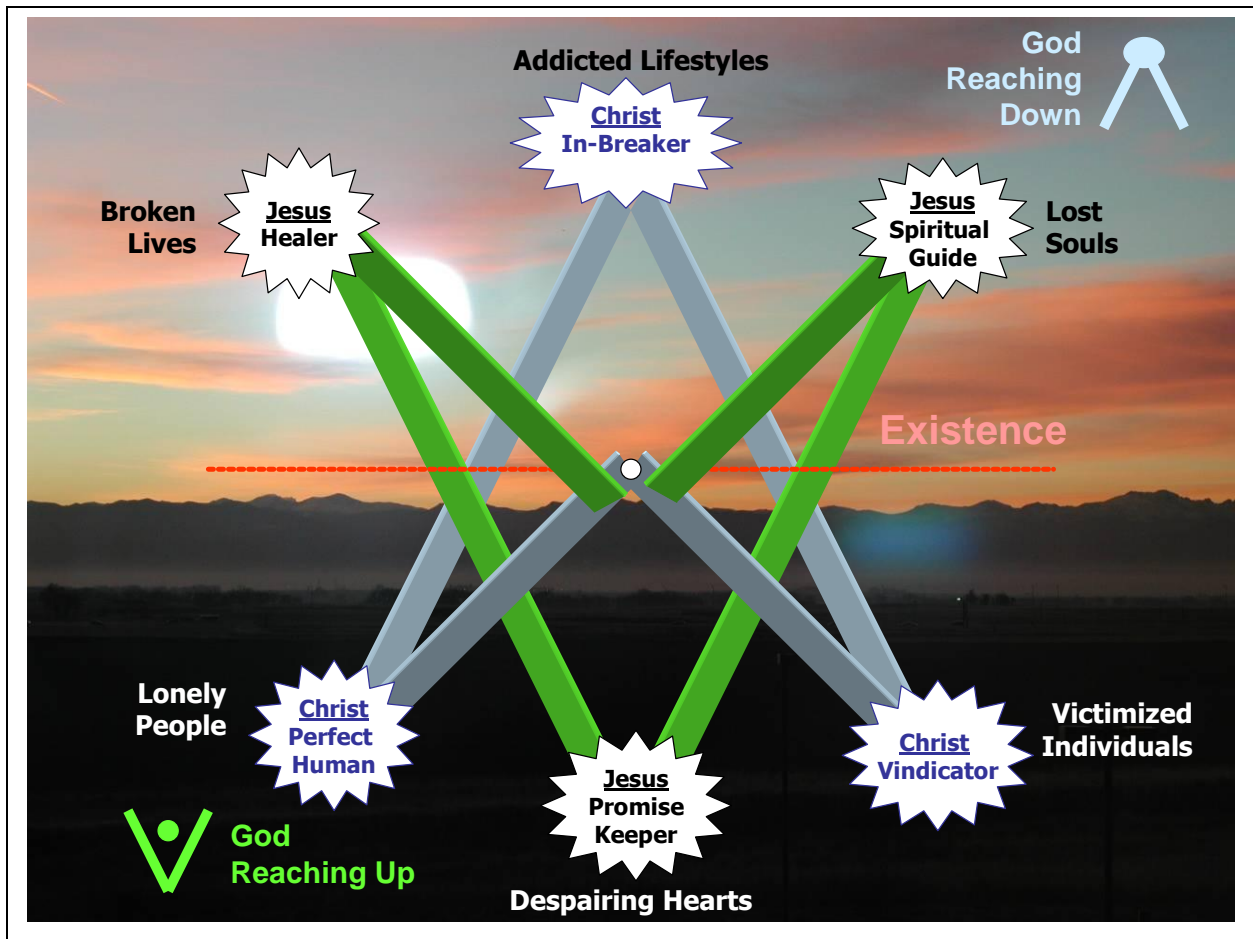
Although you were sent out with no purse, no shoes, and no bags, God suddenly equips you in the hour of need. It is uncomfortably militant: breastplate of righteousness, helmet of salvation, shield of faith, sword of spirit, etc. It’s basically the whole armor of God. The more you are alone, the more you are with God. The more you align yourself to God’s mission, the more God blesses you with strength.

The best way to face death is to be alive in Christ. Rather than wait for the unknown to overtake you, advance into the unknown confident that there is a power greater than death to defend you. It is not good fortune, but unconditional faith that favors the bold.

Prayer

God grant me the courage to utterly rely on your strength. Embolden us to stand in the face of hopeless odds, confident in ultimate victory.

Life-at-Peace



**God, rescue me from the anxieties of
Guilt and Condemnation;**

Grant me the Courage to Accept Acceptance;

**And help me experience Jesus the Christ
Healer
and
Vindicator**

Life-at-Peace

Read Micah 4:1 – 5:2 (especially 4:5-7)

What is “life-at-peace”? It is the most illusive of all states of being. No matter how wise “in-between” or how intrepid “on-the-edge”, the result is most often frustration. Life-at-Peace is the absence of ambiguity: restrictions, obligations, structures, dilemmas, fears, anxieties, and doubts. It is also the absence of ego: striving, yearning, searching, straining, competing, risking, and experimenting. It is a resolution and rest, born of compassion and conviction.

Walk in the name of the Lord. Swords are melted into ploughshares. Struggle is resolved in order; searching is resolved in being found; and harmony is synchronized with infinity. It is difficult to imagine, and we would disbelieve it if once, occasionally, at the right time, in a sacred state, we had not experienced a foretaste of promise. Harmony is such a small twist of fate away, and yet such a huge leap of faith to achieve.

One wonders how Micah died. Was he pinioned on the sword point of some Assyrian corporal, gazing expectantly toward Bethlehem Ephrathah? And did he experience in fleeting ecstasy a vision of the Word of the Lord, pre-existent, yet emerging triumphant from the gates of Jerusalem? How will I die? What will I see?

Real serenity lies not in accepting what cannot be changed, but in being accepted by ONE who has the power to transform. Peace is what results when the *necessity* of incarnation has been removed, and God is all in all.

Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept acceptance, the courage to change existence, and the wisdom to know my limitations.

JC and the Anxiety of Guilt

Read Mark 2:1-12 (especially 8-11)

We are besieged by guilt. It is the relentless virus that corrupts our every text message, and the unforgiving enemy that stalks our sleep. I did it. I'm at fault. It's my mistake. I am responsible. See that betrayal over there? Remember that hurt just days ago? I did that. I can deny it, weep over it, laugh about it, or try to correct it, but none of it will assuage the guilt. We live under the constant damnation: "Shame on you!"

Given the choice, would you prefer to be vindicated or healed? Would you rather be cured of cancer and live in shame; or forgiven of guilt and die of disease? Would you rather remain paralyzed but free in spirit ... or absolutely fit and enslaved by regret? JC stands at the intersection of the finite and the infinite, and only he understands ... and controls ... the interconnection of body and soul.

We started getting guilty at an early age. We couldn't help it. Self-preservation made it inevitable. Aging is simply a matter of longer apologies. We live in constant anxiety that somehow our infirmities are only what we deserve. We are wrong, of course. Disease and accident are not our fault. Or are they? Is there some deeper tragedy here, in which self-preservation ultimately leads to self-destruction? Is there a link between the healing of our bodies and the vindication of our souls ... between healthy living and purity of heart? If only God would say to me, "Rise, take up your life, and walk!"

Prayer

God, the troubles I've seen are as nothing compared to the troubles I've caused. The impurity of my heart makes me sick. If only I could find four good men who would carry me into your presence.

JC and the Anxiety of Condemnation

Read John 8:1-11 (especially 10-11)

“Guilty as charged!” The only thing worse than feeling guilty all the time is the worry that one day you will be condemned for it. Someone will discover the hidden diary of our hearts and publish it. Some spouse will discover our wanton thoughts, and punch us. Some watchdog will discover our clever financial or spiritual book keeping and sue us. Some victim will discover who really was responsible, and assassinate us. The truth is none of us doubts that there is a judgment day. Yes indeed, it will come.

Ironically, we will probably be convicted of something for which we are quite innocent. There is a grim justice in being wrongfully convicted for a rare moment of innocence, knowing that we deserve much worse for things as yet unknown. It must give the devil huge entertainment. We cry “Innocent!” with feeble truthfulness, and all Hades erupts in laughter to shout back “Guilty as hell!”

The anxiety of condemnation leads us into endless subterfuges of righteous indignation. I daresay someone will berate me for my bad language, and I shall take refuge in appeals to metaphor and hyperbole. We will both dance away from the unpleasant truth, hoping our quarrel will drown out the panic in our hearts. Unfortunately, we deserve everything we get, and the sooner we face our depravity the sooner we might receive salvation.

There is only one way this harlotry of ours is going to end, namely, in a hail of stones. Too late hoping for compassion from the crowd! They are too busy avoiding their own list of crimes. One can only hope for a divine intervention.

Prayer

Help, Lord! Our back is to the wall, and they’re picking up stones to throw! Do something!

Jesus the Healer (1)

Read Matthew 8:1-17 (especially verse 10)

It seems to come so easily for Jesus, this healing thing. He seeks no glory in it. He doesn't save his magic for celebrities, or surround himself with photographers, or make a scene for the national news. Some old nonentity says, "Jesus, help me!" and he says "Sure!" and bang it's done ... move on ... next. He even seems to have long-distance capabilities. It doesn't require his actual presence. One has the impression that a few miles or a few galaxies don't make any difference. Healing on Earth and healing on Jupiter are just as simple.

Yet the simplicity belies a deeper complexity. The healing of the body seems tied to the yearning of the spirit. Faith is required for grace to happen. Some sublime confidence or trust is needed. Modern people raised in skepticism sigh a collective "Uh-oh!" because we cannot sincerity imitate the certainty of the centurion. Yet there is usually no mention of such articulate faith among ordinary human beings. No liturgies, just need. No grandiose claims, just yearning. Lepers like us are not known for theological sophistication. Maybe grace is required for faith to happen.

Which came first, the healing of the spirit or the healing of the body? Do we first overcome skepticism, and then feel His touch; or do we come to wholeness, and then figure out who did it? That's the unique thing about incarnation. It is difficult to know where finitude ends and infinity begins. We only know it happens around Jesus.

Prayer

It's just a simple, complicated request, Lord. Will you heal me? Can I hear you say "I will; be clean?"

Jesus the Healer (2)

Read Luke 17:11-21 (especially 20-21)

There it is again, this connection between healing and faith. It always seems that faith emerges where you least expect it. It's not the Israelite, but the Samaritan; not the churchy person, but the pagan. One suspects the other nine lepers went away celebrating that they finally got what they deserved; while the tenth leper realized he got what he never deserved. Can one really count physical health, and lingering selfishness, as healing? Or does real healing cleanse the soul as well as the body?

Jesus healed a disproportionate number of lepers. Leprous bodies were associated with impure souls in the ancient world. Healing the one implied healing the other. But one wonders about those nine lepers. Perhaps they rejoined their families, renewed their career paths, relit their backyard barbecues, and partied hearty to the end of their days. Poor former lepers! They never knew what really happened. How many times have we been healed and failed to realize it.

He touched us, and nine out of ten lepers think only of themselves. *He* talked to us, and our souls were silent. *He* was in the room; we left the room. We're still searching, and *He* was there all the time. Only the tenth leper returned to fall at his feet. One can only guess that he returned to his friends to give them hope, shared his faith, got in trouble with the authorities, and died an untimely and ignominious death. Yet the tenth leper knew it was worth it.

Prayer

God, the hard part is not being healed, but knowing what to do with our healing. Let us bask in your presence.

Jesus the Healer (3)

Read Mark 5:21-43 (especially 39-41)

It must be difficult for God to find the right words. Weeping onlookers probably thought Jesus comment about the dead child being “asleep” to be in poor taste. At best it provoked laughter, and at worst scorn. The daughter of the ruler of the synagogue was dead. Better to face reality, seek therapy, and move on.

Yet Jesus insists she is “asleep”. He will say the same of Lazarus. His followers will continue to use the same terminology, although modern funeral directors have long since given it up as insensitive and unprofessional. Is it a metaphor, or is Jesus fighting for words to describe phenomenon even funeral directors and therapists do not really understand? He is like a time traveler trying to explain light speed to a Neanderthal. It gave the cave men a good laugh.

We are worse than Neanderthals, and Jesus is more than a time traveler. Death just isn't what we are so convinced it is. It's more akin to sleep; living is more akin to a dream; and heaven is more akin to true wakefulness. What we have taken as reality is only perception, and we can scarcely imagine what “reality” truly is. Healing is closer to restoration than creation, and by extension, death is closer to transition than cessation. How does Jesus *say* that? He says the child is “asleep”.

Still, we are unconvinced. All kidding aside, let's get some real therapy, have a real cremation, dry our tears, and forge grimly ahead. Perhaps if Jesus himself were to rise from the dead, we might believe?

Prayer

God, heal us from the greatest affliction of all, death itself. Would that we would wake from this dream into the real world of your love!

Jesus the Healer (4)

Read John 5:1-18 (especially 17-18)

“Do you want to be healed?” Stupid question! *Of course* we want to be healed. Why would we *not* want to be healed? How long has it been, living among this multitude of invalids, waiting for just one generous person to beat out the competition and carry us into the water? Waiting has been our life.

Waiting has also been our excuse. We have grown accustomed to making life a matter of “me”: my shortcomings, my paralysis; my lack of gifts, my inability to accept a calling. “Better let the pastor do it ... I’m too sick.” Besides, the company of invalids is not bad company. We visit with each other, commiserate, play cards, go to church “when we are up to it”, and complain about the inattention of our relatives. Low expectation living is a pleasant thing.

Now we are healed and all that is lost. Sudden sinlessness, like instant mobility, is a shock. It’s not about “me” anymore. It’s about some other poor stranger. We even try to forget the name of our benefactor. Who was that healing masked man? Jesus? Buddha? Thor? Then Jesus comes a second time: *Congratulations! Sin no more, now!* No wonder we reported him to the authorities. *It’s Jesus, all right!*

Transformation takes awhile. After the healing comes the calling. From those to whom much is given, much is expected. OK, we can walk. Now we decide with whom to walk, where to walk, and for what purpose we walk. We’re no longer a companionship of invalids, but a companionship of pilgrims.

Prayer

After the waiting, comes the healing. After the healing, comes the calling. After the calling comes the pilgrimage. And after the pilgrimage, comes the peace. Praise God.

Christ the Vindicator (1)

Read Matthew 25:1-46 (especially 31-36)

It is wonderful to be trusted! Trusted with the car keys and the party preparations; with the children; the money; the business; the homestead; the mission. Everyone is safe, everything thrives, every investment grows, and every person is blessed. We have been trusted, and proven worthy of that trust.

The greatest sin is the betrayal of trust. Smash the car, spoil the wedding, hurt the children, squander the money, ruin the business, damage the homestead, and lose the mission. Sure, accidents happen and mistakes are made, accepted and forgiven. Negligence and abuse are something else.

When Christ returns to discover the mess we made out of life, we will all point fingers. He did it. She did it worse. They are responsible. Nobody realized. It's only partly my fault ... and not really. The devil made me do it. Meanwhile, life is littered with hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, enslaved strangers ... and we are responsible for them and also among them. Only God's wisdom can sort it out. Only Christ's compassion can reconcile this sorry mess.

People waste a lot of time debating if and when Christ will come again. It's all a dodge to avoid facing up to our betrayal of trust. Do we really think we will not be held accountable? The "when" and the "how" are irrelevant. Only the inevitability is relevant. Persist in our trust. Watch for his return. And get ready to throw ourselves on the floor and ask for forgiveness.

Prayer

Lord, our ancestors made a mess of a good thing; we're trying to make the best of a bad mess; and we need you to make it all good again. Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!

Christ the Vindicator (2)

Read 1 John 4:7 – 5:11 (especially 5:4-5, 11)

Everybody knows love is what makes the world go round. Love is a good thing. The only problem is that we do it so rarely and so imperfectly. We are so busy with ourselves that we don't get around to it very often, and when we manage to love we do it badly. On one hand, we have fine ideals, romantic literature, marriage vows, and philanthropy. On the other hand, we have bad behavior, pornography, divorce, and social disaster. Something is missing. Love isn't enough.

Christ is enough. God is love, and God's Son is the perfect role model. It is not just that in faith we see what real love looks like; but that through faith we are capable of real love. We can do it often and well, because Christ has done it eternally and perfectly. Indeed, the closer we are to Christ, the better we become at the art of loving. Our behavior is kinder; our literature is profounder; our marriages and friendships are deeper; and our good works are better.

This connection between closeness to Christ, and ability to love, is the distinguishing feature of Christian faith. Love is not any relationship, but a particular relationship on which every relationship hinges. The world thinks that by loving, it will come to God. We believe that only by coming to God, can we be loving. This is the victory over the world. It is the power to actually do what most people want to do, but can't. Christ can ... so we can.

Prayer

Lord, release our love, by loving you. Perfect our love, by filling us. And in this sign, we shall conquer.

Christ the Vindicator (3)

Read Luke 7:36-50 (especially verse 47)

. The power of God is revealed in acts of extraordinary generosity. We usually think of vindication as “judgment”, but this is to think as the world thinks. God’s redemptive purpose supersedes our human expectations for punishment, vengeance, and satisfaction. Jesus is most visible, not on a throne, but beside the lowly victim.

Our capacity to love is directly proportionate to the magnitude of forgiveness received. If it is true that those who love much have been forgiven much, then whenever you see a great lover, there you will also see a big sinner. Conversely, if anyone claims to deep love, but cannot confess to a former life of serious sin, then they are hypocrites. God will judge them more severely.

One wonders about this woman who so debases herself out of love for Christ. There has to be a history here. She didn’t just anoint his feet on a whim. The innuendo is enough to convict her as a very bad person, so Jesus must have done something extraordinarily generous to save her life. This is her thanks. She surrenders all for love of him. He rewards her with cleansing forgiveness.

It is one thing to be vindicated when we are innocent of wrong doing; and quite another to be vindicated when we are guilty of wrong doing. There are no innocents in our world, only victors and victims, exchanging places on alternate days. Christ breaks the endless cycle of despair with an eternal promise of hope.

Prayer:

God, thank you that you never give us what we deserve. Help us to approximate your extraordinary generosity by offering everything we have.

Christ the Vindicator (4)

Read Colossians 1:13-23 (especially 19-20)

Christ Vindicator is significant only among *los de abajo* (“those from below”). The reference is to the landmark novel of the Mexican Revolution by Mariano Azuela (Mexico’s “Chekhov”). The title refers to the peasant rebels ambushed in a valley by fusillades from government troops on high. The “dominion of darkness” over which Christ triumphs evokes memories of the “valley of the shadow of death” from the Psalms. *Los de abajo* are the ones in need of a vindicator, but it is not Pancho Villa. It is Jesus Christ.

From the perspective *de abajo*, the world can only be seen in black and white. There is evil and there is good; sin and grace; entrapment and liberation. Yet such dualism cannot be the last word about life. Those *de abajo* are not looking for a temporary respite, or the next cycle of role reversal when they can take their turn at the top. They are looking to break the dualism entirely. They are yearning for a permanent solution. That is the savior for whom the world awaits; and that is the savior God provides.

That is why Christ comes from beyond time, into time, to lead us to eternity. It is divine rescue on a grand scale. It is a victory won in blood. He places himself with *los de abajo*, and is slaughtered with the rest under the guns of affluence and self-interest. Yet he rises to lead both victors and victims to a greater peace.

Rezo

Dios, agradézcale por liberarnos del dominio de oscuridad. Condúzcanos resucitado y purificado en su Reino.

The Courage to Accept Acceptance (1)

Read Luke 14:12-35 (especially 21-23)

Why does it require an act of courage to accept acceptance? Why are longtime prisoners actually reluctant to be free? Is it possible that after a lifetime lived in rejection, guilt, and despair, it is actually harder to live in acceptance, forgiveness, and hope? It demands extra effort, greater humility, more risk. It expects living life *differently*. It anticipates the death of what we were, and the emergence of a *new being*.

The *new being* is what Jesus the Christ is, and it is what we, in the image of Christ, become. It is a joyful thing to be included in the banquet of God, to become a house guest in the realm of God. Come! Just as you are! Don't even bother to wash your hands or change your boots! Yet it is a fearful thing to be included in the mission of God, to become a disciple of the Lord. Go! Just as you are! Don't even bother to say goodbye to your family or invest for your retirement! Do it and come! Do it and go! But do it *now*!

The fact that acceptance requires courage does not mean that our fate is somehow in our own hands. Indeed, the reason we need courage is that our fate is *not* in our own hands. Christ *compels* us to accept his invitation to the banquet; he *compels* us to accept his call to discipleship. It is not something we think about and decide. It is something that sweeps us away, all the while marveling, "My God! What's happening to me?"

Prayer

God, grant me the courage to come and go from the house of God, and the strength to be in companionship with Christ.

The Courage to Accept Acceptance (2)

Read Colossians 2:6-19 and 3:1-17 (especially 3:14-15)

Peace at last. After all the struggles of life-on-the-edge, and all the ambiguities of life-in-between, we are led at last to peace. We do not find it. It finds us. It has taken courage to participate and overcome the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness; and courage to separate and overcome the anxiety of fate and death. Now, in the end, we have found the courage to accept acceptance, overcoming the anxiety of guilt and condemnation. It took a lifetime, or the right time, to get here ... whether measured evolutions or revolutions.

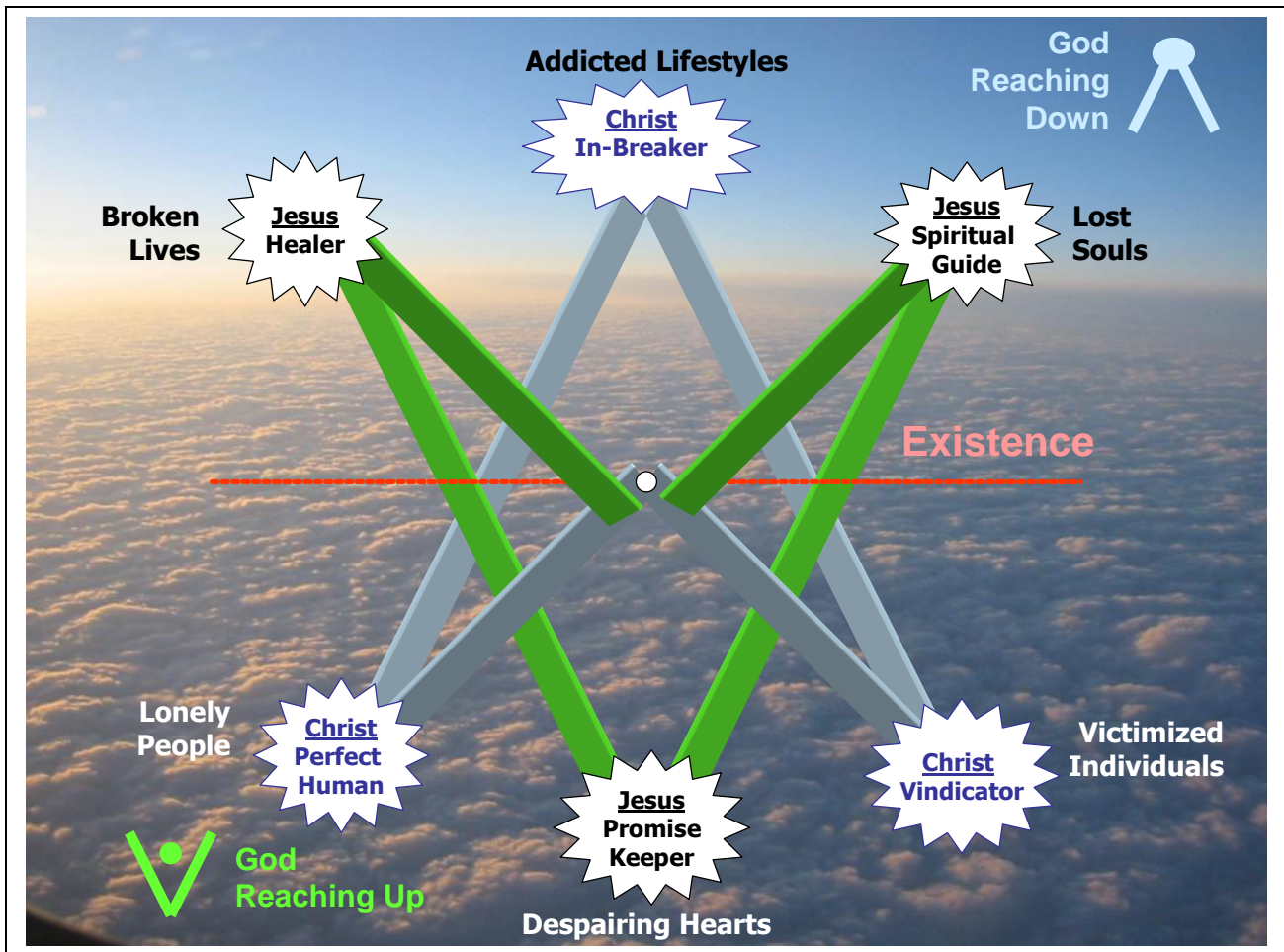
Yet here it is ... peace at last. Jesus the Christ has been experienced as perfect human and spiritual guide, bringing order to chaos and insight to uncertainty. He has been experienced as promise-keeper and in-breaker, bringing intimate and infinite beginnings. And he has been experienced as healer and vindicator, bringing wholeness and forgiveness, when we needed it most.

Peace at last. It is the moment of perfect harmony, when our hearts are attuned to the heartbeat of God. Struggle has been resolved in order; obscurity has been vanquished by clarity; we have become intimates with God. Perhaps, on this side of existence, it will only last a moment. Yet it is a moment of unbridled compassion, humility, kindness, and forgiveness, and we are thankful. The peace of Christ rules in our hearts, and we are at last One. Christ is all, in all.

Prayer

God, we thank you for this infinite intimacy, and for this unworldly reality. Let it last forever and include that stranger.

Countdown to Your Future



**God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.**

**Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace ...
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it ...
Trusting that you will make all things right, if I surrender to your will**

...

**So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
and supremely happy with you forever in the next.**

Countdown to Your Future

Read John 12:9-19 (especially 19)

This is it. It is the day of the grand entrance. Jesus goes public. Little did I know that the public Jesus would be the Christ who would make this week so very personal! I saw Lazarus and thought I believed; later I would become Lazarus and really believe.

As usual, I was restless. I spent the week yearning for a day of rest, and then spent the day of rest trying to keep busy. It is my doom to keep one step ahead of television reruns and suicide, and to perpetually seek to escape emptiness and meaninglessness. I saw the crowd, and plucked up the courage to participate. I saw him go by, tranquilly, unhurriedly, like he had all the time in the world. Hollywood star? Famous author? Millionaire on a binge? Politician posturing? Village idiot? I overheard the “suits” muttering disparaging. “What can we do? The world has gone after him!” I thought: He may be a king, but he’s not Elvis, and that’s the only fan club that matters.

Is this the magician who raises the dead? Is this the leader who will achieve the revolution? Is this really more important than I think it is? There’s certainly a lot of branch waving and ululating. Is this intersection of my journey and his journey timelier than I imagine? Should I check my horoscope? Should I tag along? Will there be a party? Might there be a door prize? Could there be a job possibility?

I followed Jesus because everybody was doing it. The price was right (or so I thought) and there was probably free food. After the parade we can all enjoy a nice blended contemporary worship service and great pot luck. Hmmm ... I can taste it now.

Prayer

Lord Christ, I follow you for all the wrong reasons. Thank you for chasing me for all the right reasons.

My Journey

Read John 14: 1-31 (especially 18-21)

There was a time when a countdown had started and I hadn't realized it yet. A revelation was coming, and I was unprepared. Looking back, I suppose I was doing the ordinary things I normally do on a weekend. I slept in, and Jesus was en route. I walked the dog, and Jesus was looking for an ass. I went to the grocery store, and Jesus was planning his last supper on earth. I went looking for a lost golf ball, and Jesus went looking for me. By the end of the week, I will be saying "If only I had known then what I know now ...", but it isn't the end of the week. Yet.

There was a time before I knew Christ. There was a time when I heard people yearn for a Redeemer, but neither they nor I really knew what to expect. I was filled with questions, but had no answers, only inklings, dark hints, mysterious suppositions, and more questions. When? Where? How? Show me! Huh?

Before I knew Christ, I hoped our journeys might intersect. Now I realize that our journeys have been intersecting over and over again, so many times, that Jesus' journey and my journey, Christ's Holy Week and my Holy Wonder, are one journey. You in me, and I in you, and us in God, all moving with hidden purpose down the highway of history. You never really came because you were already here; and you never really left because you had already arrived. And it's all in me, beyond me, in spite of me, and for me. What a rush!

One step at a time, you caution. First we need to get mocked, arrested, beaten, sentenced, crucified, and raised.

Prayer

God, I'm not ready. Of course, that's doesn't matter to you. You are ready.

My Relationships

Read John 12:20-26 and 15:1-11 (especially 15:5)

At first, I spent my life looking for friendships. I sought out people that shared my interests, quirks, and enthusiasms. I measured relationships by fun and kindness. We played together, supported each other, and worked in harmony. It wasn't enough.

Later, I spent my life looking for mentors. This was harder. I sought out people who could help me improve myself, answer my questions, and show me the next steps. I measured relationships by depth and productivity. We talked, argued, and planned together. It wasn't enough.

Finally, I spent my life looking for love. This was even harder. I sought out people who could give and receive, appreciate and be appreciated, embrace and be embraced. I measured relationships by passion and unity. We married, parented, and grew old together. It wasn't enough.

I am looking for something else: someone in whom to lose myself, so that I might find myself. A purpose greater than me; a fulfillment greater than you; a joy greater than imagination. Unity. Perfection. Life. This is hardest of all, and I am not sure I will succeed. It is tantalizing close, yet always beyond my reach.

It is both simple and impossible to form a relationship with this Jesus ... the one called "Christ". I think I have him in focus, and he sort of shimmers and is gone again. He speaks prose and poetry at the same time. The meaning is illusive, but he is no illusion. He flickers, but never goes away.

Prayer

Lord Christ, there is always something more to you than sound and sense can grasp. Yet your touch is like fire in my cold, cold heart. You infuse my blood with life.

My Worry

Read John 12:27-36 and 44-50 (especially 44-46)

Everybody I know is worried. I started worrying in infancy about rashes, feedings, and mother ... and kept right on going into adulthood worrying about health, money, and family. Every day there is a new threat of cancer, bankruptcy, or disaster. My latest worry is terrorism, although it is not always clear what I am terrified about. I conceal it well, of course, which I soon learned was the fine art of adulthood.

Some people combat worry by making money, consuming friends, and living large. My favorite dodge is higher education, hoping that the more I know the less I'll worry. I even know a lot about religion! It doesn't work. My religious neighbors clearly believe in lower education, hoping that they will worry less if they think less. Judging by their various addictions, it doesn't work either.

It's like living in darkness ... uneasy, foreboding, threatening fog obscuring the light and hiding the truth. Human beings are just shadows and echoes, colliding and calling and pretending not to worry about the fate that lies in wait or the death that stalks from behind. That is why Jesus intrigues me. He walks with assurance and talks with authority. He is luminescent. He not only brings light, he is light. Around Jesus, the darkness and fog recede, worry dissipates. Fate is replaced by destiny, and death is overcome in confidence.

I'm still worried, of course. I'm worried that something might happen to Him. Discrediting Jesus has become a postmodern pastime. What if he wasn't?

Prayer

Lord Christ, don't leave me! Don't let the world take you from us! We will always be afraid of the dark.

My Struggle

Read John 13:1-35 and 16:16-33 (especially 16:32-33)

Life is like a “professional” wrestling match, in which my “tag team” is smaller than our foes. All I’ve got is my marriage partner, our adult children; and occasional relatives and friends; along with the dubious support of my employer and the federal government (who spend less money on rehab after every bout). Meanwhile, our foes are legion. If it’s not one opponent, it’s another. And like most wrestling matches, its rigged! They don’t play by the rules. Sometimes multiple enemies beat the daylights out of me, and nobody blows the whistle. The world cheers and jeers, apparently forgetting that they’re next.

It is very tempting to change sides. Of course, that would be a betrayal of everything that is good and beautiful and true, but survival is a great motivator and the pay is better. Thirty silver dollars per betrayal, adjusted for inflation, is the going rate. I could afford a house in the suburbs. Unfortunately, something tells me that won’t work.

What my tag team really needs is some chronic kindness. We need someone to wash the feet, massage the temples, rub in some ointment, and cheer from the sidelines. We need a blood transfusion: extra energy, more endurance, greater strength, clever moves, and a winning attitude. Beaten down, we could get up again. Persecuted, we could rise again.

If only we had God in our corner, we could win this fight. Even if I was pinned to the mat, I would live another day.

Prayer:

Lord Christ, rescue me from the temptation to change allegiance. Grant us the strength to endure, that we might share in your final victory.

My Agony

Read John 18:28 – 19:30 (especially 19:28-30)

Christ's famous last words are eerie echoes of my infamous first thoughts. It is as if I shout across the chasm that separates me from I know not what "Me!" And your echo comes back, "No, me!" I shout again "Where are you?", and the echo comes back "Where are you?" It is as if we think similar things, with different implications.

You say *my kingship is not of this world*; I lament nobody recognizes how great I am. You say *you have no power over me*; I chafe under the control of every civil servant, marketing campaign, and cell phone provider. You say *behold your son* and *behold your mother*; I can't seem to communicate with my children and avoid communicating with my parents. You have the power and refuse to use it. I want the power and would abuse it. You are everything I want to be, and do things I would never do.

I live in an agony of thirst, and you live in an agony of thirst, but we seem to be thirsting for different things. Yet maybe we do thirst for the same thing. We both know that a sponge full of bad wine or high octane coffee won't quench *our* thirst. I live in terror of the day that a doctor says "You have a month to live." You say *it is finished* with such calm acceptance. Have you got some kind of food that I don't have? Or some kind of hope that I must have?

If only I could talk to you across the chasm! There are so many questions I want answered; so many doubts I need resolved; so many fears I need dispelled; so many mistakes I need forgiven. Yet fate and death intervene.

Prayer

Lord Christ, on my knees in my personal Gethsemane, awaiting my personal Golgotha, I reach across the chasm of existence for your hand. Touch me!

My Wait

John 19:31-42 and Ephesians 4:8-14 (especially 8-10)

The death of Christ gives a whole new meaning to the term “pregnant silence”. It is like the eye of a hurricane, all storm and fury, as if the universe itself were being compressed into a few square miles of shoreline. The infinite is forced screaming into a bottle, capped and sealed, trembling. It cannot last.

In the silence that follows, something is going on invisible to my eyes, and, I think, unforeseen by history. Perhaps it is a chemical chain reaction, a transformation at the sub-atomic level transforming matter into energy. Or maybe it is some colossal combat between titans in the bowels of the earth. Certainly the muscles of my body are cramped with the intensity of waiting.

Something is going to break loose, and I fear it will be the trailing edge of the hurricane, bringing destruction to the frail structures of my life. You just can't contain the infinite in a bottle or God in a tomb. How likely is it that God will break loose and smile? After all I have done to Jesus, how likely is it that Christ will emerge to give me presents? Will he not rather emerge in vengeance and wrath? It's what I would do in His place.

I am appalled by the naiveté of my neighbors in the eye of the hurricane. They emerge with cocky smiles, believing they have dodged a bullet. I think we are really in for it now, unless, unexplainably, God relents.

Prayer

Lord Christ, something is happening that we will never, ever, understand. How that rankles my human heart! Let your uncontrolled, unbridled, unexplainable love break over, into, and beyond my little life! I am waiting.

My Resurrection

John 20:1-18 (especially verses 29-31)

I am one who has not seen, and yet believes. Which is more astonishing? That God emerged from the tomb ... *and was not angry?* Or that Christ should be raised from the dead long ago ... *and that I should believe that unhesitatingly without proof?*

What leads me to believe in the first place is that *we are still here*. It is against all odds and beyond all reason. Humanity really should be dead. Perhaps the planet should still be here, but humans are the last species to rule it. We are worse than insects because we are a good deal less productive and never really sacrificial. If cockroaches behaved like us, they would have died out long ago. Yet *we are still here*. God relented, despite what we did (and keep doing) to Him. As painful as existence is, we still exist.

My new-found faith goes deeper than that. *I sense His presence!* I do not see Him or touch Him. Yet He sees and touches me. I feel it in my bones. I know it in my heart. When I first heard the news that Christ had risen ... and that apparently he bore me no ill will for crucifying him ... I literally ran to the empty tomb! I ran! I flew! I leapt at the chance!

Those more loyal and pure than I, experienced him first. Then I experienced His perfection and guidance; and then his power and promise; and then his healing and vindication; and then I *really* believed.

Prayer

Lord Christ, I was dead and am alive again! I was lost, lonely, broken, and anxious ... and now I am found, befriended, whole, and hopeful! What a gift! Thank you!

My Hope

Read Romans 8:18-39 (especially 37-39)

Every day now, I am both grateful and regretful that I exist. I am still anxious about emptiness and meaninglessness; fate and death; guilt and condemnation. Yet I have hope. There is a reason to get up in the morning, and endure the day, and rest in the evening, and that is Christ. He makes it possible to live one day at a time. More than that! He makes it possible to live *well* one day at a time.

I am convinced now that nothing shall separate me from the love of God. Conspiracies have always surrounded me to do just that. Divide and conquer. If the politicians, professors, scientists, corporate managers, telemarketers, lawyers, and my relatives can separate me from Christ, I will be dependent and they will profit. If terrorism, bigotry, illiteracy, poverty, sickness, violence, pestilence, and injustice can do it, I will be enslaved and they will multiply. They can't do it. Nothing will separate me now from God's love. Not now. Not after what Christ has done.

I wonder if you are convinced. I wonder if that woman stuck in commuting traffic has hope ... and if that homeless person has hope ... and if that soldier has hope ... and if that businessman has hope ... and if that teenager has hope. What is separating them from the love of God in Christ? In which conspiracy of despair are they entangled? And what can I do about it? It's not about me, or you, anymore. It's about God's mission.

Prayer

Lord Christ, freedom is a wonderful gift. Help me to use my freedom faithfully; that day by day I might go deeper and deeper in Christ; and week by week I might go further and further with Christ into God's mission to reunite the finite with the infinite at last.