
When We Are

Real

Or

**How Can
We Know**

The Way?

Roy Key

And
there the
great God
Almighty
W h o
lit the sun and
fixed it in the sky, Who
flung the stars to the
most far corners o f
the night, Who rounded
the earth in the middle
of his hand; this
great God, like
a mammy bending
over her b a b y,
kneeled down in
the dust toiling
over a lump of
clay till He shaped
it in his own image.

-- James Weldon Johnson
God's Trombones

CONTENTS

1. THE ARREST	1
2. GETTING SOMETHING STRAIGHT	8
3. THEN, WHAT IS IT TO BE "REAL?"	16
4. DAWNING LIGHT	24
5. GOD'S GRACIOUS PURPOSE AND OUR DESPERATE PLIGHT	31
6. THE DIVINE DETERMINATION	37
7. THE HUMAN RESPONSE	42
8. INTERLUDE	50
9. BREACHING THE BARRIER	54
10. WHEN IT'S ALL "ALL RIGHT"	63
11. ON HAVING A FRIEND	72
12. COMPANY OF THE CONCERNED	80
13. IN "ENGLISH," PLEASE	88
14. CURTAIN CALL	98
15. AT THE GALLEY	108
16. "SHALOM"	114
FOOTNOTES	118
A BACKWORD	123
BENEDICTION	124
THANKS	125

THE ARREST

"Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'"
(*John 14:5*)

"There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death."
(*Proverbs 14:12*)

"HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WAY?"

1

THE ARREST

(What Do You Make Of It?)

"Crazy Collision"

At 9:28 Thursday, April 6, 1995, headed North on Highway 259, in the brilliant sunshine of a spring morning, we were hit. Hard. My wife Evelyn, our granddaughter Annika and I. I mean Bang! Broadsided by a lad in a pickup coming out of a side road.

It was a new experience.

I saw the truck coming. "He's not going to stop!" It was all like a slow-motion movie scene. Pull the wheel to the right. Harder. Not enough. Wham! Your side hurts. And your knees. Your wife screams. Around and around you go out into some wide empty space. Stunned, you bend over the wheel and wait much too long to turn off the ignition.

People gather. Anxious, concerned looks on questioning faces. Someone calls the police, the highway patrol, and the medics. Quickly they arrive in what seems an eternity. Annika, wide-eyed, is still wordless. Someone sets her on the trunk of the crumpled Celebrity. The car's totaled... its occupants? Not sure.

It was a new experience.

Evelyn took her first helicopter ride... to St. Michael's in Texarkana, Texas. Annika and I had to settle for an ambulance. She's a fighter. "Don't do that! Take that off! I don't want it!"

Her little hands strike out. "Why must you put that collar around my neck? and strap me to that board?"

"Take care of everybody else," I kept telling the medics showing up at the door I couldn't get out. "I don't think I'm hurt above the knees." I can tell you that purple places sure make a liar of you, showing up later in the most unexpected parts. Your hips and side, yes. Arms and elbows, indeed. But the bottoms of all your toes? Even your heels? You better believe it.

When it was my turn, the medics went into overdrive. Noting the evidence of my quadruple bypass, they slapped on all those little suction cups that tell them more about the ticker than the wearer ever can. In a wink the IV dripped happily. Then came the oxygen mask. For a claustrophobic, I was frightfully brave.

Then, the lone attendant in our ambulance tried to put the mask on Annika. That's another story, or, rather, a rerun of the one about the collar and the board. Swiftly assessing his prospects of victory, this wise man asked gently, "Would you, please, help me?" Positioning the oxygen a couple of inches from her nose, he continued, "Can you hold it right there?" She did... for the 40-mile ride to Texarkana.

Challenge

What do you make of it? You rerun the video... over and over. What if we had stayed over the extra day my brothers in Houston suggested? What if we had got an earlier start from Longview? Or hadn't stopped at that last service station where gas was 2 cents cheaper than back down the road? There's a bushel basket of "what if's" strewn all over the asphalt.

We could ask, "What if we weren't wearing our seat belts?" For a lot of folks the first question was, "Were you?" Of course. We buckle up before reaching the street. "What if I hadn't swerved enough to receive a partially glancing blow?" "What if Evelyn had been in my seat and Annika in hers?" What if???

Reality, though, is what it is. So, what do you make of it? Evelyn sleeps on the couch propped halfway up, with the heating pad to her cracked rib and side. When we tell friends that Annika had a great time playing at the nurses' desk, going with them to lunch, and wasn't hurt at all, she corrects us. "My tummy hurt," she insists.

At the dining table on which Charlie has placed my computer I sit. That is, for awhile. Till I tire. Legs stick straight out, wrapped in full-length immobilizers. Five weeks yesterday they went on. It seems longer... I must consider not the calendar, but the stages of my liberation. Stage 1: flat on the back, dressed like half a mummy. (I'd as soon have missed the adventure.) Neck and back hurt as bad as the two cracked knee-caps (one crushed) and cracked right tibia. (I had really forgotten which was tibia and which was femur.) Never much for pain pills, I took half a bottle gladly before quitting cold turkey.

Stage 2: the wheel chair. Blessed wheel chair. Jim brought one from the church, and I had my first prison pass... the way to the bathroom! Then, with Milt and Bud's ramps I can get down to the living room recliner. There I read, nap, and take an occasional peek at the news. I hope to be back walking my three miles a morning before the court pulls the plug on the trial-of-the-century.

Challenge or Chance?

Having read four journals, plus four more books, I decided to write. I couldn't get to the study, but could still think. A little. Slowly. What I wanted to say was, "There really is a Reality we must deal with."

"Out there. In here.

"There is 'a way' that is the way to be and do. A way to see and know. A way to live and die. I'd like to see and understand as much of it as my limitations allow. To give myself to it as completely as I can. And, I believe that you do, too. It does not operate according to our whims and whimpers. I can't con it, but I can cooperate with it. I'd like to do that. Wouldn't you? How, then, can we find it? And know that we've found it?"

To those who doubt or deny I offer a bit of hope. Not enough sun to dispel each cloud of doubt or denial. Yet, I feel under compulsion to point to the sliver that slipped through to me. No sudden burst of sunshine that banishes the storm. Still, more than a stealing in of the dawn. As clouds, without vanishing, one by one recede, so did the dark.

It was something I wanted to ponder. To snatch a glimmer of light and point. And, I had begun. Actually, more than begun.

Then the call. It's from a long-time friend in Emporia, Kansas. "Hello, this is Bill Bowles." Evelyn answers. I'm in private conference. In the bathroom. With my Health Aide. For those of you deprived of this experience -- like Texas, it's a whole new country. Here you lose all false modesty. Every other kind to boot. Stripped even of your back-up fig leaf, you discover what vulnerability is. She kindly moves to avert her eyes, but you know she knows what you really are minus all make-up, chancel or stage.

"Is Roy doing any writing while he's laid up?" "Well, he sits at the dining table and looks at his computer. He's working on something he calls 'The Way.' It doesn't sound like a very good title. I think someone else has already written on it." "Tell him to entitle it *Human Freedom, Highway 259, and The Providence of God.*"

His off-the-cuff quip stuck like a fly in molasses. There was a good bit of human freedom on 259 that Thursday morning. There's a good bit around here right now. I could wish it had been used more responsibly then. But, today that's junk on the highway. The question looms, "What will you make of it?" That's a matter of considerable freedom, too.

My understanding of Reality (God) doesn't allow me to assert, "We were all put there at that critical moment." It does allow me to affirm, "God was there before and during and

afterward. Since in our human freedom we, at our given speed, met at precisely the same instant, what is the best that could come out of the impact?"

I give thanks that we three were arranged in the car as we were. That I was driving. That Evelyn was in the front passenger seat. That Annika was in the back on the right side. That she was farthest from the point of impact. That Evelyn was next. That I could take the hardest blow. That we were spared more. That the young man who hit us didn't seem seriously injured. That a truck driver appeared to say, "I saw it all."

I give thanks for dedicated medics, nurses, doctors and therapists. For Michelle, who drove 12 hours with little sleep, both Thursday and Friday to help bring us and our luggage home. For Bill and Vivian, who sat with me. For friends who called and came. Brought lawn mowers, food, books, a housekeeper, vans sufficiently roomy for a wheelchair to cart me to the doctor. Blessings are hard to "name one by one," unless you can count them.

That's all in the area of human freedom, but it feels an awful lot like "Providence." "Luck?" That's what some call it. Forgive a doubter. I see it as "the way" life is to be lived. Cooperation with Reality, rather than opposition to it. What would you call it, if it happened to you?

It might, you know.

The Bit I Know

Some folks, mostly religious, say there is no such thing. "Chance" is the name secularists give "Providence." Maybe. Still, I suspect not every pit stop on the trip is part of the cosmic plan. Also, that chance favors the prepared mind. And heart. As well as, the alert.

However full or limited my freedom, it's real. A part of the reality I had best not ignore. An accident could involve both chance and challenge. I can't do much about the former, but I can do a whale of a lot about the latter.

I know I'd better.

"Call
the world
if you please
'The Vale of Soul-making.'
Then you will find out the use of the world..."

"I will call the world a School
instituted for the purpose of teaching
little children to read.

I will call the human heart
the Horn Book read in that school.
And I will call the Child able to read,
the Soul made from that School
and its Horn book.

Do you not see how necessary
a World of pains and Troubles is
to school an Intelligence
and make it a soul?"

- John Keats

Letters

GETTING

SOMETHING

STRAIGHT

"So, a second time they called the man who was blind and said to him, 'Give God the glory! We know this man is a sinner.' 'Whether he is a sinner, 'he answered, 'I do not know. One thing I do know. Though once I was blind, I now can see.'

(John 9:24-25).

As I button my shirt, I'd better be certain the first button goes in the right hole.

2

GETTING SOMETHING STRAIGHT

(How Shall I Respond?)

It All Depends

How do I look at it? Is nature all there is out there? In here? If so, then I will spell "reality" with a little "r." To cooperate (move with the flow), I will seek adjustment and give up¹ on relationship. I will be skeptical about anything called "the law of love." The ultimate law² for me is "the law of the jungle." I may not live by it at home, or in my little circle of "friends," but my attitude toward God, my neighbor and nature is fundamentally altered.

If, on the other hand, I regard people as more valuable than property, and home as a higher order of life than the jungle, I may see reality differently. I may conclude there is something "real" at work *here*.

A 12-year-old Mexican child was left with 6 little brothers and sisters. She cooked, fed, bathed, dressed and cared for them. When asked, "Why do you do it?" her answer was, "I have to." "No, you don't," she was told, "you could just leave." "But," she came back, "what about the 'have to' that's inside of me?"

Ah, yes. What about the "have to that's inside?" With Immanuel Kant I could be awed at "the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." I might even add, "And the love that so surrounds me." I may hunger to know the Reality-beyond-reality. The Heart that beats through my heart and the hearts I know that I love. What in creation could this "really" be?

Something has led us to our intersection. This collision. This condition.

Something?...or Someone?

Is Anybody Out There?

Voicing our heart-hunger, one philosopher said, "If I had one question I could ask the Sphinx it would be, 'Is the universe friendly?'" That could make a big difference. If not friendly, is it malevolent? Not surprising, then, it could produce Neroes and Hitlers, Holocausts and Hiroshimas, cancer, eboli and AIDS.

But, what about Helen Keller and Florence Nightingale? Mother Teresa and St. Francis? Schweitzer and Kagawa? Jesus and Paul? How do we account for David and Jonathan? Damon and Pythias? Esther and Ruth? The presence of "love," "courage," "loyalty," "honesty," "trust?" Is all this selfless stupidity? An ancient madness of the mind? ...*Nothing?*

We know better.

Unless down deep we've tampered with our souls, we know. Today's question is not so much, "Does God *exist*?" Few would deny the existence of "Something." Yet, our heart-hunger is for more. "Is it 'Someone?'" A girl, hand up in her philosophy class, asks, "But what I want to know is, does God know my name?" A boy, in a last cry for light, laments, "I'm afraid God just doesn't care."

"Whom Can We Ask?"

I'd like to hear it from both sides. From one who has lost hope that reality knows or cares. That anything or anybody lives beyond earth's midnight witching hour. When our brightest hopes and dearest loves, like jack-o-lanterns on a post-Halloween-ruffian-ruled-street, lie alone... smashed. When our shivering or shriveled little planet becomes an iceberg or a cinder. And, that's it.

We could ask the ghetto kids who've given up on life. Whose hope is confined to the next rumble or fix. We could ask the slum lords who make sure those bums don't get any more than they deserve. Or, all of us who order them to grab those bootstraps, pick themselves up and go to work (even if they can't find it). Who in our plush homes and churches tell them to rank those priorities right. Don't they get it? This life doesn't matter. Only the next counts.

There they are. Both sides. Somehow, though, there's not much for me to grab hold of in either. Why, though, do I keep feeling the hopeless may be as honest as us cheery chiders?

Or, more so?

Is there someone else?

A Brave, Robust "No!"

Bertrand Russell has put it as starkly as possible. "When I die, I shall rot. Nothing of my ego shall survive." Here is his fuller, more eloquent expression

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his Loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined for extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins -- all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.³

Words of melancholic beauty. Heroic finality. Beyond banality and pathos. Awe-fully tragic. It's almost as if to the Void he said, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Not in

resolution. Nor resignation. Certainly, not in triumph. Could be with a note of defiance. Yet, not quite saying,

Do not go gentle into that good night,...⁴
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

It's hard to know what shoves one over the cliff of anti- or non- or a-theism. Disappointments. Suffering. War. Disease. Disaster. Death. A philosophy picked up in school... prison...or the bar. A "faith"⁵ pretending to be "science." A notion pirated from a revered mentor.

It's equally hard to know what pulls one back from the edge. Virtually all the things just noted. We respond so differently. A Dostievsky character standing with another before a painting of the Crucifixion, comments, "One could lose his faith looking at that." Slowly the reply comes, "I think that is what is happening to me now."

"Play Ball!"

Before the judgment bar of Reality devotees of opposite "faiths" separate into two groups. 1) Spectators. 2) Players. Those in the bleachers and those on the field. I'm not particularly interested in calls from the grandstands. I'm deeply interested in those on the field. Not because of the grunts and sweat, but because of the commitment.

It is reported that one came to the Buddha at bathing time and asked, "How may I find the truth?" The Buddha led him out into the water and without a word seized his head, shoved him under and held him there till in desperation he broke free. Calmly the Buddha asked, "When you thought you were drowning, what did you want most?" "Air" he gasped. "When you want the truth like you wanted air, then you will find it."

Luther once said, "No one is closer to God than those who hate and despise him." No spectator sport this. No shrug-of-the-shoulders, "maybe yes -- maybe no," response. Of the insipid, lukewarm pew warmers Karl Barth charged, "The church is not only the place where a man meets God. It is often the place where he takes his last stand⁶ against God." Jesus said something a bit more graphic.

Reality never rebuffs the puzzled mind with the hungry heart, but despises the cleverest mind with the divided heart. One thing to get straight -- whether Moslem, Jew, Buddhist, Christian, theist or atheist -- no ho-hum approach is worth half a hoot. It's nauseating.

When multitudes cry, "We want," the serious cry, "We ought." That doesn't guarantee the object of the verb. Youth as different as the Flower Child of the sixties and Americorps of today have known that a "human" ought to be more than a "trowsered ape." More than "an economic animal." *Ought*. They and we. Francis Bacon's bookplate carried the picture of a ship sailing out between the giant pillars of Hercules. On its proud, defiant bow were the two words that formed the ship's name, "More Beyond." Down deep the serious suspect that our bathtub is not all there is.

Sometimes their vision is flawed, but their refusal to be buried before they die is not. While not all of the serious are realistic, they alone can be "real." When the question is put, it's not those who nod at the existence of God. It's those who take God seriously that have a chance at reality. What a mystery. Their voting record divides them. It's in the bleachers that the lukewarm come together, and on the field that the serious unite.

An Equally Robust "Yes!"

Every school child knows of Nathan Hale's statement as the hangman's noose tightened, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Almost nobody knows that it was, likely, the sole act of courage or civic responsibility in a wasted life. It looks a lot like death-rope conversion. A belated "Yes!"

At Oxford, October 16, 1555, for his faith Hugh Latimer was burned at the stake. As the fire was lit, he looked at his companion and shouted, "Play the man, Master Ridley! We shall this day light in England such a fire as shall never be put out."

His "Yes" burned right into history.

So did that of one whose name escapes me now, but whose courage kindles my own. To the king's ultimatum he replied, "Tut, tut, my lord; make these threats to your courtiers. It is not within your power to hang or exile the truth."

Hugh Mackail, youngest and bravest of the covenanting preachers, was given four days to live. At Edinburgh, on a December day in 1666, he was led away, the weeping crowd watching as he went. So young he seemed, and so cruel his fate. But, there were no tears in his eyes. Catching sight of a friend, he called, "Good News! Good News! I am within four days of enjoying the sight of Jesus Christ!"

Bold?

Robust?

Any question about the "Yes!"?

During World War II on the Philippine Island of Panay eleven American missionaries were massacred. A couple, who had served for years in Japan, requested and received a half-hour's reprieve for prayer. They then were killed.

When the 20-year old daughter in the States heard, she sank into the bog of bitterness. Days later a wonder stabbed her tortured brain, "I wonder what mother and daddy prayed about in that half hour." At once she knew, for she knew them. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

At once she went to the nearest prisoner of war camp to give herself in service. There she ministered with such compassion that she was asked, "Why do you do this?" Her answer: "Because Japanese soldiers killed my mother and father." Prisoners watched her in amazement, unable to understand such enemy-forgiving love.

The war ended. Months passed. Near Osaka a disillusioned farmer tried to put together the scattered bits of a shattered life. Mitsuo Fuchida, former Captain of the Japanese Navy, had led the attack of 359 planes that bombed Pearl Harbor.

When Fuchida learned that a shipload of prisoners was being repatriated, he hurried to meet the boat. Maybe, he'd see some of his old friends. He found one, Uraga, who told a strange story about the American girl who served them in the prison camp. The prisoner's perplexity became his own. He couldn't fathom that enemy-forgiving love.

Shortly afterward a troubled Fuchida went to Tokyo. At the Sheybuya station door he was handed a tract. Idly he glanced at the account of an American bombardier taken prisoner by the Japanese. Then a start. The prisoner had regained his perspective on life by rereading the Bible. With the war over, this ex-bombardier returned to Japan. Not for revenge, but to serve his former enemies as a missionary.

Fuchida devoured the tract. More enemy-forgiving love! On impulse he found a book store and bought a New Testament. He began reading the *Gospel of Luke*. Read it till he came to those words from the Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "Now I know," he cried, "Now I know the secret of enemy-forgiving love!" A lightning flash cleared the air. Then the soulshake!

There before him on a Tokyo street stood a sound wagon. He strode to it. Asked for a microphone. And made his announcement: "This is Captain Mitsuo Fuchida speaking. I led the attack on Pearl Harbor. I want to tell you that I have become a Christian."

Brave?

Bold?

What if it had been... you?

There was Albert Schweitzer, with two Ph.D's and an M.D., pouring himself out in Lambarene. Asked by a native why he came, he said simply, "Jesus sent me." Bishop Bergrav of Norway, held by the Nazis in solitary confinement, had his guards continually changed lest his witness convert them. Should we go on? Public Enemy Number One. Robber. Murderer. Sentenced to hang. Cursing priests and ministers. Flipping pages of a New Testament left in his hand. Struck by a prodigal father's forgiveness. Drawn to two robbers dying on a hill. Peering deep into their contrasting reactions. Then, the soul-searing prayer, "Father, forgive..." Guilt. "I was pierced as with a 6-inch nail." Tramping feet. "It's time." Behind him a clanging door and a note found later: "Today my body perishes, but my soul redeemed takes flight."

Bold?

Brave?

Make that a solid "Yes!"

The accounts are acres of desert poppies springing up after April rains. Where does one point? To Spurgeon, interrupted by a heckler shouting, "What did God do for Stephen," shooting back, "He gave him power to pray, 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge?'" To Martin Luther King, Jr., lying stabbed, begging officers, "Don't hurt her; she needs help?"

Wasn't it Wesley who said, "Our people die well?" Yes, and the bravest live well.

However...

I still have to choose, don't I? Between "Yes" and "No." I know which sounds "real" to me. Which lures and tugs and even lays compulsion on me. Yet, never coerces. That tells me it is not better to be correct than to care. To know the score than to play the game. But, will not let me saunter off to make my choice some distant day.

I must choose.

Now.

And, I must do it honestly. Pretense won't help me as I feel the rope, the fire, the antiseptic chill no hospital room dispels. Much less, the 8:00 to 5:00 shift at the processing plant.

Call it "the will to believe," if you like. I conclude that *life - trust = death*. Existence without faith is impossible. The question is "What?" and "Whom?" We all choose. The point is that our choice be honest. No games. No masks. No pretense.

A "real" choice Reality respects.

No other.

Counting the votes?

Wait. One more.

"Aye!"

**THEN,
WHAT IS IT
TO BE
"REAL?"**

"Do for others whatever you would have them do for you.
This is the law and the prophets." (*Matthew 7:12*)

"Beloved, let us love one another, for God is love. Every-
one who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever
does not love does not know God, for God is love."
(*1 John 4:7-8*)

When the personage is an honest reflection of the person...
when the image is an honest reflection of the self... when
the self is a true reflection of Reality (God) ... we are
"real." All else is theatrics. Hollow. Illusion. In a word
phony.

"So, when you do good to other people, don't hire a trumpeter to
go in front of you -- like those play actors in the synagogues
and streets who make sure that [folks] admire them... And then,
when you pray, don't be like the play actors. They love to stand
and pray in the synagogues so that people may see them at it...
Then, when you fast, don't look like those miserable play actors!
For they deliberately disfigure their faces so that people may see
they are fasting." (*Matthew 6:2,5,15. Phillips*)

"It will be hell for you, theologians and preachers -- phonies, be-
cause you tithe your pennies, nickels and dimes, and pass up the
more important things in the Bible, such as justice, sharing and
integrity... You attlebrained leaders, you fence in a flea and let
your horse escape. You save your trading stamps and throw
your groceries in the garbage." (*Matthew 23:23-24*)

Clarence Jordan, *Cotton Patch Version*

3

THEN, WHAT IS IT TO BE "REAL?"

(When the Masks Come Off and the Emptiness Is Filled)

A Start

A huge man stepped on the scales, dropped in his coin and waited for the unwelcome news. Nearby a curious child watched the hand swing wildly up past the 12-pound mark and stick. "Golly," he cried, "he's hollow!"

It's always a surprise. You think you're dealing with someones of substance, and, poof... you see them go into orbit. Human balloons. No insides. Nothing but skin. And talk. Kids yesterday referred to these phonies as "plastic." Today there's a bunch of metaphors on the hard drive ready to be booted up.

Pick one.

"Actor"

Jesus did. It was these folks who could make him madder than anybody else. He warned of the danger they faced and the danger they posed. Seeing them shy away from Reality, he chose the metaphor that more than any other has stuck. Today you almost spit it out.

"Hypocrite!"

The word meant "actor." Whatever the actors were, they were not themselves. "Self" was lost or hidden under costume and grease paint. Or, stored back in the dressing room, to be picked up whenever, or if ever, one chose. In life's drama the actor played a role. A part that called for masks and alien garb. What a tragedy. S/he couldn't be transparent to the Light. Nor even have a real self.

"Actors," were not all scoundrels. Some were. Others were the best of the land, leaders of the religious community. Nevertheless, they were experts not in substance, but in shadows and symbols. Make-up and make-believe. Oriented to the stage, they were disoriented to life. The theater was their existence. Light was a resource used for audience effect, not Reality to be embraced and shaped by it.

This is no charge that theater is bad and every actor phony. There are those, like clowns, who picture us in caricature and help us laugh at our pomposity. Our ridiculous strutting. And those who lay bare our fears, our dreams, the hero deep within, and lure us toward the Light. It was not to them that Jesus spoke. Those who hoped that the "fool"¹ might disarm the wary. Those who, as the guard relaxes at heart's door, nudge it, so the Light unchallenged can creep

through. Had Jesus met one of them, he would unhesitatingly have said "Follow me." And, turning to the incredulous, explained, "For of such is the Kingdom." "Blind?"² Not these. It was those who couldn't see what they saw.

Even so, Jesus did not reject any "players" as persons. He tried with all he had and was to move them beyond their role-play so that they could
recognize life as real,
embrace it,
and find their emptiness
filled.

When the Curtain Falls

He stood before presidents and kings. Unassuming. Charged with quiet dignity. When he opened his mouth slaves all the way back to Africa stood up to sing, "Old Man River." Crowds swarmed to hear. He couldn't eat with them. Couldn't sleep where they slept or ride where they rode. Yet, when the curtain fell, he could go to his modest quarters, look in the mirror and see the real Roland Hayes.

Why? Because before the public he wore no mask. On center stage at each opening he stood a few moments perfectly still. Cynics considered it a dramatic pause to let the rustle of the crowd die down. It was, in fact, the time a great soul prayed, "O Lord, led Roland Hayes fade from this picture and nothing but Your presence shine through." Millions say it did.

A movie idol is interviewed on the "Today" show. Eyelashes and fingernails an excellent add for Vigoro. Though the tailor ran short of dress material, nobody seems to mind. Least of all the star. The toss of the hair, turn of the ankle, lift of the arm and fan-like spread of glittering nails, speak with superb sophistication.

"**I**'m here!"

Why does she seem more natural in the feature films than in the interview? More real? More herself? It hits me, "I don't know her *self*. I don't know what is real." I wonder if she does.

What is it like to go home and try to take off the gold-plated mask? What if one is afraid there won't be anything underneath? And what if s/he's right?

The Yellow Brick Road

At the end of the yellow brick road was a middle-age man pulling strings. The place where the craftiest make-belief ends. An open curtain reveals the grand charade. The way of pretense never leads home.

Never.

There is a way home. Beyond illusion there is the real. Not marionettes. People with real insides. Real courage. A real heart. Journeying together.

But...what happens to the wizards? They work alone... always... everywhere. "Acting" (the kind Jesus talked about) is a lonely business. When you're behind the curtain pulling strings. When you're on stage taking bows. When you're in the pulpit pounding air. When you're bluffing your way through another work week, another night at home or another pre-Easter planning session on prayer.

The yellow brick road leads to the lonely cubicle where we tug frantically at life's strings. Ours and everybody else's. "The show must go on." Close that curtain. Shut that door. Pluck out those intruding eyes. "Let's Make a Deal." "Gotcha!" "Ain't it Awful?" "Hide-n-Seek," "Jeopardy," "King of the Mountain." "Truth or Consequences"...my version. Play my game. (Of course, we'll use *my* rules.) Watch out for my feelings, you calloused SOB.

Unspoken contracts let us play our "games" together, but our separate roles are designed to keep us apart. As individuals, trapped in our loneliness, we play on to the bitter end. *Personal isolation and family fragmentation*. That's the way it is at home. At work. At church. In fact, that's the way it is with our sectarian, political, nationalistic games, as well.

There is a way out of our plight. This prison of pretense. Only, at first it seems too scary to venture beyond the open door. Beyond the safe cell. How can we live out there... with no walls? Minus the encores and curtain calls? Minus those closets stuffed with stage costumes and cabinets packed with make-up?

How?

There is an answer. So easy and so hard. The love for which we yearn. Yet, shut out by our masquerade. Deliverance from the isolation where we take refuge to keep from being hurt. Freedom from the "games" we play. The brave, bold risk of trust.

The willingness to be "real."

How Does it Happen?

The Skin Horse was the oldest toy in the nursery. His brown coat showed bald spots, and most of the hairs had been pulled from his tail. Knowing he was wise and experienced, the Velveteen Rabbit asked, "What is REAL? Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real," the Skin Horse explained, is "a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" "Sometimes." The Skin Horse was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." He went on to say it doesn't happen for a long time. Almost never

"to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and are very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real, you can't be ugly except to people who don't understand."³

What a profound picture of what we could call stages in emerging reality. This paper-and-ink book in your hand is "real." No phantom. You're not hallucinating. There's *something* here. In this sense creation is "real." The world is not "maya" (illusion).

The world's "stuff" is the "reality" the scientific method can explore. Observable. Quantifiable. Measurable. As the laboratory method confronts consciousness, however, it must: 1) deny its existence or 2) in true scientific humility confess its inability to explain it.⁴ We confront, in fact, a second level of "reality."

Mere existence + consciousness = emptiness. Misery. Despair. Ask those who choose as the welcome alternative... suicide. Stranded on level 2, we are lost. Made for more and settling for less, we are losers. There *is* another level, but we only get there with wounds.

It Does Hurt

It hurt Latimer and Mackail, Wycliffe and Tyndale and Huss, the missionaries killed in the Philippines, Lincoln and Gandhi and King. Hosts of history's greatest.

But, let the Biblical Story unfold. The Drama of how Reality gives itself away. How it starts with "stuff" and shapes it into a self. How it takes solitary selves and leads them into open, caring, creating selves. Selves who laugh and love and work and play and find that in some wonder-full way they have become really "real."

God comes to us as Artist and Lover. Artist because God creates. Lover because creation is at its heart personal. Not content with a garden of loveliness, the Artist-Lover wants artist-lovers to share creative companionship. So, creation "in the image of God"⁵ is itself an act of Love. We are, indeed, loved into reality. As the always-truthful Skin Horse disclosed, it doesn't happen quickly, and it can hurt...

There are three Acts in the Drama. Act I pictures what happens when people can only say "Me" and "No." They don't get along. They grow lonely. Big folks take what they want from mid-size folks. Little folks take what they want from the littlest folks. All do it, because everybody wants what everybody else has. Ironically, they're troubled by their bullying and end up... really? Yes... miserable.

We are created to say "We," not "Me." Our lives are not designed to center in ourselves. We're created to help, not hurt. Yet...we hurt those around us, making ourselves... (guess what) miserable. Events escalate. We seize what belongs to others and are ashamed. We use our creative gifts to invent elaborate "blame games." The cycle closes. We are... Lonely... Empty...

(you guessed it) miserable... And, that's one way God tells us that in the game of life we've missed the point. We may not hear. Not at first. Or see that on history's stage that's *our* story. Watch. Whose faces peep out of those strange times and places? Does it give you a start to glimpse your own?

In Act I of the Biblical Drama God's people find out what happens to them when they forget the point of the game. They weren't big fellows. Not even mid-size fellows. They were little fellows. In a world where people couldn't say "We" they got pushed all around. Everything they had was snatched from them, and they had to do what the heavyweights (Egyptians, Babylonians and Assyrians) ordered.

They were in big trouble for a long time. As they got shoved around they had time to think. Their conclusion was, "We've played the fool." A few stood up and said, "God wants to teach us to say 'We,' and we can't learn until we quit saying 'No' and start saying 'Yes.'" They had to come to say 'Yes' to one another. However, folks can't say 'Yes' to one another till they can say 'Yes' to God.

Act II shows God coming to the people in their mess and helping them out of it. As you can guess, they were delighted to be out of trouble. No matter, they soon figured they knew the rules so well they didn't need the game's creator around for show-and-tell. When it all turns sour again they don't understand why. "We must not be paying enough attention to the rules."

Those of keener eyesight see that in time God will send a special representative to make clear the point of the game. He will actually be a player-coach. Excitement mounts as the people look forward to this climactic time. A time when everything will be put right.

Act III, the final act, centers in Yeshua (Joshua or Jesus). The curtain rises in silence. The kind that lets you know something big is about to happen... Then... cymbals crash. Drums roll. A herald steps before the footlights. "The time has come," he calls. "This is the moment!" With an extended index finger he points. The herald's name? "John." "*There* is the special representative," he announces, and points to Jesus.

"God's order breaks in!" John cries. "Change your minds and accept the 'good news!'" The news is that God himself is stepping on stage. God (Reality or Truth) fully present in one called God's "Son" or "only Son." To indicate personal presence. He will say "Yes!" He will say "No!" With authority. So convincingly that people everywhere find themselves able and eager to join in. They will say it, too... with him.

History, however, seldom moves in a straight line. And, certainly, not on a steady incline. The special player-coach runs into "officials" who have a signed contract in their hip pockets. Not a ghost of a chance for him now. Interviews are over. The deal is sealed. Empty officials will call the game. Phony "actors" will lead the cheers. Hollow spectators will fill the stands.

Denouement **(The Midnight Bell)**

Rejecting the methods of Caesar and Herod, Jesus now faces the fury of the power he refused. Doggedly he clings to the love that gives whatever it can... bread, evidence of God's power or political freedom. First, though, it gives *itself*.

Read the morning headlines. "Growing Opposition to the Nazarene!" "Claim to Forgive Brings Blasphemy Charge!" Then, the final story: "Jesus Called 'Christ' Executed at 9:00 A.M.!" The assigned reporter writes, "After a hurried trial last night Jesus (called 'Christ') received the death sentence. At 9:00 this morning he was nailed to the cross. As I write, the honorable Justices of the Supreme Court, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, take his body down. A moment ago they handed the centurion in charge an official-looking document, apparently a permit from Pilate."

Continuing, the story reads, "It seems now that the movement begun by Jesus is dead. His disciples have scattered. Starkly the common people stand, stunned by the swift movement of events. Jesus was loved by many. Numbers of those he helped, too numb to speak, weep silently. His was a great dream. Life will not be the same, but it must go on. Only, now there will be less joy, less hope -- and, we fear, less love. For over a year your reporter has covered this disturbing story. His task is done, and he is not glad."

How wondrous strange. This tragedy, this defeat of Jesus, came to be the part of the Story his disciples loved most. Had you been the reporter who wrote "Finis," how startled you would be to find the followers who fled the Garden now at the corner of Broadway and Main. What under heaven are they saying? "We swear to you, He is alive! We've seen and talked to him. He's given us the guts to come back here and give you the news."

These cowards, recent rabbits running toward the brush, a cold cud ("Me!") clenched in their teeth, are men. Together. Standing straight, and in harmony singing. A new song. ("We"). Did it hurt? Of course. They wore no asbestos suits, nor iron masks. It hurt, and it would hurt a lot more. But, not nearly as much as the wounds they suffered on Black Friday.

Those they never forgot.

DAWNING

LIGHT

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
Those who lived in a land of
deep darkness--on them light
has shone...

"For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given.
the government shall be on his
shoulders;
and his name shall be
'Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.'"

(Isaiah 9:2,6)

4

DAWNING LIGHT

(As The Way Grows Clearer)

In Scattered Rays

Reality does not duck into the dark, nor hide its face behind masks. Light breaks where it can. Through clear sky or broken clouds. One writer says it plainly, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son."¹

Near-sighted, squint-eyed, cataract-clouded eyeballs see the Light beaming only on them. Early Church leaders, however, never hesitated to say that God broke through their limited circles and made contact with all kinds of out-of-borders.² Nobody was arbitrarily passed by. Nobody who wanted to see... and know... and care.

What soon becomes clear is that "the Way" is both personal and impersonal. Just as Reality is. Look close and hard:

- 1) Reality as the "stuff" of creation -- impersonal.
- 2) Reality as "artists-lovers"... little creators -- personal.
- 3) Reality as the Creative Source producing the "artists-lovers," itself "Artist-Lover" -- personal. Ultimate, original Personhood. Reality spelled with a capital "R."

"The Way" is that which squares with the Real. Is in line with the order and structure of creation at its different levels of being. The way things are. Not what we wish. Not what we pretend. What *is*.

"The Way" is, also, that means used to bring the unreal-real back in line with the Real. To *realize* the potential in creation. Both sub-human and human. God wants to turn phonies into real people. To fill up the hollow folks with substance. To turn *anthropoids* into persons. To give them insides. Something other than digestive tracts and circulatory systems. Something more than cash registers for consciences.

My hope is that you see why this "Way" cannot possibly be forced into a formula... mathematical, philosophical or theological. It cannot be reduced to paper and ink. It's carved right into nature and human nature. As concrete as what we call "the law of gravity" As real as what we know to be "the law of love."

Through Preparers of The Way

Those of us in the Hebrew-Christian lineage at times too quickly dismiss all others. The Apostle Paul said, "Let no one boast about human leaders. All belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas [he could string the list on out] or the world or life or death or the present or the future -- all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God."³

"All belong to you!" "The world." Even "the future." Therefore, let nobody short-change you. It's your inheritance. Claim it. Here we note but a pittance of it, but a pittance we're the poorer to ignore.

Shielding Our Eyes for a Longer Look

The Code of Hammurabi (@ 1750-1800 B.C.) predated, perhaps, contributed to the Law of Moses. Both point to the way life is and is to be lived. Our American way is based in great measure on this ancient, time-tested Law.

The vast, mysterious Orient, with its untold millions, was cut off from the great prophets of Israel. In the later 7th and early 6th centuries B.C., though, two voices were heard. "This is nothing new," they insisted and pointed back to "the old way." The way that served as cement for Oriental society across the centuries.

More prominent was Confucius, with his *Analects*. While he spoke of "the Way of Heaven," most of his energy turned to its implications for the common life of earth. Lao-tze, however, witnessed to the Ultimate. Not knowing its name, he called it "The Tao" ("The Way"). When forced to qualify it, he referred to it as "reason," "way," "master," "father," "mother," "carpenter." It was the self-existent, omnipresent, "the Real One, beside which the 'many' are phenomenal and unreal."⁴

Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others caught glimpses of reality that their contemporaries missed. Believing in one God, Socrates was accused of destroying faith in "the gods." His admonition, "Know thyself," was an attempt to get beyond abstraction to reality. Naively he thought the basic human problem was ignorance. That we all do what we deem to be "right."

For Plato "the good life" is one in which reason rules the will and appetites, and as a result one is wise, brave and temperate. Happiness and goodness are wed. Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" has furnished grist for many a theological mill.

A Glance at Historical Contemporary Faiths

"Historical" means that history is taken seriously. It is the instrument through which God makes Godself known.

Judaism

Christians are spiritual Semites. By faith "children of Abraham." Israel's faith points in the right direction. Her ethical standards are among the greatest. At our peril we ignore her insights. Yet, her image of God lacks the face of Jesus. And her violated Law, with its consequent guilt, lacks His "amazing grace."

Islam

Islam is included because of its debt to Judaism and Christianity. Also, on today's international screen it looms large. As an adolescent with voracious appetite. In one area, like every form of Fundamentalism, Islam refuses to take history seriously as the vehicle of God's revelation. God is really revealed in a book, the *Koran*. Dropped bodily from heaven. Furthermore, its theme song is, "If Allah wills." God's will is inflexible and predetermined. At its best a high ethical faith, it is currently subverted by nationalistic interests. Strong on demand. Weak on gift. Lacking the enabling companionship of the Holy Spirit.

Marxism

This politico-economic faith is included because it *is* a faith, and *does* take history seriously. Since today it is increasingly discredited, we say only a word. Marxism has a messianic people. An official creed. Millennial era. And predetermined historical movement toward that golden age. It voices a prophetic view of self-interest tainting every ordinance and institution. Even our laws embody the interests of the dominant elements of society. Even so, as a faith it fails to apply to itself the critical tests. Consequently, its secular version of "the Kingdom" crumbles.

Christianity

More will be said later about this faith. In contrast with all the "do-it-yourself" programs, the Christian faith centers in God's Grace-Gift in Jesus Christ. In him God stoops to give Godself away.

"Salvation" becomes right relationship.

By grace. Through faith. For good works.

Rampant Polytheism

Moderns are seldom either atheists or monotheists. Ours is a contemporary pantheon. Not of marble. But flesh and blood. Zeus-like, "Self" sits on the central throne. Voluptuous "Aphrodite" strokes his chest. Beloved "Bacchus" brings bottled joy. Golden "pound(s) of flesh" provide for us "the good life." And, "Mars," guardian of the lord-god "Bomb," insures our eternal safety.

Here the light is bent. Dimmed. Its objects distorted. Grotesque. Demonized. Self-esteem transmogrified to narcissism or megalomania. Love... to lust. Joy... to debauchery.

Aspiration... to greed. Security... to idolatrous tyranny. The blind confuse the light with the shadows.

A Voice in The Wilderness

Cries echo across our desert. Not all broadcast from church steeples. One recent call comes from Bill Bennett's 831-page *Book Of Virtues*. Most of it copied. Wisdom of the (s)ages. Self-Discipline. Compassion. Responsibility. Friendship. Work. Courage. Perseverance. Honesty. Loyalty. Faith. All as cross-cultural as they are transhistorical.

Light rays break through from varied sources. God speaking through all kinds of people and circumstance. The question is, "What do they say?" Our heart hunger is to know more than that at its depth Reality is "personal"... and we're to be responsible.

The questions persist, "Is the Universe friendly?" "Does God know my name?" "Does Reality back love... or hate? Sharing ... or seizing? When I defy 'the law of love' and walk off life's ledge, is anything broken? Can we all look about and see the strewn wreckage?"

Not the *existence*, but the *nature* of Reality, is our chief concern. Are we going anywhere? If, so where?

What in creation is the goal?
And, what's the hold up?

Do you remember Shelley's "Ozymandias?" A desert traveler chances upon a giant statue broken, lying half-buried in the sand. And on the pedestal these words appear:

'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings!
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Blind
souls
plunge ahead.
Struggling through
a starless night. Stumbling on
One in the throes of undeserved suffering,
They haven't a clue.
And, then...
the Light!
Dark
Eyes
open.
See
"the
Way!"
to
"the
Father."
H o m e.

GOD'S GRACIOUS

PURPOSE

AND OUR

DESPERATE

PLIGHT

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life." (*John 3:16*)

"But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ -- by grace you have been saved -- and raised us up with him..." (*Ephesians 2:4-6a*)

5

GOD'S GRACIOUS PURPOSE AND OUR DESPERATE PLIGHT (When God's Wants and Ours Collide)

At Heart Reality Is "Love"

Love is not simply a sentiment. A coward's refuge. A malady of the weak. Nor the "feeling" of the Cosmic Creator. It's the *essence* of Creation. God!

A song is not a song till you sing it,
and love is not love till you give it.

It is the *nature* of God to give. *Godself*. Away. To create and care. Not only to create things, but selves with whom to share ones self. One's joy... and work. God *yearns* for creative relationship.

As theologians say, God yearns to incarnate *Godself* in creation.¹ And does so as fully as possible. Obviously God can be *Godself* more fully in some things than in others. More fully in a faithful dog than an immobile stone. More fully in a human than in a dog. More fully in some humans than others. Yet, only in *one* human was God completely at Home, fully *Godself* insofar as God can be present in a single individual. That one -- Jesus Christ!

Whatever else may convince others that Reality is at heart "Love," it is in the face of this one person that Christians see the nature and meaning of existence.

The Greater Goal

And yet... a single, solitary human, though fully developed, is not the creative goal. Here in this one "real" person *is* the goal for the individual. Still more. In him, also, is glimpsed the greater goal on beyond individualism. To say it straight and simple, God wants a family. A grownup family, that has learned to care and share. A family to whom God can be Father and Friend. A family in which God, as well as the brothers and sisters, can all be at home. A family that learns joyfully to share in the work. The creative adventure. God's goal is a creation in which "love is law." A creation that reflects the care that is God's nature. Where even nature's impersonal elements back, rather than buck, harmony and good will. This is "the grain" of the universe and the tug of the future.

"The rugged individual" is *not* where it's all headed.

Elsewhere I have pointed to the creative intent as "One Grownup Family in a Brand-New World with Everybody Home for Thanksgiving."¹ That metaphor lifts up the unity, maturity, love-relationship, renewed environment, and joyous sharing of humanity as it is meant to be.

Not quite so explicit is sharing the creative adventure. The work we are called to do. Which to a degree defines who we are.

Shared mission and ministry is a trumpet note to let loose. And fly free. Full life is not idleness. Remember: the biblical view is that God comes to us as Artist and Lover... Artist creating. Lover creating not only order and beauty, but little artists and lovers to share both the art and the love.

What Went Wrong?

Let William Saroyan say it... again. Profoundly enough for the wise. Simply enough for the rest of us. Clearly enough that all can recognize it as the echo of our own souls. His first children's book was entitled *Me*. It begins: "Once upon a time there was only one word--'Me.' Animals had other words, but [humans] would only say 'Me.' When at last a new word was discovered, that word was 'No.'"

This is the human situation.

Me vs. You! Shoving my "No!"s into your business. Egocentricity and hostility. Demonic twins that challenge the creative intent. Creation does not welcome God home. Endowed with freedom, humanity uses its godlike gift to rebel. The result -- God could not be completely Godself. Not in the impersonal order. Now not even in the personal. Faced with human rejection, what on earth can such wounded Love do?.

Love's Difficult Dilemma

The revolt raises the question of human history, "How can God overcome the reluctance?" Can God destroy the rebellion without destroying the rebels? Turn the human "No!" into "Yes!?" Cross the chasm? Change the heart? Heal the rift? Transfigure both spirit and body? Bind those infected with His hospitality into one grownup family eager to join in cosmic ministry? Can God take self-centered individualists under the spell of illusion, doomed to death, and transform them into a community of incredible care? Bathed in the reality of love and life?

Not even omnipotent power can arbitrarily create a free realized moral end. No celestial thunderbolt brings loving trust. Or faithful union. Only a vulnerable disclosure of the heart, showing oneself trustworthy can elicit trust. Only spiritual hospitality can entice the rebel stranger. Lure one to risk entry into what heretofore has seemed a hostile fortress.

A Built-In Warning

Actions have consequences. There's a natural "No" to our "No," a "law" of creative Love we can't escape. It's our destiny. By nature we creatures are to live in line with the Creator. In freedom we get crossways, but never get away with it. Consequences! As we move with the lure of Life, those consequences cry "Yes." As we move against it, "No."

All we have to do is look about us and see. Ethnic hatreds with their barbaric blood lust. Narrow nationalism posing as "patriotism." Racial and sectarian myths that set us against one

another. The recklessness with which we treat our natural home. And now the Oklahoma City slaughter dominating every newscast... Only a few consequences of ignoring "the law of love."

We can defiantly assert our freedom and walk off a ten-story building. Peering over the ledge, one can see much that is broken. It will not be the law of gravity. As surely, we *can* choose to live as if life were a jungle. However, we *can't* choose to be beasts and get away with it.

Whatever other goals God in God's secret wisdom possesses, the one purpose made plain is that of creation-in-order-to-companionship. To be at "home" in the creation. To enjoy the love bonds of kindred spirits. And share with them the creative adventure. Resistance to that purpose results in suffering. The suffering of wounded Love. Plus the suffering of nature's "No!"

The suffering of nature's "No" is severe. If we're teachable, it can show us much. What it can never show us is the anguish of that injured Love. It can inspire fear... perhaps, respect. It cannot elicit affection. Or devotion. It can change our action. It cannot change our heart.

What can?

As
the expression
of
Ultimate Reality,
the order and structure of creation
is, also, reality, spelled with
a small "r,"
appearing as impersonal.
We study its form and describe it
physically, astronomically, geographically,
mathematically.
Observe its habits and label them "laws."
Study living creatures and call such inquiry
"Zoology," "Biology," "Anthropology,"
"Sociology," "Psychology."
Seek constructive ways of living,
interacting, and discerning meaning
in our existence.
Such shared insights we name:
"Ethics,"
"Philosophy,"
"Religion."
It is sheer fascination to
delve into these mysteries. But...the
soul-hunger lingers. Unless it is
buried
by distraction.
Then there is "History."
Light from the past.
Witness to
"the Way."

**THE
DIVINE
DETERMINATION**

"In this way God's love for us has been made known: God sent his only Son into the world that we through him might have life. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (*1 John 4:9-10*)

"...Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ."
(*Ephesians 1:4-5*)

6

THE DIVINE DETERMINATION

(The "Love That Will Not Let [Us] Go")

Personal Approach

The Truth must be driven home. Deep enough that no fist can snatch it free. God is trying everywhere in every time through everybody to get through to us. Squeezing through our armor's every chink.

Of necessity the approach through nature is inadequate. Even the personal approach often seems futile. Yet, it alone offers hope of a breakthrough.

Partial Success

We have noted real, but incomplete, success on numerous fronts. Particular persons prove more open to reality than others. Not that they are without doubt. Or without flaw. Yet, hungering for reality, they refuse entrenchment behind the breastworks of pretense. At least edgewise, through them God manages to get in a word. (Little "w").

Such souls have been our seers and sages, our prophets. They have not all been equally transparent, but all have partially illumined their time, their situation, and the creative thrust of the future. They have warned and pleaded, encouraged and inspired. In darkest days they have been filters and lenses of the Light. In ways they never knew.

In the Mahayana Buddhist concept of the *bodddhisattva* who refuses entrance into paradise and returns to life as a savior of others, the wounded love of God filters through. In a Hosea, who loved his unfaithful wife all the way to the auction block and heart-broken bought her back and brought her home, the wounded Love of God grew closer. Clearer. Just two examples of many.

"Through!"

A picture coming out of World War I shows a signalman at the front lying dead. Gripped in his stiffened hands are the ends of a broken telegraph wire tightly held together. Below the picture a single word

"Through!"

That's God's intention. To get through.

Even so, the break remained. At length God said, "I will quit sending messengers, and I will go myself." So, God stooped. Knelt and bared His breast. The Power that hurled worlds into space and ordered their courses through the heavens showed itself to be "Love," accepting every wound that rage inflicts.

Able at last to be fully Godself in a mature person, the truly "Real" became "real" in and to us. As one of us, he throughout his life identified himself with the broken and outcasts of society. Rising above self-centeredness, he poured himself out for others. At the end, as the powers who judged him a threat nailed him down to die, his prayer was, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do." No greater revelation is possible.

Un-stopable.

Un-wearoutable.

Un-putoffable Love!

Here God made the breakthrough! In Jesus Christ, the ultimate in utter unconditional self-giving love appears.

Self-centeredness... gone.

Other-oriented care... supreme.

This is no love that excites pity. It's an awe-full glimpse of our own failure and its angry gash in the heart of God. Split by the lightning flash from Calvary, the darkness for a moment hides its face. Stripped naked is the stark reality of what our "No!" *always* does to the heart of God. The cross on Calvary for a moment makes historically visible the eternal Cross.

The wounded Love of God.

Here is God's personal Word, and, therefore, God's last Word. Not that God quits speaking. Spitting out a sort of "take it or leave it!" Rather, when one bears her/his heart and soul, there is nothing left to say.

There is no other argument.

There is no other plea.

Before the wounded Love of God,

what

now?

It's our move.

Do
you
know
the story
of the Republic
set up in Rome in 1848
to establish liberty and justice?
It was savagely attacked
by the old corrupt governments
which it had displaced.
Rome was besieged.

On the day the terms of surrender were signed
a host of people crowded into
St. Peter's Square.
Into the crowd rode
a middle-aged man
whose courage had steeled them in the fight.
When the cheering ceased,
Garibaldi called out,
"I am going out from home.

I offer neither quarters, nor provisions, nor wages.
I offer hunger, thirst,
forced marches, battles and death.
Let him who loves his country with his
heart and not his lips only, follow me."
It is written that they streamed
to him in the hills.
Because of his faith and theirs,
Italy is a reality in the world today.

What echo rings through
this call?

**THE
HUMAN
RESPONSE**

"Be subject to one another out of
reverence for Christ."
(*Ephesians 5:21*)

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if any has a complaint against another, forgive each other. As Christ has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (*Colossians 3:12-14*)

7

THE HUMAN RESPONSE (At The Fork Of The Road)

When Nothing Is Held Back

Here's how it happened in Formosa. How one man stopped it. The centuries-long, blood-spattered, midnight raids of the head hunters.

The British Governor, a Christian, tried faithfully to halt the horror. Periodically the practice died down. Then the natives grew restless. The Governor knew that in the night more victims would die. He loved his people. And, they knew that he loved them.

One day the old signs were back. Meaning? Tonight the blood will flow.

The Governor called a native leader. "Since I cannot stop you," he said, "I will tell you where to find a victim." Go to a certain spot. You will find him wrapped in a red blanket. Sleeping beneath a tree.

Calling his followers, the leader stole through the dark to the designated spot. There it was. The body wrapped in a red blanket, beneath the tree. At a signal the hunters hurled their spears. Deep. Roll the body over and cut off the victim's head. Cries split the night. Hard cries. It's the Governor! They have killed their beloved friend. It is said that from this time head-hunting in Formosa died.

When evil so deep and love so strong collide on the highway, if evil is to go, love must give itself away.

The response? We see the costly consequence and recoil. The "self" begins to change. The "I" I was is the "I" I now hate. From which I "really" find myself distanced. Emotionally, volitionally, we suffer the birth pangs. Cerebrally we recognize, ratify and celebrate what is going on. Then, binding ourselves to the Beloved, we follow to the tree.

We have been captured. We have been bound. By bands of grateful love. Stronger than steel. Stronger than life. Stronger than death. We are no longer our own. The center of "self" has shifted. The self-contained, all-possessing "I" is re-placed with the all-giving "Beloved"... and the rest of the renegades like me, who are loved and accepted by him.

What no celestial lightning strike, no divine thunderbolt, no threat nor arbitrary demand, can do...has been done! The "I" is now a "We." Callouses gave way to care. Nobody legislated for me the "law of love." It caught me. In my isolation enfolded me. Drew me from my self-sentenced cell. Holds me tight in the embrace of God.

How Shall I Tell It?

The experience is the same. The same jail door clanging behind. The same warm sunlight kissing line-smoothed faces. The same joy-song in our souls. The same guilt-load lovingly lifted. The same invitation to the family table. The same apprenticeship in the Father workshop. The same safe nestling in a Father's arms.

Yet, all so different. Wintry souls and summery souls do not say it the same. They may not even "feel" it the same. We spring and autumn souls come from distant climes with different accents. Even when we all speak the same words.

At times we use different terms to mean the same thing. When we care, we listen not for the words on the lips, but for the message from the heart. Not to find excuses to pull apart, but to cling ever tighter to "the tie that binds." No more sitting in our end of the boat, arms folded, lips pursed, self-righteously saying, "It's not *my* problem. The hole's in your end. *You* bail."

We grab a bucket and start.

Together we bail...and row...and sing.

Brief Reminder

While gleams of light and glimpses of the way come from all directions in all ages, we remember that sign posts, herald's voices and index fingers are not the way. Let's, then, examine a few ways that are not-the-way. Other way(s) so often mistaken for the way. ...We sure don't need to get stuck on any dead-end byways.

Science, Education and Reason are blessings until they become substitute faiths. Major religions and philosophies give glimpses of light until they claim to *be* the Light. At the end of their beams waits the darkness. To march brashly on into the night pretending it's day is a bit of bravado we could skip.

It's late summer. At evening. A long way to go. A carload of college kids in a '36 Chevy chugs toward Los Angeles. There on the right is the sign,

**LITTLE ROCK
CITY LIMITS.**

With no money for a motel, they keep driving. After awhile it's obvious to all (but the driver) that they've taken a wrong turn. Then another. In desperation a big bunch of others. Their condition... "lost!" Really lost. Not a main road anywhere. All night they drive. Trying to head in a Westerly direction. Daylight drags in. Ahead, a city sign. Hurray! Hurry and see how far along we are. Then the shocker:

**LITTLE ROCK
CITY LIMITS**

I know. I was in that car.¹ "It's really true," I thought. "When lost you travel in a circle." It wasn't a fatal tragedy. The driver, though, who wouldn't take time early on to check our bearings, did almost miss her wedding.

Circling through the night, guided by a faith whose light ends at the curb, can be considerably more tragic. Landing us back onto that ever-present, ever-enticing, ever-seducing way that's not-the-way.

With the not-so-obvious sign...

PRETENDSVILLE.

That Plagued Way

The "Way of Pretense," we've noted, is the way Jesus fought hardest. Because it compromises us and orients us toward fantasy. Consequently, it masks not only us, but God. Creative as we are, we craft elaborate ways that are not-the-way.

Rites and ceremonies eclipse justice and mercy. Rites unrelated to the intended end. Not natural. Arbitrary. Depicting God as erratic. Despotic. Capricious. Who, like Alice's Queen can in a moment of pique cry, "Off with her head!"

The masked God is not the Father of Jesus Christ. Or, is so disguised as to be unrecognizable. Can you see Jesus leaning toward his disciples? Scanning face after face? Reading them as a parent reads a child? Waiting for their full attention?

All twelve.

"I no longer call you servants," he says, stopping for the word "servant" to sink in. He explains. "The servant doesn't know what his master is doing." Then, slowly, eyes softening, "I have called you friends." Yes. Well?

He isn't through.....

This must be important.

Where is he going?"

"Everything that the Father has told me I have told you."² Ah! So that's it. He has been utterly honest. Held back nothing. Unveiled his whole heart. Mind. Soul. He really does want to do more than program them to march lock step. To be... "*friend*." If he has opened up to them the Father's mind and soul and will, does he want them to be *God's* "friends," too?

It comes clear. The "way" of rote obedience is not his way. His is not at all dictatorial. Order is not the end. O yes, the penultimate end. Not the ultimate. Which is loving relationships. What a relief! Rip the mask away, and let God be God-the-Father-Friend!

When conformity, rather than friendship, is the goal, God is reduced to the equivalent of a mechanic. A puppeteer. Owner of a flea circus. An animal trainer can condition his troop so that it performs superbly without knowing what happens or why. The goal is not a caring community of cats (or fleas), but a spectacle that uninvolved onlookers enjoy. Such is not the peak of our past or the lure of our future.

It's to my advantage to be aware of the form and order given creation and to cooperate with it. It's even more to my advantage to know that God wants to be my Friend. [Mine. Yours.] And then cooperate.

To refuse goes against "the grain" both of the order and the offer. Any refusal packaged as a game of "Let's Pretend" is a rip-off. Sometime, somewhere phoniness will out. Mine. Everyone else's. Any unreal approach is self-defeating. Any valid approach must be honest. Ripping through all pretense of dogma or character.

The Way Of Account Juggling

With fear and trembling I now point to an extremely popular way. Before the stones fly let me say why I see "The Way Of Account Juggling" as a sophisticated theological version of "Let's Pretend."

In our legal and commercial dealings we know account juggling is wrong. Gifts, yes. Doctoring the ledgers, no. Pretending that one person's resources are not hers, but his, is fantasy. It doesn't square with reality. *It's just not true!* Isn't it an out-right crime? Surely, it grabs a blindfold.
Dons a mask. And
puts on a stage costume.

That's why "the blood of bulls and goats" couldn't cleanse the conscience. Animal sacrifice is not a normal..., rational..., or spiritual... remedy for...

blasphemy...
murder...
adultery...
theft...
slander...
greed...
pride...
or any other evil.

If it were, it could and would have continued. An effective means of handling sin. Since the ritual sacrifice of *anything* cannot be a serious, authentic, or "real" response to sin, it could never free the sinner's conscience of guilt.

Sin is not a *thing* that's rolled around. Forward. Backward. Or any other way. It is a condition in my soul, a "No!" buried in my will that erupts and severs my relationship with God. No form of "Let's Pretend" can remedy the rupture. My sin cannot "really" be shifted to a sheep. Nor "really" to anybody. A cross-shift where my wrong is credited to some other's account and his goodness to mine. Metaphorically we may speak of such a "transaction," but need to know what we're doing, lest we plunge into pious blasphemy. How ironic... to exonerate God from moral culpability, we talk in the very terms that make him inescapably guilty!

If God *cannot* tell the difference between the guilty and innocent, God is blind. If God *can* tell the difference and willfully calls the guilty "innocent" and the innocent "guilty," God does what every court in creation condemns. And every sensitive soul. In feigned defense of "justice," the unthinkable injustice is done.

Hardly the best way to tell the best news ever heard.

There are legitimate uses of metaphors such as "death," "burial," "resurrection," "ransom," "substitution," "redemption," "imputation" and "account crediting." There are illegitimate usages, as well. When a single metaphor is

selected,

literalized,

legalized,

and compelled to carry the full content of the Gospel. It alone is made *the* mediational means. It is "*the* way" of reconciliation.

Not that God's grace is wholly blocked by our ignorance. Not even by our pious pretense. We can, and often do, affirm God's grace through a theology that logically denies it. The marvel: our wrong doctrine doesn't strangle the Truth. He lives. And loves. And breaks through our blindness. Our broken dogmas, too.

"Amazing grace!"

Ignoring Accounts

A cartoon shows Jesus hanging on the cross. Below are the execution squad and the jeering crowd. The question from his lips is, "If I'm O.K. and you're O.K., what am I doing hanging here?"

There's something worse than juggling the books. Much worse. Ignoring or tossing them. Pretending nothing's happened. Everything and everybody's OK. Why make a big noise over nothing? "Sin" has a bad press in religious circles. Loosen up. Go with the flow. "You only go around once, so grab all the gusto you can."

Or... get serious. "Sin" is simply the evolutionary lag. The "not yet" in our onward march. Or... in a relativistic world, it's what you don't like that I do... or have.

Listen...

To condone lovelessness,

self-centeredness,

injustice,

rupture of relationships,

is to play fast and loose with reality. Spell it with a little "r" or a big. It's failure to take seriously anything or anyone. It is to deny God... or else to pretend that he's the-god-of-the-wax-nose.

Beckoning Byways

Now for a glance at a few of our most-trusted secular faiths. Not formal, but every bit as religious. Substitutes.

(Science) The Way of Technology

The laboratory technique discloses much about reality (little "r") and it's potential. We can hardly imagine life today without its benefits. Automobile. Telecommunications. Miracle

drugs. It possesses, as well, a lethal threat to life in all forms. Even the planet. Nuclear bombs. Biological weapons. Chemical contamination. It's we who decide between Dr. Salk and Frankenstein. Science shows us the stage, not the meaning, of life's drama.

(Education) The Way of Knowledge

Minus education we would be tossed right back into the Dark Ages. Did I not believe in it, I wouldn't have wasted 24 years in the system. Knowledge, however, is a means, not an end. It's lodged in the hands of *somebody*. Sherlock Holmes or Dr. Moriarity. Those who build Auschwitz or those who shelter the Jews. An energetic convict remarks to his lazy laid-back-on-the-bunk cell mate, "I'm going to study and improve myself. And when you're a common thief, I'll be an embezzler."

(Reason) The Way of Systematic Thought

A group of students touring a mental hospital were stopped cold. Before them a disheveled, but clear-eyed, patient. In a single lucid moment she grasped a visitor's arm and asked passionately, "Have you thanked God today for your reason?" Then lapsed back into her own dark world. She meant sanity. Ability to know those you love and who love you. To function as a normal human being in a web of meaningful relations.

Reason as the intellectual tool by which we systematize reality is something else. Driven by a rational categorical imperative, we strain to conceive the ultimate unity of all things. Intellectual giants think the unthinkable, till pygmies, springing from their tall shoulders, step out on a star. But the Ultimate cannot be grasped by a universal. Comprehended by a concept. As reason reaches the utmost frontier and collapses, it marks the boundary between logical thought and faith. Reason and revelation.

Two facts we need to note:

1) Reason does not contradict itself dealing with the objective world of finite things and concepts...but, as it tries to grasp the Ultimate it splits in two. Paradox is the only rational way of expressing truth that cannot properly be expressed in rationalistic terms.

2) Horrors! Reason can, also, be seduced. By greed. Pride. Lust. Special interest. Capitalists wanting to be called "Christian" while bleeding the helpless dry. Collectivists wanting to be called "humanitarian," while beneath a soulless system humans are crushed. M.D.'s and Ph.D.'s arguing astutely that no known harm comes from smoking. The use of insecticides. Or defoliants. Even... that Jews should be gassed to make way for the super race.

Pure reason needs truly to be pure.

Finally

To the outreaching Love of God we respond very differently... But, we do respond.

Together we travel for awhile this dusty road. Share bread and wine and water. Tears and laughter. Sun and rain. Now we pause to consider. For, the path splits square in two. We must decide. We do. "Goodbye," we call. But, only one of us knows the meaning of the word.

INTERLUDE

"And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which, indeed, you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (*Colossians* 3:16-17)

8 INTERLUDE

Let's look at how four Biblical writers talk about "the way." Their experience of rescue which they couch in different terms. Meaningful to the culture where they lived. No violence will force them to use a single accent. To be enriched by what they say, we will listen for what they mean.

We turn to witnesses such as
a Hebrew scholar,
a late-blooming apostle,
Jesus' personal friend,
and a Greek medical-historian.

They are all thinkers who, at least, wrestled honestly with the problem. Took seriously
Sin and grace.
Self-centeredness and rescue.
Alienation and reconciliation.
Leaving and coming home.

Can we change the figure? We'll try to change no more than that. Come along to the Forum and listen to a new men's quartet. You've heard "The Three Tenors." Have you heard "The Four Baritones?"¹

Why A Quartet?

Solos are fine. So, at first let's let the singers sing alone. The four of them. A Jew (writer of *Hebrews*). A Roman (Paul, writer of *Romans*). A friend of Jesus (John, author of the *Gospel of John*). A Greek (Luke author of *Luke-Acts*).

And listen as each sings the same song. As each carries the melody with a unique lilt and distinctive beat. For now we'll forget the reviews and leave that for tomorrow morning's critics.

Afterward we'll ask the four to sing together and hope to hear the sweeter melody, the bravura, the full-throated harmonies, the crescendos and diminuendos that round out the whole. The lyrics well reflect the varied cultures in which the singers live. In native dialect each sheet, each score, tells of God's breathtaking, heart-stopping breakthrough. That's why the song was understood.

And... why it was loved.

When we note the singers, as well as the song, we may find
a toe tapping,
a pulse pounding,
a mouth humming,
an overwhelming desire to sing.

If only we knew the music...
and the words.

BREACHING

THE

BARRIER

"Therefore, brothers [and sisters], since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his (flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."

(Hebrews 10:19-2)

9

BREACHING THE BARRIER

(Love As Self-Offering Across Every Chasm)

"The Literature"

"Dear Hebrew Christians facing persecution: Greetings." That's not the way the book begins. But, it could be. They're clearly the target group. And why Hebrew-Christian thought forms dominate. Behind the polished Greek text sits a scholar, well acquainted with the wider culture. But who sees now these pinched and precious faces.

That's why his song sings.

Why This Letter?

He gets right to the point. There have been a lot of revelations in the past, but God saved the best for the last. Jesus Christ is the full and final expression of God.¹ As such he towers above everybody and everything else. "Superior" is the key adjective in a recurring refrain. Superior revelation *of* God. Superior means of reconciliation *to* God. Mediator of the new covenant relation between God and humankind.² Superior to all other (personal or ritual) mediational means.

He is Lord!

It's bad times for good folks. Believers face danger. Maybe, death. Unless they'll say in a loud voice, "Caesar is lord." Even if under their breath they whisper, "It's really Jesus Christ."

Christians no longer enjoy the judicial standing they once possessed as Jews. The temptation to deny so costly a commitment is intense. "Maybe," the thought steals in, "the old way is best. Maybe, its sacrificial system is enough. For more than 1,300 years it's served our ancestors. Shall we chuck it now?"

The readers had no question about the need. They were convinced that a sacrifice was essential. Their question was, "Which?"

A little boy, commenting on the cross, said, "Somebody had to take the rap, and Jesus took it." These ancient Jews were sure about the first part of the statement. It was the last part that gagged them now. In the face of persecution, would they swallow or spit?

The Priest-- A Powerful Picture

Where I grew up ³ priests were scarcer than hen's teeth. Consequently, they were mysterious, sinister souls, wrapped in black, steeped in intrigue and prudently feared. It was the last picture I wanted of Jesus Christ.

In 1982, when I went back to Ames, Iowa, for the dedication of a retirement facility of which I was midwife, I had a startling experience. Never before told. In an upstairs hallway a young priest fell to his knees, grasped my hand, kissed it, and said softly, "My father."

Dumbfounded, I stood silent... I don't remember what happened next. Likely an attempt at some sort of gracious response. Later, though, I thought how different was my reaction from Peter's. ⁴ It was troubling. I kept asking, "Why?" "Why him?" "Why me?"

My conclusion was: 1) I was much older than he. 2) We had come to be friends. 3) We shared in a study of Scripture texts for the following Sundays. 4) He'd privately asked for help on thorny questions. 5) Occasionally I was asked to address congregations in the parish. 6) He must have felt in some way blessed. Given light in the darkness. Comradeship. Care. Through a rather plain conduit.

The thought struck home: God used one of His clay pots for more than smoke! Isn't that what we want? For which we hope? And pray? The way it should be? But...I was still awed and terribly humbled. Further, it was clear that he and I sure did see priests differently.

Which view came closer to that held by first-century Jews? I knew. Look at the sacrificial scene. Consciences keenly aware of sin. God so far away. Flames leaping at the altar. Smoke billowing to the clouds. A river of blood on the run.

What's going on here?

The priest sweeps by the brazen sea, sunlight glistening on scarlet and blue, purple and gold. Up through the smoke he mounts the stone stairs. A ziggurat, at the base 47 feet square. Isn't he closer to God? At least, now? As he offers the sacrifice, does he not open up the way through that dark cloud? Who can replace the priest? He is surely "our man."

The Fatal Flaw

"Then why do I keep feeling uneasy? Remembering my sin? Why don't I feel that it has been honestly dealt with? Blotted out? Isn't this the promise, 'As far as the East is from the West, so far have I removed your transgression from you?'" ⁵ These are the questions sensitive consciences ask. But, no final answer. Not at first. Only a finger pointing ahead.

"The old was good," the writer says.

"But temporary. A shadow. A symbol. A type." Then comes the answer. "The system holds a fatal flaw. *It can never cleanse the conscience.*⁶ That's why you keep feeling guilt. Goat blood can't bridge the chasm from God to here."

The very repetition of the offerings⁷ remind worshipers, "There's your sin... again. Not yet dealt with." Consequently, it could only highlight the honest worshiper's guilt.

On this page I can write "MY SINS." Underneath list them. Then take ink eradicator and blot them out. Every one. That is, I can blot out the words, not the sins. My action won't touch *them*.

As surely, sheep blood can be tried as a sin eradicator. It seems to work... at first. Only you have to keep using it over and over. No matter how much blood you put on top. Or how often. The sins bleed through. No sensitive conscience can close its eyes. Nor, pretending, look away. "Something's not right here." It knows.

Animal sacrifice at best was a symbolic gesture. The worshipers' penitent effort to offer *themselves*. For the wrong done to another and the God they had betrayed. An insightful worshiper might lay hands on the lamb's head, saying, "Lord, this represents me. I come to surrender my life. Confess my sin. Offer myself. To receive the due judgment for my wrong.

'Here, Lord, I give myself away.

'It's all that I can do,'"

That would be a serious response. It would be "real" in that it is honest. Though, still inadequate. Nothing the offender does or can do is sufficient to deal with the sin situation. Sin's tragic result is not merely a violation of some moral or ceremonial ordinance. But the betrayal of a trust and rupture of a relationship. Mended only by the action of all parties involved.

So...?

The self-offering of Jesus Christ is free of the fatal flaw. It is not the killing of an unwilling and dumb animal by those who have power to take its life and then hold it high as a serious,

honest,

authentic,

"real" way of dealing with sin.

The chasm must be bridged. The self-offering of Jesus Christ can do it... and did. He alone is the high priest who could not simply mount the altar stairs that rose toward the heavens. He could go into heaven itself and bridge that yawning, isolating, separating gulf.

Here, truly is "our man".

"The New and Living Way"

Now we've something to sing about. A "new and living way,"⁸ must, however, mean the "old" is "dead" or "dying."⁹ "Obsolete," "growing old," "will soon disappear."¹⁰ The ways are identified. The "old" is the Judaic sacrificial system, and the "new" is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Then the contrast: 1) an unwilling animal slaughtered to take away the guilt of human sin. 2) The free and gracious self-giving of God's own Son to take upon himself our guilt and wrong. Result? In human experience the first doesn't work... the last does.

Why?

"The new and living way" is "real." Jesus is mediator. Our "access." Because he is a true child. Through suffering made complete. He convinces us he's made it through, and will see that we do. As we identify with him, our consciences are cleansed. We trust ourselves to his care. And with him we're not afraid to go.

Full obedience.

Real sonship.

Perfected in suffering.

Offered in joy.

Barrier removed.

Homecoming begun.

Jesus, as truly, becomes representative humanity. "Our man in heaven."¹¹ During most of the book the emphasis is on his complete humanity. His identification with us in our struggle. Obedience" was not a prenatal injection into his genes. He "learned" it "through suffering." He was matured by means of it. He was the *first* to make it. So, he is our "pioneer and perfecter."¹² The first full act of God's human creation!

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.¹³

Now we know what "human" means. A "child." What God is up to with this part of creation. What we are destined to be. In him the Family began. He will bring the rest along. Be the way. The open door. Rather than hide, we now feel free to go in.

What Is Offered?

Let's be clear. Not blood *as blood*. Blood as "*life!*"¹⁴ The contrast is the life of a sheep versus the life of Jesus Christ. Where does God's energy flow free? Power to bind up and bind back? Make up and make over? To hate and love? And turn one into the other? Read history, and let the eyes of the blind be opened.

Much of my life I have felt that the Hebrew writer pictured the problem well. That gulf between God and me. I see it. Feel it. Pale before it. In addition, I've felt that he points to the

problem's solution. The bridge. Flung with bloody hands across the gulf. The sacrificial love that spans the chasm. What I felt he did not do was answer my question, "How does it work?" "What makes it effective?" "How can I explain it to those more skeptical even than I?"

A bit abashed before one who says, "The Gospel is 'News' to proclaim, not puzzles to explain," I recoil. Yes, I know... but the questions don't vanish because I tell them to get lost. Like children sent outside to play while we visit with the grownups, they keep running in.

Then, I find out how wrong I was. He does explain. I didn't listen. He starts early. In chapter 1 the author makes clear who he's talking about. Not an angel... winsome, fascinating, busy as s/he is. Not Moses... honored, thanked, revered, as he is. Not Melchizedek... mysterious, majestic, mighty, as he is. Not even the High Priest ... dazzling, dominant, distant, as he is. *It's*

God Himself!

Are you sure? Well, not the totality of God. How do you say it, then? God as fully as Deity can get into a human? If you want to point to the Power that launched creation, that surges through it, that is its goal, that refuses to leave it alone, but lures it toward that destined end, you could use a term such as "speech" to show that though you can't separate one who speaks from what s/he says, you can distinguish between them. So, God speaks. And what God says is carried by others ("prophets"). Until finally, God speaks a word that cannot be split off... *Godself!*

To show that unity you could pick out a term like "Son."¹⁵ You could go on to declare, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of his being."¹⁶ Not as a mirror or photograph. As your own flesh and blood and brain. You run out of words, but hope you've made the point.

You could choose a phrase such as the "heir of all things."¹⁷ To show that the end of creation is to look like him. To nestle in his bosom. Run off his batteries. Maintain his order. Pulse with his spirit.

You could say something like, "... through whom he made the worlds."¹⁸ To make clear that you mean the creative source of everything. No mortal. Half-mortal. Half-god. Demigod. Godling. God! The "real" God. The one whose design is the universe's "grain." The one to whom it is said, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever..."¹⁹

What is offered is the "life" of *this one*. As it was lived out historically. In Jesus, who was called "the Christ." Not some pre-existent life. Untouched by pain. Misunderstanding. Loneliness. Indecision. Hunger and thirst. Weariness of body and soul. Rejection and betrayal. ...²⁰Death.

His life!

What made it effective?

Not a substance called "deity." Or "blood." *Something* traded to the devil. *Something* appeasing the Almighty. *Something* to satisfy an abstraction misnamed "the law of justice." Or God's "honor."

"Sacrifice and offering you did not want,
but a body you prepared for me.
In burnt offerings and sin offerings
you never did delight.
Then I said, 'Look, I have come...
to do your will, O God.'"²¹

Not a dead offering. The "body a living sacrifice."²² Bent on doing the "will" of God. And doing it. It was the right offering. The self. Not a substitute. Not an artifice to hide behind. Nothing phony. Totally honest. A presentation without a mask. Or costume. Or grease-paint. An offering directly, naturally, inherently related to sin's death.

An embrace of "the will" of God is no blind external conformity, But the internalization that makes the two wills one. Here in this person God made the break-through. It's the way for everybody to live. It's God saying effectively, "Let us make mankind in our own image."

Not the *only* human. The *first*. "The pioneer and perfecter of our faith." This understanding of Jesus is crucial. So, we'll view it through the eyes of various translators.

"The forerunner and finisher of our faith."²³

"Guide and end."²⁴

"Cause and completer."²⁵

"Leader and example."²⁶

"Source and goal."²⁷

"Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish."²⁸

He blazes the trail. Lives the full life of obedient joy and costly care. So doing, he becomes the trail. The way for our emptiness to be filled with his fullness. Completion for us in companionship with him. It's the way life is meant to be... and will be because of him.

The Awe-Full Truth

The picture is not pretty. Not at first. It's the picture of pain. Terrible suffering. Diabolic torture. It's said that the first time Charlemagne heard the story of the crucifixion, he jumped to his feet, brandished his sword, and shouted, "If I and my Franks had been there, it would have never happened!"

Bevis looked at a picture of the Cross. A long time. Sadly turning away, he said, "If God had been there, he would not have let them do it."²⁹

The "news," unknown to Charlemagne and Bevis, is that *we* were there. And, *God* was there. We did it... to Him. He let it happen. 1) For our sake. Heretofore sin wore a mask. "O, it's not so bad." Like the autopsy pictures at the Simpson trial, the brutal facts appear. We face a clear choice. 2) For Jesus' sake. The author of *Hebrews* affirms that humanity is completed through suffering.

Perfected.

Filled full.

Made "real"... "truly human"

If Jesus graduated from the School of Pain, shall we escape? We're perfected in the same way. By suffering.³⁰ The present persecution must not make us turn back. Others faced it and await our response.³¹

The Cross was Jesus' final suffering. Not the whole. The culmination of his self-giving. Not all. The offering he as High Priest took into heaven's Holy of Holies was the whole. It's enough. No more can be given. Nor need be. By faith we accept it and go with him... Our sins are gone. The gulf crossed. The broken bond mended.

Here in thought forms of the Judaic heritage, using symbols of sacrifice, the writer affirms that our chief need is access to God. One to open the way. Be our mediator... our go-between. One of us who has made it through.

Now we have it. With our "High Priest" we, too, make our offerings.³² Heaven is opened, and we're free to enter. To enjoy fellowship with the Father. As "pioneer and perfecter," Jesus has gone ahead and for us pulled back the curtain.

**WHEN IT'S
ALL
"ALL RIGHT"**

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more certainly, having been reconciled, we will be saved by his life." (*Romans 5:1,10*)

"He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins... For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you will also be revealed with him in glory."
(*Colossians 1:13-14; 3:3-4*)

10

WHEN IT'S ALL "ALL RIGHT" (God's Grace-Gift)

From One Who Knew

When one dressed fit to kill marches down the church aisle, all the way to the front, shoulders back, chin forward, nose up,... and falls flat in the floor, you jump. Slap your hand over your mouth and grip hard. Snickers blow your fingers apart.

Or...you sit stone cold. Not moving. Except, your heart's in high. Not breathing, you wait. What will s/he do? What will the crowd do? Come on. There's got to be a punch line to this spectacle.

That's Paul. Striding through the court chambers to his place on the bench, he lost it. Slid right out the back door. Took the case of a scorned cause. Was disbarred. Saw his face on wanted posters plastered up and down King David Street.

He knew what it was to have a career jerked out from under him. Unable to move among former friends. Suspected as an undercover agent by former enemies he'd like for friends. All because he's found out what it is to be "real."

His acting days are over. He knows what he's not going to be. What will he become? He knows that the Law he tried to keep, pretended he'd kept,
Could convict. Couldn't convert.
Could indict. Couldn't ignite.
Could castigate. Couldn't invigorate.
Could paralyze. Couldn't energize.
Couldn't make him love God or neighbor.

All the "do's" and "don't's" in the world, even God's, are impotent before our "No" to God and "Yes" to our own urges. Paul found that out. ¹ The hard way.

Now all that's changed. This conflicted, convicted soul is accepted. Told, "It's all right." "I love you, and I'm wiping out the past. For Jesus' sake. Trust me. Let him embrace you in my name. Give him a chance, and he'll show you my face. Once you know him, you'll know and rely on me."

Knocked to his knees, Paul was helped to his feet. It was too much not to believe. He let go of himself and clung to Christ. Believed it was "all right." Felt it was "all right." Didn't know where he was going, but marched out in the confidence that now it didn't matter.

It was all
"all right."

The Great "Good News"

That's the first part of it. "The Good News."² "I've taken care of it." Paul wanted everybody to know. From out there in Hicksville right up Caesar's doorstep. Having time to think it over before writing, he sent to Rome the fullest summary of the "News" he ever sent anybody.

No church fuss was going on there, as over at Corinth. No esoteric philosophy creeping in, as back at Colossae. No challenge to his apostleship, as out in Galatia. He could center on the "News" that freed them from anxious pretense. Lifted their guilt. Filled their emptiness. And made them "real."

So, he sent a multi-page "Get Well Card." The front read:

**TO ALL SELF-MADE SOULS:
GREETINGS!**

Open it and read:

AND SINCEREST SYMPATHY.

He knew the illness...well.

Only, this card is different. The next page includes a prescription. One Paul's seen work. On him. It concludes with the profile of a recovering patient. It's quite a card. The Romans kept it. Even had copies made. And widely distributed. To many it's been a life-saver.

In A Nutshell

And, it's all there in those two little verses. The theme of the message. God's "Salvation-Power." Exodus was the paradigm. God rescued a bunch of slaves and made them into a nation. Liberated. Freed. Fed. Healed. Led. ..."Saved."

The Jews knew about "salvation." The Romans knew about "power." "The Good News," says the Apostle Paul, is God's *power*,³ to "save" every one who believes. Nobody's off the hook. Every man's messed up.⁴ Nobody makes it on her own.⁵ ...But, nobody need be hopeless. Because our crowing doesn't bring the sun up, doesn't mean we must despair of the dawn.

Still, we try...desperately. "I'm a decent guy." "I've been a good mother." Visit the dying and listen, "I've always tried to be good." They look at you and wait for reassurance, "It's all right." All right because? Because "I've been good?" Compared to whom?

Compared to Attila the Hun and Adolph Hitler? Certainly. To Nancy Smith and Jack Jones? Maybe. But, wrong comparison. If we go that route, we can't stop short of Calvary. Stand right up there and boast with the best.

Young John Wesley made that claim to the Moravian Bohler. Asked what his hope was, Wesley replied, "I have given God my best efforts." Bohler stared... and sadly shook his head. Later Wesley wrote, "I thought him most uncharitable. Would he rob me of my best efforts?"

No, not if they're presents. Love-offerings. Praise notes. Gifts of grateful joy can be piled up in both hands, like a child surprising Mom with her best crafts from camp. Hard work *can* be a free gift.

Yes. The gospel robs us of every horn-blowing, chest-thumping, deed done to raise me up and run the riff-raff down. If we insist on being a hired hand,⁶ we'll get just what's coming to us. No more.

What we're offered is not a job, but a relationship. A place at the table, as well as at the office. Membership in the family, with a junior partnership to boot.

How Paul Put It

The Big Words

Don't get hung up here. There's no need for it. We read that someone was "saved" from drowning in Buffalo River. Any problem? We don't yet know *how*, but we do know *that* s/he got pulled out some way by somebody. You can make all sorts of substitutions: burning building,.. crazy kidnapper,.. wrecked car,... wrecked life.

How, then, are we "saved?" Paul says,

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, and is attested by the law and the prophets,⁷ the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

He goes on to say that we've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

However, we

are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a blood-atonement received through faith.⁸

Whew! "Righteousness," "justified," "redemption," "atonement," all crowded together. Too much! Wait... look at them. Take the first two together. They're twins. Identical twins. If we didn't look at them together, later you'd wonder, "Why?"⁹

Like all healthy children, they grew. In infancy they were known as "straight" and "right." God is the standard by which all else is measured and shown to be "straight" or "right." Crooked or wrong.

By the time of the eighth-century prophets their name came to be spelled "vindication," God's rescue of the oppressed. Succor...relief...deliverance...even remedial discipline. In a word "salvation."¹⁰ Paul was heir not only of Jewish legalism, but of prophetic faith. Shaped not by the Roman Court, his language is the product of his own Hebrew Scriptures.

To be "justified," then, is to be "saved." From what? From the mess we've been in¹¹ ...and are. From estrangement and guilt. Ultimately, death. To use purely legal language, this is the Judge sentencing us to die. We *are* guilty! But, we walk off free! Incredible!

Don't panic yet. Wait... for the rest of the story. The case isn't closed. Something grand occurs as the final gavel falls. What? The Judge becomes "Savior." And straightens out the situation. Puts us "right." Stands us up beside the Real, and, look, we're true. Not right *about* everything. But... right...straight...true *with God*. Legality gives way to love.

We're not "saved" as in "made perfect." We're brought into right relation. But, isn't that winking at sin? Conferring "cheap grace?" Let's look at a few more words. Invite them to break free of the shell and show us their faces.

Take "redemption." In some versions terms like "ransom" and "propitiation" intrude. You save stamps? The kind you take, or send, to "redemption" centers? Uh-oh, one of those big words some folks can't understand. [What do they do with their stamps?] The word literally means "to buy back." Or "ransom." You've actually paid for what you've not received. So, turn in those stamps.

God paid for us, too... in heartbreak. At Calvary God can "redeem" us, if only He can get us there. And, that's the rest of the story. He does. What God has in Christ done *for* us, God begins right there to do *in* us.

"Atonement." To "atone" is literally to make "at-one."¹² Reconcile. Restore the broken relation. "Ransom" is the cost involved. "Expiation" is the atoning means of removing sin. "Propitiation" points to the one being reconciled. Often considered angry. In Paul "the wrath of God"¹³ is characterized in terms of consequences, rather than temper.

The Bigger Content

We see what Paul *says*. What does he *mean*? Remember, he's talking to people in their own vocabulary. And, unless we want to miss out, we'd better be bilingual. That doesn't mean we pay no attention to what he said. We play very close attention.

Let's do so...now.

Way up into *Romans* chapter 3 Paul shows how we would all fare judged by law. Not a ghost of a chance. Neither the worst nor the best. Then in 3:21 he crosses the Continental Divide between Law and Grace. He says, "But **now**, *apart from the law* the righteousness of God has been disclosed."¹⁴

"Apart from the law!" The rescue is no legal pardon. It's a gift! If it were the cancellation of a sentence, clearly it would be a judicial decree. With the writer of *Hebrews*, Paul chooses the language of sacrifice to tell how we're made "at-one" with God. Through the offering of Jesus. "God offered him so that by his death he should become the means by which [our] sins are forgiven."¹⁵ That sacrifice, however, must never be understood as a legal offering. It's utterly personal. The gift and the reception. The result? "[Our] sins are forgiven." As we shall see later, nothing can be less judicial and more personal than forgiveness.

It all boils down to this climactic act. God holding out His arms, saying, "It's all right." Not what we've done. Nor what we've been. No! But, what God is. What God's done. For nothing but our openness to His forgiving love, God takes us back. Gives us "right" relationship. And in that transforming friendship, we actually start "straightening" out.

How?

See if this helps. As I type here the margins are uneven. Ragged. I strike a key to "justify," and, look, the margins are "straight." "In line." What I've written is no more sacred than it was. Streetprose is not turned into BibleSpeak. But, according to my standards I've set it "right" on the page. And, here the figure shrivels.

Not with God's "justification." In our rescue God first brings us into "right" relation with Godself. Which spills over into right relation with one another and with the "real" world about us. But, first He has to strip that mask off our faces. Get us past our prancing and posturing. And hiding from reality. Make a breakthrough.

He does it in Jesus Christ. His Gift. Himself. Through forgiveness. We, in penitent honesty and openness accept Him. Our hands clasp. The Gift is given. Two hearts are joined, Two selves unite.

God's giving ... "grace."
Our receiving ... "Faith."

This first phase in our "salvation" Paul calls "justification." We're now "in line," "straight," "put right."

The second phase he calls "sanctification."¹⁶ "Set apart for God's purpose." Parts of the experience are distinguishable, but not separate. In Christ's companionship, we begin to look and act like him. To share more and more in his work.

1) "Set right." 2) "Set apart." Yet, our *selves* not compartmentalized. If we were not already "infected" with God's nature, we would have never said "Yes" in the first place.

"What God Has Joined Together..."

Here is the heart of the gospel as Paul knew it. We are accepted into "union" with Christ.¹⁷ We are "saved through faith." Trust -- openness to one another -- is the only way two can possibly become one. One mind... one spirit...one heart...one hand.

Love comes in,
but trust opens the door.

Here's another way Paul thinks of that "union." In our guilt, we received the sentence of death. Bearing our cross, we were led away to execution. Then, like Simon of Cyrene, Christ Jesus stooped where we fell. Lifted the load and bore it with us. There on the Hill of Skull we died. He and we. Every sin listed. Nailed high above our head. A spike driven through the charge.¹⁸

We were united there. He... we...a penitent thief...and everyone else who walks that *Via Dolorosa*. We died. We must know that. The old self-cantered self. Spiked to that tree. With him. He with us. Enfolding us. Taking our crimes as his. Refusing to let us go. Accepting our shame. Our past. Linking his fate to ours all the way to the death.

Then, O happy day, the God who said "No!" to our sin said "Yes!" to that death. Power to reverse everything grasped death upright and pinned it for the count. Light streamed in. Life broke through. "Christ arose!" We arose with him.¹⁹ A new self.

That's not to say our path is never stone-strewn. Clouds not only go. They come.

"Are you saved?" was the question leveled at Reinhold Niebuhr. His quick reply was, "I am saved. I am being saved. I shall be saved." Ah!

In seasons of dark doubt Martin Luther banged the table with his fist and cried, "I have been baptized!" Reverting to legalism? Turning to magic? No. Claiming God's covenant promise. "Martin," Christ is saying, "remember who you are and who God is...and trust God!" Following Paul's urging, "So you must *think* of yourselves as dead to sin, but alive to God..."²⁰

Remember, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old has passed, and, look, the new has come!"²¹

We are "set right." "Set apart." "United." Joined to God-in-Christ. You want to know what we look like? Then read the rest of the story. Look at him. Gaze into our eyes. See his reflection there? In time you'll see it in our faces... we trust. And in the work of our hands. That work is essentially ethical, rather than ceremonial.²² God's joy and our true worship is to serve and share with one another in the circle of His care.

Life is filled full. The emptiness gone. The relationship right. And, we're in process of
the magnificent metamorphosis.²³

HIS JUDGMENT-GRACE

He comes where we are
and refuses either to
leave us or compromise
with us. Against our
lovelessness comes His
"No!" as inflexible as
it is tender. Because
He will not let us down,
He cannot let us off.

Because "God is Love," we are made for love and cannot get away with anything less. Since God is Social, we can never live alone. Aloneness is the "hell" we choose against His will, and at the breaking of His heart. Into our desolation He comes where we are and wraps Himself in our pain. Into our hostility He comes to take upon Himself our anger and guilt. He kneels beside us, reaching for our wounded hands. Into His own He folds them, wound against wound, and by His wounds we are healed. As we say "Yes" to His relentless No!," upon us comes His "Yes!" as tender as it is inflexible. A second time He breathes His breath upon us, and we become living spirits, our faces all so different, and yet so strangely like His own. Folded in His embrace, we find our littleness lost in His greatness and our weakness in His strength. For a moment we rest, and then together as His Family turn to embrace the World He loves, for which He died, and over which, now risen, He reigns, its ever-living **LORD!**

**ON
HAVING
A
FRIEND**

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for a friend. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I no longer call you servants, for the servant does not know what the master is doing. I have called you friends, because everything the Father has made known to me I have made known to you."

(John 15:12-15)

11

ON HAVING A FRIEND

(Where Light And Life And Love Unite)

When The Void Vanishes

"You are so changed!" one acquaintance exclaimed to another after a long absence. He said simply, "I had a friend."

So did John. The friendship was no "Surprise Lily." O, a real friend or lover lives perpetually in surprise. "How could this wonder come to *me*?" But, with John it didn't happen in a night. Just brown earth when you go to bed. Then at daybreak this fragile creation of beauty.

There was something about him from the beginning. A grace. A peace. A look of knowing something you don't. Or someone. An air of authority. A sense of destiny. "Come with me," he said, and John did. It seemed crazy. It, also, seemed right. Now he knew it was.

They were together three years. The bond was tight. Tough. Like goat's hide dried...oiled...rubbed...and doubled. It wouldn't break easily. Some thought it did ...that fateful night.¹ He didn't.² Though he made no big point of it. Always he was dangerously near.³

But, what are friends for?

That's what Jesus called him,⁴ along with the other eleven. He never forgot. If Jesus said so, you know...well, it had to be true. He'd see that it was.

It seemed so long ago. John was now old and didn't want the secret to die with him. He found someone⁵ to write it down, so it wouldn't get lost. Now he could rest. For, if people only knew. Knew him. He could be their friend, too.

What a difference it would make. It was not for nothing that Jesus first called him and James "Sons of Thunder."⁶ Dear James. Gone a long time. If only he could have lived, he, too, might be known as "an apostle of love."

It sure made a difference.

"I'm afraid of the dark." said a little girl as she was taken upstairs and put to bed, "Don't you know God is with you?" her mother asked. "Yes," she replied, "but I want somebody with a skin face." So, did John. And got it. He wanted everybody else to see... and know.

It filled a dark room with light. And an empty heart with love. Everybody needs a friend. And, he knew just the one.

That Dogged Question

We "Thomases" are all from Missouri. "Show me,"⁷ we say, flinging down the challenge we're sure won't be picked up. Sometimes, though, we're really searching, struggling, clawing our way through some impenetrable jungle. A race that rats won't enter. A job that stinks. A boss that thinks we do. A wife that thought she got a go-getter to discover she got a done-goner. A society where folks grip one another by the throat, instead of the hand. "How do you get out of here?"

"Where is the way?"

That's what Thomas asked Jesus when he told the disciples He was leaving. "I'm going to go get your own rooms ready. Then I'll come for you. So that where I am, you will be. You and I. Together." Then, added, "You know the way."⁸

"No. We don't," Thomas interjected. Not at all hiding the heaped-up trouble in his soul. "We don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?"⁹ He sure speaks for most of us. Jesus' statement is a hard one. Particularly his reply. "I am the way, the truth and the life..." What under heaven can he mean?

It's not helpful to have somebody shout, "Christ is the answer!" when he hasn't even heard my question. How can a person be "the way" through *my* jungle? Can you be more specific? I think I understand how Thomas felt. And I join in asking, "How can we know the way?"

The Way To What?

Maybe, I've been looking backward. Thinking only of the way *from* my predicament. A way leads *somewhere*. Doesn't it?

It's difficult for us Thomases to think of a way that's not; 1) a road, like Highway 259, or 2) *a method*, like baiting a fish hook, or 3) *a mode of living*, such as "the way of Cain," "the way of the World" or "the American way."

If Jesus said, "Come with me to the gate of the city, down to Hebron, Beersheba, and on to Horeb. I will show you the mountain where God hides," Thomas might doubt. But, he would understand.

If Jesus said, "Keep the commandments," and you will see God," Thomas might despair, but he would understand. If Jesus said, " $E=MC^2$ is the secret of life," Thomas might nod, but wonder, "Why I did I bother to ask?"

Being myself a scribe, I've had difficulty with Jesus' simple words, "I am the way." That doesn't seem to be any kind of way I know. Not a road...a method ...or a way of life. I was never enough of a literalist to accept the first. Nor liberal enough to pick the third.

As a legalist I latched on to the second. Jesus gave us a "plan." The "plan of salvation." What finally hit me was: "'The plan' is 'the way' -- not Jesus." Jesus was like John the Baptist, pointing beyond himself. Like Obi Knobi on some cosmic skylane showing us how to make it. Christ will not be co-opted as a celestial traffic cop, directing us to the right lane and waving us on.

Nor a cosmic computer, typing out guidelines (ceremonial, ethical, academic or occult) to insure our destiny. Not yet do we take seriously the depth of our sin or height of God's grace. Not yet do we see that on our own, even with the best instruction, we can't make it. In this tangled world we're lost.

Like the traveler, deep in an African jungle, looking frantically for a path, we call, "Where is the way?" From his guide ahead, out of sight, the answer comes, "There is no way. I am the way."

In a day when we see no path to permanent peace in our world, our streets or our homes, we could well hear the voice John heard and followed. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me."¹⁰

No Other Way

That's another hard saying. That last part. For me, however, it holds a clue. "Way to what?" Nirvana? Shangra-Lai? Valhala? Paradise? The end for Jesus was "the Father." Sure, he said, "I go to prepare a place for you." But, it was not for the sake of the place. "That where *I* am there *you* may be."

The "place" is not a "sweet little nest way out in the West"... a celestial dude ranch or heavenly Hilton. Our "place" is where we are really ourselves. Where we know who and whose we are. No facade. A character in "Twelfth Night" comments, "I know my place, as I would they should do theirs." As the disciples picked Judas' successor, they prayed,

Lord, who knows the hearts of all, show which of these two
you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and
apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own
place.¹¹

One "place" abandoned. Another chosen. Neither geographical. Relational... the real "We." Conditional... the real "Me." Judas went to his "own" desolate, solitary "place," because of who he *was*. Not simply what he *did*. Peter did worse. But, found his "place" again in Jesus' open arms.

Asked, "Where is home?" a child replied, "Where mother is." For Jesus (and John) "the place" is where "Father" is. And, we're together.

That brings me to the hard ending of Jesus' statement. "No one comes to the Father but by me." By some forged into a club to beat back all who have not publicly confessed faith in Jesus.

We don't reflect the face of Jesus as truly as he reflects the face of God. Yet, he's judged by what we reveal. Rejecting us is not rejecting him. Messengers get in the way of the message. Elsewhere I've considered this matter more fully.¹² Just remember that all sorts of people came to God before Jesus was born. Abraham, Moses, David. Read the list in *Hebrews*.

Jesus sketched a new *image of* God. Hence, a new *relationship to* God. Only in this Father-Son relation could "the Father" be seen as He is. Wearing the face of Jesus. Therefore, Paul calls Him "the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹³ Jesus in prayer, crying, "Abba, Papa," discloses how close and dear they are. It's *this* relationship he offers. To which he invites. And, without him we will miss.

If instruction were enough, God could put it in an addendum to the *Analects*, *Torah*, or *Koran*... drop it from heaven ... thunder it from the throne ... write it in gold across the sky. Still it would be impersonal. It wouldn't have a skin face.

What if God were after something different? Something a "Do-It-Yourself Manual" couldn't supply? What if God wanted *us*? Not our conformity, but our hearts? Wanted us to want Him? See Him? Know Him? Love and trust Him? What if God wanted to free us from pretense and make us "real?"

There would be no way but to come where we are. Help us get acquainted. Woo and win our hearts. Elicit our trust. Otherwise, we aren't about to venture outside ourselves stark naked. Without our mask and robe. The sadder part...we couldn't, if we would. We're like the little girl, fumbling behind her back, trying to button up her dress. "Are you about ready?" her mother asked. "No," was her frustrated response, "I can't do it. I'm in front of myself."

Our Hungry Hearts Full-Fed

"Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."¹⁴ That was Philip's cry following the Thomas-Jesus exchange. "Have I been with you so long," asked Jesus, "and still you do not know me?" That must be his cry as he tries again and again to get through. And fails.

In the winter of 1946 our first child was born in Juneau, Alaska. For medical care that was unavailable there we returned to the States. The treatment was so painful that at night the baby regularly waked screaming. Often I ran to her bed, vainly trying to quiet her. No matter what I did or said, she couldn't understand.

Then *I* understood. A fiery shaft shot through my soul. "This is the way it is with *my* Father! Whose heart breaks as He tries to get through to an aching, frightened child, sobbing in the dark."

It didn't matter that it was night. I couldn't have seen had it been high noon. But, there, I prayed, "God... [and didn't know what to say next, only]... help her, and me, understand...a little. Enough to know it will be all right."

"Lord, show us the Father," and we can take the pain. As the seizures come, hold tight our hand. As our friends forsake, stay with us then. As the darkness falls, sit close beside. And let us lean back hard... on You.

Our heart-hunger is expressed in many ways. A speaker from India said, "My people have been famed for their philosophical capacity. They have woven many sublime speculative systems. Now the Indian race longs for those lofty ideals to take concrete human form upon the road of life." A Black responded. "My people have had no gift for speculation. We have not lived in the clouds, but on the hard road of life, which for us has been full of thorns and jagged rocks. What [my people] have longed for is a road companion who bears the image of the divine."

It was such yearning that shook the soul of an American philosopher who wrote, "My longing for some audible voice out of the infinite silence rose to a pitch of torture. To be satisfied I must see face to face, I must as it were, handle and feel -- and how should this be?"

The question John poses is, "Are you willing to settle for less?" For information on the situation? How to make survival kits? How to find inner quiet in the traffic rush? Or, even, how to know *about* God? Would we settle for a marriage manual, instead of a mate? 10 rules on child-rearing, instead of a child? A lecture on "Life After Birth," instead of living?

"This is life eternal,¹⁵ to know you, the true and living God, and Jesus Christ, whom you did send." Life is not biological existence, It's loving relationships. Not acquiring. But, sharing. Giving. Working. Serving. Scrooge only lives when he cares about Tiny Tim. Deep inside, his hunger was for more than profits and the chance to spit out "Bah, humbug!"

Light. Life. Love. These are the themes that run through the Gospel of John. All focused through Jesus Christ. 7 "signs."¹⁶ 7 "I Am's."¹⁷ All pointing to Jesus as God's "Word."¹⁸ Self-expression. Out-going, creative energy. He is "the light of the world"..."the bread of life" ..."the water of life"..."the good shepherd"..."the way, the truth, and the life"..."the true vine"..."the resurrection and the life."

His is a "kingdom not of this world."¹⁹ Only those "born from above"²⁰ can see it. God's new order. We don't know just what its work will be. But, we know that we're getting ready. And, some day when the angels cry, "You are so changed!" we'll smile and say,

"I had a Friend."

A FRIEND WILL TAKE THE RAP

Kagawa, the great teacher and saint of Japan, was as a theological student expelled from school. He and four others had criticized members of the staff for wrongly dismissing a student. As he said "goodbye" to the principal, he remarked, "Christianity is a religion of love, and a theological college should be a school of love. A school of love should guide mistaken students. As God never abandons anyone, so a college ought never to drive a student away. Please, forgive and reinstate the other four students and let the sentence of expulsion fall upon me alone."

All were reinstated.

COMPANY
OF
THE
CONCERNED

"Among the whole host of believers there was but one heart and soul. Not one claimed anything was his [her] own, but shared everything as common property. So with great power the apostles continued to witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. No one was in need, for as many as owned farms or homes sold them, brought the money and put it at the disposal of the apostles. It was then distributed to each as needed."

(Acts 4:32-35)

12

COMPANY OF THE CONCERNED

(All The Way)

"To Be Absolutely Sure"

"The Italian Navigator has reached the shores of a new world." No, this isn't a 1492 courier's report to Queen Isabella. It's Dr. Arthur Compton speaking to Harvard's President James B. Conant.

Rearrange the numerals. 1-9-4-2. On December 2, the atom is split. Nuclear energy for the first time is harnessed. Enrico Fermi is the leading genius of the breakthrough. It's a pivotal point in our brief period on this planet.

You could write a two-volume world history with the titles: *Vol. I, From The Discovery Of Fire To The Splitting Of The Atom*, *Vol II, From The Splitting Of The Atom To The Present*. That's what Luke, a Greek historian, did with a fast-moving drama that gouged out a Grand Canyon right down the middle of history.

It was his larger "Family" record. If you want your story remembered, you write it down. If you want it accurate, you double check your facts. Luke did both¹

He knew he was in on something big. It must be reported... and recorded. So, he not only talked, but wrote. His work prosaically called...

Luke-Acts.

How the book got separated, we don't know. Maybe, then, as now, most people won't read big volumes.² Anyway, they're both about Jesus. The first, how he brought to birth the "company of the concerned." The second, what he did with it after it was born and he was gone.

Vol I is not radically different from *Matthew* and *Mark*. *Luke* does show Jesus reaching out specially to the disinherited. Samaritans. Tax Collectors. Prostitutes. Lepers. The Prodigal and his Older Brother. In the gospel nothing is said about "the Way." This was the time of its gestation. In *Acts* it's mentioned a half-dozen times.

But, that's the rest of the story.

That Troublesome "Gang"

It was a national holiday, and downtown things were rocking. Crowds gathered. Necks craned. Eyes bugged. Scowls spread. Jeers flew. Respectables pulled their robes tighter and exchanged knowing glances. Obviously this raucous bunch is drunk.

The Christian community got off to a rough start, judged by religious elite. As if those folks across town could sing...pray...lift their hands...and talk out loud when it's not even listed in the bulletin.

But, they did more than hold service. 3,000 called out, "Count us in!" The city was staggered. But, "this bunch" was off and running. After that nothing nor nobody could stop them.

Beyond The Campfires

"The Way"³ is the name they picked, or others appropriately picked for them. Their intention was, starting there in Jerusalem, not to stop till they reached the heart of the Empire. "On to Rome!"

They had a lot of barriers to break. Geographical. Cultural. Religious. Racial. Vocational. It wasn't easy, but they did it. Kept moving. Leaving worn-out wardrobes marking the trail.⁴ Spectators never dreamed they'd survive. When the Empire fell, its fragments held together by rough, bronzed hands, a surprised world stood shaking its head.

This little company had leaped the gulf between Jew and Gentile. Slave and Free. Male and Female. Civil and Barbarian. Law and Grace. Religion and Life. Pretense and Reality. ...Asia...Africa...and Europe!

There was no way it could happen. No 5 or 10 steps to a new social, religious and civil order. Plans are a shekel a dozen. Good plans. And here, just a band of people called "The Way."

What's with them?

In his *Cotton Patch Version* Clarence Jordan renders the first reference:

All the while Saul was harassing and threatening to kill the followers of the Lord. He even went to the governor and got some papers to the Chattanooga Council asking them for permission to arrest and return to Atlanta any men and women he might find who were taking Christianity seriously.⁵

These last 5 words he uses for "the Way." Any "who were taking Christianity seriously." In the final instance he has Paul confess before the judge, I am "a member of what they call a 'gang.'"⁶ It's likely that when enemies said "the way," they meant "gang." And when disciples said it, they meant "the family" or "our covenant community."

The paradox, however, is that this "gang" is at once totally open and utterly exclusive. Anybody can get in who is "serious." A reality both inviting and repelling. The earliest

Christians were Jews. Who had forgotten they were created to be a missionary people.⁸ No more. This "gang" wasn't about to forget. Jesus had called and commissioned them to be his "witnesses"⁹ ...to the ends of the earth.

They couldn't wait to get there.

"Is This Trip Necessary?"

He grabbed the bus, but had run so hard that, till he caught his breath, he couldn't speak. Then, gasped out, "Where is this bus going?" People of "the Way" no longer asked that question.

They knew.

They were headed for a new world. Not a new planet inhabited by the same old people. For a little while it could be the same old world inhabited by new people. Only it wouldn't stay like that. Either way, it would be a world where people cared and shared. A world contagious with the spirit of Jesus. People of "the Way" were carriers and wanted everybody infected.

During World War II daily we were confronted by the question, "Is this trip necessary?" Billboard, radio, newspaper, conspired to arrest us. When gasoline was desperately needed for planes, how could we plan a joy-ride?

People of "The Way" had answered the question. With all they had. And all they were. Their name was a reply. They weren't arrogant. They were grateful. Joyful. Also, they were needed. They understood themselves to be "Sharers." Not just with one another. With all. Wherever there were people, they were needed. And they meant to go.

You ask, "How, though, could they use that name at all? Knowing Jesus was really "the Way?" Very humbly. They knew well the identity of "The Way." They knew, too, that he created them carriers of his spirit. *He* was present with them. Among them. At work through them. They were salt shakers and lamp wicks and yeast lumps.¹⁰ God's answer to the heart-cry of a child in the dark, "But, I want somebody with a skin face."

The trip was necessary. Because the mission was possible, and the name "real." Paul found out the hard way. As a persecutor, his passion was to kill anyone, everyone, "who took Christianity seriously." Men. Women. With names. Faces. Families. Jobs. Dreams. Stamp out the lot of them. Yet, when Jesus arrested him, the question was, "Why do you persecute *me*?"¹¹ He couldn't forget that "me." Tugging at a spear thrust through his conscience led him to see *this* community as nothing less than "the body of Christ!"¹²

A lightning flash no darkness could extinguish.

Paul was swept up into "the Way" and never stopped till they chopped off his head ...in Rome!

"The Tie That Binds"

It wasn't their ratings on the stock exchange. Good press. Imposing cathedrals. Finesse in lobbying the Sanhedrin and Pilate. Posh headquarters. Special dress. Speech. Any oddity. Except... one. The group itself. It just wasn't "normal." "Impractical!" skeptics snorted.

Still, there was something that sunk its teeth into you and wouldn't let go. They sat so loose to everything. The very idea that you share with another anything you have that s/he needs!¹³ Though they are called "The Way," the term they use for their life together is "Sharers."¹⁴ It's a "Care and Share" group.

Which is always a judgment and a grace. Some are drawn, ennobled, as they've been in Oklahoma City. Others are judged. Who do these "do-gooders" think they are? Trying to make us look bad? Somebody ought to... what?

Kill them? Run them out of town? Not in our nice society. Just look down that aristocratic nose. Not too close. Not enough to see beyond it's point... and hear.

I've tried before to describe this incredible community.¹⁵ Taking the form of a servant. Task of faithful witness. Life of a loving family. Style of joyful obedience. Goal of universal (w)holiness. Moving in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's its self-understanding. Enough to make others say, "Look, how these Christians love one another!"

The Road Untraveled

To shield ourselves from judgment, we segment life. Public and private sectors. Business and religion. Politics and civility. Morality and money. Advertising and truth. Anybody with common sense knows Jesus would fail in all these public ventures. And so will those who try to bring his principles into the public arena. Soft hearts make soft heads.

So, we ride up to the disputed fence line, pat our holster, shift our cud, spit and say, "We'll negotiate only from a position of strength!" If the gang on the other side pats, shifts and spits back, "So, do we!"... whatever happens, it won't be negotiation.

Until something occurs on the inside, what occurs on the outside is pretty scary. Until something happens to relationships, the law of the jungle is the law of the range. So far, we've said, "That's how it is."

Well, that's not how it's meant to be. And, settling for it doesn't make us look all that bright. Maybe, George Bernard Shaw was neither senile nor stupid when he said,

I am no more a Christian than Pilate was, or you, gentle reader; and yet, like Pilate, I greatly prefer Jesus to Caiaphas; and I am ready to admit that after contemplating the world and human nature for nearly sixty years, I see no way out of the world's

misery but the way which would have been found by Christ's will if he had undertaken the work of a modern practical statesman.

Well, he didn't. What he did was start shaping people who could shape the state. Creating the creators. Providing a kindergarten. Unveiling the order that must prevail... if we do.

By now we know how a new world would look. Unless we never had a home. That's scary, too. So many youngsters today haven't. Somebody must model it for them. They did back then. With a tie neither state nor culture could tug loose. And, so they believed, neither death nor hell could break.

Somebody said, "Christianity has been tried and found wanting." The reply...? "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried."

Wherever it has been, it's made a difference.

Lure Of The Future

One reason this little company never feared "the tie" would break... they knew who tied it. Threatened by earth's fury, they never dreaded tomorrow. No last gasp of a dying institution, but the birth pangs of "the Way." The "way" that squared with reality. As life was meant to be. The "way" through the open door of "Home."

A criminal on death row flipped through a New Testament. Gripped by the execution of Jesus... His dying prayer... His resurrection. His eyes softened as he said, "That man Luke sure wrote some story."

He never knew the rest of it.

Maybe, now he does.

Only through the door of "Responsibility" do we reach
the privileges of "Community."

He was
a respected citizen.
Banker. Officer of the church.
To meet an emergency he "borrowed" funds from his bank.
Intending to repay them soon.
He would have done so,
but the very next day the examiners came.
Knowing the man's character, bank officials
refused to press charges.
Offering, themselves, to make up the deficit.
The law had its way, and he went to prison.
A few people muttered, "We suspected
him all along," but the church community
embraced him and cared for his family
He served his sentence.
On the morning of his release
he was met at the prison gate by every one
of the fellow officers of the church.
Immediately this ex-convict was taken to the church building,
where the Lord's Table was spread.
Their first act together was Communion.
There were no speeches.
He did not have to be told about
a redemptive fellowship
called "the Community of Christ's Concern."
He was living in it.
And, in difficult days to come
was sustained by it.

This is no
phony "Family."
It's "real."
It's "Home."

IN
"ENGLISH,"
PLEASE

"I will stand on my watchtower,
and station myself on the
rampart;

I will keep watch to see what
he will say to me, and what
he will answer concerning
my complaint.

Then the Lord answered me and
said:

'Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that one may read it on
the run.'

(Habakkuk 2:1-2)

13

IN "ENGLISH," PLEASE

("That Those Who Run May Read")

First, Listen

For over a year we had in our home a young Pakistani student. A Moslem. Eager to learn everything he could. About America. Our great presidents. Military geniuses. Space engineers. "Red" Indians. Cowboys. The English language.

He had been warned about Christianity. Yet, he went regularly with us to Bible study, worship and (eagerly) to the pot-luck suppers. He always looked at Evelyn as he went down the table. She'd nod, and he'd dig in (no pork). She'd shake her head, and he'd pass the dish by.

We don't know where he is now. He was deeply attached to us when he left. We were to him. We kept saying, "Zeb" (his name was "Aurangzeb"), somebody has to break the cycle of violence in the Middle East. You're bright and will one day wield power." With pain on his face, he'd reply, "But, Mom (or Dad), they'd kill me!"

He may have been right.

He grasped so much that was foreign to him, because he listened. It was as true with us. Strange language. Strange customs. Strange ritual. Strange politics. We had to want to hear.

At the World Food Conference held at Iowa State University experts from around the globe drew diagrams, wrote formulas, and spoke forcefully on what it will take to feed the world. A renowned food scientist strode to the board and in capitals wrote, "YOU GOTTAWANNA!"

Yes. Unless you do, you won't listen to what these early witnesses say. They're "barbarians." Strange, though. Once you wanna, words become luminous. Like star-bursts. You catch the falling gleams and put them in your love-chest. And...never ever let them go.

"Listen!" Or, "Hear!"¹ Jesus said over and over. A lot of responsibility rests on us who try to speak. However, Jesus says straight-out in this story, "The hearer controls the message!"²

Second, Ask

Often I say to Evelyn, "I didn't understand." As often she responds, "You weren't listening." Or, the aggravating question, "Are you wearing your hearing aid?" Too often I must admit, neither was I listening, nor taking advantage of an aid, right at hand. So, I ask her to repeat. Happily, she does.

The adverb depicts my feeling. Not hers.

Sometimes we must ask a writer to repeat. We control the manuscript. We can read and re-read as many times as we like. I've read through a paragraph of scholarly prose or classic poetry without being struck by a single sliver of light. Only on re-reading a dozen times did I watch the words sleepily stretch, yawn, get up and start dancing around. Light broke.

Scripture has not been nearly so difficult. Except once. Having been born and bred in a "works-salvation" circle, I had a terrible time getting Paul and James to talk to each other. In a civil way. I had no trouble with James. It was Paul who was obtuse. His words seemed easy enough. It was the thought I couldn't grasp. Like bicycle ball bearings rolling across the concrete and me trying to grab them with greasy fingers.

The grease had to go. I had to quit reading through eyes that could see only what they'd already seen. It was more agonizing than I could imagine. I had to give up. My morality. Titles. Trophies. Medals. Me. I did. Though I try to pilfer one or another now and then.

Honestly, those terribly difficult sentences are not nearly so difficult now.

But, somehow, grasping the thought was not nearly as important as knowing myself grasped by grace and wrapped in peace. It was an obscure verse, anyway, where the floodlight cut through. Not *John 3:16*, *1 John 4:16* or *Psalms 23*. But, *Romans 4:7-8*.

For the first time I knew I could be wrong and still be "all right." I didn't have to fight so fiercely for every inherited dogma. God loves me in my ignorance. Accepts me in my weakness. Asks simply that I be open and honest. Be done with theatrics. He'll help. It's a new experience. Like diving in the river when you know you can't swim.

But someone's there to pull you out.

If this is too weird, I'm sorry. But, the truth is that some flashes come only on your knees, with the eyes of your soul wide-open...and your mouth tight shut. If God is personal and wants to get through to us, He simply has to have our attention. The noise not only distracts, but distorts. "Ask, and you will receive," Jesus said. "Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened."³ It really will.

With A Hand Cupped Behind The Ear

Can we hear what they're saying?
The Hebrew scholar...
Late-blooming Apostle? ...
Friend of Jesus...
Greek Medic-Historian?

Writer Of *Hebrews*

The word is "access." We all know what that means when we want to get on the Freeway. Here it's access to God.

The problem is, on our own we don't have it. Our sin shuts God out. Hiding in the garden, in guilty fear we see God's face monstrously altered. And blame our predicament on one another.

We go on hiding. Patching together fig leaves... social, academic, political, clerical. Until someone gives us new eyes to see. Breaches the barrier. Lifts off our load of guilt. And leads us to the Father.

We could not have become "Zeb's" friends (second parents) had we not tried to understand his heritage. We made sure he knew how to face East. Were careful not to uncover his *Koran*. Or lay anything on top of it. Let him splash up the bathroom with his ceremonial washings. Listen to his litany of wrongs committed against the Palestinians. Many of his complaints legitimate.

Hebrews uses the language of sacrifice. In a rush to get taxes down and the deadbeats off the gravy wagon, we don't find "sacrifice" a popular word. Except...in national crisis. Yet, when called up, it's our noblest response. And deep down beyond all the grease paint, we know it's so. This is the way Reality is, and the way authentic life is lived.

Since sacrifice calls for more than spaghetti in the spine and avarice in the arteries, the temptation is to don a mask and leap on stage. Let's talk about everybody else's responsibility.

Hunger, though, when it's hunger for the Real, rather than make-believe, is a powerful pull. We yield. To that embrace that tugs us across the chasm and lures us toward the goal of Christ's creative care.

The Mediator is God's Love stretched all the way from God to us. That despite our "No!," will not weaken. Love that does not simply judge us from without, but wakens self-judgment within. Love so contagious that the core of our being is shifted to God-in-Christ and our neighbor-in-him. ...That's what this letter is about.

The Apostle Paul

A *New Yorker* cartoon shows two shaggy-haired, skeleton-like figures locked in a dungeon. Through the bars of a tiny window high above, a shaft of light focuses on their manacled hands and feet. Chained tight to the stone wall. One says to the other, "Now, here's my plan."

Paul finally got it. The word now is "salvation." He didn't have it. By himself he couldn't get it. Two words define it for him: "in Christ."⁴ The problem is separation. Alienation. Wrong relationship. Broken vows. Slavery to "Sin." Weak will. Divided mind. Destiny -- "death."

Our doom is sure. Unless God acts to deliver us. He does. His action... Jesus Christ! In him is right relation. The separation... gone. Alienation... gone. Slavery to "Sin"...gone. Divided mind... gone. Death... dead!

How does it happen? Self-identification. "Faith." A simple trust that results in union. Personal union. Union of spirits ...minds...selves. The only possible way for two hearts to become one.

Such self-identification allows the believer to see himself/herself "in Christ."

To see his death as theirs. His burial and resurrection as theirs. Their sin spiked to that cross. Their old self dead and buried. Their new self raised "in him."⁵ As they have been judged, condemned and executed with him, they now share his triumph and glory.

Beyond all the metaphors, Paul talks of wrong relations set right. Broken ties made whole. Peace in the heart and in the home. Growing to be and look like Jesus. Sharing his work now. Looking forward to a greater share later.

It's easy to cry "mysticism!" and reach for another fig leaf or three-bars-on-the-sleeve gown. Anybody who's ever loved and trusted anybody knows that, swept up in that mystery, a living bond is created. Two *can* become one. In this case they do.

We weaker drink in the nature of the stronger. Begin to catch his spirit. Think his thoughts. Share his dreams. Adopt his family. Accept his work. Even look like him. Since his nature is "love," we grow to share and care.

For Paul this is where it all comes out.

The whole law fulfilled in love.⁶ We're real "children." Spiritually God's kin.

Filled, we're real.

Empty, a bunch of phonies.

The secret is "union."

Life "in him."

Friend Of Jesus

A child pulled cans off a market shelf and lined them up in the aisle like tiny railroad cars. An irate clerk shouted at him to put them back where they belonged. Puzzled, the child stood there, not knowing what to do. A second scolding didn't help. The clerk couldn't tell he was retarded.

Nearby a little sister heard the angry voice. Running over to her brother, she bent down and whispered in his ear. Immediately he got up and replaced the cans. Now it was the clerk who was puzzled. "What did you say?" he asked. The sister replied, "He can't understand you when you talk to him like that. I just love it into him."

John wasn't argued into it. Nor bullied. Nobody is. He was loved into it. This "son of thunder" found a friend. Rather, the friend found him. That was the heart of it. What he treasured and longed to share. The joyous love story of a friend.

A minister's son, inducted into the armed services, was asked how he fared among tough army recruits. He answered, "Well, I heard a lot of theological language used in a non-theological context."

Doubtless, John, the whole fishing gang around Capernaum, and up and down the shores of Galilee, could brandish a bunch of hefty theological cudgels. Wield them like the jawbone of an ass when provoked. In time, though, he could use a simple term like "Word" and then lovingly swaddle it "in a skin face."

It wasn't the insight, though, that wooed and won him. It came from knowing the friend. We've seen how Jesus calls his disciples "friends," because he's shared his whole heart-mind with them. How John is called "the disciple whom Jesus loved," a special friend among friends.

The word was often on his lips. "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him."⁸ Even in the Garden as Judas gave him the viper's kiss, Jesus, said, "Friend, do what you're here to do."⁹ The ultimate scandal to the Pharisees, and our last hope, is that he "is the friend of sinners."¹⁰

John came to know him as friend of despised Samaritans. Hated Romans. Obnoxious tax collectors. Bothersome poor. Embarrassing ill. Scandalous profligates. Covert inquirers. Chicken-hearted followers. And tail-tucked cowards.

He trusted them, and they were confounded. He wouldn't let up, and they couldn't let go. Or keep letting Him down. His unconditioned love elicited their gratitude. Friendship was born. They were like the soldier who in heat of battle ran from his post. Rather than courtmartial him, his commanding officer gave him a special assignment. In the next fight he distinguished himself for bravery. When asked how he stood his ground after the previous desertion, he said simply, "I failed him, and he trusted me."

It wasn't loyalty to doctrine. It was loyalty to a friend that braced John. That steeled him in the venture ahead. The friend who said, about his going,

I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you. In a little while the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you, too, will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and show myself to them... and we will come to them and make our home in their hearts.¹¹

Jesus made clear that this inner Presence was the Spirit of God living with and in them.¹² No absentee landlord. The Father. The Son. At home with them through the Holy Spirit.

John hadn't worked out some later doctrine of the Trinity. He simply knew the Friend was not gone. And His transforming presence was the Spirit of God. In him. Enlightening. Energizing. Running interference for him.¹³ Comforting. But, most of all, being there. Brightening a long-remembered promise, "That where I am, there you will be, also."

The Medical Historian

"That man Luke sure wrote some story." The challenge was first to get it in, and then to get it out. People who grope in the dark need light. Those who are locked in jail need release. Those who fall under the load need a lift. This little odd-ball community is running with good news for the lot of them.

You'd suspect Luke was a *young* doctor. The way the drama moves. With vigor. "Enthusiasm" is the word. "God within." People surging forward. Not busy pushing machinery and cranking wheels. But, being borne on unseen winds.

Yet, no slanting of the story to make its heroes look good. The infighting is laid bone bare. It took an earthquake to gather them in, and another to scatter them out. But they went. With news about a tomb with the end knocked out and a Power that charged right through it. Let loose in the world. To raise the dead.

People were confronted with a decision. Like the game warden interested in how a particular fellow always came home with a full boat. The obliging fisherman invited him along on a trip.

Arriving at a select spot, the boatsman lit a stick of dynamite and threw it in the air. Its explosion brought dozens of fish to the surface. The warden blew his top, threatening fines galore. In the midst of his apoplexy the inviter lit a second stick and tossed it in the lap of the invitee. With the question, "Are you going to sit there bellyaching, or fish?"

Those of "the Way" promptly, grabbed their nets and began to cast. As well as, to keep tossing dynamite. You know the Greek word for "power" is *dunamis*, the word from which "dynamite" is derived. And, it was Luke's mentor who said, "The gospel is the *dunamis* of God to save all who believe."¹⁴

Gandhi said, "Each of us must be the change we seek in the world." Those of "the Way" agreed. Bet their lives on it. Only they went on to say, "We *together* must be the change we seek in the world." Only that "together" included the risen Christ. The Holy Spirit. Present in Power! Now the gates of hell cannot prevail. And, surely, not the Empire.

They didn't.

These people of "the Way" demonstrated a life together, modeling the order of society as it is meant to be. Sure, they did it at times in jerks and spasms. Whenever and wherever the old order broke through. Nevertheless, their simple caring-sharing life threatened the mighty religious and political institutions of the day.

As the book of *Acts* closes, it's clear the strategy's worked. The gospel has gone to Rome. Where all roads lead. The caring community is present. And contagious. We don't know what happened to Paul. But he wasn't the news. Merely its carrier.

Vol. II of the drama is finished. Luke's work is done. The work of the caring community is not. It must go on leaping chasms and breaking barriers. Geographical. Racial. Cultural. Religious. Vocational.

To the ends of the earth!

THE FUNDAMENTAL MIRACLE

"What occurred in the ancient civilization was the organic development of the fellowship, but never a merely individual Christianity. That would not have been able to survive. The fellowship was the only thing that could win. The early Christians came together to strengthen one another and to encourage one another in their humble gatherings such as are described in *I Corinthians*, Chapter 14, and then they went out into their ministry in the Greco-Roman world until they were finally able to touch every part of it educationally, politically, culturally and morally.

"What is the contemporary relevance of the original Christian story? It appears in the recognition that the paganism of our time is not likely to be countered and met by any other way than by the way in which the paganism of the Greco-Roman world was countered and met. Christ's method is still our method; it is still our hope. The task before Christians is the re-enactment of the fundamental miracle."

--D. Elton Trueblood,
"The Salt Of The Earth" in *The Yoke Of Christ*

THE FIERY CROSS

The wayward world has nailed itself
On its own cross of woe;
With its own hands it hewed the wood,
It dyed the rood with its own blood,
And, then, with vicious blow,
Drove home the nails that it had cast,
Through its own flesh and made them fast;
It dug the pit below.

But every cross new meaning holds
Since such sweet virtue came
Of Calvary; and though mankind
Still wanders graceless, deaf and blind
To his own bitter shame,
Yet, by God's grace, he shall arise
From this dread cross of sacrifice
To set all life aflame.

-- John Oxenham
The Fiery Cross

CURTAIN

CALL

" I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

(Jeremiah 31:33b-34).

"... If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

(1 John 1:7)

14

CURTAIN CALL

"Amazing Grace"

Encore For "The Four Baritones"

We heard their solos. Let's listen to the quartet.

Are They Singing The Same Song?

Their's is not a rendition of one-part harmony. The question comes, "Is it real harmony, at all?" Beyond all the metaphors? Beyond all the thought-forms of each? What is the song they raise? The gift they give?

*The writer of **Hebrews***, after pointing to all the "betters" and "superiorities" of Jesus Christ, comes now to the once-for-all sacrifice that "really" takes away sin. "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."¹ He then contrasts those sacrifices, and their repetitive offerings, with the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In him alone is forgiveness truly found.

Granted, the word does not keep recurring. The concept most certainly does. Forgiveness is not all the writer means when he speaks of entering into "rest."² It is, however, what must occur, if ever there is to be "access." And, if that access is a "real" restoration of relationship. Rather than a legal issue of executive clemency.

Here is disclosed the fundamental purpose of all sacrifice..."the forgiveness of sins." It was so under the law. It is so under grace.³ The new covenant is now internalized. Written on the heart.⁴ The conclusion comes in a quotation. Then an affirmation. "I will remember their sins...no more."⁵ "Now where sins are forgiven, there is no more sacrificing for sin."⁶

Beyond legality,
Beyond artificiality,
Beyond all impersonality,
Lies the reality...forgiveness.

*Turn to the **Apostle Paul***. Beyond his usage of the terms "justification" and "righteousness," together with the phrase "in Christ," rests the reality of "salvation." Faith-union with Christ. "Salvation," however, is first of all "forgiveness."

How were Abraham and David counted "righteous?" By use of Hebrew parallelism Paul tells.

Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.
Blessed is that one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.⁷

The first clause carries the reality. The second and third the metaphors. Beyond the legal and commercial lies the personal.

To various congregations Paul made it plain. Our "forgiveness" is "*in Christ*." "In him we have redemption, through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses."⁸ "In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."⁹ First the metaphor. Then the reality for which it stands.¹⁰

God's forgiveness of us, though, is the galvanizing thrust toward our forgiveness of one another.

And, when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands.¹¹

Therefore, "You be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."¹²

Listen now to John. For him, as for John the Baptizer, Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."¹³ He takes it away by removing condemnation. Giving light for darkness. Freedom for bondage. A brand-new birth. Nothing less than eternal life.

When Jesus said to the woman taken in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you," it could look like condoning her wrong. When he added, "Go and sin no more,"¹⁴ it could sound like, "You're on your own. Make it, if you can." Where is the cost of forgiveness? You can bet she didn't miss it. He had placed his life between her and the outraged moralists. The rocks still clutched in their fists. They could have stoned them both... right there.

John shows Jesus coming through locked doors to give his resurrection gifts. "Peace." "The Holy Spirit." That awesome power to "forgive" and "retain" sins.¹⁵ We can miss the first two by wallowing around with the third.

We don't need to dive headfirst into priestcraft to recognize that we, in fact, open up and shut down avenues to the Kingdom. No wonder Jesus said to heartless "gatekeepers," "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. You won't go in yourselves, and you stop those who would go in."¹⁶

They had an exciting ministry going. Only in reverse.

A recovering alcoholic decided to go back to church, hoping to cement together the bits of her shattered life. Only to be met with the cruel question, "What's a woman like you doing among decent people like these?" A slammed gate sent her back to the only escape she knew.

The sobering truth is that our forgiveness may make it possible for a fragile soul to say, "Maybe, it's true. Maybe, God can...will...forgive...*me*." I've been in on it a few times. I covet the same for you.

The aged John wrote, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name."¹⁷ Our hope is, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."¹⁸

What about Luke? Will he join in? Why, he's the sole source of Jesus' story of the "forgiving father," often misnamed "the prodigal son." He it is who renders the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."¹⁹ His version of "The Great Commission" reads,

'This,' he told them, 'is what is written: The promised Savior will suffer, rise from the dead on the third day, and in his name you will preach to all people, beginning at Jerusalem, that they repent of their sins so that they will be forgiven.'²⁰

In *Acts* "forgiveness" is the recurring theme from the birth of the caring community²¹ to Paul's final court appearance before being shipped as a prisoner to Rome. It was his commission that he never forgot.

I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles -- to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.²²

The song of "forgiveness" was for this four their grateful tribute to God's "Amazing Grace."

Free-- Or Nothing At All

One cannot buy, barter, or bully another into forgiveness. He may buy the refusal to take revenge. She may barter her body or service for some winking at her wrong. With proud disdain the offended can withhold punishment. Forgiveness, though, can but be freely and painfully offered... and received.

A judicial pardon, is an external offering that can leave the offended
bitter...
calloused...
arrogant...
or morally bankrupt.

A legislative decree *may* be less serious than animal sacrifice. The crassest form of "cheap grace." Forgiveness takes into one-self the blame, the guilt, the pain of the offense, refusing to let "rupture" be the last word.

Of all acts the costliest is forgiveness. And, the more flagrant the offense, the more expensive it is. To condone is to take sin lightly. To forgive is to take it seriously. Exposing the breast to its savage sword-thrust. Opening the heart to all its shame... and guilt... and pain. Nothing less can be called "forgiveness." It's absolutely the costliest act possible. And the graver the offense, the more painful the embrace. All who've ever given or received forgiveness understand.

Yet, no matter how much the offended yearns to grant it, forgiveness can be given only when received. The suffering love. The pained and wounded and betrayed self. This *self*. This self... that's received. In shame. In pain. Humbly. Penitently. Gratefully.

At Home In The Father's Arms

That's what it means. Rift gone. Chasm crossed. Alienation dead. Rupture healed. Guilty conscience clean. Family gathered. Because the Father said, "Welcome home, my child. Say no more about it. We'll live it down together."

We're not ready to chirp, "Cheap... cheap." Hands reaching out to us bear nail prints in the palms. Love-scarred and tear-stained is the face that searches our own. It has not been easy... for him... or us. Only love...wounded love...can offer or receive forgiveness.

On Beyond Pardon

I waited as the clock ticked midnight. Breathed a prayer and whispered, "It's about now." The executioner threw the switch, and another soul went out to its own place. The personal cost was relatively small for him who held the controls. Or for the governor. It would not have been appreciably greater, had the order come down, "Hold!"

I thought, "How different, if that prisoner were the governor's daughter or son." The relation no longer purely legal. But, excruciatingly personal. Or, if the victim's parents held in their hands the murderer's fate, and with soul-wrenching conviction said, "We forgive," who could cluck, "How cheap it is?"

Judges, governors, officials of the state, can see that pardons are issued. Only the aggrieved can forgive. Only those with the spear-thrust in the soul.

In Contrast To Condoning

To condone costs nothing. And heals as much as it costs.

Brutally frank was the counselor who said to his counselee, "You don't have an inferiority complex. You're really inferior." The pseudotherapist says, "Forget it. It's no big deal. Your

problem is you've got a guilt complex." For the therapy of the Cross to heal, some honest-to-God soul must tell us flat out, "You don't have a guilt complex. You're guilty."

For Guinevere, after her adulterous affair with Lancelot, to hear King Arthur say, "Tut, tut, my dear; it means nothing to me," would be but another dagger in the heart. A clear refusal to deal with the reality of her sin.

One who took the sin seriously wrote of its dread end:

Two haggard shapes in robes of mist
For longer years than each will tell,
Joined by a stern gyve, wrist to wrist,
Have roamed the courts of hell.
Their blank eyes know each other not--
Their cold hearts hate the union drear;
Yet one poor ghost was Lancelot,
And one was Guinevere.²³

What's unsung in this frightful fate is the power for (w)holiness surging through forgiveness. Where it's real, the relationship is restored. Trusting love again flows free.

Discovered in the nunnery where she hid, Guinevere made no attempt at self-justification. Rather, she confessed to nothing less than "the ruin of my Lord the King." Arthur then replied,

I did not come to curse thee, Guinivere,
I whose vast pity almost makes me die
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,
My pride in happier summers, at my feet.
My wrath which forced my thoughts on that fierce law,
The doom of treason and the flaming death,--
When first I heard thee hidden here,-- is past,
And all is past, the sin is sinn'd and I,
Lo, I forgive thee, as Eternal God forgives.²⁴

Here is no refusal to deal with the sin. The cross stabbed deep in Arthur, and now in Guinevere, is bloody proof. No "Tut, tutting" here. Condoning is to cry aloud, "It was never *right*. The relationship meant nothing to me."

The king could grant the fallen queen his pardon. A pardon that could never grant her peace. That peace of conscience forgiveness alone can bring. Pardon is ever its negative side. Refusal to exact the penalty. Forgiveness moves past pardon to the open arms of love and the open door of home.

Look carefully at the difference. Polar distances apart. Two sets of parents. One condones everything a lawless child can do. Comes up with excuses beyond his fertile imagination. The

other excuses nothing. Disapproves of every wicked deed. Follows him all the way to the death chamber. And ... forgives, if it breaks their hearts and turns their hair gray.

Such grace is free. It's hardly cheap.

Those who do not see the traumatic judgment in forgiveness both for forgiver and forgiven, are blind to the breaking up of the deeps. They see but a refusal to recognize wrongs. For which there are many reasons. Impersonal spirit. Uncaring soul. Self-righteous disdain.

Far from "tough love," refusal to recognize wrong becomes a conspiracy where shallow judgment makes of one an enabler. A contributor to the offender's destruction.

E. Stanley Jones tells of a British official in India who, in his long absence from home, succumbed to temptation and was entangled in a sordid affair. As the story of infidelity spilled out, his wife turned white. Clutched at her breast. And fell against the wall. When she could speak, she said, "You are my husband and I love you. We will live this down together."

Smitten with guilt... condemned by so pure, so unselfish, so deeply-wounded a love betrayed... the husband broke down. "For the first time," he confessed, "I began to understand the meaning of the Cross."

The penitent could not possibly confuse forgiving with condoning. Nor could he escape the redemptive power of so costly a care. A new heart... a new relationship... that's...

The True Test

When sin is condoned, the conscience first is pained. Until the pain is dulled. Then comes the callous. What Paul calls being "seared as with a hot iron."²⁵ Conscience dies. The eyes of the soul go out.

When sin is forgiven, the conscience is cleared. Cleansed. Grows even more sensitive. Broken relations are mended. Broken hearts are healed. When Jesus said, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, if you forgive not your brother [or sister] from the heart,"²⁶ he meant that openness of soul which provides mutual entry and ends in a shattered relation restored.

When Peter told the Council, "God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as leader and savior, to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins,"²⁷ he meant the open door, the warm embrace and welcome home.

Furthermore, the floodgates of gratitude are flung wide. It was party time at Simon's house. Somehow Jesus was invited. At least, he was there. In his busyness with the "important" guests, the host neglected the common courtesies in welcoming Jesus.

In came a woman from the street. Uninvited. Braving arched eyebrows and hostile stares, she fell at Jesus' feet. To anoint them with oil. Shamelessly, she kissed them. Repeatedly.

Mingling oil and tears in an offering of grateful love. The stage players, who couldn't recognize reality right under their noses, huffed and puffed, piously indignant. With the story about a big debtor and little debtor, whose debts were both forgiven, Jesus seized the floor and said, "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven her; hence she has shown great love. But one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."²⁸

Forgiveness opens the floodgates of God's loving kindness, the fountain of our gratitude, the wellsprings of our love. And, the stark reality is...we love in direct proportion to our sense of sin forgiven and the enormity of its cost.

I hope that you liked the quartet. And will want to hear these fellows again. Their theme song is "Amazing Grace." Variations on the theme run through the entire evening at the forum.

In conclusion, they always ask the congregants to stand and join them in...

"How Great Thou Art!"

The terrible responsibility of being keeper of "the keys"
means that we open up, or shut up, "the gates of heaven."
The family of Copernicus dared not place
on his tombstone an epitaph of praise.
Only the petition of penitence...
"Give me
but the mercy
Thou didst show the thief on the Cross."

By the way, now that you're downtown, would you mind walking across the street and down a few doors to a quaint little gallery spotted a few days ago. A shipment of paintings from the Middle East is currently on display.

Oddly enough, the exhibit is entitled
"By 'The Way.'"

And,
the "words"
become the *word* and
confront us. With who we are.
Whose we are. And who we can be.
Should be.
Will be...
unless we're lost in ourselves
along the way.
When, we are left with only
the "words." A forest of "words."
A jungle.
Where we shall welter in them.
Till we are sick of them.
And our selves.
What is left of them.
Sick of the situation.
Sick of Reality.
Till we discover a new thirst.
Hunger. Wishing. Willing.
A cry in the night.
Of despair.
.....
Or hope.

**AT
THE
GALLERY**

"He used many parables like these to speak the Word to them as they were able to hear it. He wouldn't speak to them without a parable. But when He was alone with His disciples, He would explain everything to them."

(*Mark 4:33*. Beck)

The magic mirror shows not the image we expect, but a reflection of the real. If we look long, we will see it. That is, we will see it, unless we create another, a fantasy, to plaster on the glass. Then, we can preen until the midnight hour. When the spell is broken. And we are face to face with truth.

We shall be surprised ... or startled. At what we see *now* or what we shall see *then*.

15

AT THE GALLERY

(So Alike...And Yet...)

The Kin Of All

You walk in. The curator bows. His earth-colored robe, plain but for the hem, makes you wonder. What did they look like then? And, did they make such a flourish when they bowed? But, your thoughts are interrupted by his quick call. Soft, but firm. "This way, please."

At once you are in an anteroom. With what looked as if it were to be a closet at the other end. Only, the doors were never hung. The lighting not all you'd like. The pictures neatly grouped and carefully spaced. At the flick of a switch a soft glow fills the room. A spot light brings to life one painting at a time.

You see that the first group is by Luke. Second by John. Third by Paul. Fourth by the mysterious Hebrew. Someone, perhaps, thought that was the chronological order. Or, maybe, the psychological. At any rate, there they are.

You note the general heading,

"BY 'THE WAY.'"

The guide moves from one to the other, commenting on each. As the spotlight singles it out. Most look familiar.

Boy in the temple...

Jesus Baptized in the Jordan...

The Crew after a hard night's fishing...

Jesus alone at prayer...

Feeding the multitudes...

Arm about a lone leper...

Embracing a child...

Then... pictures a bit different. A Samaritan on the Jericho Road bending over a wounded man. Backsides of church leaders are seen retreating. As they rush to the meeting. They must not be late. The wounded man's head cradled in his helper's arms. The Jew's face... black. The Samaritan's... that of Jesus.

The elder son leads his prodigal brother into the house. Through the open door you glimpse the banquet table. The roasted calf. The waiting Father. As with the Transfiguration scene at Forest Lawn, the light changes. And the face on each son. That's your's on the prodigal. No, on the elder brother. ...For just a moment. Then... The light breaks, and the "Elder Brother" wears the face... of Jesus!

Twelve gather about a table. The meal ready. The bread and wine at hand. John, eyes partly closed, countenance bathed in peace, leans on Jesus' breast. On the other side, just down

the table, Judas sits stiffly. Anxious eyes contradict the thin smile on his lips. White knuckles clutch the bag. Back and forth between the two disciples you look. Trying to figure out which is the painted face and which the mirror.

The Crucifixion. Eeriest of all. The fiery light. The whole skull-shaped hill blood-red. And, you know Rembrandt was there. You see his face in the midst of the crowd... And, right beside it... yours. ...Mine. ...Whoever looked. And would not look away.

Then, two pictures. With the same name. Simply, "The Meeting."

In the first, the presence of Jesus is depicted halfway through the locked door. Hands raised. Lips apart. As if calling, "Peace!" Five disciples look at him. Four at one another. Two stare at their open hands, wondering if anything in the room is real. Wondering joy on the faces of the nearest gravitates slowly back.

The second pictures the same room. The door flung wide. A table in the middle of the floor. A much larger group now. Everyone's mouth open, as if in song. Faces are of different color. Robes of varied quality and hue. Baskets of food nearby. Different sizes. Some with brown bread. Some with meat and wine. Jesus nowhere visible. An unearthly glow bathes the room. Somehow, you know the song.

"Blest Be The Tie That Binds!"

The guide is silent...
for a time.
So is the group.

At length he motions. You turn to the next pictures. A pair. In the corner farthest from the window. The should-have-been closet. They're on an easel. Draped. One portrait on top of the other.

As the guide lifts the drape he explains, "These came to us from Corinth. Weathered, irregular brown-edged pieces of papyrus stuck on the back. Presumably, from the hand of the artist, *Paulus*. We've left the names as he gave them. But, framed the notes and placed them beneath the appropriate portrait."

The spot falls full on the first picture.
Entitled...*"Empty."*

"You want to know what empty looks like? And full?" the artist asks. "When you show these, place one on top of the other. Look... a long time. Before you remove the first to reveal the last."

On top is the portrait of an "actor." First-rate, too. Would you like a rough translation of the note framed beneath?¹ Contemporized?

I tell you, if I could preach like Billy Graham and Robert Schuller and have no love, I'm but a bay at the moon and a fistful of air. If I had the faith of Oral Roberts and could yank up mountains by the roots, and have no love, I'm precisely zilch. If I followed Mother Teresa to Calcutta, gave away every rag to my name, and even went to Memphis with Martin Luther King, Jr.-- without love, I am but a bark² at the bus and a belch in the storm.

After a moment's reflection, the guide walks back to the easel, lifts off the first picture to reveal the second. Titled "*Full*."

Love does everything and goes everywhere. It's there when nobody else is. Stays when everybody else goes. Keeps on when all the rest give up... and slink away. Reaches out when every other soul pulls back. Gives...and forgives. It's the maturity... completion... fill-fulment of the human spirit... and quest. It will never wear out. Walk out. Or, burn out. Till God goes, love will stay.

It's the best way of all.

"Remarkable face, don't you think?" asks the guide. "Strong features. Yet, relaxed. Must have been the artist's friend." You know... very well who sat for the painting. He was, indeed, "full." Real. Substance, instead of shadow.

What God is like.

What God is.

What God wants.

What we're to be.

God "with a skin face."

We, our faces turned toward him.

No wonder Paul said, "I will show you the very best way."³

You wake from your reverie, realizing the group has moved on to the last picture. High on the hill stands a castle. Or, is it a stockade? It's hard to tell. Yet, it's radiant with a glow that seems not to come from street lights, but emanates from the structure itself.

The doors are thrown wide. At the central entrance a figure stands. Feet apart, in full stride. You'd swear he wore a buck-skin suit and coonskin cap. The staff in his right hand points through the open door. His face turned toward the woods. From which a host of travelers pour. No one sees how far the line stretches backward through the trees.

The picture's title... "Pioneer."

"This ends our tour," the guide says smiling. "Please, return. And bring a friend. The portraits are worth viewing again." A comment comes, "I'm not sure I cared for them all." Crisply, the guide responds, "I'm sorry sir. The pictures are not on trial."

"Go out and live like that," one of the more pious of group is heard to retort. Loud enough for all to hear.

Why not tell me to go write another *Hamlet*? Or compose another *Messiah*?
Without giving me
the mind of Shakespeare?
Or, of Handel?

It's no use telling me to go live *like* Jesus, unless you let me live *with* him. Paul would say,
"*In* him."
That's the secret.

Then Nietzsche would not need to say, "It would be easier
to believe in the redeemer if Christians looked more redeemed."

"SHALOM"

"May you be grasped by grace and wrapped in peace by God our Father."
(*Colossians 1:2b*)

"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid." (*John 14:27*)

16

"SHALOM"

("Peace!"...But Not Too Much)

Why

"You wonder why I called this meeting?" We've got problems. Shackled in the dungeon, we turn to each other and say, "Now here's my plan." A voice from the Cross keeps asking, "If I'm O.K., and you're O.K., what am I doing hanging here?" In our frightened loneliness we cry, "But, I want somebody with a skin face."

I've tried to point to "the Way" out of our jungle of wrong relations. "The Way" of reality, rather than pretense. And to be up front with my convictions. I've asked no one who doesn't see what I see to park his/her brain under a church pew and make a blindfolded leap of faith. Self-inflicted sightlessness is hardly the honesty reality requires.

I believe that Reality is ultimately personal. To assume that the impersonal produces the personal is to me as irrational as to assume that acorns produce elephants and dandelions dragons. For one who has no difficulty with irrationality, I confess this effort is fruitless.

For those who ask seriously, "Why is there something, instead of nothing?" the way called "chance" is out. The rest won't bother with any intellectual or spiritual wrestling with the question. But choose to sit this struggle out. So, we must leave them where they choose to sit.

The exuberant soul crying, "I gotta be me!" thinks reality has no parameters. At least, none that s/he can't ignore. At the height of fame, power, wealth, and what many label "success," suicide is "the way" more and more deal with their hollowness.

A way not particularly promising.

I've tried to listen with you for the answer to our heart-cries and soul-hunger. "Is the universe friendly?" A longing "for these lofty ideals to take concrete form on the road of life." "A road companion who bears the image of the divine." "Somebody [who would] take the rap."

In a day when there's no visible path to permanent peace, lasting marriage, or the violent crime explosion, we might listen for a voice, calling, "I am the way." In a time when earthbound eyes can't see and noise-filled ears can't hear, the need for "a skin face" is imperative.

The child was right. "Somebody had to take the rap." A lot more costly than anyone could dream. Our yearnings have not gone unnoted. God stooped to us in "a skin face." Long ago. He still does. Only, for this time and this place our own is nominated.

"Why the meeting?" We've got problems....

"Good News"...

And decisions to make.

Time To Go

A child was telling her mother about Sunday School. The story of "Enoch," who, according to the Bible, "suddenly was no more, for God took him"¹ "One day," she said, "Enoch and God were walking along together. They walked a long way. Enoch was tired, and it was getting dark. So, God said, 'Why don't you just go home with me?' And he did.

It's not quite like that. Walking with Jesus, we know Home is on beyond Jerusalem... and Gethsemane... and Calvary. But, we're never alone. Beyond the hill is the Garden. With the end knocked out of the tomb. Then... a voice that soothes our fear, "Mary..." Or... "Charlie." "Sudie." "Minnie." "Alton." Your name? Mine?

Here it is...9:28 A.M., Thursday, -- precisely 12 weeks after that sudden halt on Highway 259 one Spring Texas morning. It's been quite an adventure. Maybe, in preparation for another around the corner.

It was good visiting with you. Sure beats sitting around all day, looking at the tube. Except for catching up on the comics, a few of which are still funny. I identify with "The Born Loser." Plus, my inner child keeps yanking at my shirt tail and, asking, "Can I run over and play with 'Calvin and Hobbes?'"

Anyway, thanks for listening. It would be better not to have to do all the talking, so I could profit from your wisdom. But, I must close.

"Where do I come in?" I ask after listening to these four:

An unknown Hebrew scholar,
An Apostle named "Paul."
A Friend of Jesus named "John."
A Greek doctor named "Luke."

They've all been talking about me. My sense of emptiness. Loneliness. Alienation. Separation. Guilt. Fear. Disappointment. Hope. Joy.

And, maybe, about you.

They've charted my journey. The leaving... and coming home. The surprise of a loving welcome. In spite of everything. The speech I never got to give the Father. Gratitude. Peace.

Compulsion to work my head off and heart out to say, "Thank You. I love You, too." The truth that Jesus revolutionized my image of God. Replaced that frowning face with that of a gracious Father. Then changed the faces crowded all around. Enemies now potential friends. Brothers and sisters I never knew. My task made simple and plain.

Tell them.
Show them.
Invite them.
Serve them.
Ah, yes, love them. As I see them through Jesus' eyes, I can.

But, all that was gradual. With God far away, scowling, and Jesus up in heaven, who would look after me? Who would run to my bed in the dark when the night terrors returned? Lay her hand on my head and say, "It's all right. I'm right here?" My mother. And who convinced me that Jesus cared?

Jesus loves me, this I know,
For, my mother told me so.

Who would watch for me? Encourage me? Help me know Jesus better? Wipe that frown from the face of God? Push back those clouds that darkened Scripture? Help me venture out into an alien world and dare to try? Is anybody out there?

Yes. O, yes. President Ijams, Mrs. Ijams. Dean Sanders. Ralph Wilburn. James Muilenburg. Joseph Haroutunian. All gone now, but one. Heaven's clay pots when I needed both warmth and light. Members of the Community of Incredible Care. God wearing a skin face. Hurrying through the night to say,

"It's all right.
I'm right here."

I thank God for a Friend who made it *...through*. That he not only pointed to the way, but falls in beside me to say, "It's all right. I'm here. I know this jungle of ruptured relations. Personal... National... International. The swamps of deceit and intrigue.

There is no way.
"I am the way."
And we can walk on together.

Time hurries. These 77 years have been full of disappointments and glad surprise. I'll take the first for the sake of the last. There are great days ahead. I'd like to hang around and see how it all comes out.

But, I must go. Loved ones wait. And friends. Conversations were interrupted. Work left undone. There are so many things I'd like to do... I still need the old encouragement that let me venture out of my safe shell so long ago. Another venture's waiting. I guess I wouldn't want to be late. I do hope, though, when the time comes to catch the ferry, there will be a hand holding mine and a voice calling clear, "It's all right. I'm right here."

Then, maybe, I can join the little fellow who played hard every day, and at bedtime smiled, said his simple two-word creed, and fell asleep.

"Fun tomorrow!"

.....

Only
the reality of the Cross
cuts through the charade.
Only the reality
that broke through in Jesus
and His little band can take solitary
souls and bind them into an unbreakable
circle of caring... sharing... inviting...
venturing... singing... hoping...
conquering spirits.

The "new and living way" is open.
Jesus made the offering God wants and
we are created to give.
As the first perfected person,
He blazed the trail.
Made it through.
Perfected by pain.
Undeserved suffering.
At the hands of those who never
had a clue.

The Pioneer knows we'll make it in no other way.
So, He comes
and walks with us. Becomes the Way.
Shares the pain
through which we, too,
are filled full.

Finis

FOOTNOTES

1. GETTING SOMETHING STRAIGHT

¹ Coining the term "law," we point to nature's "habits." We may even bind ourselves by it and dogmatize that she has no "original acts," despite eye-witness evidence to the contrary. Still, it's the "habits" that at the cost of sanity we deny.

² Here relationships count, or we've fooled ourselves into feeling and acting as if they do.

³ Cited from Leslie D. Weatherhead, *This is The Victory*, pp. 113-114.

⁴ Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night."

⁵ Belief that reality is a cosmic machine, blind energy acting on matter, creation by a personal God, or any other substitution of convictional language for indicative.

⁶ *Revelation* 3:15-16.

2. THEN, WHAT IS IT TO BE "REAL?"

¹ Cf. *1 Corinthians* 1:21; 2:14; 4:10.

² *Matthew* 15:14; 23:16-24; *Luke* 6:39-42; *John* 9:39-41. Sightless swallowed in darkness. To the distorted everything's cockeyed.

³ From: William J. Bennett, *The Book Of Virtues*, p, 276. He got so much wrong that it's a joy to see just what he got right.

⁴ "Matter" has dissolved into "energy," which we hardly understand. There's no point in being a materialist when we don't even know what matter is.

⁵ *Genesis* 1:26-27.

3. DAWNING LIGHT

¹ *Hebrews* 1:1-2a (NRSV).

² Note Jesus' scandalous estimate of Samaritans! *Amos* 9:7 challenges those who think God incapable of pulling off more than one Exodus. *Acts* 14:17 and 17:22-28 affirm that God has not left himself without witness and is near to those who worship, though ignorantly. Early Church leaders held that philosophers such as Socrates and Plato were used as prophets.

³ *1 Corinthians* 3:21-23.

⁴ Archer, John Clark, *Faiths Men Live By*, Revised by Carl E. Puritan, p. 125. 2nd Ed., The Ronald Press Co., N.Y., 1958.

4. GOD'S GRACIOUS PURPOSE AND OUR DESPERATE PLIGHT

¹ Creation is in order to incarnation. Which is in order to covenant. Which is in order to community.

² *Gracious Contagion and What In Creation Is God Doing?*

6. THE HUMAN RESPONSE

¹ I wasn't driving when we made those first bad turns. All right, after midnight I was. By then nobody had a clue where we were or...why... I knew you wouldn't believe it. However, six witnesses survive. None with advanced dementia.

To speak of.

² *John 15:15.*

7. INTERLUDE

¹ While the four have the same range, you can still tell them apart. And they do make beautiful harmony.

8. BREACHING THE BARRIER

¹ 1:1-3. ² 8:6-7.

³ In Northwest Alabama at a time when our religious prejudices outweighed our political ones, we elected Herbert Hoover president, because we feared Al Smith.

⁴ *Acts 10:25-26. Cf., also, Matt. 23:9.*

⁵ *Psalm 103:12.* ⁶ 9:9,14; 10:1-2.

⁷ 10:1-3. ⁸ 10:20.

⁹ 8:6-7. *RSV,NIV.* ¹⁰ 8:13.

¹¹ Edward Fudge, commentary on *Hebrews*. Harold Key, *Son Of Man*.

¹² 12:2. *NRSV* ¹³ 5:7-9.

¹⁴ *Lev. 17:11. Not blood as blood, but life is the offering. Life offered even unto death.*

¹⁵ 1:2. ¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Loc. cit.* ¹⁸ 1:3.

¹⁹ 1:8. ²⁰ 4:14-16.

²¹ 10:5-7.

²² *Romans 12:1.* ²³ *Conybeare.*

²⁴ *NT in Basic English.*

²⁵ *Berkeley Version of the NT.* ²⁶ *Goodspeed.*

²⁷ Phillips.

²⁸ NEB.

²⁹ From Richard Jeffries, *Bevis, The Story Of A Boy*.

³⁰ 10:32-39; 12: 3-12; 13:12-13.

³¹ 12:1.

³² 12:28; 13:16.

9. WHEN IT'S ALL "ALL RIGHT"

¹ 7:7-25.

² 1:16-17.

³ 1:16.

⁴ 3:9-18.

⁵ 3:20,23.

⁶ 4:4.

⁷ 3:21-22a.

⁸ 3:24-25a.

⁹ Mothering the pair was a single word in both Hebrew and Greek. The Hebrew (*tsedeg*); the Greek (*dikaiosune*).

¹⁰ Cf. *Isaiah* 46:13; 51:5-6; 56:1,5; 62:1-2.

¹¹ Chapters 2--3.

¹² "Ransom" is every kidnapper's demand. Remember O. Henry's delightful story, "The Ransom of Red Chief?"

¹³ 1:18-31; 3:5; 4:15.

¹⁴ In private correspondence, R. L. Greenhow says of this verse, "Here the Judge comes down from the bench, takes off his judicial robes and burns the court house down."

¹⁵ 3:25 (TEV).

¹⁶ 6:22; 15:16; *1 Cor.* 6:11.

¹⁷ 6:1-11.

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*; *Col.* 2:14.

¹⁹ 6:4-11.

²⁰ 6:11 (*Goodspeed*). Emphasis added.

²¹ 6:4; *2 Cor.* 5:17.

²² 12--15:9.

²³ 12:2. The word "transform" is from the Greek μεταμορφωω (*metamorphoo*).

10. ON HAVING A FRIEND

¹ *Mark* 14:50-51.

² 18-15-16.

³ *Loc. cit.*; 19:26-27.

⁴ 15:15; 13:25; 21:20.

⁵ 21:24

⁶ *Mark* 3:17.

⁷ 20:25.

⁸ 14:4.

⁹ 14:5.

¹⁰ 14:6.

¹¹ *Acts* 1:24-25.

¹² *Disciples Dilemma*.

¹³ *Romans* 15:6; *2 Corinthians* 1:3.

¹⁴ 14:8.

¹⁵ 17:3. *Bios* is the Greek for biological life. *Zoe*, used here, indicates the spiritual quality of life shared at its depths. "Knowing" God.

¹⁶ 1) Water to wine. 2) Paralytic healed. 3) 5000 fed. 4) Storm Stilled. 5) Blind man healed. 6) Lazarus raised. 7) Jesus raised.

¹⁷ Listed top of page.

¹⁸ 1:1-18.

¹⁹ 18:36-37.

²⁰ 3:3.

11. COMPANY OF THE CONCERNED

¹ *Luke* 1:1-4.

² Such as James Michner and Bill Bennett being exceptions.

³ *Acts* 9:2.

⁴ Suits marked "All Mine!" (4:32-37); Night-Rider white robes (8:5-8, 26-40; 10:34-48; 11:19-26); Grand Inquisitor black robes (15:1-33).

⁵ 9:2.

⁶ 24:14.

⁷ 5:13-14.

⁸ *Isaiah* 42:6; 49.

⁹ 1:8.

¹⁰ *Matthew* 5:13-15; 13:33.

¹¹ 9:4; 22:6; 26:14.

¹² *Romans* 12:14; *1 Corinthians* 6:15,19.

¹³ 2:44-45.

¹⁴ Greek, *Koinonia*. Community or communion. Joint-participation. Partnership. Fellowship. Sharing.

¹⁵ *Gracious Contagion and What In Creation Is God Doing?*

12. IN "ENGLISH," PLEASE

¹ *Matthew* 15:10; *Mark* 4:3:14; *Luke* 8:18,21.

² "Good seed" is always at the mercy of the "soil."

³ *Matthew* 7:7; *Luke* 11:9.

⁴ *Romans* 6:11; 8:1-2; *2 Corinthians* 5:17.

⁵ *Romans* 6:1-14.

⁶ *Romans* 11:8-10; *Galatians* 5:14; 6:2.

⁷ *1 Corinthians* 12:31.

⁸ *John* 11:11.

⁹ *Matthew* 26:49.

¹⁰ *Matthew* 11:19.

¹¹ *John* 14:18-23.

¹² *John* 14:16-17,25; *Lk.* 24:49; *Acts* 1:4-5,8.

¹³ *Parakletos*. Literally, "called along-side." (Sometime "beyond"). "Advocate."

¹⁴ *Romans* 1:16.

13. CURTAIN CALL

- | | |
|---|---|
| ¹ 9:22. | ² 4:1-11. |
| ³ <i>1 John</i> 1:9; <i>Colossians</i> 13-14 | |
| ⁵ 10:15-17. | ⁶ 10:18. |
| ⁷ <i>Romans</i> 4:7-8. | ⁸ <i>Ephesians</i> 1:7. |
| ⁹ <i>Colossians</i> 1:14. | ¹⁰ At times he can reverse the order. |
| ¹¹ <i>Colossians</i> 2:13-14a. | ¹² <i>Galatians</i> 4:32. |
| ¹³ 1:29. | ¹⁴ 8:11. |
| ¹⁵ 20:23. | ¹⁶ <i>Matthew</i> 23:13. |
| ¹⁷ <i>1 John</i> 2:12. | ¹⁸ <i>1 John</i> 2:9. |
| ¹⁹ 11:4. | ²⁰ 24:46-47. Beck. |
| ²¹ <i>Acts</i> 2:38. | ²² <i>Acts</i> 26:17-18. |
| ²³ Edgar Fawcett. | ²⁴ Tennyson, <i>Idylls Of The King</i> . |
| ²⁵ <i>1 Timothy</i> 4:2. | ²⁶ <i>Matthew</i> 18:35. |
| ²⁷ <i>Acts</i> 5:31. | ²⁸ <i>Luke</i> 7:47. |

14. AT THE GALLERY

- ¹ I said "rough." And "contemporized."

15. "SHALOM"

- ¹ *Genesis* 5:24 (NRSV).

A BACKWORD

Though from the creation something of the nature of God is discerned, such scrutiny never fully unveils the purpose. Creation's end lies not within creation. But, surfaces in the creative Act of Self-disclosure entering creation.

That creative Act we glimpse in Jesus Christ, and on the basis of this conviction I've sought to indicate how he is the Self-disclosure of Ultimate Reality and that his way is a manifestation of that "Way" we regard as truly real.

Ignorance. A willing ignorance. Separation. Starvation. Sustained denial. A deliberate donning of the mask. These are seen as the human problem. "Sin" is a threadbare blanket we can toss over both our stage play and terrible self-imprisonment. So, we can confess "sin" in the abstract even as we deny our hollowness.

We have trouble being "real."

To be "real" is to say "Yes" to Reality. That "Yes" and "Amen" lays hold on us in Jesus. God's creation of a "real" person. Fully-mature.

Not the last,
not the only,
but the *first*."

Not the whole Family. The beginning. Our Older Brother. "Earnest" of God's human creation. "Alpha" of God's resurrected, transformed children.

As prototype of what we shall one day be, Jesus is, also, the "Omega." Together, he and his compose the Beloved Community. Bound together in covenant love. The goal of God's human creation.

To reach the goal God penetrates our cloud of fantasy and love of illusion. Our auditioning in the global game of "Let's Pretend." Showing us His face, God woos us from our make-belief "Yes" before our self-installed footlights to the real "Yes" and "Amen" in His one true Son.

With him...
in him...
we find our true selves. Our place in the drama that is real.
Not by coercion...
but, by contagion
he lures us home.

BENEDICTION

May the Grace of Christ enfold you,

Now and evermore!

May the Love of God uphold you,-

Now and evermore!

May the Holy Spirit hold you,

In communion close and sweet,

With Himself, the Paraclete,

Now and evermore!

-- John Oxenham

I am not walking my three miles yet. But, I am getting about with a cane. I rejoice in One who heals. And, am quite aware that without the accident I would not be writing this. Instead of the book, I'd be putting in that new front walk we've long planned.

THANKS

Time will not tell, nor space allow, the list of friends and neighbors who have stood by us in a time of need. The sense of helplessness fades in the warm presence of kindly care.

Some names appear in the text. Most do not. I must, however, mention Jim and Joanne... Milt and Vivian... Roy... Lindy and Jody... Hazel... Betty... Eddie and Rachel... Allan and Jan... Ralph and Bernice... Liz... B. J.... Ruth and Bob... Gloria and Vito... Margaret... and the Questors.

My apologies
for those
I've overlooked.

Then, there is Evelyn. Hers has been a double load, which she has borne... How shall I say it? "Nobly" sounds pedantic. "Uncomplaining" is but the other side of everything. "Lovingly" she would consider saccharine. I owe her more than I can say or show.

No wonder that I love her.