

# PRAYING THE JEWISH- CHRISTIAN LETTERS:

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HEBREWS TO THE REVELATION



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DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS  
OF THE GOD-LIFE THROUGH  
PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LETTERS

Jesus was Jewish: born into a Jewish family in a Jewish province and raised to practice Jewish customs. He grew up to be called “Rabbi,” a Jewish teacher.

The religious movement Jesus ignited is too often identified as a North American and Euro-centric religion, whose depictions of Jesus are of a white, blond, blue-eyed man who bears little resemblance to the historic, Jewish Jesus.

Jesus the Galilean prophet and teacher, whom his followers claimed was the Jewish Messiah, ignited a religious revival within first-century Judaism. What came to be known as “The Way,” and later “Christianity,” began as a sect within Judaism. Scholars refer to first-century Judaism using the plural: “Judaisms” because there was not a single, monolithic belief system in first-century Israel. Readers of the Gospels are familiar with some of the various strands: Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, and Zealots. The people of The Way belonged to another strand.

That the early Christians moved beyond the ethnic, cultural, and religious traditions of multiple Judaism is well-known—Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles and the controversies over “the Judaizers” in his letters and Acts 15 depict a national religious movement expanding into a global one. However, even while Paul was “the Apostle to the Gentiles,” some Israelites practiced Judaism as framed by their rabbi: Jesus, whom they called Messiah. In this present work, I attempt to share the story of these followers of Jesus so that readers might be blessed by their faith and wisdom.

Ironically, the letters contained in this devotional are commonly called the “Catholic” or “General” letters. “Catholic” means “universal,” but even so, it’s hard not to hear “Roman Catholic.” The term “General” seems more appropriate because the works do not have an addressee, or are addressed to individuals, or are addressed to the scattered twelve tribes of Israel rather than to specific Gentile communities.<sup>1</sup> However, these letters center around Jewish people’s experiences of The Way, a Christ following. Therefore, I have titled this devotional *Praying the Jewish-Christian Letters*.

Each of these letters has a uniquely Jewish perspective.<sup>2</sup> Consider:

- Hebrews describes Jesus’ relationship to the Jewish sacrificial customs and how he fits into this system and transforms it.

- James is written in the style of Jewish wisdom literature, specifically The Book of Proverbs, to offer common-sense, practical ethics for first-century Jews who follow The Way.
- First and Second Peter wrestle with what it means to live in the shadow of Empire, as Jews had so lived for centuries. Peter, whom the tradition calls “the Apostle to the Jews,” uses the themes of exodus and exile to reflect upon what is required of those who live under the shadow of Roman law yet claim the sovereignty of one whose name is not Caesar.
- John’s three letters reflect a style of Jewish faith common in intertestamental Judaism associated with the Jewish sect called the Qumran community, with themes of light vs. darkness and love vs. disobedience.
- Jude warns against immorality by evoking Jewish writings from the intertestamental period that emphasize strict moral and ethical teaching (known as *paraenetic* literature).
- The Revelation, finally, uses the Jewish literary style known as apocalyptic literature, particularly Ezekiel and portions of Daniel, to offer its pastoral word of hope. Further, as will be detailed in *Praying the Revelation*, the work is littered with references to the Hebrew Scriptures.

Finally, when using the divine name, I seek to honor the Jewish character of these letters. Following the Hebrew Bible’s example (e.g. *El-Shaddai*, *El-Elyon*), for each letter or group of letters, I use a different title that suggests something significant in Jewish theology and spirituality:

- “The Name” for Hebrews,
- “Sophia” for James,
- “The Sovereign” for Peter’s letters,
- “The Love” for the John’s letters,
- “The Holy,” for Jude, and
- “The Glory” for The Revelation.

I am not the first to call Yahweh by a unique characteristic. In Genesis 31:42, God is called “The Fear of Isaac” (Genesis 31:42). If God can be called “The Fear,” why not “The Name” or “The Glory”?

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Brad Munroe

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING HEBREWS

The Holocaust casts an inescapable shadow over *The Book of Hebrews*. To read *Hebrews* without cognizance of the Holocaust (and, before it, centuries of pogroms, persecution, and prejudice by Christians against Jews) is both a moral and literary offense. It is a moral offense because it neglects the responsibility Christian theology, teaching, and practice has in creating the culture of hatred that led to the Holocaust. It is a literary offense because it neglects the reality that centuries of prejudice obscure our ability to comprehend what we read within *Hebrews'* pages. Reading *Hebrews*, therefore, requires both moral courage and a rigorous adherence to intellectual integrity.

The theological word for the above dilemma is called "supercessionism." Supercessionism is the belief that Christianity replaced, or superseded, Judaism. Many Christians assume this reality is fact and a rather harmless fact. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There are three, primary ways the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has been taught within Christian theology: punitive, functional, and structural supercessionism.

*Punitive supercessionism*<sup>3</sup> teaches that Jews who refuse Jesus as Messiah are rejected by God and worthy of punishment, with God's promises to them revoked. The 3<sup>rd</sup> century theologian Hippolytus of Rome declared, "[The Jews] have been darkened in the eyes of your soul with a darkness utter and everlasting."

*Functional supercessionism*<sup>4</sup> teaches that Israel's role in salvation-history is replaced by the Christian Church. The 2<sup>nd</sup> century theologian Justin Martyr wrote, "For the true spiritual Israel ... are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ."

*Structural supercessionism* recognizes that for many in the Christian Church, the norms and values of the Hebrew Scriptures related to God's work of redemption are often ignored by Christian thinking and practice, becoming irrelevant for many Christians.

The essential message of these three kinds of supercessionism is each offensive in its own way: (1) "I hate you," (2) "I don't hate you but am far superior to you," or (3) "It's not that I hate or feel superior to you but that I just don't think about you at all." Each of these messages cultivates antagonism and disdain rather than respect between Jews and Christians, and each can argue that support for the perspective is found in *The Book of Hebrews*.

*Praying Hebrews* suggests a different way. Pope Francis, in a document called *Evangelii Gaudium*, pointed to this way beyond supercessionism when he wrote,

We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (*Rom* 11:29). The Church, which shares with Jews an important part of the sacred Scriptures, looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity (cf. *Rom* 11:16-18). As Christians, we cannot consider Judaism as a foreign religion; nor do we include the Jews among those called to turn from idols and to serve the true God (cf. *1 Thes.* 1:9). With them, we believe in the one God who acts in history, and with them we accept his revealed word...<sup>5</sup>

God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word. For this reason, the Church also is enriched when she receives the values of Judaism. While it is true that certain Christian beliefs are unacceptable to Judaism, and that the Church cannot refrain from proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Messiah, there exists as well a rich complementarity which allows us to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another to mine the riches of God's word. We can also share many ethical convictions and a common concern for justice and the development of peoples.

Drawing upon Paul's metaphor in Romans 11:11-22, the Christian Church lives because it has been engrafted into Israel. Israel is not to be punished, disrespected, nor ignored but celebrated, honored, and engaged as a partner in God's work of bringing *shalom* into the world. This is *Praying Hebrews'* perspective. When provided with the opportunity to uproot supercessionism, to prevent its roots from being planted, *Praying Hebrews* will seek to interpret the Greek text in ways that convey genuine respect while acknowledging authentic differences of opinion, perspective, and purpose between Jews and Christians.<sup>6</sup> It is past time for the hatred to stop.

Brad Munroe  
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## Hebrews 1:1–14

The Name<sup>7</sup> has always been about the business of restoring the creation: speaking to our ancestors through truth-tellers time and again and in ways too numerous to count. Recently The Name intensified his speaking—almost shouted, as if from the rooftop—through his Anointed One, his Son, whom he established as the One who will receive all things: heaven and earth, the creation and the cosmos, every atom, proton and quark. The Son will receive all these things because The Name created all things through him—they came from the Son and will return to the Son.

The Son is the radiance that flashes in the night, illuminating all, making everything so that it can be seen for what it is—its true nature. The Son reflects The Name's light and life into the creation, making it new creation. The Son whispers and The Name's *dunamis*<sup>8</sup> is unleashed, new creation bursting forth in praise, galaxies singing The Hallelujah Chorus. The Son purged<sup>9</sup> the dross from human abuse, betrayal, and corruption to give our fractured minds and splintered spirits hope for new beginnings, and then he went to heaven to chill with The Name, as The Name's right hand.

Lots of people are impressed with angels and rightly so, but the Son is so far superior to the angels that it's unfair to compare them. Of which angel did The Name ever say,

You are my Son, my begotten,  
now I have brought you forth to shine.<sup>10</sup> Or,

I'll be The Name to you,  
You will be my Son.<sup>11</sup> Or,

Hey, Angels, come take a peek at my Son!<sup>12</sup>

When The Name has spoken about the angels, what did he say? He said nice things, yes, but nothing so lofty:

I created you angels as spirits,  
You are servants who help purge me the dross.<sup>13</sup>

Being one of The Name's servants is a high honor, but it's not in the Son's league:

Come, sit on your throne!  
Take your time: it will be here for all eternity.

Come, hold your scepter!  
Hold it high, for it is a symbol of justice for all.

Come, you who adore right relationships!<sup>14</sup>  
I have fixed you as the brightest light in highest heaven.

Come, you who abhor abuse, betrayal, and corruption!  
My joy will refresh you—always and forever.<sup>15</sup>

The Name also says of the Son,

From the beginning, you are Sovereign,  
You laid earth's foundation and set heaven's lights.

Though heaven and earth perish,  
You will be and abide and be adored,

Though heaven and earth become a raggedy robe,  
You will be clothed in glory and honor and majesty.

Though heaven and earth suffer corruption,  
You endure into all eternity—always who you are.<sup>16</sup>

Let's be honest with one another. The Name never said to one of the angels,

Come, chill next to me!  
Rest your feet upon my enemies' backs.<sup>17</sup>

Angels are wonderful, yes, and they have a sacred purpose: to serve, to encourage, to support the becoming of our true self as we become whole and complete in the Son.

*Above those who caused laughter.<sup>18</sup>*  
*Above the one who silenced the tongue.<sup>19</sup>*  
*Above the one who declared a maiden's exaltation.<sup>20</sup>*  
*Radiance.*  
*Reflection.*  
*Reality that exists in Creation's heart.*  
*Alleluia!*  
*Alleluia!*  
*Amen.*

God, it's me. I celebrate Jesus! I honor his name that is above all names. I rejoice that he is honored above the angels. Yet in my rejoicing, teach me also the ways of respect for those who do nor or cannot see Jesus as I see him. Give me humility to acknowledge the many times and too numerous to count ways I and my fellow Christians have brought dishonor to his name. Reveal to me the moments when my lips must remain shut even while my heart bursts in praise. Show me the times when I must walk the path of humility and confession for the sake of my Lord, in whose name injustice was done.

### **Hebrews 2:1–9**

We must attune our ears to the acoustics<sup>21</sup> of the God-life, listening attentively to the God-harmonies that help us to dance the God-rhythms. We certainly don't want to stumble because we try to dance with two left feet! Indeed, the word spoken by angels endures and deviating from its truth leads us to grasp that which destroys—why lay hold of that which harms us and so be unable to embrace The Name's *agape*<sup>22</sup> that seeks to adopt us? Wholeness awaits us, our true self blossoming into what The Name designed us to become. The Name has sung this song for ages through actions that invite wonder and evoke awe. The Name also makes us able to join her chorus through gifts of the Divine Spirit, freely given through her joy and determination.

The Name created the world she intends not through the mouths of angels but in the word spoken by the Son, of whom the Psalmist bears witness:

What is humanity that you care, O Name?  
What is the Son of Mortality to occupy you?  
You created humanity a stitch lower than angels.  
You crowned mortals with honor not as high, yet  
You place all things beneath their feet!<sup>23</sup>

In placing all things under humanity's feet, all things are subordinate to humanity, all things are lesser. Yet that is not what we observe! Humanity does not appear superior to all things—certainly not superior to the majesty of mountains nor the galaxies that hint of eternity. What, then, are we to understand about the Psalmist's words?

Though humanity is not ascendent, Jesus is.<sup>24</sup> We see Jesus, who was human—made to be lower than angels—but only for a time. This Jesus is now crowned with honor and covered in The Name's goodness, exalted above all names. Jesus was exalted through humiliation, his goodness displayed in welcoming the disobedient, his power paraded through weakness, his glory ascending as high as his humiliation descended. In Jesus, who dined at Death's table for everyone, The Name's loving-kindness was uncovered for all to witness.

*Who gets an invitation?*  
*Is the Table large enough for everyone?*  
*Is the Host prepared for the celebration?*  
*You've received an invitation—how will you RSVP?*

God, it's me. The mystery of Jesus invites wonder and evokes awe. Jesus bears the image of our humanity while radiating the light of your deity. Help me to understand the mystery of Jesus not as an abstraction but through the embrace of my spirit. Lead me to meditation that centers my heart and mind. Open me to a prayer life of contemplation that deepens connection with the One who is lower than angels yet above all the heavenly host.

### **Hebrews 2:10–18**

Now why am I comparing the Son to angels?  
Because many assume the angels are superior to

humanity and, therefore, the God-life cannot be repaired by mere humanity.<sup>25</sup> However, in leading the beloved to reflect the divine image, The Name acted conspicuously,<sup>26</sup> through a “mere human.” All heaven and earth exist because of The Name and for The Name, and he chose a mere human as the Archetype<sup>27</sup> and Author of new creation! Indeed, so audacious was The Name that he leads the beloved to become new creation through the Holy One who suffered! The Holy One sets apart the beloved for a purpose: to join together as The Name’s family in the kin-dom. And Jesus is pleased to call by their true name those whom The Name wooed to his bosom: beloved. He says,

I celebrate you, my beloved!  
I sing thanksgiving and joy among The Name’s gathered.<sup>28</sup>

I have full confidence in you all,  
that you can be persuaded by what is trustworthy.<sup>29</sup>

So here I stand with my beloved,  
with all those whom The Name has entrusted to me.<sup>30</sup>

Because those The Name entrusted to Jesus are flesh and blood, Jesus shared their humanity, becoming incarnate, God *en carne*.<sup>31</sup> He embraced the form of mere humanity in order to give us eternal dignity. He immersed into human experience in order to absorb death itself into his person, and so be able to make null and void<sup>32</sup> the power of the Accuser—Death is now idle and need not be feared. The angels don’t need this help—but humanity does!

The Holy One was fashioned into human form—made fully human in every way—so that he could be the living exemplar of both The Name’s mercy and human trusting. So that he could serve not just as a priest but as the High Priest, to bring together heaven and earth, to embrace humanity with his deity and usher humans into the divine presence. He gets how hard it is to be human! He entered into human suffering that he might transform it, embraced our brokenness that he might heal it, accepted being tested

that he might help others pass their test. As the High Priest, he makes us whole and complete.

*Experience  
when shared  
creates intimacy,  
a way of knowing and being known  
that transcends cognition and  
saturates the soul  
with love.*

God, it’s me. Wonder and awe fill my spirit as I contemplate the mystery of Jesus: the lowly One healing all creation, with suffering as the balm used to mend broken hearts, embracing the human experience as the path back to the divine. Audacious, indeed!

### **Hebrews 3:1–6**

Oh, my beloved, who are set apart for the God-life, you who share a holy communion with Jesus the Son: focus on Jesus—never let your gaze drift from the One whom The Name sent from heaven and made him the mediator between the earthly and the divine. In holy contemplation, ponder the divine mystery: Jesus brings heaven to earth and earth to heaven!

As you gaze upon Jesus, notice how trustworthy he was to the calling The Name gave him—as faithful as Moses and yet even more essential to The Name’s work of restoring all the cosmos. And Moses was faithful—The Name’s instrument of blessing to her family!<sup>33</sup> But just as Moses received respect for his service to The Name’s family, so Jesus honor for his service as The Name’s Son. Moses was The Name’s instrument of building a dwelling place for her family, and Jesus is the dwelling place for The Name. Moses spoke The Name’s promise for the future that was fulfilled and is being fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus the Anointed is also our dwelling place as<sup>34</sup> trust embraces assurance. Dwelling in Jesus our hope finds a home. Never look away. Never let go.

*Fidelity  
is neither contest nor race  
but opportunity:*

*Where will I look?  
What challenge lies before me?  
Who calls me forward?*

*Where are my sights set?  
What choice will I make?  
Whom shall I serve?*

God, it's me. I look to Jesus, but what visage do I see? Blonde Jesus or Baby Jesus? Laughing Jesus or Unflappable Jesus praying in the Garden? The Jesus that looks (and acts) like me? The Jesus that seems perfectly comfortable in our churches, communities, and culture? I hope not. Rather, when I look to Jesus I see one who seems strange: as if from a distant era and unfamiliar culture, as one whom I cannot possess. I see one who both calls and commands, one whose rebuke is received as blessing. I need no artist's rendition to see the earthy Jesus who spit upon the ground to make healing mud or the lonely Jesus who sought out solitude. I feel trepidation in the presence of the angry Jesus who turned over tables or know sorrow as I kneel before the broken Jesus who hung from a Roman cross. I look to Jesus, fixing my eyes and heart upon this man whom I cannot possess but who occupies my soul. I cannot bring myself to send him away and doubt he would listen if I tried.

### **Hebrews 3:7-18**

The Name's Divine Spirit tells it like it is:

Hey now, right now:  
Keep your ears open and your hearts soft.

Rebellion closes ears and hardens hearts—  
Failure is inevitable!

Our ancestors failed their test—  
The Wilderness was too much trial for them.

Even The Name grew weary at how easily they  
deceived themselves and each other.

Distorted desire led to intention, which led to  
choices, then to practices, then to habits—habits  
that killed.

The Name spoke truth into their distorted lives,  
“Chaos cannot know calm.”<sup>35</sup>

So, beloved, learn from our ancestors'  
example: chaos cannot lead to the God-rhythms.  
Distorted desire leads us away from the God-life.  
Instead, infuse courage into each other's hearts—do it  
today, right now! We need each other to dance the  
God-rhythms and live the God-life—we can't do it  
alone! As we are partners with one another in the  
God-life, so we are also partners with Jesus the  
Anointed. We hang on to our trust, our assurance,  
and our hope, found in him. Never looking away.  
Never letting go. Not until the Day when our hope is  
made manifest and becomes fulfilment.

I remind you again of what the Psalmist said,

Hey now, right now:  
Keep your ears open and your hearts soft.

Rebellion closes ears and hardens hearts—  
Failure is inevitable!<sup>36</sup>

And who rebelled? Was it not our very own  
ancestors? Those we revere? Those who journeyed  
with our forefather Moses? Yes! And The Name,  
frustrated by their lack of trust, allowed distorted  
desire to lead them astray. The choices they made  
became practices and then habits—habits that killed.  
So, beloved, learn from their example the importance  
of trust, of assurance. Our hope must be placed in  
The Name's Son. Never look away. Never let go.



*Resilience:*

*the common oyster creating a pearl,  
a simple creek carving a canyon,  
prayer shaping faith,  
mercy forming character,  
justice infusing love into the world.  
Never looking away.  
Never letting go.  
Not now, not ever.*

God, it's me. "Ears open and hearts soft" sounds so simple, yet I find it deceptively difficult! The author didn't say it, but I heard it: "Ears open (mouth closed) and hearts soft (spirit willing)." I find it easier to keep my ears open (to you and to others) when I'm not scripting my speech. My heart is softer when I allow your Spirit to whisper to my spirit. The Name, make me eager to desire what you desire. Grant me the courage to do what you desire. May your desire guide my intention, so that intention would become an act, and actions repeated would become my practice, and practice over time would become a habit that shapes and forms my character according to the image of Jesus. Today—right here and right now—may your will be done on earth, through me, to all those I will encounter.

#### **Hebrews 4:1–11**<sup>87</sup>

Companionship with The Name is open to all. The solitude of a walk in the garden or a stroll on the beach is The Name's invitation to us, and you don't want to miss it. Sitting with The Name along the riverbanks, what an opportunity! Our ancestors missed the opportunity to accompany The Name into a land flowing with milk and honey. The invitation was delivered to them, and they rejected it because they could not trust The Name's promise—that she would dwell with them, and they would dwell in her.

We who trust The Name experience her dwelling in us—the Divine Spirit inhabits us as her home. Those who refuse to listen to The Name

(because they do not trust) cannot experience her indwelling them. As the Psalmist writes,

I am passionate to proclaim,  
"Without trust you cannot dwell in me and I in you."<sup>88</sup>

The Name's rest is a gift written into the creation's DNA. In Genesis, we read that The Name's creative energy culminated on the seventh day and dwelling with The Name became an invitation for all humankind. But some refuse the invitation through obstinate apathy<sup>89</sup> and so cannot discover both the welcome she extends to enter her home and the opportunity for us to become her dwelling place.

Hey now, right now:

Keep your ears open and your hearts soft.

Rebellion closes ears and hardens hearts—  
Failure is inevitable!<sup>90</sup>

Joshua did not invite our ancestors to enter The Name's promised land (for in their apathy they did not trust), but instead pointed them toward a future horizon, a day when they might discover the true purpose of The Name, when they might learn to dwell in The Name and have her dwell in them. So, let's not be like them and turn away from The Name's offer to be with and within us. Our ancestors' apathy—and its consequences—should warn us to walk the path of trust that leads to The Name's indwelling.

*I remember the long drives from Illinois to Florida,  
the back of the station wagon  
cluttered with the bodies of my three siblings and me.  
The journey was arduous for a six-year-old,  
but the welcome of Granddaddy and Grandma,  
on the porch of their pink, cinder-block bungalow,  
made the journey a hazy dream.  
Welcome is home.  
Love is home.  
Home is a place I long to dwell.*

God, it's me. I long to dwell with Jesus—abiding in the home with many rooms. Help me remember the simple, present joy of dwelling with Jesus today: solitude, contemplation, remembering I am beloved. The Name, as I dwell in you and you in me, may I open my heart to others in whom you also dwell. May I remember in my daily hustle-bustle the presence of their struggles. May I recognize amidst my scurrying about that these others also are in need of the simple joy of being with you. And may I love accordingly.

### Hebrews 4:12–16

The Name's Word brings God-life; indeed, it infuses the God-life with divine energy—constantly creating, always calling, guiding and directing according to the God-rhythms upon which the cosmos is founded. Like the tip of a sword that forces a decision, The Name's Word penetrates the soul and pervades the spirit, down to the very marrow of our being. We cannot fool the Word, for it is able to discern our thoughts and even our intentions. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, we cannot hide. Like our spiritual ancestors, we walk naked before the Word and must answer when called upon to tell the story of our lives.

*There are times I read the Bible—  
mere ink upon a page,  
and times when the Bible reads me—*

*whispers encouragement,  
punctures ego,  
draws me into wonder.*

*The dividing line between good and evil  
intersects my heart  
causing me to doubt the story I might tell.*

*And then I remember the story will be told  
not as a monologue but as a chorus—  
Jesus himself with and within me.*

God, it's me. I crave the God-life—constantly creating, always calling, guiding and directing me. When this comes, I discover the path that helps me craft a narrative infused with the God-rhythms. May my story be a part of your Story, my life infused with divine energy as I walk the way of Jesus and live with him and for him.

### Hebrews 4:14–5:10

Do not lose heart! Jesus, The Name's own Son, stands between us and this divine requirement to justify all we are and all we have done—a great High Priest who brings heaven to earth and lifts us in our mortality into the heavenly realms. Jesus brings The Name to us and us to The Name.

Hold fast to this word of our hope! For Jesus has both traversed the expanse of the heavens and the dusty paths of human suffering. Jesus experienced the trials, tests, and temptations that cause us to fall yet did so as one able to stand. Therefore, we can be bold. We need not fear to give account of our lives. Rather we amble into The Name's very throne room with confidence, as those who have already been granted the gift of his loving-kindness. We approach The Name with confidence, assured that help is on the way.

High Priest is not a job one applies for but one for which you must be chosen and chosen by God, as Aaron, Moses' brother, was chosen.<sup>41</sup> The High Priest in the Jerusalem Temple stands<sup>42</sup> before The Name's throne and brings the people to The Name and brings The Name to the people. The High Priest represents the people—is the people's stand-in to offer gifts of gratitude and acts of apology. The High Priest comes from among the people and shares in human obliviousness to the God-rhythms; the High Priest, like everyone else, sometimes fails the God-life (which is why he offers sacrifices for his own sins, too).

In a similar way, The Name chose the Anointed One for the honor of becoming the last High Priest. The Name said to him,

You are the One to whom all authority is given,  
for you spring from the womb of my heart.<sup>43</sup>

And,

The Last High Priest you are, Eternal and Sovereign—justice and right relationships will result from your reign.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout Jesus' life as he walked among us, he lived the life of a faithful priest: offering prayers, feeling anguish for our suffering and his own, yet always with a spirit that honored The Name. Jesus was drawn ever deeper into human obedience through what he suffered. Although everything that belonged to The Name had been given over to Jesus, yet he gave himself over to the work of attentive listening<sup>45</sup>—to The Name and to the experience of suffering. Always learning, forever immersing into the human experience, Jesus became the consummate vessel for The Name's restoration—perfect form for the function of making people their true selves. Through Jesus, all who listen attentively to the whispers of The Name's heart are made whole and complete: today, tomorrow, and into eternity. This is why The Name anointed Jesus to be the Last High Priest, the Eternal and Sovereign One, with justice and right relationships the result of his reign.

*To stand in the gap  
holding the hand of the dying  
walking beside the grieving  
listening attentively to another's flooded emotions  
while acknowledging one's own loss and pain  
is the work of a priest—  
ushering others into The Name's presence  
then stepping aside to allow her to heal.*

God, it's me. I am thankful Jesus did the heavy lifting of his priestly calling: bringing earth to heaven and heaven to earth, creating (and becoming) the path for wholeness, rewinding Death itself! Wow! All that yet never turning away from suffering—not his, not ours. How did he do it? I am not a priest, merely a "Minister of Word and Sacrament," yet I find it difficult to lean into human suffering (and would prefer to avoid or ignore it). I am thankful Jesus is my High Priest,

who did the heavy lifting for me. I am grateful that when I cannot bear to suffer alongside those whom I am called to love, Jesus is there with them. He always is and always will be.

### Hebrews 5:11–6:3

There is much for us to say about all this, but it may be more than you can handle right now. If you do not open your ears, you cannot listen to The Name's whispers. If you are not attentive, you will never perceive The Name's wisdom. Indeed, you ought to be able to teach his poetry by now but are still learning your A-B-Cs. Instead of feasting at The Name's banquet table you remain suckling at her breast. Her milk will keep you alive but only her solid food will help you grow more fully into right relationships. Discerning good from evil is no work for children but work for the mature. You're not ready—not yet. You need to grow up.

Therefore, let's move beyond the ABCs of the God-life and toward maturity in Jesus the Anointed. Move beyond saying, "I'm sorry" and trusting The Name to act on our behalf; beyond avoiding the things of death and trusting The Name for life; beyond rites and rituals and even beyond things like believing in resurrection and heaven. All these are good! But they are basic—like suckling mere milk when you should be learning to dance the God-rhythms every moment of every day as the Way to live. May The Name allow us the wonder and awe and joy of learning to dance.

*Beyond...  
my now  
my failure  
my being tired  
my being stubborn*

*Beyond...  
implies something else, something more?  
invites a journey  
entices with hope  
encourages a step*

*A step beyond where I am is all that is needed for today.*

God, it's me. Help me take the next step—the step beyond where I am. The step toward you. The step toward becoming my true self. The step toward loving neighbor and stranger, friend and enemy. The step I need this day. And only that step.

### **Hebrews 6:4-12**

Those who have heard the Heavenly music and danced to the God-rhythms, those who have tasted the sweet fruit of the God-life, those who have shared intimacy with The Name's Divine Spirit, if they then turn away from her cannot be coerced into returning.<sup>46</sup> To reject the Word after one has feasted upon it is like sitting with Jesus at his Last Supper and then shouting for him to be crucified—truly disgraceful behavior. Such people are not like land that receives The Name's blessing of rain and produces fruit with which to bless others. Rather such people are like land that receives rain and then produces thorns and thistles—the kind of land you don't want to go near—which is restored only when it is purged. The prophet Malachi spoke of such people when he said,

The fires of purgation reveal The Name's glory;  
dross is taken away,  
only that which is precious remains.<sup>47</sup>

While dross covers their eyes, they will not see. While dross fills their ears, they will not hear. Their only hope is the Refiner's fire.

Beloved, please do not fear such warnings but be confident The Name holds you firm and sure. She is just! She remembers that you love not with mere feelings but as actions, showing love to The Name by how you serve her people and help all. We set our hearts on the hope you will persevere on your journey—walk toward the horizon of your wholeness! Don't give in, never give up, for there are no slackers in The Name's kin-dom but only those who mirror

the trust and forbearance of those who have already received The Name's promised blessing.

*Will I be defined by my worst moment?<sup>2</sup>  
Will I be judged by my worst decision?<sup>2</sup>*

*or*

*Is there a Balm in Gilead?<sup>28</sup>  
Is there deliverance beyond what the mind imagines?<sup>2</sup>*

*perhaps*

*The journey really is the destination!  
The destination rests with The Name more than with us!*

God, it's me. Lead me beyond green pastures to the places where I am confronted by the Cross: challenged to let go of childish ways, invited to trust what I cannot see (but for which I hope), emboldened to choose love. Lead me beyond the ABCs of the faith to the high and holy calling of the God-life: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you, my God.

### **Hebrews 6:13–20**

We need never doubt the assurance of The Name's embrace, for it endures from moment to moment, generation to generation, and into eternity. The Name's embrace is rooted in The Name's promise to our ancestors and grounded in the soil of his character—his own Name the basis of the promise to Abraham,

I will bless you and keep you.  
My face will shine upon you.  
I will make you the father of many.  
My promise to you will endure forever.<sup>49</sup>

After many years, Abraham was blessed to receive what The Name had promised.

Here is how we can be confident The Name's embrace will never leave us: people are restrained by those who are stronger than themselves. In a similar way, people are compelled to live a certain way by sacred values honored by all. This is why people take an oath in a courtroom or pledge allegiance to the ideals of a nation—to promise publicly to speak truth, act with honor, and seek justice. But who is great enough to restrain The Name or compel his behavior?

Only The Name. And so he promised by his own Name—his unchanging character of loving-kindness—to be the foundation of our hope, the assurance that brings courage to those who trust in him. This hope is like an anchor for our soul and keeps us from drifting even while tossed about by wind and waves. With this hope we dare enter into intimacy with The Name. There, in The Name's presence, we find Jesus, who like an advanced scout discovered the trail to The Name's embrace, created the path, and became the Way. Jesus brings The Name to us and us to The Name—forever a High Priest,<sup>50</sup> eternally the King, with right relationships always the gift he gives to all.

*Embrace*  
*giving, receiving*  
*assurance of affection*  
*physical manifestation of care*  
*connection*

*God, it's me. I need to be embraced—by your love, by your care, by your presence felt as a heavy blanket on a winter's night. In your embrace I can sit and be still. In your embrace I peek through the darkness to eye the first glimmer of dawn. In your embrace I remember who I am and to whom I belong.*

### Hebrews 7:1–10<sup>51</sup>

Melchizedek of the Hebrew Scriptures was king of Salem and a priest of The Name Most High. He encountered Abraham when our patriarch returned from defeating his enemies. Melchizedek

blessed Abraham and Abraham gave a tenth of all he possessed to this king-priest.<sup>52</sup> This Melchizedek was a foreshadowing of the eternal priesthood of Jesus.

First, his name literally means “king of right relationships”<sup>53</sup> and *Salem* is a variant of *shalom*—meaning the robust peace of a community's wellness. Further, the Hebrew Scriptures recount no genealogy for Melchizedek—without mother or father, without beginning of days or end of life. In this way, Melchizedek resembles The Name's Son and remains a priest forever!

Second, Melchizedek was so great that even our patriarch Abraham gave to him a tithe—a tenth of his very best possessions. Now, we know that in the Torah, the Levitical priests—that is, those who are descended from Abraham's son Levi, whom The Name appointed to be the tribe of the priesthood<sup>54</sup>—collect a tithe from their fellow Israelites, even though they too are Abraham's descendants. Melchizedek, however, wasn't a part of Abraham's family and wasn't a part of the Levitical priesthood, yet he collected a tithe—not from Abraham's descendants but from Abraham himself!

Third, we know (and this is beyond any dispute) the lesser is blessed by the greater. And what happened between Melchizedek and Abraham? Abraham (the lesser) was blessed by Melchizedek (the greater).

Finally, we must compare Melchizedek to the Levitical priests in this way: priests collect tithes and eventually die, whereas Melchizedek collected a tithe and, by the witness of the Scriptures, lives on. Think about this, too: as Levi was still yet to be born, there is a sense in which Levi was still “in” Abraham, so when Abraham offered up a tithe to Melchizedek, it is as if Levi also gave the tithe.

*How far*  
*we go to “prove”*  
*a conviction that rests in faith*

*How high*  
*our own opinion*  
*that disregards others' beliefs*

*How wide  
God's vision  
that observes our hijinks*

*How much  
God's heart breaks  
at the lengths we travel to judge*

God, it's me. I love Jesus. I really do. And I believe the Christian faith, my faith, rests on a firm foundation of truth and logic, of experience and conviction. Must I work so hard to convince others (and myself) that Jesus is superior? What happens if I merely trust Jesus is enough? Enough love. Enough light. Enough life.

### **Hebrews 7:11–19**

So here is the question we must answer: If wholeness and completeness exist through the Levitical priests, why was there need for any other kind of priest? If Aaron's lineage of priests was sufficient to make people whole and complete, why did we need a priest like Melchizedek—the king of right relationships?

The answer is: When the premise changes,<sup>55</sup> so does the argument. When the “facts on the ground” change, so the response that is proper must change. When the old ways needed to pass away (for they could not accomplish all that was needed), a new Way was given. The new priesthood was revealed—unveiled in the person of Melchizedek—and the God-life itself was transformed according to new rhythms, a new beat. A new Way was born.

Melchizedek belonged to no tribe; he was not one of Abraham's sons. He never served at an altar—nothing died by his hand. Death never entered the world through his life. We know the Anointed One descended from Judah, not Levi. Beyond dispute, then, is this: when a priest like Melchizedek is unveiled in the world, he enters the vocation not through tribal lineage as the Levitical priests did, but on the basis of his rising<sup>56</sup> into life anew and life eternal. Therefore, the Psalmist declared:

You are a priest into eternity;  
as Melchizedek, so you;  
he the foreshadowing, you the fulfillment.<sup>57</sup>

The premise changed because the old ways were unable to make us whole and complete. The Name sent the Anointed One to change the “facts on the ground” and create new rhythms for the God-life, through which intimacy with The Name can be received as a gift.

*As Autumn gives way to Winter  
so change my patterns  
of sleep and companionship  
and what brings joy and health.  
“Facts on the ground”  
like shifting sand  
cannot endure  
until enters the eternal Spring  
of resurrection.*

God, it's me. I participate in well-intentioned rituals: Sunday liturgy, morning prayers, dinner with my family, Netflix before bed. Show me which of these rituals are life-giving, spirit-deepening, friendship-enriching. Show me, too, what new patterns for making meaning and doing justice you would have me embrace, and then teach me not only to embrace but to practice them; not only to practice but to allow them to become habits of my heart, that the habits of my heart may shape my character and form the image of Jesus within me.

### **Hebrews 7:20-28**

There is yet another difference, too, between Melchizedek and the Levitical priests, who do not take an oath, for they are born into their vocation. Melchizedek, however, became a priest based on an oath—not his own but The Name's Word to him:

The Name's conviction is rooted in her character.  
Her conviction will not change:  
“You are a priest into eternity.”<sup>58</sup>

The Name's Word, rooted in unchanging conviction, assigned Jesus a holy calling: to ensure the sanctity of The Name's sacred promises, offering assurance that The Name's promise is real.

The Levitical priests come and go, for they are born and die. Jesus, however, lives into eternity and so his priesthood is eternal. He will always bring The Name to the people and the people to The Name. He will always bring people's brokenness to The Name. He is the One through whom the people's cry is given Voice. Therefore, Jesus is able to make all people whole and complete—thoroughly and absolutely their true selves.

Jesus is the real deal—has the skills to do whatever is needed in this work of healing and transforming people into the divine image: beloved of The Name and without guile; pure in mind, body, and spirit amidst the contaminants of the world; heaven's emergence on earth.

Jesus is not like the High Priests elected annually. These High Priests must kill and kill and kill—continually—for their own sins and the sins of the people. Their sacrifices are temporary; needed again when sins are repeated. Jesus, however, ended the need for sacrifice to forgive sins when he offered himself. The Torah appointed the Levitical priests, but The Name's conviction, rooted in her character, named the Son according to The Name's intention. The Name's oath created, conveyed, and consummated her purpose:<sup>59</sup> to transform both people and creation toward becoming whole and complete.

*Subtle the difference between conviction rooted in character and rigidity.*

*Faint the distinction between temporary blessing and eternal assurance.*

*One leads to a good place while the other leads to the only place I will be in you and you in me—forever.*

God, it's me. So much of my life is built on ethical foundations. My habits express that which is good and just and true. And yet the still, small voice of your Spirit whispers and invites and (sometimes) cajoles: The Name's intention is a character that reflects Jesus. The Name's design is the transformation of all things. The Name's invitation is for me to participate in all of it to the fullest. Whoa! May my choices today say, "Amen!" to the fullness of The Name's invitation.

### Hebrews 8:1–13

Now, here's the point: Jesus is just such a High Priest (of the order of Melchizedek—king of right relationships). Jesus is The Name's "right hand man" and hears when The Name whispers his desire, delight, or determination. Jesus serves in the midst of The Name's eternal dwelling place, the heavenly home that no human hands can build. Every High Priest, being mortal, is assigned special gifts to offer and ordinary sacrifices to make. But not so with Jesus. (Were Jesus merely mortal and of the family of Aaron or Levi, he too would offer such sacrifices, as Torah commands. But as Jesus is eternal, he serves not for a lifetime but for eternity.) The Temple in which the High Priest offers sacrifice is the shadow of The Name's heavenly home, a glorious replica of the eternal, but still only a replica. This is why Moses was warned while speaking with The Name on Mount Sinai to build the Tabernacle—also known as the Tent of Meeting—to precise standards, so that it would convey the spiritual truths that it represented.<sup>60</sup> Thus, Jesus' ministry of creating right relationships is more dependable, for it is built on a more certain foundation.<sup>61</sup> Cracks exist in the foundation of the Levitical priesthood that Jesus' priesthood repairs and makes whole.

*The Saguaro in my backyard beckons:  
"Can you wait with me?  
Can your prayers and praise remain lifted  
as long and as high,  
enduring beyond your mortal existence?"*

*The Saguaro scoffs at my temporal concerns:  
I flit about like a gnat,  
waxing hot and cold,  
refusing to endure,  
failing the test of steadfastness.*

*I must learn from my friend the Saguaro:  
Patience is a gift.  
Endurance is a virtue.  
Praise and prayer are intended not for the moment  
but  
to sculpt a soul worthy of eternity.*

God, it's me. I long for certainty: not the kind conveyed by power and privilege, nor that which comes from market success or insurance. No, I long for the certainty that my life is built on that which endures: character and hope and a love that will not let me go. I long for the certainty that my well-being depends not on human choices but upon Divine choosing: I belong to you—body and soul, in life and in death. I am humbled and grateful, that my longing is welcomed by Jesus.

### **Hebrews 8:8–13**

We see The Name's desire to repair right relationships and make whole again the human family in the words she spoke through the truth-teller Jeremiah:<sup>62</sup>

“Look to the horizon!” says The Name.  
“I will fulfill all goodness for the divided and exiled;<sup>63</sup>  
sacred promise I will accomplish.

“This promise—my promise—is fresh:  
an open window through which the Wind blows,  
a wide-open door that welcomes and invites.

“This promise depends only on my Word:  
neither the distracted trust of our ancestors  
nor their journey's detoured steps define what  
shall be.

“This sacred promise I make to my people:  
I will inscribe justice upon their hearts and minds;  
I will embrace them as a mother with her infant.

“Through intimacy and experience  
they shall know me;  
Through perception and intuition, I shall be  
known.<sup>64</sup>

“I will envelop them in mercy that astonishes;  
I will cause their brokenness to become like a  
dream.  
I will restore them to their true purpose.”

In declaring this sacred promise, The Name reminds us that transformation only comes as that which is tired and weary is relinquished.

*Tired and weary,  
Covid continues to oppress  
yet new every morning  
the dew of God's mercy—  
the yellow finch upon my fountain,  
the encouraging word from my friend,  
the gentle touch of Holy Spirit reminding me,  
“I am known, and I am loved.”*

God, it's me. Help me to hear your covenant as if you spoke it this morning, as fresh word. Help me to receive it not merely with my mind but also in the depths of my soul. This promise—your promise—was spoken to those desperate for hope and longing to believe they were still your beloved people. Help me to hear it just as they heard it.

### **Hebrews 9:1–10**

When The Name crafted the sacred promise between him and his people Israel, it included rules and rituals to show the way people are to live in mutual love with The Name and one another. Israel's ritual life is enacted in a grand and glorious Temple, whose every furnishing foreshadowed The Name's perfect plan for his people.



There is a curtain separating the people from a room called Sacred Space. The Levitical priests each serve in this room, which contains a lampstand and bread, symbols of The Name's power and provision. A second curtain separates Sacred Space from a room called Divine Dwelling, for it leads the High Priest into The Name's direct presence. The symbols in this room were all covered in gold, call people to prayer, and remind the people of The Name's power. Ancient artifacts are contained in the ark of the covenant—manna, Aaron's staff, and the stone tablets upon which the commandments were inscribed. Above the ark hang representations of heavenly beings, which overlook an elaborate seat, known as the Seat of Mercy, upon which the High Priest offers sacrifices. So sacred is the Divine Dwelling that only the High Priest enters it and only once a year, and always with sacrificial blood to be offered for his own sins of commission and the people's sins of omission. (There is more to these sacred rooms, but this is enough detail for now.)

The Name intends for these rooms and the rituals commanded for them to be a foreshadowing of that which was fulfilled in Jesus the Anointed. The Divine Spirit works in these places and through them, upon these priests and through them, both to enact The Name's mercy and to point to the culmination of The Name's mysterious plan: that in Jesus foreshadowing becomes fulfillment. That which foreshadows lacks the power to form the moral conscience<sup>65</sup> of the worshiper, but that which is fulfillment transforms the worshiper into their true self. Rules and rituals, as valuable as they are (especially as they are given by The Name), are but heralds awaiting the *kairos*,<sup>66</sup> the holy time when The Name sets things straight.

*Shadows expose light. I  
see God's face in the other,  
see Jesus in the least of his brothers and sisters.*

*Foreshadows point to light not yet dawning. I  
trust beyond experience,  
hope beyond vision.*

*Shadows and foreshadows—though glorious—  
revealed as sacred imitation  
when consummation comes.*

God, it's me. I confess I read this passage through the lens of my competitive spirit—"My team is better than your team!" I repent, for both "teams" belong to you. I seek your mercy, that I may see how you choose us all to craft your Story—the good news narrative told not in a single lifetime but from generation to generation and age to age. I seek to be formed and transformed, that I might see not merely what is but perceive what can be. May I look not merely at what I am but behold what you would have me become. May I step from shadows into light and beyond foreshadowing into fulfillment.

### **Hebrews 9:11-15**

When the Anointed One was revealed as High Priest of all the good foreshadowed in the Temple (and now fulfilled in his person), he drew near the Divine Dwelling of The Name's presence in heaven and not merely the room found in the Jerusalem Temple. He drew near not by means of animal sacrifice but through the offering of his own self. He drew near to reclaim all creation from the grip of the evil one, to repurchase our lives for The Name's purpose. He drew near not merely to make us outwardly clean but to form our moral conscience. He drew near that we might turn away from marching into death and begin to serve The Name as the path for our life.

The Anointed One is The Name's ultimate and final "go between," bringing us to The Name and The Name to us. Through the Anointed One we receive The Name's invitation to lay claim to our divine birthright. Through the Anointed One we hear The Name's summons to live as her beloved children. Through the Anointed One we are liberated from looking back upon our falls and failures that we might live into the lovingkindness in which we now find ourselves.

*Intimacy is a wondrous gift  
seductive and scary  
inviting discovery of other while requiring revelation  
of self.*

*Jesus said it best,  
“that they may all be one. As you, Father,  
are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.”<sup>67</sup>*

*Patrick said it well, too:  
“May the Christ in me speak to the Christ in thee,  
that we may be one in him.”<sup>68</sup>*

*Draw near...  
Draw near...  
Draw near!*

*God, it's me. As Jesus drew near to you, may I follow in drawing near. As Jesus drew near to me, may I draw near to him. As Jesus drew near, not just to tidy my outward person but to transform my inward being, may I accept his influence, welcome his comfort, receive his challenge, and walk boldly into his lovingkindness. Liberated from looking back upon my failures, may I walk forward with him toward my best, true self.*

## **Hebrews 9:16-28**

“Why is it,” you ask, “that the Anointed One had to die? Wasn't the Anointed One chosen and beloved of The Name?” It's complicated.<sup>69</sup>

First, let's remind ourselves how covenants—as sacred promises—work. They are like a person's will. When one makes a will, their intentions are made public to all—convictions and commitments extending beyond life and into death. The covenant, like a will, requires death before it is enacted, for it was made to endure for all time.

So it was with the first covenant made with Israel—The Name's promise spoken through Moses. When Moses explained to the Israelites both the gifts and responsibilities of being The Name's beloved, he expressed the solemnity of both The Name's blessing and their obligation.<sup>70</sup> Moses used symbols of

commitment and cleansing to honor the sacredness of the moment: the sacrifice of calves, the sprinkling of blood and water to consecrate both Word and people. He said, “The calves' blood is both sign and seal of The Name's sacred promise and our holy commitment to live as his beloved.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Moses sprinkled blood in the Tent of Meeting and in many other rituals: each a sign to remind the people to let go of their old lives and their false selves.<sup>72</sup> Only by releasing our brokenness can we embrace The Name's healing lovingkindness.

So it is with the new covenant made through Israel and extended to all humankind—it was enacted through death not using those things that were mere copies: signs that pointed to the heavenly reality, symbols that signified a purpose greater than themselves. The Anointed One entered not the human copy—the Temple—but the Divine Dwelling in The Name's direct presence! The Jerusalem Temple, with its unending need of sacrifice—priests drenched in the blood of bulls and calves, sheep and doves—was not sufficient to transform all things into new creation. Therefore, the Anointed One entered the Divine Dwelling to present himself as the perfect gift, which he needed to do only once for all eternity rather than over and over, for his sacrifice was not mere calves and goats and doves but his eternal person. The Anointed One did not suffer again and again from the beginning of creation, but once for all *chronos* to bring about the *kairos*<sup>73</sup> of new creation. In the Anointed One is the consummation of creation's purpose—its fulfilment discovered in his self-emptying love. Everyone dies and looks into the mirror of their own brokenness, which is a weight we cannot carry, a truth we cannot endure. But the Anointed One carries what we cannot and brings to us a truth deeper than ourselves—the truth that we are beloved, embraced, and held near to The Name's bosom. When the Day comes and the Anointed One is revealed in his full radiance, he will bring to us the culmination of this truth, and we will be made whole and complete, our true selves.

*Forgiveness as letting go  
releasing past hurt*

*sending painful memories away  
embracing a new future.*

*God no longer punitive,  
not finding glee,  
neither inflicting suffering,  
nor cosmic child abuse.*

*Forgiveness, then, begins  
with emptiness  
seeking fullness in what  
brings justice and joy.*

God, it's me. I shudder at the thought of how barbaric rituals were in centuries past: the blood of calves required for reconciliation. I mock the ancients, who believed such barbarous things could represent the God-rhythms. Far more sophisticated is our generation, who decimates thousands from the air—If we cannot see them, did people really die? Far more urbane is our culture, whose urban landscapes overmatch ancient Jerusalem in the shedding of blood. The Name, I am so glad I have moved beyond my silly, ancient forebearers, who thought forgiveness was somehow painful. I am so, so glad to have adopted a more modern perspective that says forgiveness is easy, abundant, and, above all, cheap.<sup>74</sup>

## **Hebrews 10:1–18**

The Torah is an outline<sup>75</sup> of The Name's good, to be revealed in fullness, but is not the full reality. Like a shadow that presents one's silhouette but cannot display one's heart and soul, so the Temple's sacrifices guide us in the direction of the God-rhythms and signify the God-life without being able to transform one's true self. The sacrifices remind us annually, from year to year and age to age, of our need—and also that bulls and goats cannot make us whole and complete.

The Anointed One pointed beyond the sacrifices of bulls and goats to a deeper truth. He quoted the Psalmist:

The Name, you do not yearn for what I give beyond me;  
your desire is for what I give from within me—  
not the riches of calves and coins,  
but the treasures of my heart.<sup>76</sup>

What is given from beyond oneself is good and The Name's command in accordance with Torah to point toward the God-rhythms and to signify the God-life. Yet giving from within oneself, the treasures of one's heart, is the Way of discovery of one's full humanity. The Anointed One let go of the former to embrace the latter. The Anointed One established the Way of the God-life: to stand for The Name not through bulls but through the offering of his own body, given once for all eternity. The Anointed One established that it is not through the sacrifice of calves but through the offering of the Christ that we are made whole and complete.

Day after endless day, the Levitical priests slaughter livestock—turning Jerusalem's streams red during the Passover—only to return to slaughter again, for guiltless and goodness are not the same thing. Those who offer sacrifice take away guilt for a time, but without goodness one must return—again and again and again.

But since the Anointed One, as a priest like Melchizedek—the king of right relationships, offered his own body rather than a bull, his goodness affects all who encounter his lovingkindness. The Anointed One needed not to return again and again to slaughter but instead returned to his home in The Name's presence. He was commissioned with The Name's authority and awaits the culmination of the age to come. By his one act of self-giving, the Anointed One makes whole and complete all whom The Name has set apart for salvation and for service.

The Divine Spirit bears witness to this new reality through the truth-teller Jeremiah:

Thus says The Name:

“This is the sacred promise I make:  
I will inscribe my poetry upon their hearts,  
my prose upon their minds.  
Broken they are, yet I will forget it;  
Orneriness they are, yet I will remember it no more.”

When The Name heals our brokenness, bulls need not be slaughtered. When The Name releases us from our own orneriness, calves rest easy and give thanks for the Christ.

*I spoke kind words  
(with rage in my heart):  
Was I just and good?*

*I wrote the check  
(begudging every stroke of the pen):  
Did it draw me closer to God?*

*I stopped pretending  
(honesty and authenticity are surprisingly difficult):  
Is this the Way of Jesus?*

God, it's me. May I grow toward becoming good even as I seek to look good. May my inward growing toward the image of Jesus be reflected in actions and attitudes toward those I encounter each day. May I both give you the treasures of my heart and express outwardly the truth you are forming inwardly. Help me, The Name, to realize your call upon me is both/and rather than either/or.

### **Hebrews 10:19–25**

Because we have been released from our own brokenness by Jesus' healing balm, we are confident—assured that we belong to The Name's family. Because we have been liberated from our own orneriness, we walk forward with conviction that Jesus escorts us into The Name's Divine Dwelling—assured Jesus offered his service freely; indeed, it brought him joy to serve in this way.

Therefore, we draw near, resting ourselves upon The Name's bosom, with confidence,

conviction, and trust that we are both declared innocent and immersed into the renewing waters of the God-life. We grab hold of The Name's hand knowing he will never let us go. We walk beside The Name rejoicing in his faithfulness, rejoicing that his promise is our hope.

Therefore, we plan day and night how to encourage each other toward *agape* and inspire each other toward goodness. We gather together because we know it builds a strong foundation for our being “In-Courage-Minted.” We continue to gather because we know we are “In-Spirit-led” when we are together instead of isolated, alone, and without the support that only our family in Jesus can provide. This is important! And we need each other all the more as we await the Day of Jesus to be revealed.

*COVID cases rise,  
my temptation to hunker down rises, too.  
My head lies to my heart,  
“I don't need other people around.”*

*COVID cases rise,  
my determination rising faster.  
My heart responds,  
“Separate doesn't have to mean isolation.”*

*COVID cases continue,  
my affection for the Body of Jesus grows.  
“Christian” is always a plural, never singular:  
“me” and “we” intertwined in love.*

God, it's me. Though an individual, grant unto me the gift of community. Though I have my own thoughts, grant unto me the joy of learning from others. Though I enjoy a little “alone time,” grant unto me the joy of knowing your fellowship of love. Though I like “me,” grant unto me an even greater appreciation for “we.”

### **Hebrews 10:20–39**

If we knowingly walk in the wrong direction, we will not get to our destination. If we deliberately choose isolation, we will not share community. If we

purposefully aim for a lesser good, we will miss the mark of The Name's perfect desire for our wholeness.<sup>77</sup> The only thing we should expect is for our choices to be delivered into The Name's purging fire.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, it is better that our choices be consumed as The Name's enemies than for us to be consumed!

To treat Moses' teachings as unimportant is to miss their ability to bless us. Playing hide-and-seek with The Name's mercy is foolishness. Anyone who treats the sacred as profane obscures our vision of the God-life and compromises our ability to dance the God-rhythms. When we treat the profane as sacred we obscure the beauty and blessing of The Name's Beloved, the Anointed One. His giving himself as an offering invites us to join him in a life-long journey of discovering our best and true self. Why would we treat The Name's lovingkindness so contemptuously by rejecting her invitation to dance?

Have a healthy awe of and reverence for The Name's judgment. As the Torah and the Psalms speak:<sup>79</sup>

"I live by my values," says the Lord.  
"Decisions of right and wrong affirm my character."

Or again,

The Name will separate wheat from chaff,  
Dividing precious metal from dross.

Being held in The Name's hands inspires awe and invites right action, especially for those wise enough to heed the opportunity to draw near!

Remember the early days of your journey with the Anointed One, when you accepted the light shining upon and within you. Remember that even great suffering could not dissuade you from trusting The Name: insult and intimidation were no match for your conviction. You walked with siblings in their suffering and surrendered earthly possessions to snatch up heavenly ones, in the certainty that only heavenly possessions endure.

Don't lose confidence now! Instead of losing confidence, persist, persevere, and proceed ever

deeper into The Name's heart and mind. Dive into her waters. Immerse yourselves in her lovingkindness. Bathe in the hope of her promise that she is near.

The *kairos* is near  
The One who comes is coming!  
The *chronos* approaches when all shall be revealed.<sup>80</sup>

Or again,

Trust is the path to right relationship!  
Joy cannot be found by those who hide from love.<sup>81</sup>  
We are not those who hide from love, shriveling in fear that we might be seen as we are. Instead, we trust that even as we are seen, so we are loved. We trust that though we are broken, so shall The Name make us whole and complete—our best and true selves.

*Woke up this morning to  
possibilities, opportunities, challenges  
to be shaped, formed, and transformed  
or twisted, distorted, and warped,  
taking another step  
with your lovingkindness as companion  
on a journey toward becoming  
my best and true self.*

God, it's me. Help me be present in the moments I live today: aware and noticing myself and others, recognizing hurts and listening to your Spirit's nudge. Help me live where my feet happen to be and not repeating an unforgiven past or rehearsing an uncertain future. Help me to claim your lovingkindness for me in this moment and then share it with the one and the many whom I will encounter today. Help me make choices that become habits and practice habits that will shape me in your image.

### **Hebrews 11:1–16**

Trust is the mortar that holds the walls of our spiritual home in place. Trust is the guarantor that our

conviction is sufficient foundation upon which to build our spiritual home. Trust creates our conviction that even though our physical vision is limited, yet our spiritual discernment rightly perceives The Name's goodness and the many gifts that come from his lovingkindness.

The ancients lived and died singing the wonders of The Name's goodness and gifts. Our spiritual fathers and mothers discovered the blessings that can be received only through trust. Trust conceives in us wonder and awe that The Name spoke all creation into existence—from nothing to abundance as a single Word.

Consider the lived and living witness of our spiritual fathers and mothers—all of whom received The Name's blessing through trust.

Abel, who trusted The Name that his gift would be welcomed and who, also through trust, was welcomed into right relationship. Abel's trust speaks to each new generation even though he is long dead.

Enoch, who trusted The Name and whose life was taken into the heavenly dwelling. Enoch made The Name's heart happy. Without trust, it is impossible to make The Name's heart happy, but through trusting that The Name is and loves, we are compelled to seek The Name's face, which always shines upon those who seek him.

Noah, who trusted The Name enough to build a HUGE boat on nothing more than The Name's warning. Noah's trust led him to save his family. His trust declared with conviction the brokenness of the world; his trust led him to inherit right relationship with The Name.

Abraham, who trusted The Name when called to go to a foreign land, a land not his own, among a people not his own. He obeyed, taking a journey into the unknown. What Abraham knew (but only because he trusted The Name) was that The Name had made him a promise. That promise was enough for Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob to wander forward, in search of the dwelling place not constructed by human hands but grown from the seeds of trust planted in The Name's promise.

Sarah also trusted The Name's promise. Though she was well past the ideal age for

childbearing, Sarah trusted The Name would be faithful to her and to his promise that she would bear a son through whom all nations would be blessed. From Abraham and Sarah, well-elderly though they were, came great nations—offspring as plentiful as the stars in the night sky or as abundant as the sand on the seashore. Sarah's trust has led generations to trust.<sup>82</sup>

All these ancients were still living by trust when they died. The Name's promises were still in front of them, still their horizon. They were strangers to the experience of receiving The Name's blessings fulfilled, foreigners to the full benefits of being citizens of The Name's beloved community. They understood their true citizenship is not on earth but is discovered wherever The Name dwells. They weren't looking for a country to call their own but searching for their true home in The Name's presence, wherever it would be discovered. They weren't looking backward, homesick for their past, but forward toward a future in which they would walk alongside The Name. And The Name welcomed them into his beloved community, for they made The Name's heart happy.

*Life shatters, sometimes, like a broken mirror,  
distorting the image I see before me.*

*My brother and father died the same week.*

*The Capitol was invaded and officers died.*

*My friend without insurance needs a hip replacement.*

*What is trust when the mirror breaks?*

*What image do I see*

*What reflections as I look into its fractured shards?*

*Trust sees the hurting child within another.*

*Trust hears the plaintive cry in the harsh barking.*

*Trust feels civility's heartbeat—not quite dead, yet.*

*Trust extends an olive branch in spite of the evidence.*

*Trust looks in the shattered mirror*

*and sees the one becoming like Jesus.*

God, it's me. It's hard to trust when your brother attacks—did Cain compromise Abel's trust? It's easy to trust on Easy Street—Ah, to be escorted to heaven like Enoch! It's scary to trust in the

face of cataclysm—"foxhole faith" that endures, like Noah possessed, is easier said than done. I like the experience of Abraham and Sarah, for mutual support and encouragement make trusting much easier. The Name, however it happens, help me to trust that you exist and you love, now and for always.

### Hebrews 11:17–31

The story of "salvation history" cannot be told without trust. Trusting The Name, Abraham passed his test. Though Abraham had embraced The Name's promise that he would be the father of a great nation, he was asked to offer up his son, as if—quite suddenly—The Name had embraced the practices of the pagan gods to demand child sacrifice (of course, we know this was not the case). Abraham did not understand how The Name's seeming demand conformed to the promise, but trusted that The Name could raise the dead, if need be. Indeed, through Abraham's trust in The Name's goodness, Isaac was not sacrificed, and Abraham received his son—his one and only son—into his embrace.

Trusting The Name, Isaac blessed his two sons, Jacob and Esau, toward the fulfillment of their journeys.

Trusting The Name, Jacob blessed all of Joseph's sons, even as he approached his death and had to lean on his staff to do it.

Trusting The Name, Joseph inspired hope in his family that they would be led out of Egypt to return to the land of promise, and even gave them instructions to take his bones with them when they left!

The story of "salvation history" cannot be told without trust. Trusting The Name, Moses' parents hid him for three months, in defiance of Pharaoh's decree that the Hebrews' male babies were to be slaughtered. Trusting The Name, they were unafraid of Pharaoh.

Trusting The Name, Moses refused to be known as son to Pharaoh's daughter (even though she raised him) but instead joined himself to The Name's family (even though they were rejected and relegated to abuse, oppression, and suffering). Moses' trust

foreshadowed a devotion to the Anointed One—the emptiness of Jesus being preferred over the fullness of Egypt, ephemeral indulgence rejected for the sake of eternal extravagance.

Trusting The Name, Moses provoked Pharaoh's anger, yet persevered because he perceived The Name's presence was behind, beside, and before him.

Trusting The Name, Moses enacted the Passover, applying the blood of goats upon the door frame to preserve the firstborn children of Israel from the Destroyer.

The story of "salvation history" cannot be told without trust.

Trusting The Name, the Hebrew people passed through the Sea just as the Destroyer had passed over them as a people. The Egyptian armies, however, were not so fortunate and became the Destroyer's feast.

Trusting The Name, the armies of Israel marched around the walls of Jericho for seven days—The Name's victory their rest.

Trusting The Name, Rahab the Canaanite welcomed the Hebrew spies, and she and her family and all who belonged to her were saved from destruction.

The story of "salvation history" cannot be told without trust.

*Trusting The Name  
human assent  
to divine yes.*

*Trusting The Name  
courage and humility  
in conjugal union.*

*Trusting The Name  
her story  
becoming our story.*

God, it's me. The river of history meanders, its path changing course because of single acts of courage. History, like that river, deepens during seasons of humility and becomes perilous when

arrogance is ascendent. Teach me, therefore, to intertwine courage and humility so that, when called upon to act, I might choose wisely. Teach me to choose your justice and your joy. May the waters of your history flow through me.

### **Hebrews 11:32-40**

Oh my! I don't have time to tell all the stories of The Name being at work through truth-tellers and rulers, through both the mighty and the humble—Gideon and Barak, Samson and Jephthah, David and Samuel, and so many others. With The Name at work through their trusting, kingdoms fell and justice rose, the mouths of lions were shut and the fury of flames quenched. With The Name at work through their trusting, soldiers escaped the sword and the weak were filled with strength, enemy armies were routed and mothers saw their children return home alive, as if raised from the dead!

Still others<sup>83</sup> showed The Name's strength through their willingness and ability to endure opposition. With The Name at work through their trusting, they faced angry mobs, unfair punishment, and even imprisonment. With The Name at work through their trusting, they were executed—stones thrown and swords swung, some even sawed in two! With The Name at work through their trusting, they were clothed in poverty and adorned with persecution. The world found no place for them, so they wandered the deserts and camped in the mountains, caves their boudoir and crevices their study. Yet even these made The Name's heart happy because they trusted him. Though they did not see the promise fulfilled within their own lifetimes, they trusted that The Name's inexorable plan, his inescapable vision, would bring them to us, and we will be made whole and complete together.

*Trusting The Name—  
at times a ballet of blessing  
at times a samba of suffering*

*Trusting The Name—  
path diverging in the woods  
choosing the one that leads to wholeness*

*Trusting The Name—  
not always easy  
always best*

God, it's me. I am aware of the temptation to define my faith in terms of blessing, the Tempter at work not only through the heresy of the Prosperity Gospel but even more through my own privilege. I do not want to see suffering in others and cannot welcome it in myself. Yet life comes to me as it does to all, and when it does, will I affirm you are with me even then? When confronted by opposition, will I seek ways to have you at work through my trusting, or will I choose to show the bastards what I'm made of? Which is the path that makes your heart happy?

### **Hebrews 12:1-3**

Look around at all the people who have lived trusting The Name—a throng of sacred testimony to The Name's work among them and through them, a chorus of witness from every century, singing songs of praise to The Name's justice and joy. With mentors like this, be inspired! Be encouraged! Take your broken ways of living, stuff them in a box, and set the box out front to be collected with the trash. Persevere toward the goal of becoming your true self. Turn the agony<sup>84</sup> of sin into the triumph of transformation through daily practices that become holy habits.

Here is a good place to start this work of transformation: Look at Jesus—don't turn away and don't take your eyes from him. Jesus started us on the path of trusting and will accompany us every step of our journey. He will make our trusting whole and complete so that we will become our true selves, which will be his great joy to see. For the sake of this joy Jesus endured the Cross, didn't care a whit that others thought it shameful, for he knew it was the Way that would lead us back to The Name. At The Name's



side is where we can find Jesus now, running the family business of *agape*.

More than just glancing at Jesus, keep looking, then ponder and wonder: How deep was his love for us that he would endure such hostility and hatred? As you ponder and wonder, turn your thoughts toward meditation—give it a good think. Then you will be inspired and encouraged. You will neither fade nor falter from the sacred work of keeping your gaze on Jesus.

*The willow beckons  
its arms lifted vertically in praise  
inviting me to join in silent admiration.*

*The dove dips its beak into the fountain  
thirsty for The Name's provision  
inviting me to relish creation's goodness.*

*The Cross, a multi-colored Talavera, hangs  
like Jesus to whom it points  
reminding me to celebrate because I am not alone on  
this journey.*

*Seeing, looking, pondering until I perceive  
the cloud of witnesses in creation and community,  
with Jesus, my Savior, my beatific vision.*

God, it's me. Fix my eyes on Jesus. Let me not look away—when social media roars or church gossip whispers. Let my gaze remain steadfast—when family troubles erupt or obligations burden. Let me perceive the One who entered into human suffering to bear it and break its power. Let me ponder the truth that only that which is endured can be transformed. Fix my eyes on Jesus. Let me not look away.

### Hebrews 12:4–17<sup>85</sup>

Becoming your true self is a difficult journey, and you all still have far to travel. You believe yourselves to be constantly fighting against your addictions, your temptations to betray your values, and your desire for personal control over people and

circumstances. Yet in your struggles, you have not yet given your lives but have neglected the truth found in Proverbs:<sup>86</sup>

My child,  
esteem the struggles The Name allows you to endure;  
through them you draw near to The Name,  
and are trained in right relationships.  
As The Name's beloved children,  
your lives' struggles forge your identity—  
adoption the journey's beginning,  
inheritance the journey's end.

Struggles and even suffering tutor us in the Way of Jesus, which is a cruciform life. Without adversity, there is no learning, no growth, no formation nor transformation into the image of Jesus within you. Without adversity, it is as if you aren't even The Name's children!

As we respected our earthly parents' discipline, their imperfect attempts to train us to be good and kind and faithful, so we must accept, receive, and submit to The Name's tutelage, which leads us toward right relationships and being made whole and complete. Through struggles, the image of Jesus is formed within us. Through suffering, our character begins to mirror his. Adversity, then, can be our *paidagogos*,<sup>87</sup> the path our journey takes to lead us toward right relationships and The Name's *shalom*.

If all this sounds overwhelming, take heart. Be of good courage! Be strong in The Name, remembering these words from the Proverbs:<sup>88</sup>

The Name walks with us on our path:  
the lame walk and the broken are healed.

Therefore, search The Name's *shalom* for yourself and seek it for your community—being set apart from the values of the world and set apart for The Name's purposes. Being set apart enables us to see The Name clearly, whereas being mired in the muddy waters of the world obscures our vision and our visage. Cultivate loving-kindness in one another because its absence even in one will cause trouble for

many and is the root of bitterness within the gathering. Warn those who pervert their desires, exploiting people and things. They reason with their loins and think with their stomachs, like Esau who sold his blessing for a pittance. What did it get him? Only heartache and tears.

*The road less traveled:  
I don't want to travel it!  
Yet it leads to me.*

God, it's me. Discipline is not something we like in our culture. We prefer rights to responsibilities. If we choose discipline because we are a scholar or an athlete, it is "our" choice, not something imposed upon us by another. Yet life does not cooperate. Choices are taken away by illness or accident, by circumstances and choices (our own and others'). Rather than rage at the unfairness of life, help me learn this truth in every given moment: You are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me, and you are forming the image of Jesus within me. Open my heart that I may accept, receive, and submit myself to you, even when life's troubles confront me.

### **Hebrews 12:18–29**

Though your struggles are great, you need not fear. Consider what confronted our ancestors: a mountain that could not be touched, enveloped in flames, shrouded in darkness, gloom, and storm. They heard a trumpet blast from above and a voice that caused those who heard it to beg that the voice would speak no more, for it overwhelmed them with fear: "If an animal touches this mountain, kill it!" Even Moses was afraid.<sup>89</sup>

Your path is different, for you were invited to journey with Jesus to Mount Zion—and not just the earthly city of Jerusalem but the Jerusalem that comes from above, the heavenly city of the living Name. You accepted the invitation to join tens of thousands of The Name's messengers gathered in celebration and song. You are among those whose names are

inscribed in the halls of heaven, who have become members of an inclusive gathering: those who belong to Jesus—elder brother of us all. With Jesus leading the Way, you stood before The Name without fear—trusting her judgment would lead to you being made whole and complete. You trusted that the sprinkled blood of Jesus, who lived fully human yet without sin, spoke more powerfully even than Abel's innocent blood (which is saying quite a lot).

Therefore, do not avoid the word spoken by Jesus, and the Way his life directs you to walk. You cannot escape the message his sprinkled blood whispers to us all: "I gave my life for you, for you are precious to me. Do not reject my love!" If our ancestors did not escape consequence when they rejected Moses, who is of the Earth, how will we escape consequence when we shun the gracious invitation and loving-kindness of the One who comes from heaven?

In the days of Moses, the Earth shook. In the days to come, both Earth and heaven will shake. All creation will have its reckoning, and only those who abide in The Name will remain.<sup>90</sup> Those who do not reject but who receive The Name cannot be shaken and will remain. Therefore, let us be thankful and worship The Name with the goal of pleasing her—showing her reverence as we are filled with awe. That which cannot be shaken will endure, for,

The Name is a fire that consumes.<sup>91</sup>

*Reject or receive?*

*Heart closing or opening?*

*Fear overwhelming or reverence blossoming?*

*What shall I choose?*

*Choosing to abide*

*I lean into the love  
of the One who fills  
me with trust.*

*Receiving*

*Opening*

*Blossoming*

*I am chosen for love.*

God, it's me. It is easy to fear these days. Heck, it's always been easy to fear. As I grow older (and, hopefully, more mature), I recognize the temptations to be afraid are accompanied by a growing, maturing assurance of your love. I choose to abide in your love, to remain in your embrace, to stay with you "though the waters roar and the Earth quakes, for you, The Name, are my refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble."<sup>92</sup>

### Hebrews 13:1–6

Here is a hodgepodge of wisdom and counsel. Abide in love<sup>93</sup> as siblings called to travel together on a sacred journey.

There are consequences when we neglect to welcome strangers, not the least being that we might turn away those whom The Name sends to us as messengers!

Suffer with those who are in prison as if you are the one who suffers and suffer also with those who are tortured<sup>94</sup> as if you are the ones being mistreated.

Marriage is a trust to be honored by all who make promises before The Name and to each other. Don't vandalize the promises you made but remain conscientious<sup>95</sup>, connected, and caring to your beloved. The Name's refining fire consumes the behavior of all who choose to stray.

The Way of Jesus is like the love of family—accepting one's situation and circumstances as best as we are able, embracing both joy and sorrow, free to choose to be our best, true self. The Way of Jesus does not replace people with things but trusts The Name who said,

I got you! Every step, every breath.  
'Til long journey's end.  
Short step or giant leap, I'll be there.<sup>95</sup>

And so, with robust hope, we confess,

The Name's got my back!  
I have nothing to worry about.  
Live or die, I'm on The Name's side.<sup>96</sup>

### *Hodgepodge of wisdom Sharing in community All are beloved*

God, it's me. The Church, YOUR Church, is called many things: the Body of Christ, the Beloved Community, a gathering of saints and sinners. It is also the place where we discover how delightful and how difficult it is to do life together in Jesus' name. Like our human families, our church families are places where we learn to love (and find the lessons trying at times). Help me both to learn the lessons I need to learn and be beneficial to others in learning the lessons you have set for them.

### Hebrews 13:7–19

Remember the way your leaders live; recount their words and emulate their behavior. Look closely and see how their behaviors become practices. Look closer still and perceive how their practices become habits. Mimic them that the image of Jesus the Anointed may express itself in you. His character and fidelity remain unwavering yesterday, today and into all tomorrows.

Don't stumble over weird teachings whose focus is fringe concerns. Focus instead on what matters: The Name's loving-kindness that strengthens our hearts. Debates about rituals and ceremonies or what foods make one more likable to The Name don't benefit you. (They don't really benefit anyone.) The animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple need not concern us. The High Priest carries the blood of animals into the Divine Dwelling as an offering, but the other priests burn the animal's flesh outside the city. This is all symbolic of what happened to Jesus, who suffered outside the city gate to lead people into right relationship with The Name. Likewise, we follow him outside the city, to follow in his footsteps, to walk the Way of Jesus, even if it leads us to be reviled and repudiated as unworthy of The Name. We know where our true home is—not Jerusalem but the place that remains,<sup>97</sup> the abiding place The Name intended from before the beginning of time, intends today, and will bring to fulfillment in the Day of Jesus.

Through Jesus let us offer sacrifices—of praise! Praise Jesus morning, noon, and night! Talk openly about him and then match your walk with your talk—doing good in partnership<sup>98</sup> with others. This is the sacrifice that truly matters and makes The Name's heart happy.

Be willing to yield to the leaders who keep watch over you as responsible for others' well-being. Help them help you grow toward your true self. Make their work among you a source of joy not grief, for leaders who experience their jobs as drudgery are rarely able to maintain cohesion in the Body.

Finally, pray for us, for we seek the beauty and wholeness that comes from living as The Name's beloved. Especially pray that I may find my way back to you soon, restored to my place in your beloved community.

*Easy to confuse  
symbols for substance,  
appearances for deeper truth.*

*Simple to see  
what matters:  
partnership and praise.*

*Trust your belovedness.  
Walk ever deeper into  
him whose character and fidelity remain unwavering.*

God, it's me. I seek your face in others: friends and mentors and spiritual guides. When I see you in them, I am encouraged and inspired to walk deeper into my belovedness. Do others see you in me? Are others encouraged and inspired? The Name, help me to walk the way of Jesus that I may reflect his image to those whom I encounter today.

## Hebrews 13:20-25

The Name's peace rest upon you. The Name's power work through you. The Name's purpose inspire your vision and direct your service. The same The Name who spoke a sacred promise, who raised Jesus from the dead, and who designated Jesus to be the Good Shepherd of her sheep. May The Name equip you for all you will do, empower all your doing, and be pleased by all you have done, through Jesus the Anointed, to whom all doxology is sung today and into all tomorrows. Amen.<sup>99</sup>

Beloved, endure with patience my words of encouragement and exhortation, which I have written briefly. I want you to know Timothy is no longer in prison—Yay! If he comes soon, I'll bring him with me when I visit. Greet all your leaders and laypeople alike. The beloved in Italy send greetings. The Name's loving-kindness surround and embrace you all.

*Peace, limp without power.  
Power, lifeless without purpose.*

*Promise, pointing to the plan.  
Plan fulfilled in the person of Jesus.*

*Equipped and empowered—both are needed to  
Please the One to whom all doxology is sung.*

God, it's me. May this become my daily prayer: may I know your peace, power, and purpose; may I remember your promise fulfilled in Jesus; may I be equipped and empowered to serve you through loving all whom I meet, ever pleased and ever pleasing in your sight.

**PRAYING THE**  
**JEWISH-CHRISTIAN**  
**LETTERS:**   
**JAMES**

DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS  
OF THE GOD-LIFE THROUGH  
PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

Brad Munroe  
[www.BradMunroe.org](http://www.BradMunroe.org)

## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING JAMES

The Book of James gets a bad rap in some Christian circles. Martin Luther, founder of the Protestant Reformation, famously called James “a strawy Gospel.” Luther felt that reading James tasted like straw compared to the succulent filet that is Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Luther especially took issue with James’ emphasis upon “works” in contrast to “faith.” Others have followed in Luther’s footsteps.

It is true that Paul and James contrast each other. Both cite the Genesis passage that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteous,” with James emphasizing Abraham’s actions while Paul emphasizes Abraham’s belief.<sup>100</sup>

More is made of this contrast than is warranted. James did not reject faith; nor did Paul reject good works. Both writers advocated for faith that leads to ethical actions and ethical actions that express one’s faith. To argue that one theological construction of this Gospel truth is “better” than the other is like arguing for heads over tails on a coin—both sides are needed.

The Book of James was written by James, but which James? Many readers assume the book’s author is the James who was the brother of John, one of the twelve disciples encountered in the Gospels. However, a comparison of Acts 12:2 and 12:17 shows there were at least two leaders in the early Christian community named James and that King Herod had James the brother of John put to death by the sword. Scholars agree that the author of The Book of James was James the brother of Jesus.

What we know about James the brother of Jesus is that he, like his older brother, was raised in a devout Jewish home. James observed the Sabbath with his family and traveled to Jerusalem to attend the Jewish festivals. It is unsurprising that James expresses a thoroughly Jewish character. He cites the moral examples of a host of Old Testament figures: Abraham, Isaac, Rahab, Job, and Elijah. Indeed, James reads like Jewish wisdom literature.

The Book of James reads, specifically, like The Book of Proverbs. The wisdom literature (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) is unlike

other Jewish literature. It does not convey the historical narrative of God’s “mighty acts” (e.g. Genesis and Exodus). Nor does wisdom literature offer social critique as do the prophets (e.g. Amos and Jeremiah). Rather, wisdom literature describes the lived experience of relationship with God (e.g. Psalms), wrestles with the eternal questions of human experience (e.g. Job), and guides God’s people with focused, ethical counsel (e.g. Proverbs). Like Proverbs, James reads as a series of short, pithy sayings that convey practical advice and common-sense truths about the God-life. The difference between Proverbs and James is that the latter offers practical, ethical guidance for Jewish followers who claim Jesus is Messiah.

Another example of Jewish wisdom literature in the New Testament is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This sermon contains Jesus’ most focused and extensive ethical teaching. James is similar in both form and content to the Sermon on the Mount. James references his brother’s teaching throughout the book<sup>101</sup>

The name of God in Praying James is one I have taken from Proverbs 8, where wisdom is personified and even participates in creation. I use the Greek word for “wisdom” when speaking of God: thus, I call God “Sophia” in the present work and use the feminine pronoun throughout.

I interpret the Scripture paraphrases using Haiku poetry, which observes a strict format of five-seven-five syllables. Haiku’s abbreviated form lends itself to the pithy, staccato pace of the ethical admonitions in James. If any of the Haiku don’t “work” for you, I invite you to craft your own response to the Word. After all, most important are not the words I write but that God’s Word dwell richly in us and be written upon our hearts. A personal response to the Word is always appropriate, so long as we don’t just say we believe but act upon that belief. May our lives express in all things what we believe.

April 2022

Brad Munroe

## James 1:1–4

James, servant of Sophia and of Jesus the Anointed, who is the Sovereign of Israel. To the Migration—the families dispersed throughout the Nations: Greetings.

All is gift, beloved, as you are led into various tests and trials, for your testing leads to a trust that endures, perseveres, and ultimately prevails. Embrace the struggle these tests invite you to encounter. Every encounter with struggle is an opportunity for Sophia to shape and form your inner person. The horizon of your testing is your true self—whole and complete, lacking no good gift of Sophia’s Spirit.

*Global pandemic  
Months of trial and testing  
What are we to learn?*

God, it’s me. As I move from season to season in my life’s journey, the tragedies are more poignant, and the joys refresh more deeply. Are these joys and sorrows a part of your plan, or are they accidental opportunities you use to shape and form my character? Regardless of the answer, the image of Jesus within me is not yet complete. I pray I might continue to journey toward my full, mature, and true self. Help me, Sophia, take a single step today.

## James 1:5–8

The wise seek wisdom, while the fool hides from her.<sup>102</sup> The wise discover Sophia’s generosity when they ask for wisdom, while the fool hides in shame. What are you waiting for?

When you ask Sophia for wisdom, trust it will be given to you. Sense her nudge and follow where it leads. The key to Sophia’s wisdom is trusting—not doubting. The one who doubts is like a kite let loose in the wind, blowing hither and yon until finally it crashes. Doubting what Sophia’s Spirit whispers to you is like having two souls.<sup>103</sup> People stand on two feet, but no one is stable if they are uncertain about which soul belongs to them.

*Generous wisdom  
Given through Spirit whisper  
Let your soul listen*

God, it’s me. Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah—may I both sense and heed your Spirit’s nudge today. Grant me courage for the facing of this hour—to protest a war and the propaganda that feeds its ravenous maw. Grant me wisdom for the facing of this hour—to pray for others as if my heart aches and the world depends upon the prayers of all your saints.

## James 1:9-11

Those of lowly status (in the eyes of the culture) often must be God-reliant rather than self-reliant. This is a matter for rejoicing—exult that you are learning lessons in trusting Sophia. Those of high status (in the eyes of the culture) are often only self-reliant, which is a cause for lament. Be forewarned: Those riches last for a moment, like a spring flower scorched by the summer heat. Riches fade but God-reliance lasts forever.

*Trusting wealth—fool’s game.  
Becoming God-reliant -  
Path of the Wise Ones*

God, it’s me. I am a middle-class, white-collar professional with a full-time job. How easy it is to delude myself into thinking I am self-reliant. Remind me, Sophia, of my need for you. Instruct me, Spirit, to be ever more God-reliant. Teach me, Jesus, compassion for those without the option of self-reliance.

## James 1:12-15

Those who persevere through trial discover the ability to stand. Such people will receive the crown of life as a gift Sophia gives to honor their love. So, when enduring one of life’s many tests, don’t say, “Sophia sent this to get me to falter!” (That’s not how

she works.) When we falter, it's on us, not Sophia. Our false self gives birth to the addictions, brokenness, and corruption that lead to the true self's death.

*Trials come in life  
Blaming is a temptation  
Endure with God's help*

God, it's me. Trials will come; help me persevere. Temptations will come; help me overcome. My faith, my character, my integrity are tested all the time! Help me grow—choice by choice, opportunity by opportunity, day by day—ever closer to you, that I might more clearly show forth the image of Jesus today and into all tomorrows.

### **James 1:16–18**

Don't chase shadows down a dark alley, my beloved. Every good thing you have is a gift that originates in Sophia, who intends<sup>104</sup> to make you whole and complete. Sophia's light shines upon us always—never fickle, never flickering on and off<sup>105</sup>—and shines with a purpose:<sup>106</sup> that we might live as Sophia intends and be the first to express her desire, which is to love one another.

*Creator's desire  
Love, love, love, love, love, love, love  
My true self, become*

God, it's me. Thank you for life and light and love. Thank you. I am becoming who I am in your eternal purpose. Thank you that in life and in death, in body and in soul, I belong to you. May I express your grace, mercy, and peace to all whom I meet—the firstfruits of your realm breaking into our lives, our world, all creation.

### **James 1:19–20**

Listen up, my beloved! Are you listening? My counsel to you is this: Listen as if your lives depended on it. Listen both to the words spoken and the

underlying emotions. Listen to hear another's soul-speech.

My second bit of counsel to you is this: Pause a moment before speaking. It's okay to take your time before speaking. Measured and thoughtful speech usually avoids igniting in yourselves and others anger that often leads to violence and contradicts Sophia's intentions. Anger destroys right relationships.

*"Listen to me first!"  
"Only then will I listen!"  
Not the path to love.*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your grace—through holding space for another. Make me an instrument of your mercy—through acceptance that embraces even their brokenness. Make me an instrument of your peace—through listening deeply to another's lament. May I be quick to listen and slow to speak, assured you know my thoughts already (and not everyone needs to know my every opinion).

### **James 1:21–25**

Be intentional about how you feed your minds, hearts, and spirits. Stop polluting your minds with malignant voices. Instead, humbly accept Sophia's Word planted in you, for it will nourish and heal you.

Don't just hear the Word—actually listen to it and do as it says. The Word's transformative power is found in action, obedience, and embodiment. Mere hearing without doing is like having "bed head" when looking in the mirror in the morning and then neglecting to comb your hair.

Deep, intentional meditation on Sophia's desires, as revealed in the Word, brings freedom and fulfillment. Being oblivious gets you nowhere. Listen deeply to the poetry<sup>107</sup> of the Word to discover sacred rhythms that enable us to dance the God-life.

*Doer of the Word  
Living in God's sacred peace  
Act embracing trust*



God, it's me. It's difficult to hear your Word amidst the clutter, chaos, and cacophony of the culture. Even more difficult is to do your Word because... because... because... perhaps because I just don't want to? This sounds like a lame excuse to me, too, God. Forgive me and free me to live what I believe and to follow your Word that I may embrace joy. Show me today at least one thing I can do to embody your Word. I promise I'll do it!

### **James 1:26–27**

Appearances can deceive. It is worthless to seem to obey Torah<sup>108</sup> yet loose one's tongue to wound others. It is not the observance of rituals commanded by Torah but caring for orphans, widows, and those in distress<sup>109</sup> that protects one from the culture's contamination.

*Deceptive goodness  
Observance over mercy  
Worthless religion!*

God, it's me. More than seeming to be your child, may I embrace that I am beloved. More than seeming to follow Jesus, may I walk the Way of the Cross. More than seeming to be spiritual, may I listen and obey the Spirit's nudge. More than seeming, may I be.

### **James 2:1–7**

My beloved, those who follow the Reflector of Sophia's perfect brilliance—Jesus the Anointed, who is the Sovereign of Israel—embrace equality and reject discrimination, whether of race or riches. Here is a practical example: If someone enters your gathering looking like a million dollars—wearing a Rolex watch and a Brooks Brothers suit—and a ratty looking guy wearing a holey t-shirt comes in behind him, to whom will you give the seat of honor? If you honor the rich looking man but are dismissive to the shabby guy, you demonstrate your belief in society's wealth-based hierarchy of value. Such thinking is evil.

Listen up, my beloved: Sophia turned society's hierarchy of value upside-down when she chose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in trust.<sup>110</sup> Even more, Sophia promised that through loving her, the poor would possess the realm of her sovereign purpose.

Get a clue, beloved. You insult the poor and daily show you despise them. The rich tyrannize<sup>111</sup> you and seek to dominate you from generation to generation—a dynasty of tyranny! The rich drag you into court, where you are powerless, and the rules of engagement are stacked against you. Is it not the rich who blaspheme the name of Jesus by using it to justify what he clearly denounced?

*Poverty unwound  
The world turning upside-down  
Equality now!*

God, it's me. Help me not trust in wealth and property, my 401K and investments. But how can I start this journey into your upside-down vision for the world? Perhaps I can begin, with your Spirit as instructor and guide, by sorting through the messages I see and hear every day. With your Spirit's encouragement and holy chastisement, perhaps I can begin by looking and listening to words that conform to the realm of your sovereign purpose. Help me to begin by loving you with all I have, all I am, and all I am becoming. May I embrace the humanity of all whom I encounter today and treat them as sister or brother or friend.

### **James 2:8-13**

If you fulfill the purpose<sup>112</sup> of the royal law revealed in Sophia's Word, "Love<sup>113</sup> and keep loving; love stranger as neighbor and neighbor as yourself,"<sup>114</sup> you will show honor and demonstrate your nobility. If, however, you submit to society's hierarchy of wealth-based value, that same law exposes the corruption of your thinking, believing, and behaving.

The law is not intended for your personal convenience! You don't get to pick and choose which parts you like and to which you will be obedient. Consider this example. Sophia said we are to be faithful to our spouse ("You shall not commit adultery") and protect life as sacred ("You shall not commit murder").<sup>115</sup> If you murder your neighbor but are faithful to your spouse, you're still a lawbreaker.

Let your talk and your walk agree. Let there be no distinction between what you say and what you do. Live in the freedom<sup>116</sup> to which the law invites you and by which it will judge you. You are free to love your neighbor as yourself, so do it! You are free to embrace equality and reject discrimination, so do it! According to the freedom given you by the law, turn upside-down society's hierarchy of wealth-based value, remembering Sophia honors every act of mercy. Sophia's intention is mercy. Mercy beats judgment in Sophia's eyes!

*Loving my neighbor  
Steps toward God's horizon  
Freedom's true intent*

God, it's me. Renew in me a holy desire to serve, to love, and to forgive all whom I encounter this day. Restore to me the love of stranger and neighbor as I embrace them equally. Reclaim for me the sacred intention to talk and walk the way of Jesus. May mercy exult over judgment<sup>117</sup> in all I do.

### **James 2:14-17**

Beloved, trust divorced from action is a mirage—is it really trust if there is no action? Such alleged trust does no one any good. Imagine someone you claim to love is naked and starving. You walk by, stop, and say, "Hello! How's it going?" Then you keep walking before they have time to answer, and you don't even notice they are naked and starving! Is that what you call trust worthy of Sophia? Or maybe you give them a pep talk, "Buck up, little buckeroo. It'll be okay! Sophia's going to take care of you. Don't you worry." True trust is compelled to act. Action is trust exhaling.

*Sophia at work  
In and through faith, hope, and love  
Divine dance through us!*

God, it's me. May my words mirror my deeds. May the height of words in Sunday worship be matched by the depths to which I will kneel in service to others Monday through Saturday, for your name's sake and for my own healing and wholeness. Teach me to exhale my faith.

### **James 2:18-25**

Now some folks spout nonsense such as, "Trust, works, to-mah-to, to-may-to. What does it matter so long as you have one or the other?" What does trusting Sophia without works even look like? Trust that only tries to hold its breath, that never exhales, will sooner or later pass out. Actions express your trust—people do what they truly believe. You say you believe in Sophia: great! But caring for your neighbor, naked and starving, tells me who you are and what you believe better than words ever will.

Here is something to consider. The evil one's minions know the truth about Sophia, and it terrifies them! Does their knowledge constitute belief? Hardly. Mere intellectual assent, such as they possess, is a mirage of trust.

*Words, words, words, words, words.  
Or feeding the world's hungry  
Faith expressed through love*

God, it's me. As a preacher, I love, love, love me some words of faith, words of hope, even wonky words of theological disputation. I don't care, just give me some words. I'll dine upon words for three meals a day and a bedtime snack. And when I am fully gorged, I realize words alone are not enough. I need to be put on a diet of doing justice, inspired to fast by loving mercy, placed on a hunger strike that I may walk humbly with you. O Sophia, may I feast upon your word as I also discover the God-rhythms of walking the way of Jesus.

## James 2:20-25

Fool! Can you not perceive that trust without action injures<sup>118</sup> your true self? Abraham received credit for his right relationship with Sophia when he obeyed and offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham trusted that Sophia would be merciful and just. His actions brought his trust full circle and Sophia's Word was fulfilled:

Abraham trusted Sophia.  
Sophia claimed Abraham as a friend!  
Relationships built on trust are the only way to do it.<sup>119</sup>

Do you see now? In right relationships trust embraces action and actions express trust. Another example of this spiritual truth is revealed in the story of Rahab the prostitute.<sup>120</sup> She was deemed right with Sophia because she expressed her belief about justice and truth when she protected Sophia's spies, showing strangers hospitality and then directing them away from danger. Again I say, in right relationships trust embraces action and actions express trust. Without action, trust is a mirage.

*Faith and works embrace  
Expressing pervasive truth  
They need each other*

God, it's me. As I age, I find myself pretending less and less. What people see is what they get. What I say I believe is what they see lived out. At least this is true with outward things. With inward things—like hope amidst the tribulation and love of the acquaintance who irritates the crap out of me—well, I have a way to go. O Sophia, continue your work of growing me ever more clearly into the image of Jesus! Help me live, both outwardly and inwardly, as one whose trust embraces action and whose actions express trust.

## James 3:1–2

Don't be too quick to elevate yourself to the status of "Minister of Word and Sacrament,"<sup>121</sup> for those who teach others Sophia's Word are held to a higher standard. Of course, we all trip up at times and in a variety of ways. Anyone who neither stumbles nor falls is amazing. Sophia's bridle has tethered them to her truth so they can live it fully.

*Sophia's bridle  
Guiding toward belovedness  
Uncommon restraint*

God, it's me. I resist influence (sometimes). I may be a bit too independent for my own good (sometimes). I certainly trip, stumble and fall through being too self-reliant (sometimes). So, please, grant unto me the grace of accepting your bridle and bit that I may be guided to live fully into your truth (always).

## James 3:3–6

When we bridle a horse, it obeys us, and we can guide the entire animal. Large ships are steered by a small rudder, so even strong winds do not prevent the ship's captain from steering it to its destination. Likewise, the tongue, though small, influences the whole person. It makes great boasts and sets an entire forest on fire. The tongue is a fire-starter, in our body and in our life, and is itself consumed by the fires of Gehenna.<sup>122</sup>

*Choosing words with care  
Bridle and bit directing  
God's wholeness living*

God, it's me. Help me live what I believe. Help me walk what I talk. May the words of my mouth, the meditations of my heart, and the actions of my hands and feet honor you and be worthy of my being called your disciple. Braid them into a three-fold strand that endures and cannot be broken.

## James 3:7–12

Humanity has tamed beasts and bugs, fish and fowl, all manner of animals. The only thing we cannot tame is our own tongue! Our tongue brings injury and death—treason and poison germinate from it, disease and death its decomposing fruit.

Consider the tongue's hypocrisy: praising Sophia and cursing her children who bear her likeness. How can it be that from the same tongue come praise and cursing?<sup>9</sup> No more than fresh water and salt water can flow from the same spring, nor a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs. It makes no sense and should not be.<sup>123</sup>

*What you say matters  
Injuring others with words  
Betrayal of faith*

God, it's me. Help my "yes" mean agreement, affirmation, and accountability. Help my "no" mean negation—not to do, not to say, not to pretend. May I learn the ways of praise—bit by bit, step by step, year by year. May I unlearn cursing and never again look down at another.

## James 3:13–18

The wise and experienced among you show their wisdom through how they live: embracing humility while they do the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reason. Fools, however, sink their teeth into bitterness, envy, and selfish ambition, then boast about it! They deny Sophia's truth by the way they live.

The "wisdom" of fools cannot dance the God-rhythms of Sophia's Way because it belongs to the world of "dog eat dog" and "survival of the fittest." The beasts of the field cooperate with each other better than three fools trying to one-up one another.

Sophia's wisdom teaches us how to dance the God-rhythms with modesty and gentleness, as those inclined to seek peace, offer mercy, and bear good fruit. Sophia's wisdom is the heart undivided, totally committed, the real deal. Living according to Sophia's

wisdom inevitably leads to becoming a peacemaker who plants seeds of peace to harvest right relationships.<sup>124</sup>

*Shalom, salem, peace  
Welcoming friends and stranger  
Enemies embracing*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your peace—like Francis and Clare, like Rosa and Martin, like the grandmother who never misses a day of prayer. Teach me, Sophia, to strive less and embrace more, to let go of bitterness that I embrace modesty and gentleness, and unclench my fists to welcome stranger and enemy as beloved brother or sister. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

## James 4:1–3

Polemics<sup>125</sup> dominate you—fussing, fighting, and fraud a way of life—because hedonism dominates your false self.<sup>126</sup> What you covet you cannot have, so you murder to get it—your hedonism spilling over the rim like boiling water.<sup>127</sup> And when you pray to Sophia, you demand, as if you dictate to her and she must do your bidding. Narcissism and self-defeat control you even when you pray.

*"The dividing line between good and evil  
runs down the middle of every human heart."<sup>128</sup>*

*"There is a labyrinth of emotions  
in every human heart."<sup>129</sup>*

*Calvin was correct:  
Ain't nobody squeaky clean.  
You, me, nobody*

God, it's me. Am I as broken as James suggests? Or am I just better at hiding my false self—softening my polemical thoughts and not allowing the roiling waters of hedonism to boil over? And I have another question: Why am I so opposed to

acknowledging my false self exists? Everyone has one. Everyone knows I have one, too. Sophia, help me live, open and transparent. Help me be honest about my false self, that I may be forgiven, redeemed, renewed, and restored to my true self, through the ministry of Jesus for me and the ministry of your Divine Spirit within me.

#### **James 4:4–6**

Don't be double-hearted! You must choose: Sophia's justice and joy or the world's broken ways that lead to heartbreak—hostility<sup>130</sup> toward Sophia boiling over. Sophia's says the Divine Spirit yearns to dwell within our hearts, to become part of our household.<sup>131</sup> And so Sophia lavishes us with gifts as her Word says,<sup>132</sup>

Sophia dulls the brilliance of those who over-shine,<sup>133</sup>  
but magnifies the light of those who depend upon her.<sup>134</sup>

*My over-shining*  
*Seeking to compete with God*  
*What am I thinking?*

God, it's me. I surrender. I lay down all the armaments I have used against you in an unwinnable war: my pride, ego, and certainty. I have sought to over-shine, but also, at times, have resisted trying, doing, risking. Sophia, teach me silence when I shout my name too loudly, and teach me to speak when I am too timid. May I learn to depend upon you, through you, and with you, for I really love it when your Spirit is a part of my household.

#### **James 4:7–10**

Don't be double-minded! Sit under Sophia's tutelage—arranging your life according to her sacred rhythms. Stand against evil and it will disappear like morning mist. Snuggle up to Sophia and feel her warm

embrace. Wail about all the ways you welcome evil to visit.<sup>135</sup> Grieve the times you invited evil to stay for an extended visit. Then turn your mourning into laughter<sup>136</sup> and transform your sorrow into joy as you allow chagrin to seep into your consciousness. Welcome regret to dance in your spirit and seek Sophia's forgiveness. Humility before Sophia is the ultimate exaltation.

*Sitting, listening*  
*Clarity coming within*  
*Spirit rhythms teach*

God, it's me. Humble me! Set my confidence in its proper perspective, giving it clear focus, creating boundaries that give life. You are the source of that life. Focusing on you and what you have done rather than what I am doing gives life. Your eternal perspective rather than my temporal one gives life. May I reach highest heaven by lying prostrate before you, O Sophia.<sup>137</sup>

#### **James 4:11–12**

Beloved, don't disparage each other! Slander is a form of cancer. Judgment is malignant, too. When you mock and malign one another, you place yourself above the Torah (where you cannot abide). There is One who is Judge—not you. There is One who both draws near and cuts off—not you. There is One who stands above the heights and glory of Torah—not you. It is not your place to judge your neighbor.

*Judgment malignant*  
*Slander a slippery slope*  
*Knowing my place: priceless*

God, it's me. I ask that my confidence would not become judgment and my belief in my own gifts not diminish my openness to others' giftedness. I ask that I have the humility to stand aside and allow you to be Judge, for only your judgment is seasoned with divine grace. Only your judgment can be

experienced as love that will not let us go. I know, Sophia, that being Judge is not my job (help me let it go).

### **James 4:13–17**

Be careful about your plans. You say, “Today I’ll be here and tomorrow there. Next year I’m going to travel, maybe start a business. Check me out: I’ve got big plans!” Yet you cannot predict tomorrow, let alone next year. What is life? You are but mist that evaporates. Rather than boast of your big plans, you should say, “*En shallah*.”<sup>138</sup> If Sophia intends, I will live and move and have my being.” Arrogance is evil; self-glory does not reflect light. Therefore, know the beautiful and do the beautiful.<sup>139</sup> To know it and not do it brings a just judgment.

*See the beautiful  
In the moment of seeing  
Live in the beauty*

God, it’s me. I love to plan! Help me not to presume while planning. Help me to understand that I am not ultimately in control of my own life, let alone the universe. Help me even more to seek your plans, to discern the paths you have carved out for me. May my journey be guided by your Spirit, for what wonder that will bring. Oh, the places I shall go...*en shallah*.

### **James 5:1–6**

Listen up, one-percenters! Cry aloud with lament and then cry even louder. Wailing and weeping are your only options, for your riches have corroded your hearts and minds. Fine clothes rot, eaten by moths, and even gold and silver tarnish. On the Day of Jesus, all these will testify against you that you stored up treasures on earth rather than treasures in heaven.<sup>140</sup>

Look at the truth, one-percenters! Like Abel<sup>141</sup> before them, the howls of your workers—those who serve your interests and make you great wealth—cry

out against you for your failure to pay them. As in the days of Moses,<sup>142</sup> Sophia has heard their cries. You live in luxury and cultivate indulgence—your self-absorption a right and every extravagance excused. Your actions condemn the innocent and murder those who do not resist you.

*Listen to their cries  
See the destruction rendered  
Repent now to live*

God, it’s me. I want to take the edge from James’ words—make them less declarative and more nuanced, more open to interpretation (and my comfort). I want to believe his declarations against the rich apply to Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos—the 1% in the U.S.—and not middle-class people like me—the global 1%. These words shake my smug self-assurance and call me to renewed honesty: Am I being a good steward of what you have entrusted to me? Sophia, in your mercy, inspire me to live generously—blessed to be a blessing.

### **James 5:7–11**

Now to the rest of us I say: Endure until the Day of Jesus when Sophia’s kin-dom will be revealed in full. For inspiration, look to the farmer as an example of patience. Day and night the farmer toils without evidence of a crop, planting and plowing, seeding and searching until the day when the crop sprouts, grows, and, finally, is ready to harvest. Endure with patience and trust, for the Day of Jesus is nearer today than it has ever been. Neither murmur nor grumble against one another, as our ancestors did in the desert.<sup>143</sup> Frustration grows during trying times, yet we are not to judge one another. There is one who is Judge (and it’s not any of us), and the Judge will speak when the time is right.

Until that time, beloved, endure with patience. For more inspiration, look also to the truth-tellers from ages past who suffered for speaking Sophia’s truth. They named broken systems and corrupt

practices. They called out the powerful and privileged, even kings! And they suffered because of their words. Yet we consider these truth-tellers blessed because they endured, their resilience a sign of their trust in Sophia. Job also endured and look what happened: He was restored to honor. Sophia's compassion is abundant, her mercy never-ending; therefore, I urge you again to endure.

*Enduring in hope  
Resilience as active trust  
Patient faithfulness*

God, it's me. Teach me to endure hardship when it comes. Not seeking it but standing true to who I am as your beloved. Not hiding from it when called to stand in solidarity with others. Neither hiding nor seeking but walking in faith, hope, and love, trusting we journey together.

### **James 5:12**

When you confront hardship,<sup>144</sup> speak truth—simple, straight-forward, without hesitation. Don't make flowery promises. Don't say, "I swear on a stack of Bibles," nor, "I swear on my mother's grave." Rather than prevaricate to avoid trouble, just say "Yes" or "No."<sup>145</sup> To do otherwise will trip you up and cause you to fall, according to the broken practices of your false self.

*Truth as yes and no  
Not as a commodity  
Something to ponder*

God, it's me. Help me to speak what is in my heart and on my mind. May I speak with courage and kindness. May I speak as a fellow pilgrim on life's journey. May my words invite loving discourse rather than bludgeoning debate. May others receive my words as I intend them: your voice speaking through mine. Even more, may my words actually be you speaking through me.

### **James 5:13-18**

When suffering, pray. When rejoicing, praise. When sick, call wise mentors from the gathering to pray and anoint you with oil in Sophia's name.

Trust-full prayers bring wholeness and wake us up<sup>146</sup> to the God-life. Honest prayers that acknowledge acts of brokenness and the false self bring forgiveness. Indeed, when we admit our wrongs to one another and pray for each other, we bring healing to the Body—restoration and reconciliation result from our sharing prayer together.<sup>147</sup>

Prayer spoken by those who live in right relationship with Sophia, others, and their true self is forceful, even when gently uttered. Elijah spoke in such a way. He prayed that it would not rain, and for three and a half years, it didn't. He prayed the rain would come, and it did, heaven itself watering the earth's crops.<sup>148</sup>

*Praying in all things  
Prayer as a form of breathing  
Discovering God*

God, it's me. Teach me to pray as Jesus prayed. Teach me the way of the saints before me—the Desert Fathers and Mothers, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, Miss Virginia who taught third-grade Sunday School for more years than I can count. Teach me the gift of meditation—thinking on the Scriptures. Teach me the gift of contemplation—releasing my thoughts to dwell in your presence. Teach me to pray with and for others that, together, we may find your healing touch upon our life together.

### **James 5:19–20**

Beloved, sheep get lost. If you are the shepherd who brings them back, ponder this: You saved their life. Likewise, people do stupid things, walk down the wrong path, and get lost, too—sometimes mentally, sometimes socially, sometimes spiritually. If you are the one who leads them back—

into the wide and generous love of Jesus, right relationship with Sophia, and the God-life, you will have saved them from death. Grace overwhelms all the breakage we cause and heals all the brokenness in us.

*Grace wins every time  
Broken choices cannot win  
When grace is at work*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your grace, always prepared to lead a stray sheep back into the fold of your pasture. Open me, also, to others doing the same work. As they lead me home, may I not resist the grace they offer in your name.



PRAYING THE  
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN  
LETTERS:   
1 AND 2 PETER

DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS  
OF THE GOD-LIFE THROUGH  
PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

Brad Munroe  
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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING 1 AND 2 PETER

It is debatable whether Peter's letters should be included in a work called *Praying the Jewish-Christian Letters* because they may have been written to Gentiles. Not only is this "circular" letter (that is, to be circulated from one church to the next) addressed to locations in northern Turkey, but certain verses<sup>149</sup> seem to refer to Gentiles rather than Jewish followers of Jesus. It may be that including 1 and 2 Peter among Jewish-Christian letters is too much rhetorical flourish on my part.

However, the tradition calls Peter "the Apostle to the Jews" in the same way that Paul is called "the Apostle to the Gentiles." Though addressed to churches located in northern Turkey, Peter also addressed his letter to "exiles" (c.f. 1 Peter 1:1); that is, to the Jewish believers in the Diaspora. Though certain verses refer to Gentile believers (unsurprising given the geography of northern Turkey), the theological perspective of both letters leaps from the pages of the Hebrew Bible.

The central theme of both letters focuses on how a faith community might live under the rule of an oppressive Empire. Peter mines Israel's history for wisdom, connecting the Israelites' experiences of exodus and exile to his readers' lives. For example, references to other great themes of the Hebrew Bible litter 1 Peter's five, brief paragraphs:

- Being a chosen and covenant people,
- Passover and wandering the wilderness,
- Being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation
- The Temple, Holy of Holies, mercy seat and scapegoat,
- Citation of the prophets, especially Isaiah, as well as the Psalms and Proverbs,
- Malachi's purifying fire (c.f. Malachi 3:3).

It is unsurprising, then, to notice that a pastoral emphasis on suffering weaves through both letters, as the flocks to whom Peter wrote suffered and experienced an Imperial oppression similar to Israel's throughout much of its history and for the entirety of Peter's life. The pastoral and ethical focus on the suffering of faith communities is perhaps the greatest sign that 1 and 2 Peter are Jewish-

Christian letters. Peter *assumes* his community is oppressed and powerless, and his pastoral and ethical counsel *accommodates* this reality.

In my note at 1 Peter 2:18 I write,

Some translations seem to suggest suffering is a command. Such translations do not acknowledge the realities of Roman culture and the necessity for Peter to respond to the culture *the way it is rather than the way we prefer it would be*. The paraphrase seeks to acknowledge the reality of suffering for Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> century who were usually poor and always a religious minority.

1 Peter is interpreted as acceding to Empire and often cited by those advocating acceptance of provisional, civil laws as God's will (c.f. 2:13-17). However, the acceptance of provisional, civil laws advocated in 2:13 is toward the goal of protecting a vulnerable community. In contrast to 2:13, we read in 2:17 that faith communities should prioritize the eternal principles (as opposed to provisional necessities) of being a faith community, with Caesar being last in the order of priority. Israel did the same for centuries.

2 Peter extends the counsel for suffering faith communities. Peter encourages faithful living in the midst of both Roman oppression as well as the challenge of "false prophets" or "false teachers." The specific challenge addressed in Peter's second letter is unique, but his counsel remains the same: live the faith and be the faith community God has called you to be.

In *Praying the Jewish-Christian Letters*, I experiment with gender inclusive names for God by attempting to capture a harmony between Jewish thought and a particular letter's literary style or focus. For 1 and 2 Peter, therefore, I use the name "The Sovereign" to refer to God, as Peter's context was that of an oppressed faith community who yet proclaimed God in Jesus Christ as the actual and true sovereign above Caesar.<sup>150</sup>

May 2022,

Brad Munroe

## 1 Peter 1:1–2

Peter, a sent one<sup>151</sup> of Jesus the Anointed, to The Sovereign's<sup>152</sup> hand-picked, the refugees<sup>153</sup> scattered all over north central Turkey,<sup>154</sup> those The Sovereign was determined to know. The Sovereign set you apart from the world by the Divine Spirit and set you apart for the work of hearing, heeding, and holding true to Jesus, whose blood, sprinkled like the offering made on the mercy seat in the Jerusalem Temple (in the Holy of Holies),<sup>155</sup> was offered for you also. May The Sovereign's gift and *shalom* overwhelm you with joy.

*Years ago  
watching Charlton Heston lead  
exiles*

*Mom thought him so handsome  
Dad thought him "a man's man" for the way he led  
exiles*

*I wonder now  
about the difference between refugees and  
exiles*

*And I conclude:  
the people to whom Peter wrote his letter were  
exiles*

God, it's me. Am I one of those exiles to whom Peter wrote? Your Good News came to me from one who knew Jesus. Your Good News came to my Scottish ancestors from Roman Catholic priests. Your Good News came to them from those of Jewish heritage who claimed Jesus as Messiah. We all come from somewhere and most of us sojourn on this earth. Wherever I go, whomever I encounter, may I greet my fellow travelers as one set apart from the values of this world and set apart for the work of hearing, heeding, and holding true to Jesus.

## 1 Peter 1:3–9

Sing joyous songs to The Sovereign of Jesus the Anointed, who himself is sovereign above Caesar. The Sovereign's mercy overshadowed us, and we have been born into a hope that lives among us and moves through us. Our hope sprung to life when The Sovereign raised Jesus the Anointed from the dead, making us a part of the

family. Now we have an inheritance that can never die, never degrade, and never diminish, for it is preserved and protected in heaven for us—just waiting for us to get there! Until then, The Sovereign's power preserves and protects us in the here and now and prepares us to be revealed as whole and complete, our true selves, when the fullness of The Sovereign's kin-dom<sup>156</sup> arrives for all to see.

Joy dances with grief for those who belong to The Sovereign (as you know well), for the hope which is our inheritance is commingled with trials that test us. We rejoice though, do we not, because our trusting is genuine, authentic, the real deal. We're not playing games as we seek to honor Jesus the Anointed. Instead, we are demonstrating our trust in the midst of difficulties, being refined by fire,<sup>157</sup> which is better than gold. The authenticity of our trust helps us discover the full blessings of the God-life. Genuine trust reveals Jesus.

You have not seen Jesus with your eyes, yet you love him without condition. Though Jesus is not seen, yet you trust him, which fills you with joy no words can convey. The culmination of your trust is The Sovereign's gift: your true self as you are intended to be.

*The assurance of being beloved  
side-by-side with moments of doubt*

*Times of sorrow  
accompanied by courage permeating the heart*

*Pain in loving when  
joy dances with grief*

*The God-life is not either-or but  
one over-writing the other until all becomes whole*

God, it's me. For the blessings of knowing you, I offer my praise. For the joy that is mine to share with others, I praise your name. Even when difficulties come, I know your Spirit leads and guides me. Especially then, your Spirit is my strength and my shield. May I not avoid grief and sorrows but embrace them with the hope that is my inheritance, until all mourning is turned into dancing and all sorrows transformed by joy.

## 1 Peter 1:10–16

The truth-tellers from ages past told about the Story that makes us whole and complete, our true selves as we are intended to be. They spoke of it as a gift. Like scientists peering into a microscope, the truth-tellers looked for the smallest clue that would unlock to them its mysteries.<sup>158</sup> Their quest for discovery was the Divine Spirit at work in them, to crack open for them foreknowledge of the Anointed.

Their “Eureka!” moment unveiled to them the truth that the Anointed would both bear our brokenness in himself and radiate The Sovereign’s brilliance to all people—suffering and sorrow borne in the one Anointed. The Divine Spirit unveiled to them that this knowledge about the Anointed was not for themselves alone but for future generations, to be told by those whom Jesus would send, through whom the Spirit would speak heaven’s message. Even the angels were jealous.

So, with this in mind, fully informed, aware and alert, set your sights on this hope: the gift to be unleashed when Jesus the Anointed is unveiled in his full glory. Let hope be your North Star. Be obedient, too. Let your hope set the course for your journey and then walk the Way set out for you. Don’t be poured into the mold of moral blindness and ethical ignorance—neither greed nor corruption are to be your North Star! “Just because I want it” does not make an action good and just and true. Instead, seek to be like The Sovereign, who said in Torah:

Be like me!  
Live the God-life!  
Dance to the God-rhythms!  
Be like me!

*I almost never find what I’m looking for...  
I search for selfish things, easy things.  
I usually find the unexpected:*

*How raising children transformed me (for the better),  
How life is more fragile (and precious) than I imagined,  
How sorrow and joy both teach deep truths.*

*The Anointed immersed in suffering  
The Anointed engulfed by blessing  
The same Anointed—the same, the same.*

God, it’s me. I seek to be holy, as you are holy. I long to be set apart for meaningful work, for service that makes a difference: touches a life with love, heals a

hurting heart, provides food and shelter to those in need. I long for these things because you planted a seed in me that refused to die. May I nurture that seed unto harvest—blessed to be a blessing. O Sovereign, may I be holy as you are holy.

## 1 Peter 1:17–25

The Sovereign doesn’t play favorites and expects us all to live the God-life. Though we are on this earth only for a brief time, we are to live with reverence and respect.

We are like refugees—in this world but not to live according to its values. Our human dignity depends not on riches—silver and gold do not define us—but on our being redeemed.<sup>159</sup> As slaves in the market have had their freedom purchased for them, so The Sovereign purchased our freedom from the clutches of the evil one through the self-giving of Jesus. Jesus the Anointed is like a lamb without blemish, upon whom the world’s brokenness was placed, a scapegoat that takes away the sin of the world.<sup>160</sup>

Before time began, Jesus was appointed this task. In more recent times, Jesus was unveiled for you, that you might trust The Sovereign, letting go of old practices that bring death to be embraced by the ways that raise us to life. It is The Sovereign at work through Jesus, raising him from death to life and making his name to shine like the sun, that infuses our trust with perseverance and causes our hope to shine like the North Star it is.

You opened yourselves to the transforming work of the Spirit when you submitted yourselves to truth. Your authenticity as followers of Jesus is demonstrated by how you love<sup>161</sup> one another. Keep loving! Love deeply and sincerely from the heart, for you are new creation. Seeds of corruption were not planted in your hearts but eternal seeds, seeds that endure, seeds that cause The Sovereign’s Word to live and abide within you. As the truth-teller Isaiah wrote,

All humans are grass,  
our glory like the flowers of the field,  
grass withers and flowers fade,  
The Sovereign’s Word endures.<sup>162</sup>

This is the Word that was told you—the Story that endures.

*Forest wind—  
dry, barren arms silhouette gray skies.  
Brown tufts peek on the trampled path,  
awaiting the renewal of spring.*

*Fall and fade we must,  
but wind ushers in  
hope and the promise of life,  
dreams we will live again.*

*Wind  
breaks and blesses,  
creates belovedness  
in all in whom the Word abides.*

God, it's me. May I learn humility as I accept my mortality. May maturity deepen not through length of years but by plumbing the depths of your Word's understanding, acceptance, and embrace. For in its pages, I find Jesus and am found by him. In its pages I learn the Story of true freedom. May I abide in your Word and your Word abide in me.

### **1 Peter 2:1–3**

Because The Sovereign's Word lives and abides in you, be new creation. Peel away all the layers of malice and deceit with which you have clothed yourselves. Strip yourselves naked of every kind of hypocrisy, envy, and slander. Such clothes no longer fit you (and are definitely out of style).

Instead, like a newborn swaddled in a warm blanket, suckle the milk that makes you whole and complete. Yearn for The Sovereign's breast that nourishes your true self. Taste and see:

The Sovereign is good  
*all the time;*  
all the time  
*The Sovereign is good.*

*Spew and view:  
Malice, malignancy,  
Envy and slander embracing*

*or*

*Taste and see:  
Life without guile  
Goodness growing*

*or*

*Spew and view:  
Deceit, devolution, devolving, devolving,  
Hypocrisy heightened to highest heights*

*or*

*Taste and see:  
God is good (all the time)  
All the time (God is good)*

*May I take your order?<sup>2</sup>*

God, it's me. I long to taste the pure spiritual milk that helps me grow toward my true self. I crave that which causes the image of Jesus to live more fully within me. "Teach me how to filter, when to release, what to treasure. Remind me that your ways are everlasting, your paths well-trodden, your journey life-giving."<sup>163</sup>

### **1 Peter 2:4–10**

Come to the Living Stone! Come to the One rejected and ridiculed by humans but respected by The Sovereign. In him and through him you also are like living stones and, piece by piece and stone by stone, all y'all, together, are being built into a spiritual house—the dwelling place in which The Sovereign lives. The Sovereign lives in you all and through you all so that, together, you may be set apart for divine service to bring people to The Sovereign and The Sovereign to people.<sup>164</sup> The giving of yourselves is a gift The Sovereign honors, a gift that pleases, a gift that brings life to others through Jesus the Anointed.

Now, what do the Scriptures say? The Psalmist declares,

Look! I lay a stone in Jerusalem,  
chosen and honored it is.  
The one who trusts in the Living Stone  
will always live with honor, never disgrace.<sup>165</sup>

To all who trust in Jesus, the Living Stone is honored and respected. But those who reject Jesus are shocked when they discover,

The Living Stone  
rejected by ones who thought they knew best,  
ridiculed by ones who thought they had it figured out,  
became The Sovereign's masterpiece,

the foundation upon which the God-life is built.<sup>166</sup>  
A stone people trip over, stumbling, falling. So sad!<sup>167</sup>

Those who reject Jesus as the Living Stone trip, stumble, and fall, setting in motion their own demise as they refuse to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life.

Not so all y'all. You have not rejected Jesus as the Living Stone but embraced him as such. You, therefore, have been engrafted into the work, purpose, and role of Israel:<sup>168</sup> to be those whom The Sovereign has chosen, the beloved; to be those who serve the royal work of bringing people to The Sovereign and The Sovereign to people; to be those who are a people set apart from the world's values and set apart for The Sovereign's purposes.

All this—*all this!*—is a gift to you all so that—*so that!*—you may proclaim the praises of The Sovereign, who lured you from the dark cave you called home and brought you into the warmth and light of the Sun. Once you were nobodies, now you're somebodies—The Sovereign's beloved! Once you all only knew to expect judgment (and rightly so), now you all have been overshadowed by The Sovereign's grace, mercy and peace. It is good to be you all.

*Dancing with two-left feet,  
"trip, stumble, and fall" concerns me,  
for I am broken, tempted by*

*the sexy stranger's eye across a room,  
the fortunate accounting error,  
the desire to avoid suffering and loneliness.*

*I could fall from all of the above  
if I didn't cling, cling, cling  
to the Living Stone.*

God, it's me. I rejoice that as I cling to you, you have always embraced me. I give you thanks that when I trip, stumble, and fall, you are beside me to lift me up. I give you praise that you chose me for a purpose—your purpose. As you have lured me from the dark cave of my own self-interest, send me into the light of your Son, that I may reflect your love to all.

### **1 Peter 2:11-12**

Beloved, as foreigners and refugees, create a barrier between you and the floodwaters of broken desire that continually rise and threaten to overwhelm your souls.

Keep your distance from distorted desire. Learn to let it go; indeed, get in the habit of sending broken desire packing.

In the way you live, give those who do not know Jesus zero excuse to judge or accuse. You know that many falsely accuse us of cannibalism because we say in holy communion, "Take, eat, this is my body...."<sup>169</sup> You also know we are falsely accused of being atheists because we do not believe in the Roman gods. You know, finally, we are always under suspicion because we welcome poor and rich, women and men, and people of all nations to act as a family united in Jesus. Such breaking down of human barriers is unheard of and causes the Roman authorities to wonder if we have a political agenda against Caesar.<sup>170</sup> Again I say: Give those who do not know Jesus zero excuse to judge or accuse. Instead, seek the good and perform the good. Walk in the light and reflect the light. Let your lives reflect The Sovereign and prepare you all for the Day when the kin-dom will be unveiled in its fullness.

*Falsely accused  
misunderstood  
true intentions ignored.  
Love anyway!<sup>171</sup>*

God, it's me. Teach me to love for love's sake. Not to be thought of as good by others. Not to open a door for evangelism. Not to get my foot in the door for a business deal. Rather, help me love for love's sake. To love because loving is right and just and good. To love as a reflection of your Spirit at work in me. To love because I desire to honor you. When others falsely (or rightly) judge or accuse, help me to love...anyway.

### **1 Peter 2:13-17**

With full understanding that we are under suspicion, falsely judged and accused, arrange<sup>172</sup> your lives in such a way as to avoid false accusations. Accept that The Sovereign allows human cultures to be organized by rulers and their delegates: from Caesar down to the local sheriff, rules are made and laws enforced to preserve the good and discourage the bad. Obeying just laws, therefore, honors The Sovereign and is a good way to keep out of trouble.

So, live free and do what you think is right and just, but don't use your freedom as license. "Because I can" is no excuse for abuse, betrayal, or corruption, no excuse for allowing injustice or tolerating inequality. Live as servants of The Sovereign, who is your true ruler. Here's how: first, respect everyone without exceptions; second, love<sup>173</sup> the

beloved, the Body of Jesus, without condition; third, revere The Sovereign with awe and trembling; and, fourth, give to Caesar as much honor as he is due—no less and no more.<sup>174</sup>

*Church and State*

*Two peas in a pod*

*Rivals for a common crown*

*Awkward dance partners*

*Protection from the abuses of each other*

*The order is everything*

God, it's me. Help me do justice even when the laws say I don't have to. Help me to love kindness even though no law says I must. Help me to walk humbly with you, my true sovereign, whose rule of my heart is deeper than any Law of the Land could ever hope to be.

### **1 Peter 2:18–25**

To the beloved who live in poverty<sup>175</sup> I say: Roman culture is contrary to The Sovereign's kin-dom in the way it creates social and economic hierarchies that oppress those with the least power. So, if suffer you must,<sup>176</sup> do so as those in whom the Divine Spirit lives. Whether your master is kind or harsh, gentle or severe, to show respect testifies to your grace amidst suffering—you honor The Sovereign. Now, if you are punished for doing wrong, that's another story. But if you live with integrity while enduring suffering, you preserve your dignity and your grace shines for others to see. The Anointed encourages you to suffer as he suffered: without malice in your heart nor hatred upon your lips. As Isaiah, the truth-teller from ages past, wrote:

The Servant broke no law,  
the Servant spoke no evil.<sup>177</sup>

The Anointed's example endures for all who suffer unjustly. When soldiers insulted him, he was silent. When abused, he did not respond in kind. He surrendered himself to The Sovereign, giving himself over to judgment and the work set before him. He assumed others' brokenness that they might be healed.<sup>178</sup> He received the world's darkness within himself that he might transform it into light. On the cross, he died that we might live as those given the gift of right relationship with The Sovereign. It is just as Isaiah the truth-teller wrote:

The Servant's wounds healed your own,  
like sheep you were lost, lost, lost.<sup>179</sup>

And now the Good Shepherd is the boss of you all (so you're in good hands).

*Suffering*

*not commandment but reality,*

*not welcome yet instructive,*

*not denied, transforms.*

God, it's me. Teach me anew that suffering is not divine punishment but human opportunity to turn to you in faith. Malice and avarice consume and lust for control inflames the powerful. May my heart be open only to you as my true hope. When suffer I must, may I follow the example of Jesus, whose heart remained outward in love.

### **1 Peter 3:1–7<sup>180</sup>**

To the beloved who are wives I say: Roman culture is contrary to The Sovereign's kin-dom in the way it tolerates Patriarchy—men oppressing women. In the kin-dom all who are married, both husbands and wives, are called to submit to one another out of reverence to Jesus.<sup>181</sup> Reverence to an unbelieving partner may open their heart to hear The Sovereign's message of unconditional love. Inner beauty matters more than outer beauty. Integrity and respect shine brighter than a Gucci bag or Brooks Brothers suit. Your heart's humanity is revealed through the indestructible, incorruptible, and immortal beauty of a kind and gentle spirit. Neither Gucci nor Brooks Brothers can compete with such a spirit.

Scripture is littered with stories that assume Patriarchy is The Sovereign's will. Immersion into the Scriptures, however, reveals a deeper truth. Sarah was made whole and complete through her hope in The Sovereign (though she also listened to Abraham).<sup>182</sup> Sarah did what was right and lived with courage. Husbands, you can learn a thing or two from Sarah. Indeed, treat the women in your life as if you are serving Mother Sarah, as those who are to be honored. And remember, you do not journey to the kin-dom alone but accompanying one another, dancing together the rhythms of the God-life.

*We sever*

*head from heart whenever*

*equality bends the knee to hierarchy*

*But two are made one,  
made beautiful  
through kindness*

*Intimacy:  
life-giving  
dances the God-rhythms as partners*

God, it's me. Thank you, O Sovereign, for my beloved. I am truly blessed, a better follower of Jesus because of her influence in my life. I have learned and am learning to love, for I must shut down my inward narcissism, my desire to be served and not to serve.<sup>183</sup> I thank you we get to dance "The Kin-dom Twist" together!

### **1 Peter 3:8–12**

To all I say: share a common purpose, shower each other with compassion and caring, be tender-hearted and humble. Don't return evil for evil or insult for insult. Instead, repay evil with blessing and insult with affirmation, remembering you are heirs of The Sovereign's blessing. As the Psalmist wrote:

Do you love life and desire goodness?  
Then tame the tongue!  
Let no evil drip from your lips:  
honesty not deceit,  
transparency not manipulation is what I require.

Turn away from evil and turn toward goodness.  
Seek The Sovereign's *shalom*!  
Seek and keep seeking until you are in its embrace.  
The Sovereign sees and hears.  
The Sovereign is attentive to all goodness,  
and turns away from evil.<sup>184</sup>

*Kindness is life-giving.  
Kind words the Balm of Gilead.*

*Easy to hate, to spew venom.  
Tongue's poison the serpent's legacy.*

*No one deserves venom.  
None have the right to bite.*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of civility in uncivil times. Attune my ear both to the words I say and the tone with which I speak. As I have been blessed, make

me a blessing. As I have been loved, teach me to love. In your shalom may I find a home large enough for all to find shelter.

### **1 Peter 3:13–22**

A passion for good protects you from bitterness. Eagerness for the right douses anger's flames. As Isaiah the truth-teller wrote:

You need not wallow in fear, even when conspiracies abound and persecution is around every corner, for you bear the imprint of The Sovereign's blessing upon you. The Holy One of Israel has called you.<sup>185</sup>

Instead of fear, turn your hearts toward the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Revere the Anointed and fear will flee!

Always be prepared to speak hope into the world. Don't offend through arrogance and presumption, but gently and respectfully speak of the hope that lives within you in Jesus. Give no one a cause to slander you by the way you behave. If you must suffer, better to suffer for doing good than because you deserve it. Neither being a "Goofball for Jesus" nor "Obnoxious for Christ" is The Sovereign's will.

And here is a summary of our hope in Jesus:<sup>186</sup> The Anointed suffered for our sins. The one who was just confronted evil and overcame it to bring us into The Sovereign's presence. His confrontation with evil brought him to the Cross,<sup>187</sup> where the Accuser sought to turn his heart inward toward hate. But the Accuser failed, for the Anointed's heart remained outward in love for all people.

Though the Anointed's body was put to death, the Breath<sup>188</sup> still enlivened his soul. The Breath led him into the abyss, to those who had died long ago, in the days of Noah. There the Anointed proclaimed The Sovereign's mercy to those who had never had a chance to hear of it—The Sovereign's heart had been hidden from them, but the Anointed revealed it by sharing Good News.

And so The Sovereign's plan to bring new creation came full circle: through the waters of the flood, righteousness was given a new beginning, and eight people were saved through the waters that foreshadowed the waters of baptism.<sup>189</sup> Now, you all are made whole and complete through baptismal waters, cleansed not from dirt upon the body but purified in your moral conscience. Baptism River flows through Jesus' resurrection and into heaven itself, carrying us to Jesus, who sits next to The



Sovereign. There the heavenly hosts sing praises to his name.

*Tiptoe between  
anger and fear  
awkwardly stumbling  
on the journey.*

*Better by far to be zealous for  
Kindness, respect  
drifting on baptismal waters  
toward hope.*

God, it's me. The whispers of hope I speak are drowned by shouts—angry shouting, a cacophony of bitterness, resentment, and indignation. Can I speak light into this darkness, O Sovereign? Can my words effect goodness? I confess that at times I despair. Renew in me a vision of Jesus on the Cross—confronting the powers with emptiness, overcoming hatred with love, defeated in the moment yet victorious forever.

#### **1 Peter 4:1–6**

Hold as your intention to adopt the same resolve as the Anointed expressed when he suffered. Though afflicted with trauma, the Anointed did not flinch from loving those around him. Suffering inflicted upon us may lead to death, and then we will be finished wrestling with sin, for sin cannot live after we die.<sup>190</sup> Living with Jesus' resolve, however, we may choose to live for The Sovereign's purpose and pleasure rather than our own indulgence.

You lived long enough wallowing in indulgence: before you came to know The Sovereign, your lives were consumed with carousing, seeking lust over love, ignorant and agnostic about the God-life. Those who knew you then are now surprised you will not join in their unending quest for self-gratification. They mock you now but will soon have to pay the bill for their wild and wanton ways.

There is One who judges the living and the dead, and that One is both just and merciful. Therefore, Jesus was sent into the abyss to proclaim The Sovereign's love for all people, even the dead! They have received the judgment of all humanity<sup>191</sup> in their dying, but The Sovereign invites them to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life.

*That was me, carousing.  
I liked to party.*

*That was me in lust, yes.*

*That was me, unknowing and unbelieving,  
God-life a hazy dream.*

*Your judgment, just and merciful, O Sovereign,  
liberated my mind, then my heart.  
Your Spirit taught me to dance*

*God-rhythms.*

God, it's me. Thank you for the love and mercy you rain down upon me in Jesus—his suffering, my resolve; his self-emptying love, my being filled with purpose. O Sovereign, may I find joy in living for you that is greater than any self-gratification. May I offer myself to others this day for the work of your justice and joy.

#### **1 Peter 4:7–11**

The purpose<sup>192</sup> of all things has drawn near. Therefore, notice with intention both those near you and the Divine Spirit at work all around you. Notice with a clear mind and calm heart. Notice, then pray and act: to notice, pray, and act are the dance steps of the God-rhythms.

And when you act, loving without condition is the first and best of all things you can do. Love deeply and intensely, for such love hides blemishes and heals brokenness. Love strangers into friendship, into becoming family. Love with neither grumble nor murmur of complaint.<sup>193</sup>

Each one of you received a gift from The Sovereign. These gifts were given for a purpose, and you are to use them as wise and faithful stewards to bless the gathering. If you speak, speak as if The Sovereign was speaking through you. If you serve, serve with all the ability The Sovereign gives you. Use your gifts to serve others so people will shout, "Huzzah! Huzzah!" to The Sovereign and sing thanksgiving to Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar. To Jesus is given all authority in the kin-dom, for he perfectly reflects The Sovereign.

*Notice is an active verb.  
Intention and focus embrace.  
Personal agenda released*

*to welcome the gift of another,  
to hear the Spirit's whisper,  
to become*

*gift and blessing,  
The Sovereign's intent,  
our true self.*

God, it's me. Quiet my mind through your Breath. Still my spirit through breathing. Help me to notice—my own longings and needs. Help me notice when I lie to myself and then others. Help me notice, as well, the gifts waiting to be discovered, affirmed, and then used for blessing. Help me to notice others, too, to give to them the gift of being seen and heard and loved. Let me not forget to love, for what is the point of noticing another if I do not love them? Help me, O Sovereign, to notice you also, and, in noticing, to remember I am not alone.

#### **1 Peter 4:12–19**

Beloved, don't be surprised<sup>194</sup> when suffering comes and walks alongside you—not as a stranger but as a companion. Rejoice that you share in the suffering of the Anointed and so will be overjoyed when he is unveiled, his radiance revealed for all to behold.

Being insulted because you reflect the Anointed's character and integrity is a point of pride: blessed are you—yours is the kin-dom of heaven,<sup>195</sup> and The Sovereign's pleasure rests upon you. Now, if you suffer because you deserve it—that is, because you murder or steal or just because you mess with people and disrupt their lives—well, that's a different thing. However, if you suffer because you claim Jesus, being proud you bear his name—you are a fellow heir with Jesus of The Sovereign's kin-dom.

The *kairos*<sup>196</sup> is at hand, when The Sovereign brings judgment to the gathering, who are indeed heirs with Jesus of the kin-dom. The kin-dom has been promised to us as a gift, and we are not yet prepared to receive it. The Sovereign loves us just as we are and too much to let us stay that way. If judgment is upon us, how much more is it on those who refuse justice and joy? As the Proverb says,

It is difficult for those with right relationships  
to be made whole and complete.

How much more difficult is it for those who  
do not dance the God-rhythms of the God-life?<sup>197</sup>

So, if you must suffer (and we all will suffer), better to do it because you are pursuing the Creator's justice and joy, leading others to the life of *shalom*.

*Suffering— no stranger to  
“Good Trouble.”*

*Suffering— companion to  
the labor of justice and joy.*

*Suffering, too, comes alongside us  
in a Buffalo supermarket or in a Taiwanese church.<sup>198</sup>*

*Suffering erupts when  
suspicion, paranoia, and lies,  
lead to hatred and obliterate Jesus' way.*

*But suffering, when walked with Jesus,  
becomes a strange, sacred friend,  
and weeping becomes our new Way.*

God, it's me. I don't want to suffer but am willing, if needed, in order to protect my neighbor's rights to healthcare or civil protections I assume as a birthright. If I must suffer, may it be because I spoke out for free school lunches for our nation's children or against the practice of redlining.<sup>199</sup> O Sovereign, in many ways, from multiple directions, suffering will enter my life. When it does, may I encounter it not as a stranger but as a friend prepared to guide me ever deeper into the heart of Jesus.

#### **1 Peter 5:1–4**

I am an old man, but I remember what the eyes of my youth saw: My eyes saw the Anointed's suffering! I saw his suffering and shared in it as *koinonia*,<sup>200</sup> as spiritual fellowship, so I speak with authority when I say, “You who share the *koinonia* of the Anointed's suffering will also share the *koinonia* of his glory when the kin-dom is unveiled in its fullness.”

Therefore, be not afraid that suffering may come, and tend your sheep. The Sovereign has placed sheep under your care, so love them like they are your own children. Love them with glad and generous hearts; love them not for greed but in goodness. Eagerly teach them to dance the God-rhythms. Infuse them with God-life in the way you serve and set an example for them. When the Good Shepherd is unveiled, you will receive the victor's

crown—even better than the Olympian’s garland, which fades away, but The Sovereign’s wreath endures forever!

*Mine eyes have seen the glory  
of the suffering of the Lord.  
He’s unlocking every vintage  
that produces what is poured.  
He hath loosed the faithful wonder  
of his sorrow and his Word.  
His care is tending on.*

*Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
His care is tending on.*

*He has sounded forth the trumpet  
that does call us forth to serve.  
He is sifting hearts and minds  
to find those with the needed nerve.  
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer  
and be filled with joy and verve.  
His care is tending on.*

*Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
His care is tending on.*

*In the beauty of the lilies,  
Christ did die across the sea.  
With a glory in his visage  
that does transform you and me.  
As he died to make us holy,  
let us live to make all free.  
His care is tending on.*

*Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
Loving, caring, hallelujah!  
His care is tending on.<sup>201</sup>*

God, it’s me. Make me a faithful shepherd, who cares not for greed nor gain but in goodness. When the hours get long, give me strength. When sheep go astray, give me patience. When troubles come, give me the courage to stand against all that would harm my flock, which is really your flock, for we are all the sheep of your pasture.<sup>202</sup>

## 1 Peter 5:5-14

Likewise, you who are not shepherds and who are less experienced in the God-life, arrange your lives under the tutelage of those who are mature in Jesus. All y’all should clothe yourselves with humility, for,

The Sovereign opposes braggarts  
but showers the humble with grace, mercy, and love.<sup>203</sup>

Humble yourselves, therefore, by opening yourselves to The Sovereign’s strength, trusting you will be raised up in the *kairos* moment. Discover your wholeness by giving yourselves to The Sovereign, for the God-life is not divided,<sup>204</sup> but a unity of love and concern and care. Trust this truth: The Sovereign holds your entire person—all of you!

Be aware and alert to the dangers around you that destroy the God-life. Your enemy, the Accuser, walks around looking for trouble to send your way. Stand firm! Stand in The Sovereign’s love! Stand even though you know suffering may come. Stand knowing that others before you have stood against the Accuser, others after you will stand against the Accuser, and others right now stand alongside you in your fight against the Accuser. So again I say: Stand!<sup>205</sup>

Stand, then, assured The Sovereign’s gifts overshadow you, for you were named<sup>206</sup> before the beginning of time and will be embraced until after the end of all things. The radiance of the Anointed shines upon you to restore what has been divided, to make you secure and strong, your true self. To the Anointed is given honor and authority to make it so. So be it.

With the help of my scribe, Silas, who is a trusted brother, I have written you briefly to encourage you. I speak truth when saying my words bear witness to the gift and truthfulness of The Sovereign. Stand in these words.

Your sister in “Babylon”<sup>207</sup> greets you, as does Mark, my beloved son in Jesus. Greet each other in love in ways that convey solidarity and support for each other while respecting boundaries.<sup>208</sup> *Shalom* to all who live in intimacy with the Anointed.

*Do I kneel or stand?  
Humility, the power for resistance.  
Submission, the leap to greater heights.  
Standing, an acknowledgement of dependence.  
I stand by kneeling.  
Kneeling I stand.*

God, it's me. Help me to kneel that I may stand. May my dependence on you drive me to embrace a sanctified humility that learns to serve with joy and perseveres when lifting others up. As I stand, may it not be for my own justification but as one who walks with you, serves for you, and seeks your honor in all I do.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 2 Peter 1:1–11

Simon (my original name), now known as Peter (the name given me by Jesus, meaning “Rock”),<sup>209</sup> a servant and sent one<sup>210</sup> of Jesus the Anointed. To those who have been gifted with a right relationship with The Sovereign through trusting, which itself is a gift and privilege and honor: May gifts of goodness and the presence of The Sovereign's peace surround and embrace you through Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.

The Sovereign's *dunamis*<sup>211</sup> gifts to us all we can need, hope, or desire to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life. With these gifts we discern our true purpose: to honor The Sovereign through lives of virtue. Through these gifts The Sovereign bestows,<sup>212</sup> and we receive, the full promise of life in Jesus: to share in *koinonia*,<sup>213</sup> with his image being formed within us to transform us into our true self. For this we were created. For this we escaped the broken world of abuse, betrayal, and corruption.

For this reason, therefore, come alongside<sup>214</sup> Jesus who comes alongside you. Give yourself both to Jesus and to the work of being your best and true self. With energy and enthusiasm, amplify your trust with virtue, your virtue with wisdom, and your wisdom with mastery of self. With passion and power, magnify your mastery of self through perseverance and your perseverance through devotion. And then bring all these to climax and culmination through tenderness that leads to affection and affection that leads to *agape*—love that is whole, complete, and without precondition.

Growing ever deeper into these virtues will keep you from being confused or befuddled when you try to discern the ways and wisdom of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Those without these virtues can't see their own shadow—oblivious to the God-life! Therefore, my beloved, live ever deeper into these virtues. Remind yourselves that you were called before the beginning of time—The Sovereign chose you, named you, and embraced you. Then live according to this truth. Live like this and you will always dance the God-rhythms, and,

when the moment is right, you will be welcomed by Jesus himself into the kin-dom with a grand celebration. And he can do it, for he is the Healer of All and sovereign above Caesar.

*Virtue*  
*not seen by the naked eye*  
*obvious to the human heart.*

*Virtue*  
*creating character*  
*preventing corruption.*

*Virtue*  
*in search of self-discovery*  
*never-ending journey.*

God, it's me. Grant to me the virtuous gifts—not that I may claim them as my own but rejoice that they are gifts from your Spirit. Grant to me the virtuous gifts—not so others will see me and be impressed but that they will see you more clearly. Grant to me the virtuous gifts—that I may discover my best and true self through love that is whole, complete, and without precondition.

## 2 Peter 1:12–21

I tell you these truths even though you know these truths. I remind you of them even as you live ever deeper into them. It is my joy to refresh your memory while I remain in this human tent of a body. As has been revealed to me, one day soon I will go to meet Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Until that day my zeal burns, to sear into your memory the truths about the God-life revealed by Jesus. These truths aren't manipulative myths but the source of power and presence<sup>215</sup> in Jesus! And we who are sent ones are eyewitnesses of his majesty, dignity, and radiance, which reflect The Sovereign. We heard the Voice on the sacred mountain—heard it declare,

My Beloved! My Beloved!  
Who brings joy to my heart!<sup>216</sup>

In addition to our witness, we have the truth-tellers from ages past.<sup>217</sup> Their words endure, for the Divine Spirit speaks through them. Their words remain unshakeable from age to age, and you would do well to attend to them, to let them not merely flit about in your mind alone but

allow them to seep into the deep places, into the very marrow of your soul.<sup>218</sup> The words of the truth-tellers shine light into dark corners, including the dark corners of our hearts, until the presence of Jesus dwells within us. No word spoken by a truth-teller from ages past was uttered by mere whim. Instead, their words were influenced by the Divine Spirit upon them, so their words originate in The Sovereign.

*What is trustworthy  
in an era of “fake news”  
when manipulative myths  
become common coin?*

*What is trustworthy  
in an age of unrelenting data  
when sipping water from a fire hose  
becomes daily habit, like brushing teeth?*

*Jesus is trustworthy  
in this age and any age  
where light shines into the darkness  
becoming life and love that cannot be overcome.*

God, it's me. I long for truth rooted in your goodness, sprouting from your grace, that bears the fruit of godliness. Not the sanctimony I see among TV preachers but the sanctity of those who leave water for travelers in the desert, serve at soup kitchens, and help children learn to read. I long for the kind of truth that looks like Jesus. I pray your Spirit would help me live such truth.

## **2 Peter 2:1–11<sup>219</sup>**

What is the opposite of a truth-teller? Liar, scoundrel, and hypocrite—all of these lived and spoke amidst the truth-tellers of ages past, and such persons will live and speak among you, too. They will introduce discord—decadence will be their goal and disparaging the Way of Jesus their means to that end. They will tread paths that shock the conscience and are filled with reckless violence.<sup>220</sup> In their greed, they will weave together fabrics of myth and manipulation that sell books by the truckload. The gathering storm of their judgment will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Sovereign's justice is not always gentle; forbearance and restraint are sometimes removed. Celestial messengers (aka angels) were cast from light to

darkness, the ancient world consumed by flood waters, and Sodom and Gomorrah became a cautionary tale of the fruit of lawlessness. And yet, even amidst these shadows, The Sovereign's light shines.

The Sovereign's angels remain strong and steadfast, even though some of their number strayed. Through the flood waters, Noah gave righteousness a new beginning. Amidst the depravity of those who would rape Lot's guests, Lot himself endured and persevered.<sup>221</sup> The shadow of The Sovereign's judgment is cast by the light of The Sovereign's love.

In the Sovereign we are rescued from the test that would destroy us, from the temptation that would weigh us down. Instead, The Sovereign weighs justice and mercy, darkness and light, law and grace, and makes us able to stand.<sup>222</sup> Liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites will have to give an account of their lives. The stench of their contaminated desire bears witness to how ornery they are. The scorn they heap upon those who lead testifies to their arrogance. Liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites harass and harangue even the angels who convey The Sovereign's discipline (which is profoundly foolish, as anyone who knows anything about angels can tell you). Luckily for them, angels show restraint!

*Bearing false witness  
depravity and discord  
myth and manipulation*

*Light casting shadow  
weighing justice and mercy  
scoundrels need beware*

*Light still shining now  
grace, mercy, peace triumphant  
always and amen*

God, it's me. May I never be a liar, scoundrel, or hypocrite—at least, not as a habit nor apt description of my character. Yet I confess I have lied, done scoundrel-like things, and been a hypocrite more times than I care to admit. Forgive me, O Sovereign! Free me to live as my best and true self. May I never lie about your love, defame your name by how I conduct myself, or act with false face in ways that hide the light of Jesus from others.

## 2 Peter 2:12–22

The liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites shout of things they do not know; they vilify what they do not understand. Like wild animals, they snarl and chase destruction and will perish like the beasts they emulate, being paid just wages for their injustice. Their idea of fun is debauchery; they revel in deceit and are a stain upon your feasts. Adultery is a game to them and seducing those weak of mind or heart is their sport. What wretched beasts they are, trained for avarice and skilled in duplicity.

The liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites are like Balaam, who deserted his service to The Sovereign to serve the cause of injustice. Balaam's madness was restrained by a donkey, who spoke sense into the chaos—an ass was more grounded in the God-life than a truth-teller gone astray.<sup>223</sup>

The liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites are like legislators who do not pass laws and talking heads who spout merely white noise.<sup>224</sup> Moral gloom follows them around like a cloud, for their shouting and pontificating appeal only to human desire—power and control being the gods they serve. They lure their prey from among those who would escape their gloom, from those who seek the light and love of the God-life. Instead, their prey become victims, enslaved and lured into a stupor that overwhelms their moral senses.

These victims are worse off than they were before! Mastery of the God-life is easier for those who have never heard the Good News of Jesus the Anointed, never discerned Jesus is Healer and sovereign above Caesar. More difficult is mastery for those who have been invited into right relationship with The Sovereign, danced to a few songs of the God-rhythms, and then left the party. Such people know the sacred way yet refuse to embrace it or be embraced by it. The Proverbs speak of them:

A dog returns to its vomit!<sup>225</sup>

A washed pig rolls in the mud!

*Pity the nation for whom  
a monster truck rally  
contorts the Way of Jesus  
for those who would follow the Master.*

*Pity the church for whom  
political rallies  
deform theology and ethics warning true believers against  
heretics.*

*Pity the children for whom  
a world filled with white noise  
distorts the God-life.*

God, it's me. Protect me from white noise—from hearing it or heeding it, from preaching it or teaching it. As a pastor, may I take seriously your command that I speak truth as seen in Jesus, revealed in the Word, and heard through your Spirit.<sup>226</sup> As a pastor, may I guard my flock by helping them discern truth from falsehood and the Way of Jesus from the ways of the world.

## 2 Peter 3:1–10

Beloved, this is my second letter to you all and in both I have written with a purpose: to give you genuine insight, uncorrupted clarity, and the ability to reason with both depth and breadth. I have written that you might remember the words, discern the justice, and live according to the truth-tellers of ages past and the sent ones of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.

You need to realize there will be those who will mock the justice and joy of Jesus. These are the same people who hear The Sovereign's promise of *shalom* and ridicule it. They would heap scorn on their own mothers to make a buck.

Those who mock will ask, "Where is Jesus' second coming? Why is he taking so long? Nothing ever changes—same old, same old." They neglect to remember The Sovereign's power: that heaven and earth were formed by The Sovereign's Word, dividing water from water,<sup>227</sup> and that The Sovereign also used water to give righteousness a new beginning through the waters of the flood. The *kairos* will come when heaven and earth endure their just judgment, and on that day all creation shall receive The Sovereign's purification. Only that which conforms to the God-life will endure. All else will endure the Refiner's fire.<sup>228</sup>

Beloved, what is time to The Sovereign? A thousand years are like a day! The Sovereign does not dawdle but waits patiently. The promise of new creation will be fulfilled; there is no rush nor hurry. Instead, The Sovereign waits and works, inviting some and luring others, but desiring for all to dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life.

Now, when the *chronos* becomes *kairos*, The Sovereign will act decisively! What is experienced as chaos and calamity to some will be perceived by us as new

creation being revealed. We who trust in Jesus the Anointed will see it all unfold, behold its beauty, and rejoice that we get to be a part of The Sovereign's eternal kin-dom.

*Rejoice (even amidst Buffalo's sorrow).<sup>229</sup>*

*Revel (even amidst Laguna Wood's tribulation).*

*Recognize (even amidst Uvalde's lament) that*

*new creation is promised (as much now as ever),*

*new creation is coming (yet not fully present),*

*new creation will overcome the old.*

*Don't mock. Trust and work.*

*Don't despair. Strive for the solution.*

*Don't fear. Jesus is coming.*

*He does not look pleased.*

God, it's me. Visions of "baby Jesus" collide with visions of Jesus as "the just and righteous Judge who comes to restore heaven and earth." I know these are not mutually exclusive roles for Jesus. The former is promise in love; the latter is promise, too, in holiness. One proclaims your desire and will; the other enacts the same. One invites repentance; the other inflicts it upon heaven and earth. O Sovereign, may I accept your invitation to dance the God-rhythms because I trust your desire and will. May I welcome your promise in love. In your mercy, hear my prayer.

## **2 Peter 3:11–18**

The sage once said, "Begin with the end in mind."<sup>230</sup> New creation comes: Who will you be? What will you do? Dance the God-rhythms! Devote yourselves to the God-life! Work toward the kin-dom and desire it earnestly.<sup>231</sup> On that day, all Heaven will break loose—calamity and chaos becoming new creation, heaven and earth becoming one, and right relationships dwelling<sup>232</sup> in and through all.

Beloved, as you look forward and long for new creation, live as those becoming your best and true selves.

Live as those who seek justice and, even if you fall short of its ideal, live so that others will say you love mercy and walk humbly. Remember, The Sovereign's patience means others may also become whole and complete, their true selves.

Our beloved brother, Paul, makes the same point in his letters, which are sacred writings even though they can be difficult to understand at times and people twist their meaning for broken purposes. Whoever distorts The Sovereign's Word, whether in Paul or any other of our sacred writings, does so to their own harm.

Thus, forewarned, be wary and aware of those who perpetrate fraud and promote license in the God-life. Don't become ineffective or aimless<sup>233</sup> in how you live. Rather, grow more fully into the gift that is the God-life. Root yourselves more deeply in its wisdom. Rejoice that you know and are known by Jesus the Anointed, our Healer, who is sovereign above Caesar. To Jesus be songs of praise today and into all tomorrows. So be it!

*On the horizon*

*sun rising*

*new day dawning*

*On the horizon*

*son risen*

*new creation dawning*

*Toward the horizon*

*journey embarked*

*kin-dom restoring.*

*Horizon, O Horizon!*

*How I long to see*

*your dawning become Day!*

God, it's me. Who will I be this day? What will I do? Will I live deeper into your truth for me: beloved and chosen, called and sent? Will I live faithfully to what you require of me: justice and mercy and humility? As I look to the horizon of your new creation—heaven come to earth—make me an instrument of your peace.

# PRAYING THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN

LETTERS:



1, 2 & 3 JOHN

DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS  
OF THE GOD-LIFE THROUGH  
PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

Brad Munroe

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING 1, 2, AND 3 JOHN

John's letters are a love fest. Love is in the air. Love is all around. If the Beatles had written a portion of the New Testament, they would have written the Johannine letters: *All You Need Is Love* (da-da-dadda-da)!

And not just any love: *agape*. *Agape* is one of seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four. *Agape* connotes love that is perfect: whole and complete, offered without reservation or pre-condition. No one earns *agape*, for it is given as a gift. In the Johannine letters, a version of *agape* is used 21 times. Compare this to two uses in Hebrews, zero in James, four in the Peter's letters, and three in Jude. John's letters are not just a love fest but an *agape* feast. Seeking a gender inclusive name, the prevalence of *agape* in these letters inspired me to call God "The Love" in the following pages.

As one reads 1 John, it becomes clear that John writes with a different style than the other New Testament writers. One reason for this difference is that, technically speaking, 1 John is not a letter but a sermon. Also, John's writing style incorporates a Greek rhetorical form known as "amplification." There are many ways a writer can amplify, and John's favorite is to repeat a thought, exaggerate for effect, and present stark contrasts (e.g. light versus darkness). The writer is not attempting to build a linear, sequential case using a thesis-evidence-conclusion format. For the reader, amplification may feel overwhelming, a jumble of thoughts, ideas, and examples piled one upon the other toward the writer's desired conclusion. This is John's style, especially in 1 John.

Many readers will recognize that they have experienced amplification as a communication technique but usually through preaching rather than the written word. When reading 1 John, it helps to imagine a pastor bringing energy, intelligence, imagination, and love through the spoken word. Imagine thoughts, ideas, and examples pouring out of your pastor toward an inexorable conclusion: God loves us!

John's letters also use dualism, a literary style associated with Second Temple Judaism, also called the intertestamental period (between the Hebrew Scriptures

and the writing of the New Testament, roughly 165 BCE to 70 CE). Often associated with Greek philosophy, dualism (e.g. body vs. soul, material vs. spiritual) entered Jewish culture through the Greek Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires (following Alexander's conquest). Jewish religion of that time was in constant conflict and protest against Greek cultural influence. For example, the Book of Daniel reflects this tension. However, Jewish religion also adapted Greek dualisms, using a similar form to express a different meaning.<sup>234</sup> For example, The Love's *agape* is contrasted against the work of the devil and those who carry it out—the antichrist (singular) and antichrists (plural), whom I paraphrase as the Accuser, Opposer, and Opposers. Other dualisms include light vs. darkness, life vs. death, and truth vs. deception. John contends that the Opposers seek to destroy the truth that Jesus is the Way into the God-life.

The letters of John encourage the early Jewish-Christian community to affirm, support, and practice the Way of Jesus that grows out of his life, teachings, physical death, bodily resurrection, and heavenly ascension. The Opposers rejected the idea that Jesus had a physical body, arguing that Jesus only seemed to be physical. This teaching, known as Docetism (after the Greek word *doceo*, meaning "to seem"), was pronounced a heresy by the early Church. The Docetic heresy persisted into the 2nd century CE and expanded into what is known as Gnosticism, a spiritual system that emphasized knowledge of certain abstract truths about gods, angels, and the heavenly realm. Gnosticism minimized nitty-gritty, earthly compassion toward individuals and justice for society. John rejects all teachings that would make the God-life a theoretical endeavor rather than a lived Way, arguing instead for (you guessed it) love, a commitment to act in others' best interests and shared as a gift that cannot be earned and needs no precondition—in a word, *agape*.

July 2022

Brad Munroe

## 1 John 1:1-4

Before the beginning of time, before all that is seen and unseen, the Word of Life lived and moved and had its being, dancing the God-rhythms together with The Love and with their Divine Spirit—a fellowship of sacred Trinity. Then, in the fullness of time—when human *chronos* became The Love's *kairos*<sup>235</sup>—we heard, we saw, and we touched the Word of Life. The Word of Life was unveiled to us, and we cannot deny what we witnessed but must testify to its truth: The Love is revealed through the Word of Life, and we are invited into sacred *koinonia*<sup>236</sup> through him. Amazing, right? The Love invites us to dance the God-rhythms through Jesus the Anointed, invites us to join the celebration that is the fellowship of sacred Trinity. It is our joy to tell you this truth. Our joy is made whole and complete as we write this to you all.

*What do you know?  
How do you know it?*

*What have you seen, heard, and touched  
that enlivened your soul?*

*To witness Life leads us to Love:  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and forever shall be.*

God, it's me. I love to dance the God-rhythms—to love effortlessly and breathlessly, to be lifted upon the winds of the Spirit and breathe the Spirit of Jesus. O Love, as I live, may you dance through me—teaching me to love as you love, helping me to live as you live. As I live, may my life bear witness to how great is your faithfulness.

## 1 John 1:5-10

News! News! Hear ye! Hear ye! We report what we heard with our own ears: The Love is light. In The Love there exists no darkness—none, nada, zilch!<sup>237</sup> We deceive ourselves and others if we say we share *koinonia* with The Love yet meander the path of darkness. Truth is not constructed through deception. However, if we hop, skip, and jump down the Way with the Word of Life, who is the light, then we share *koinonia* with each other. And together as one, the self-emptying sacrifice of Jesus, The Love's own son, liberates<sup>238</sup> us from our brokenness.

If we imply to others that we are not broken at all, we deceive ourselves. (The truth cannot be manipulated

into something it is not.) If we openly acknowledge before The Love that we are not whole and complete, The Love embraces us! (We can trust The Love to infuse us with right relationship and to liberate us from our broken past—totally and completely.) If we imply to ourselves that we don't need this kind of help from The Love, we accuse The Love of being a liar! The Word of Life does not make its home in self-deception.

*Into what kind of home do I  
invite The Love to  
reside?*

*Must my home be  
neat and tidy for The Love to  
feel welcome?*

*Cluttered sink and unmade beds,  
bills piling up and couches with cat scratches  
does The Love care about these things?*

*An ever-deepening journey toward  
self-awareness and self-discovery, honesty and humility:  
the marks of genuine hospitality for The Love.*

God, it's me. Chagrin, regret, and confession are in short supply in our culture—replaced by bluster and berating of others. Help me, O Love, not to contribute to this circus of self-promotion and self-justification. Help me, O Love, to discover the freedom of being my true self through honesty about my false self. Help me, O Love, to become who you have called me to be.

## 1 John 2:1-6

My little lambs, I write to you so that you will not miss the mark nor be led astray. And if you do miss the mark and are led astray, you are not lost forever, for we have a Counselor and Guide who intercedes for us with The Love—Jesus the Anointed, the one who creates right relationships between us and The Love. Indeed, Jesus makes right relationships for everyone in the whole world!

We are confident through personal experience and intimacy with Jesus when we follow his commands. Anyone who says, “Sure, I'm tight with Jesus—we're best buds,” and then lives a life that looks nothing like the way Jesus lived, that person lies to themselves and to others. Truth does not dwell in deceit and manipulation. But anyone who lives as Jesus lived—all who walk Jesus' cruciform

Way—are made whole and complete by The Love’s *agape*<sup>239</sup>—the love, offered without precondition, that transforms us. All who live like this have the confidence that comes through personal experience and intimacy with Jesus.

*“Hitting the mark”  
without self-awareness and honesty  
is an illusion.*

*How can I hit the mark  
of something I cannot see  
unless someone shows me the Way?<sup>2</sup>*

God, it’s me. Help me know what I do not know. Through a willingness to listen to others, help me perceive what I do not understand. Through a commitment to follow Jesus, help me live as he lived, walking the Way of the Cross. As I so live, increase my confidence that I do not walk alone.

#### **1 John 2:7-14**

My beloved, my command that you should love with *agape* is nothing novel. *Agape* was in the beginning—both in the creation and with the Christ<sup>240</sup>—and is what you have heard from me before (and will hear again). It is “novel” only in that it does not conform to the pattern of this world, which is dying away. The broken culture in which we live and move and have our being may appear robust but in reality is on its last gasp—its gasping no match for The Love’s Spirit, which shines light into every dark corner and illumines every forlorn alley.

Anyone who says, “I love the light!” but denounces another while elevating himself, remains in darkness. Living with *agape* is light, and the one who lives in the light avoids stumbling. To despise another is to walk in darkness. The Way is obscure to them, and they fall.

To my little lambs,<sup>241</sup> I write to remind you that in Jesus your past is released, and you are made new creations. Little lambs, experience The Love and dance the God-rhythms.

To those who are apprentices in the God-life, I write to remind you that you are powerful in Jesus to overcome the Accuser. Apprentices, you are stronger than you imagine because the Word of Life lives in you to help you to stand against the Accuser.

To those called to be guardians in The Love, I write to remind you that you live in the One who is from

before the beginning of time. Guardians, experience The Love and live the God-life to its fullest.

*It feels weird to think  
“old school” is novel:  
speaking truth in love,  
speaking truth to power.*

*I long for the “good old days”  
when loving neighbor didn’t require  
sides to be taken,  
toxic division to be elevated, honored, cherished.*

*Walking in the light should not be this difficult.*

God, it’s me. The darkness, O Love, descends so quickly sometimes, as if to devour my soul. I fear not the darkness but long instead for the light of your presence upon me and through me. Help me to walk in the light, as you are in the light, that I may have fellowship with you and build your shalom with those around me.

#### **1 John 2:15-25**

Seek purpose more than pleasure. Direct your passion toward The Love rather than allowing your passion to be diverted toward that which does not bring life: unbridled desire, obsession with “beauty,” and bragging about the size of your wallet. These things do not come from The Love but distort holy desire. The broken culture that gives birth to these things will die but doing the will of The Love endures into eternity.

My beloved students, apprentices in the God-life, the *kairos* draws near when the kin-dom will be unveiled for all to see. The Opposer<sup>242</sup> comes to do the work of the Accuser: to fight against the influence and activity of Jesus the Anointed. Indeed, there is not just one Opposer but many Opposers. Some of these who oppose Jesus went out from our own gathering, though they never really belonged to us. Had they truly been a part of us, they would have remained. Deserting us demonstrated their true colors; they never were a part of our family.

But all of you are part of The Love’s family, and so you were given a *charism*, a gift. All of you remember the truth and appreciate<sup>243</sup> it. I don’t write because I doubt you remember the truth nor appreciate it. I know you remember and appreciate it, for the truth protects us from deceit and manipulation. Who deceives? The one who rebuffs Jesus the Anointed, rejecting both The Love and

the son. No one who rejects the son appreciates The Love, but all who covenant to walk the Way of Jesus belong to The Love. You belong to The Love, so see that what you have heard from the beginning continues to live in you—the Word of Life dwelling deeply to nourish you. As the Word lives in you, you will live in The Love and be drawn ever deeper into the God-life until it becomes your eternal home.

I write as one who desires to protect you from those who would lead you astray. You are those in whom the Divine Spirit abides; you got this. I do not need to teach you anything because you are being taught by the Divine Spirit already. Trust the Spirit's nudges. Go forward in *agape* with The Love.

And now, my little lambs, continue to abide in Jesus the Anointed so that when the Day arrives, we may be bold, open, and free to celebrate his unveiling without chagrin, regret, or shame. He is right, just, and good, so do what is right, just, and good to show you are born of the Anointed.

*Oppose:*

*fight against*

*stand against*

*contradict*

*manipulate*

*distort*

*shade*

*gloss over*

*look upon without doing anything*

*remain silent.*

*Lots of ways to be an antichrist.*

God, it's me. I prefer the notion of one antichrist—a really "bad guy" that I can despise and fear. I know it is not biblical, but it is theatrical. There's comfort in believing I just have to avoid one bad person. More discouraging is to think there are many who oppose the influence of Jesus upon them and upon our society. Most discouraging of all is to recognize there are times when I oppose Jesus' influence upon me! In that moment, I am one of the Opposers!! O Love, in your mercy, save me from myself. In your mercy, hear my prayer.

### **1 John 3:1-3**

Look! Listen! Discern the moment: The Love surrounded us in *agape* when he claimed us as family, calling us children! Beloved is who we are. The broken

culture cannot accept us (and we cannot be intimate with it) because it did not recognize The Love. Friends, though we are now indeed The Love's beloved, the fullness of what we will become remains a mystery—the unveiling of our true self an unformed hope. But of this we can be confident: When the Anointed is unveiled, it will be the transformative moment of our lives. We will see Jesus in his perfect humanity and become our true selves.<sup>244</sup> Those who walk toward this horizon journey toward the sacred, as he is sacred.

*Who hasn't wondered*

*what it would be like to be*

*Captain America or Marilyn Monroe?*

*Who hasn't wanted*

*to go back to a certain age*

*and get a do-over?*

*Who*

*looks not backward but forward*

*to the horizon of our hope?*

*That one becomes and will become*

*the one The Love saw*

*when Creation sprang forth in the Word: "Let...."*

God, it's me. I long for the beatific vision: Jesus in glory, standing before my kneeling self. When I think of that moment, I am filled with awe and wonder yet also chagrin, for I am confident it will not be what I expect. I will have gotten so many things wrong about Jesus (who will have neither blond hair nor blue eyes)! Yet I rejoice that you have brought into right relationship with you I can ask for nothing more; I long for nothing else.

### **1 John 3:4-10**

Missing the mark creates chaos; to do so as a habit is moral anarchy.<sup>245</sup> You remember the Anointed was unveiled to carry sin away (though he himself did not sin), so no one who abides in Jesus, who makes him their home, abides in the chaos and anarchy created by missing the mark (to do so means one probably has never met the real Jesus).

My little lambs, don't be led astray. Doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason in the right way leads to right relationships of the kind Jesus offers. Anyone

who seeks to abide in the chaos and anarchy created by missing the mark is being influenced by the Accuser, who has been a chaos and anarchy expert from the beginning. The Love's son, Jesus, came to destroy the Accuser's influence—to replace chaos with new creation and anarchy with the assurance that we are The Love's children. The knowledge of that love inspires us to hit the mark through right relationships and *agape* toward others in The Love's family. Those influenced by the Accuser are led away from these things. My little lambs, don't be led astray but rather make your home in Jesus.

*Chaos  
muddled choices  
misguided, awry, astray  
miss the mark of  
agape*

God, it's me. I thank you for your influence in my life—for the way you guide me toward justice and joy in my choices. You challenge me to reject my false self and express my true self in how I live and how I love. May your *agape* win the day in my heart as I open myself more and more to your inspiration, influence, and impact.

### **1 John 3:11-15**

The acoustics of the God-life reverberate *agape*—love made whole and complete and offered without precondition. It's always been this way, even from the very beginning, and always will be.

Don't tread the path of anger that leads to hatred; Cain walked this path to his destruction. He gave his heart, mind, and spirit to the Accuser, and it led him to murder. Hatred had its way with Cain: first causing him to be stingy with his offering and then leading Cain to hold on jealously to what he perceived belonged to him (when it really belonged to The Love). Hatred, having stalked Cain like prey, finally pounced, causing Cain's killing rage against his brother, Abel. Abel, however, lived in right relationship with The Love, to whom Abel freely gave from the best of his flock, an offering of thanksgiving.<sup>246</sup>

Don't be surprised when those immersed in the broken values of culture dislike you. Our false selves have died, and our true selves have moved into the God-life. (We know this to be true because we seek to love with *agape*.) Those drowning in culture's broken values cannot understand us, for they are living as already dead, with the

spirit of Cain sharing their home. Murder and the God-life cannot share a home; the God-life only abides in those who seek to live with *agape*.

*Stalked like prey:  
infotainment prompting outrage  
addiction whispering to demons  
lust overwriting love*

*Stalked like prey:  
inner critic encouraging shame  
negative self-talk inviting depression  
hubris unwilling to look in the true self's mirror*

*Stalked like prey:  
poverty that  
crushes, crushes, crushes  
people, neighborhoods, and community*

*Stalked like prey:  
racist thoughts insinuate themselves  
into minds unaware  
anger simmering beneath the surface of every moment*

God, it's me. I cry unto you, O Love; O Love, hear my prayer. The jackals of anger howl, and the lions of hate stalk their prey. I pray I would not give in to them but flee, flee, flee! Even more, help me protect my herd, especially those who are easy targets: the emotionally frail, the intellectually dishonest, the immature who do not know they are in danger. Anger distorts vision and hatred decapitates the God-life. O Love, in your mercy, deliver me from these evils, for yours is the kin-dom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

### **1 John 3:16–24**

The experience of *agape* is in this: Jesus the Anointed gave himself for us. Likewise, we should give ourselves for our brothers and sisters in the Body. If you perceive one of them is in need and close your heart<sup>247</sup> to their pain, The Love's *agape* is but a visitor to your home rather than a full-time resident.

My little lambs, *agape* always dives deep into the truth of the God-life; it is an action not a feeling, doing and not mere speaking. By living into *agape*, we are able to discern that we are in the truth, and this sets our hearts at ease. (Even if our hearts are troubled and worry overwhelms us, The Love is greater than our hearts.) The

Love knows who we are and whose we are. So my beloved, take heart. Be encouraged. And trust this truth: if our hearts are not troubled as we live into *agape*, then we are fully and unequivocally assured that we belong to The Love.

As we belong to The Love, we take hold of those things that are *of* The Love and *in* The Love. As we follow the Way of Jesus and obey all The Love's commands, we bring joy to The Love's heart. And this is the first and best command: that we trust the character and integrity of Jesus the Anointed, love one another with *agape* (as he commanded us to do), and make our home in The Love just as The Love makes a home in our hearts. The experience of home is this: The Love lives in us and gave us the Divine Spirit as a housewarming present.

*"Greater than our hearts"  
seems like the bar is set too low,  
for my heart leads to  
doubt,  
despair,  
distrust.*

*"Knows whose we are"  
is a truth that brings comfort,  
for I am not  
in charge,  
in control,  
in constant need to prove myself worthy.*

*"Makes a home in our hearts"  
is exactly what I need,  
for the pilgrim journey is a  
long walk toward trust,  
life worth living,  
love that will not let me go.*

God, it's me. I thank you for the many ways I receive *agape* from you and others. May I also give *agape* to others in your name. I thank you that you are greater than my heart. May I encourage others that they may move forward in hope. I thank you that I belong to you. May I be a messenger of peace that others may know they, too, are welcome in your home.

**1 John 4:1–6<sup>248</sup>**

Beloved, trust only the Wind<sup>249</sup> whose gust leads to The Love. Much wind blows like a dust devil swirling up

into nothing; such winds are the words of false preachers and teachers. You will know them because their version of Jesus avoids the nitty-gritty of life in this world; they reject the cruciform Way of Jesus—solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In their telling of the Good News, Jesus doesn't lift a finger to help those who suffer injustice and oppression.

Not so the true Wind that leads to Jesus incarnate as the Word made flesh. The true Wind refreshes us as we walk with Jesus through deserts and down dusty roads. The true Wind inspires us to work for equity and equality. The true Wind leads us to confess with our lives that Jesus is the crucified God—and not to be ashamed that we put our trust in him.

Those who proclaim a disembodied version of Jesus work in opposition to him. Their influence avoids the challenge of bringing *shalom* into the world—on earth as it is in heaven. The false preachers and teachers align with the avarice, betrayal, and corruption of the culture, which is why they are so popular! Such false preachers and teachers already work among you, but fear not, my little lambs! You belong to The Love and so will triumph over them. The Wind that blows upon you is a trade wind that propels ships compared to the light breeze they experience. We belong to The Love, and those who dance to God-rhythms listen to what we have to say. Those immersed in avarice, betrayal, and corruption cannot hear nor accept what we have to say. This is the litmus test: The true Wind leads to The Love, while dust devils disappear into nothing.

*Summer heat brings dust devils  
spouting beside I-10 between Phoenix and Tucson.  
I see them in the empty fields.  
Occasionally they cross the freeway,  
rattling my car as I grip the wheel tighter.  
Dust devils are more bark than bite.*

*Summer heat also brings the haboob:  
a wall of dirt and dust  
eclipsing the sun.  
I follow truckers to the side of the road,  
not daring to continue my journey.  
Haboobs are the fear of the Lord.*

*Different winds  
bringing unique vistas:  
only one must I heed.*

God, it's me. I long for heaven. So why do I resist bringing heaven to earth? I believe Jesus is "fully human, fully God" yet I give more honor to his divinity than his humanity. I know the Gospel narratives of "doing to the least of these,"<sup>250</sup> "Go and do likewise,"<sup>251</sup> and "proclaim the Year of Jubilee,"<sup>252</sup> so why is the Jesus I proclaim so heavenly bound that his Church is too seldom earthly good? O Love, forgive my heresy of practice and hypocrisy of proclamation! Free me from the chains of living only half of the Gospel that I may work for your justice and joy—today, tomorrow, and until the Day comes when Jesus is unveiled for all to see.

### 1 John 4:7-12

Beloved, do *agape*: now, always, and forever. Do *agape* with everyone, especially the Body. *Agape* is birthed in The Love and flows from the experience of The Love because The Love is *agape*. If you cannot or will not do *agape*, then your experience of The Love is lacking.

We saw and experienced *agape* when The Love sent Jesus into the world—The Love's own son—so that we could live in him and he live in us—now, always, and forever. In Jesus' life and death, in his kin-dom words of comfort and challenge, in his resurrection and ascension, in everything that happened to Jesus and through Jesus,<sup>253</sup> The Love's craving for justice was satisfied<sup>254</sup> and we were brought into oneness—now, always, and forever. Therefore, as we have been showered with *agape*, so we should show *agape* to others. No one has seen The Love face to face so *agape* is the Way that The Love makes a home in us and, breath by breath, makes our *agape* whole and complete.

*Remembering a song:*

*Behold what manner of love  
the Father has given unto us!*

*That we should be called children of God!*

*Joy again fills my heart.*

*Behold indeed.*

*Being held.*

*Now, always, and forever.*

God, it's me. I rejoice that I am being held. I give thanks that I am called one of your children. I rejoice that, through Jesus, I can show *agape* to all whom I

encounter. In Jesus, I am one with you—now, always, and forever. Amen and amen!

### 1 John 4:13-21

We experience living in The Love and The Love living in us through the Divine Spirit. This is why we who have seen and perceived that The Love sent the son into the world bear witness that the son is the rescuer of all the world. As you confess that the son belongs to The Love, then The Love lives in you and you in The Love. In this way, we experience and trust The Love's *agape* for us. The Love is *agape* and whoever makes *agape* their home also opens their heart and makes their heart a home for The Love.

Loving with *agape* makes us whole and complete, our true selves. Loving with *agape* builds our confidence that when the Day comes, and The Love's kin-dom is unveiled in its fullness, we will stand with The Love and with one another. Side by side with The Love, we will stand together as one in the midst of the broken world becoming new creation.

So fear not! *Agape* knows no fear; *agape* made whole and complete drives fear away. Fear is a response to threat, to punishment. *Agape*, when made whole and complete, cannot fear, for it knows that we have been loved from before the beginning of time and will be loved even after the end of all things. Such love overshadowed us, and we have responded to it, each in its own time: first the *agape* from above and then our *agape* in response.

So love with *agape*! Whoever says, "I love The Love," yet hates a brother or sister, that person lies. If we cannot love with *agape* the one we see before us, how can we hope to love The Love whom we have never seen? So remember the commandment: Show *agape* to all: first to The Love then also to our brothers and sisters.

*As the world seems to fray at the seams  
there is much to fear.*

*Wars begun by Russia or because of Roe invite  
our hearts to quiver with hatred for "the other."*

*But who is "other" in a world  
created for love by The Love?*

*Helping us see fear's frail shape,  
agape drives away hatred.*

*Under the influence of agape,  
fear becomes an apparition in the light of the Day.*

*No one will be “other” when the Day is unveiled  
for those known and named by The Love for love.*

God, it's me. You have created me in love, for love, to love. Help me live toward the fullness of my calling as one who follows Jesus. May fear loosen its grip upon me as I abide in you, and you abide in me.

### **1 John 5:1-12**

All who trust that Jesus is the Anointed are born of The Love. Indeed, all *agape* is born of The Love and leads to love for Jesus. Through *agape*, the son is born in us.<sup>255</sup> We experience The Love's *agape* by giving *agape*—first to The Love and then to all The Love's children, just as we have been commanded to do. By following the commandments we express our *agape*, and the commandments are not burdensome. The commandments are given by The Love and make us strong to overcome the broken culture in which we live. Our trust is a testimony to the ways we are victorious over the broken culture of avarice, betrayal, and corruption. Who wins the victory over the broken culture? Only those who by trusting The Love entrust themselves to Jesus the son.

Jesus the son is the one who entered the world and gave himself over to water and to blood; that is, to baptism and to the cross,<sup>256</sup> just as the Divine Spirit bears witness, for this is the truth. Thus do we see that we have three who testify that Jesus is the son: the Divine Spirit, baptism, and the cross. Indeed, there is even a fourth witness: The Love! (Human testimony is good but The Love's testimony is even better.) All who trust the son cling to this testimony. And whoever does not trust The Love's testimony calls The Love a liar. And here is the purpose of all this testimony: to invite and to lure us into right relationship, to provoke and to evoke trust that the gift freely offered to us in the son is the God-life! Whoever says, “Yes” to this invitation lives the God-life. To reject this invitation is to walk away from the God-life.

*Testimony  
bearing witness  
seen, heard, touched  
experience of The Love  
truth*

God, it's me. I learn to love by loving. I learn to love by being loved. I learn to love so that I can love even more. Love begets love. May love be born in me. May love be borne by me into the world. May love, your love, infuse all I do and who I am becoming.

### **1 John 5:13-21**

I write to all of you who trust the character and authority of The Love's son so that you may experience the fullness of the God-life—today and into all tomorrows! We who trust the son can ask for what we want. If it conforms to The Love's purposes and passion for new creation, we can be confident The Love listens to us. And as The Love hears, so we take hold of our goals and dance the God-rhythms that lead to justice and joy.

Beloved, we must encourage each other—those within the Body<sup>257</sup>—to dance the God-rhythms. If you see something—such as one of your own beloveds going astray, accepting the broken practices of avarice, betrayal, and corruption—say something. Pray The Love would lead them back toward the God-life. Pray that your beloved's heart would turn away from twisted desire that results in injustice and the oppression of others. Pray that your beloved's mind would be freed to embrace the Way that turns death into life.<sup>258</sup>

We understand that repetition of behavior leads to habits and habits form character: therefore, acts that conform to the broken culture distort our true self and lead to death. That is not the Way we are to walk. Instead we walk the Way of Jesus that breaks free from the evil one's hold on the world. The Way of Jesus leads to life. In Jesus, we discover truth that brings justice and joy. In Jesus, we find and are found by The Love, who will not let us go—not now, not ever.

My little lambs, abide in Jesus and evade idolatry.

*Sin leading to death  
hatred living in the heart  
in your mercy, free me*

God, it's me. Free me from the temptation to judge. Free me from judgment's lure to exert power over another. Free me from the sense of control I feel as I cast aspersions upon my brother or sister. Free me to recognize I live in a glass house! Free me to accept that to glance out the window is far less important than to gaze in the mirror and see myself clearly. Free



me, when I see someone sin, to pray that I will not be filled with false pride but will pray for them and with them. Free me to see we are all a part of your Body, and no one can live apart.

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## 2 John 1:1-3

The wise one, to milady, she who was claimed and named by The Love before the beginning of time, and to your children, whom I love with *agape* as truth directs—and not I alone but all who walk the Way of truth and live ever deeper into the truth of the Way: the gifts of lovingkindness, renewal and *shalom* be upon you from The Love and from Jesus the Anointed, The Love's own son. May these gifts be with and within us all through truth and love.

*Greetings  
bring joy,  
reminder  
of love shared  
that never leaves  
and never disappoints.*

God, it's me. This is such a simple greeting yet so filled with joy and love. May I never take for granted the love shared in Jesus that makes my heart one with another through grace, mercy, and peace. O Love, may I rejoice in the gift of those whom you have shared with me as dance partners in the God-rhythms!

## 2 John 1:4-6

It brings me joy to discover (what I expected all along) that your children hop, skip, and jump along the Way of truth, as The Love commands us. So now, milady, I write to you not a novel command but one that is as ancient as human breath: live with *agape* toward each other. *Agape* is doing and not just feeling; it is action that conforms to The Love's heart. *Agape* was the beginning of your journey—its first word—and will be its compass as you continue forward.

*I don't always know  
what to do  
where to go  
when I have arrived,  
but am always assured when  
agape is the path I travel.*

God, it's me. Your way is really not that complicated: "Love one another." Yes, life can be complex: "Love one another." Ethical conundrums abound: "Love one another." People I respect disagree: "Love one another." I'm uncertain of the best choice to make: "Love one another." O Love, teach me to love...one another.

## 2 John 1:7-13

I remind you to love with *agape* in all you do because many oppose the God-life through deceit and manipulation. These opposers do the bidding of the Accuser. They refuse to accept that Jesus the Anointed came *en-came*; that is, incarnate, in a human body. He did not merely "seem"<sup>259</sup> to be flesh but actually ate and drank, grew tired and slept, suffered in heart, mind, and body as do we all. Those who preach and teach that Jesus only seemed to be human oppose the God-life, for that which is not assumed cannot be redeemed.<sup>260</sup>

Be wary and aware of the opposers. Do not allow them to influence you nor lead you astray. Instead be assured that you make Jesus happy as you walk toward the true teaching about the Anointed—keep on keeping on. Only the true teaching about Jesus leads to the God-life: that Jesus walked through deserts and down dusty roads; he worked for equity and equality; he is the crucified one whose humanity reveals The Love.<sup>261</sup>

The opposers who teach a spiritualized Jesus cannot heal the world's brokenness; such teaching is so heavenly bound as to be no earthly good. Do not welcome them into your home. To honor them with your hospitality is tacit endorsement of their teaching—may it never be! Do not share *koinonia* in work that destroys the Way of Jesus.

I have much more I could write about this but prefer to speak with you face-to-face. Seeing each other will make our joy complete. The children of your sister, who also was claimed and named by The Love, send their greetings.

### *An Ode to Isaiah 58<sup>262</sup>*

*"On the day of your fasting you do as you please,  
and exploit all your workers."*

*"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice?"*

*"Is this the kind of fasting I have chosen,  
only a day to humble themselves?"*

*"Is it not to share your food with the hungry,  
to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?"*

*We would see Jesus!*

*Do you dare?*

God, it's me. Help me to see my neighbor in need (and not look away). Help me to hear the cries of strangers (and listen, listen, listen). Help me to act as one who follows Jesus, who suffered hunger, fatigue, taunting, and torture. In a virtual world, help me keep it real.

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### 3 John 1:1-8

The wise one, to my beloved friend, Gaius, whom I love with *agape* as we walk together the Way of Jesus. Beloved friend, I pray your journey find you well and in good health. I pray also that your journey in Jesus is making you into your best, true self. I rejoiced to hear some of our siblings in Jesus tell about your steadfast trust and how you always walk the Way of Jesus. I have no greater joy than to hear that those whom I love are walking in the Way.

Friend, you are trustworthy to treat the brothers and sisters I send to you with open and robust hospitality, even though you don't know them personally. These brothers and sisters have returned to the Body telling stories of your *agape*. Please support them as they continue their journey; send them out in a way that brings honor to The Love! Their work of Good News sharing started only with the help of those in the Body—no one from outside the gathering supported them. Showing them open and robust hospitality, therefore, is a way to share in their work, to work together to teach others the God-rhythms that lead to the God-life.

*I met Ernest for the first time at the airport.  
Midnight-thirty at the end of 30 hours journey.  
Exhausted, I thanked him for his kindness.  
With a smile and a sigh, I got in his car.*

*The next morning came too early.  
Breakfast was on the table, waiting for me.  
Two boys, bundles of energy and glee, waited as well.  
They called me grandpa.*

*I was not actually their grandfather.  
Just someone with gray hair  
who sat at their parents' table.  
Discovering the welcome of home.*

God, it's me. Open my heart to the spiritual gift of hospitality. May I find joy in welcoming others. And when the gift is given to me, may I not demur, with a false humility, but accept the gift with gratitude—humbled to be so honored.

### 3 John 1:9-13

I wrote to the Body but Diotrephes, who believes himself to be the most important person of all and guardian of all that is allowed to happen in the gathering, refuses to welcome us. We shall see about that.

When I come to visit—and I shall—I will confront Diotrephes' behavior: spiteful slander, refusing to welcome others who are of the Body, and even forcing them out of the gathering!

Friend, do not imitate such worthless and depraved behavior. Instead, do what is just and leads to right relationships. The one who walks in darkness is blind to The Love.

As for Demetrius, everyone speaks highly of him, as does the truth itself! And as do we, and you know we always speak the truth about others.

I have so much to write but prefer to speak with you face-to-face. Pen and ink cannot convey my thoughts and feelings about you. May The Love's peace rest upon you. All your friends here greet you. Greet our friends there by name.

*Inhospitality  
welcome refused  
shutting others out  
arrogance ascending and condescendingly  
cold*

God, it's me. May I learn the art of hospitality: a warm smile, open arms, a desire to serve and refresh. May my spirit seek this spiritual gift not for my own sake but for the sake of those I encounter, those whom you bring into my home and my church. May I see them as already abiding in your heart.

PRAYING THE  
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN  
LETTERS:   
JUDE

DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS  
OF THE GOD-LIFE THROUGH  
PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING JUDE

I find Jude difficult to read. I am a Mainline denominational pastor, and *Amazing Grace* is my favorite hymn. I would rather love people into the kin-dom than scare them, and my training for pastoral care emphasized unconditional, positive regard. I find judgment unhelpful in drawing people deeper into the God-life; fire and brimstone sermons are not my style. I am not alone in my distaste for negative religion.

What I do find in Jude is the New Testament's most definitive proponent of no-nonsense morality. Jude is willing to name immorality as evil, inspire holy and healthy guilt, and (arguably) cross the line into inviting shame. Consider these examples:

They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus. (1:4)

...these ungodly people pollute their own bodies, reject authority and heap abuse on celestial beings. (1:8)

These people are blemishes at your love feasts... (1:12)

The Book of Jude reminds me of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words about costly grace:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again...Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a [person their] life, and it is grace because it gives a [person] the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.<sup>263</sup>

Jude preaches a Gospel of costly grace. Like the early Christian communities whom Peter and John addressed, some people in Jude's community proclaimed Christian liberty included license to sin. While Peter and

John name such leaders as the Antichrist or antichrists (that is, those who oppose the Way of Jesus), Jude merely denounces their immorality and impact upon the Body.

Jude's writing is associated with literature specifically directed toward moral and ethical teaching (what scholars call *parenetic* literature) from the intertestamental period (between the end of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament). Jude quotes directly from two parenetic works,<sup>264</sup> and in Jude scholars notice similarities to four other parenetic texts.<sup>265</sup>

The intertestamental period was dominated by an evangelistic Greek culture that sought to impose Greek perspectives and practices onto its subjected cultures, including Israel. One typical response of the conquered nations was to accommodate and allow Greek culture to influence and create a new, syncretistic culture. But the majority of Jews of the intertestamental period resisted all syncretistic influences. The Jewish literature from this period reflects this rejection of Greek culture. It is fierce, unapologetic, and forever willing to protect Jewish culture, especially its moral foundations, ethical mandates, and liturgical practices.

Jude fits right in with the great cloud of parenetic witnesses. I have chosen to call God by the gender inclusive name "The Holy" as a reminder that the God of love is also the God of justice. God's mercy and holiness are two sides of the same Gospel. Jude, therefore, reminds me to appreciate costly grace:

Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.<sup>266</sup>

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## Jude 1:1-4

Jude, servant of Jesus the Anointed and brother of James, to all who have been summoned through love. The love of The Holy guards us for Jesus the Anointed, in whom mercy, *shalom*,<sup>267</sup> and *agape*<sup>268</sup> are received in abundance.

Beloved, I write to exhort you to stand with Jesus and walk the Way of Jesus. I urge you to dance the God-rhythms delivered to you and live the God-life entrusted to all of The Holy's family. I am distressed by what I see happening among you all: deceptive leaders slithering into your gatherings. These snakes were foretold, as is their condemnation. They refuse to behave like children who belong to The Holy. "Anything goes" is their motto and YOLO<sup>269</sup> their mantra. They mock the lovingkindness of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar and our true and only leader in the Body.

*Christians gone wild  
Anything goes, even sin  
Who cares what God thinks?*

God, it's me. I worship and serve among people of grace—mercy and lovingkindness are cornerstones of our faith. Therefore, I am uncomfortable with judgment, intolerance, and pharisaic morality. Yet there are limits. Teach me the distinction between setting a boundary that brings grace and wholeness and being a bully that brings guilt and shame. May I learn to stand for good without being a git.

## Jude 1:5-11

Though you know these things, I feel the need to remind you that tolerating deceptive leaders slithering into your gatherings is spiritually dangerous. Remember that The Holy liberated the Israelites from political oppression and economic servitude in Egypt yet later punished those who refused to entrust<sup>270</sup> themselves to The Holy. And celestial messengers who rebelled against The Holy are chained in darkness, awaiting the Day The Holy will unleash the kin-dom in all its fullness.<sup>271</sup> Recall that the men of Sodom and Gomorrah sought to rape The Holy's messengers.<sup>272</sup> These cities and their people serve as a warning to all that The Holy's justice cannot be denied and the redeeming fire<sup>273</sup> will not be quenched.

As past is prelude, so these snakes slither into your midst. Their arrogance deludes them, and so they pollute

their own bodies, reject your authority, and even mock The Holy's celestial messengers! As Moses declared,

Even Michael, leader of all the celestial messengers, when struggling with the Accuser over who would get to possess Moses' body upon his death, refused to claim authority for himself but submitted to The Holy. Michael declared, "The Holy rebuke you!"<sup>274</sup>

These snakes say whatever they want and speak of that which they do not understand. They slander the good, slithering into dark holes that lead to their demise. They murder like Cain,<sup>275</sup> profiteer like Balaam,<sup>276</sup> and are insolent toward authority like Korah.<sup>277</sup> Woe is their destiny! Woe is their name!

*Wrestling with darkness  
denial of its power  
unwise in extreme*

God, it's me. Help me to be wary and aware that not everyone in my life has good intentions. Help me guard against the desire to trust others at all costs, even the cost of the health and well-being of others in the Body. Such a cost is too high a price to pay.

## Jude 1:12-16

Deceptive leaders are a blemish upon your *agape* feasts. They gorge themselves on deceit and manipulation without the slightest hint of shame. They are like rainless clouds over parched land, harvest trees without fruit (uprooted, too, so doubly useless), wild waves that toss ships to and fro but never into a current, a galaxy of stars sucked into a blackhole.

Enoch of old spoke truth about these snakes,

Look! The Holy arrives with thousands and ten-thousands—holy ones all—to declare the *kairos* of justice: Deception will be swept away by truth. Manipulation will crumble under the weight of integrity. Mouths spewing defiance against the God-life will be muted.<sup>278</sup>

These snakes murmur complaint when they should burst forth in praise; their desires usurp the Way of Jesus; they vomit arrogance with their lips and use flattery as a weapon.

*Look! The Holy comes!  
Peeved is an understatement  
Justice has its day*

God, it's me. Jude seems angry. Yet it isn't a general anger but specific and targeted: directed at people like me. O Holy, help me take this word of warning with all due necessary caution: that I as a leader of your sheep will be held accountable. My words and actions will be weighed upon the scales of holiness, justice, and shalom. I am forewarned; may I live and lead accordingly.

### **Jude 1:17-23**

Beloved, remember the words of the sent ones<sup>279</sup> of Jesus the Anointed, he who is sovereign above Caesar. The sent ones spoke of scoffers and cynics and the "Anything Goes" crowd. What I describe is no surprise. These people seek to conquer by dividing; they influence by appealing to instinct. They know not the influence of the Breath of The Holy.

You, my beloved, are not like them. You build your house upon that which is sacred. You strengthen your Body through trust emboldened by prayer. Keep on keeping on! These things lead to The Holy's *agape* and prepare you to receive the mercy poured out through Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. This mercy leads to life anew, life abundant, and life eternal.

In your own leadership, don't be like the deceptive snakes. Instead, be compassionate with those trying to figure things out.<sup>280</sup> In their wavering, be a steadfast friend and guide. When they are hesitant, be patient. When they begin to separate themselves from the Body, lure them back with *agape*. Stir up in others a passion for The Holy and a longing to live the God-life the way Jesus lived it. Help others become those who burn with desire to be like

Jesus in all they do and in how they do it, always avoiding the degrading, corrupting stain of the snakes.

*Protect the bruised reed  
snuff not the smoldering wick<sup>281</sup>  
Gentle is the way*

God, it's me. I am challenged by Jude's fiery words. Fire and brimstone is not really my style. Yet as Jude is your word, I submit to its message. Mold my spirit by these words; conform me to the mold that leads to a passion for you, The Holy.

### **Jude 1:24-25**

To The Holy, who is willing and who is able to keep you from stumbling and make you to stand<sup>282</sup> even before his presence—

To The Holy, who is willing and who is able to present you before the heavenly host without fault (and a very great joy it is to do!)—

To The Holy, who is our Rescue, be the radiance of a thousand suns and the glory of ten-thousand galaxies, be the shouts of all rulers and the whispers of all who are oppressed—

To The Holy, through Jesus the Anointed, he who is sovereign above all creation today and into all tomorrows, be our joy, our gratitude, and our thanksgiving! Amen.

*The Doxology  
is more than singing a song  
life of thanksgiving*

God, it's me. Yes. Yes. Yes. And yes.

PRAYING THE  
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN  
LETTERS:



THE REVELATION

DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS  
OF THE GOD-LIFE THROUGH  
PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING THE REVELATION

Imagine: 1,000 years from now a scholar researches an ancient document written in code:

And I saw a woman in a long, flowing gown of red and white wearing a blue crown. In her arms were held the multitudes of the earth, and in her hand was a torch whose brightness blinded kings and those who would make war against God's people.

The scholar is uncertain what to make of the cryptic passage until she unearths a book written by 20<sup>th</sup> century historian David McCullough: *1776*. Suddenly the scholar understands the passage is more poetry than prose. She scribbles a note to herself:

The woman is obviously Lady Liberty dressed in the colors of the American flag. The torch in her hand is the light of liberty and the multitudes are those of whom it is said "give me your tired, your poor...."

She continues to scribble, "A translation might be:

America is the land of liberty whose light shines into all the world drawing people to its shores; its freedom is a challenge to all dictators who would oppress their own people; its religious freedom a special source of strength against tyranny and oppression."

Interpreting The Revelation is like trying to interpret a bit of U.S. history out of context. Indeed, the majority of The Revelation's verses have a referent point in either the Hebrew Bible or Roman culture, which I cite in the nearly 300 footnotes that follow. Knowing these referents is key to understanding The Revelation's symbolism. One can read this devotional without reading the footnotes, of course, but reading them and connecting them to the symbols in the text will deepen one's understanding of John's message.

If it seems outlandish to suggest an ancient reader would be able to recognize almost 300 Hebrew Bible references while reading The Revelation, consider our modern lexicon of phrases:

Four score and seven years ago....  
Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.

One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

Most readers of this work will recognize these saying as quotes from a U.S. president, actor, and astronaut, and the list of such quotes is nearly endless. Even if a reader could not name Abraham Lincoln, Clark Gable, or Neil Armstrong, the setting of the quote and its symbolic connotations would be understood.

In The Revelation, symbolism conveys the message in a similar way that emojis communicate. If I type the symbols for "eye + heart + u," I am saying, "I love you." If I type the symbols for a church steeple + an infinity symbol I am saying either, "The Church is eternal," or, "This sermon is sooooo long!"

Symbols convey meaning beyond themselves. We know this in our society through politics (the American flag), economics (the Apple logo), and entertainment (the Oscar statue). The symbol itself is the message; the message is found in the symbol.

By symbolism, John<sup>1</sup> conveyed his message. John follows the books of Ezekiel and Daniel<sup>2</sup> in using the literary genre known as "apocalyptic." Apocalyptic literature is visually communicated, like a well-crafted movie in which the story is communicated as much visually as through dialogue. The Revelation is better seen than read.

John wrote under house arrest on the Isle of Patmos, just off the west coast of modern Turkey, during the general persecution of Emperor Domitian (c. 95 CE). John used the coded language of apocalyptic literature to critique the Roman Empire. He denounced "Babylon" rather than Rome; and foretold its eventual demise. Because he wrote symbolically, his allusions to Rome were oblique enough not to attract his jailors' attention.

The Revelation is more than social critique, however; it is also John's pastoral appeal to a persecuted people. John wrote to give hope to those languishing under Domitian's ire: The Emperor seemed to be in control of all history, but the Emperor's control was an illusion according to The Revelation. Jesus, the Lion who looks

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<sup>1</sup> Due to stylistic and linguistic differences between the works, most scholars argue the author is not the apostle John who wrote the Gospels and letters but a disciple known as John the Elder.

<sup>2</sup> It is significant that both Ezekiel and Daniel were also written by authors living under political occupation—Ezekiel under Babylonian rule and Daniel under Greek rule.



like a Lamb, is the First and Last, the One who holds the keys to life and death, the only one who can open the Book of Life, the one riding the white horse to war against the Dragon and the Beast, the one who will be victorious! All of these images will unfold in the pages to follow. The Revelation says less about the specifics of history and more about who holds the ultimate destiny toward which history travels.<sup>3</sup>

I blend symbolism and meaning into the text of this interpretive paraphrase. English translations of the Bible name the symbols (e.g. trumpets, seals and lamps, etc.). By contrast, I convey what these symbols *mean*. Therefore, “the translation” will read differently than what you are used to reading when you open The Revelation. When forced by literary considerations to choose between naming the symbol or describing its meaning, I describe its meaning.

An example of how literary considerations influence my interpretive paraphrase is found in Revelation 4:3. The New International Version translates Revelation 4:3 as,

And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.

In my interpretive paraphrase I convey that in ancient, Hellenistic culture, jasper and ruby symbolize holiness and passion. While I found no good way to work in the words “jasper and ruby” except in a footnote, I was able to convey both the symbol and its meaning of the emerald rainbow (with a footnote to two verses in Ezekiel). My version of Revelation 4:3 reads as follows:

On the throne sat The Glory, whose radiance shone with holiness and passion, with an emerald rainbow—symbol of the Messiah—encircling the throne.

Footnotes may be especially helpful at the beginning of each passage. The Revelation uses what preachers call a “diamond” approach for its literary form. That is, it looks at the same thing (the diamond in this analogy) from one direction and then the next, with the light that shines upon the diamond giving the viewer a

different perspective each time (though discussing the same diamond). A better-known example of this literary technique is found in Matthew 13 where Jesus says, “The kingdom is like...” seven times in a slightly different way each time (e.g. “mustard seed,” “treasure hidden in a field,” etc.

This diamond approach is used in chapters 6-20 to describe the conflict between God and evil, and God’s eventual victory, from five perspectives, but each time it is the same conflict with evil / victory cycle being described.

A brief outline to introduce you to this cycle and prepare you for what you will read below follows:

- Chapter 1: Describes God and Jesus as those in charge of heaven and earth.
- Chapters 2-3: Jesus encourages and challenges seven churches.
- Chapter 4: Worship prepares the Church for conflict.
- Chapter 5: Jesus, not Caesar, controls history.
- Chapters 6-7: First conflict with evil / victory cycle: the four horsemen of the apocalypse (unlocking seven seals).
- Chapters 8-9: Second conflict with evil / victory cycle: a series of plagues (blowing seven trumpets).
- Chapters 10-11 Conflict pauses for an interlude as Scripture is read; (second conflict cycle concludes in 11:15-19).
- Chapters 12-15 Third conflict with evil / victory cycle: the Dragon and two Beasts are introduced.
- Chapters 16-18 Fourth conflict with evil / victory cycle: the grapes of wrath (pouring out seven bowls).
- Chapters 19-20 Fifth conflict with evil / victory cycle: final judgment of the Dragon)
- Chapters 21-22 Description of the new heaven and new earth.

A final note: Throughout *Praying the Jewish-Christian Letters* I use gender inclusive terms for God. In *Praying the Revelation*, I refer to God by using the term “The Glory.” The Glory is The Revelation’s theme and an apt description of the One to which the book points.

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This is the existential question that plagues John’s people and to which John offers pastoral encouragement.

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<sup>3</sup> Christians proclaim the risen Lord Jesus, victor over death, victor over sin, victor over the powers and principalities! How can it be that the followers of Jesus are suffering persecution?

## Revelation 1:1-6<sup>4</sup>

The unveiling of what is, has been, and will be<sup>5</sup> was given to me by Jesus the Anointed, and it was given to Jesus by The Glory. Jesus unveiled who holds the future by sending a celestial messenger to me, his servant John, who witnessed everything. And everything I saw and heard I wrote down—The Glory’s Message and Jesus’ Witness. Sacred joy overshadows the one who reads to the Body the truth embedded in this message. Sacred comfort overshadows those who hear this message, heed its truth, and allow it to move beyond their minds and into their hearts, for what follows is a message of hope: The *kairos*<sup>6</sup> is near.

John, to the seven churches in Turkey: may you be overwhelmed by lovingkindness and *shalom*<sup>7</sup> from The Glory—who was before the beginning of time and who will be after then end of all things and who is in every moment in between, the eternal present. And lovingkindness and *shalom* be also from Jesus the Anointed, who speaks the truth of all that has happened to him—descending into death’s dark depths and arising into eternity’s first light, the promise for all who will follow. He is the sovereign above Caesar and above all who rule upon the earth. To Jesus who loves us and has liberated us to live the God-life through the giving of his own life; to Jesus who has called

us into the kin-dom to serve as those who bring The Glory to people and people to The Glory; to Jesus be the radiance of a love that defeats death itself and wins an eternal victory.

Huzzah! Huzzah! Amen.

*Good start.*

*Can you finish?*<sup>9</sup>

*Talking a good game*

*Doesn’t solve problems IRL.*<sup>8</sup>

God, it’s me. Here at the beginning of The Revelation, John conveys my theology well: You, O Glory, and your son Jesus are light, life, and love. Why, then, is life sometimes so difficult? Why, then, does “Caesar Domitian” persecute your Church? When, then, shall justice roll down like a river; righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?<sup>9</sup> Where, then, are you, O Glory, in our hour of need?

## Revelation 1:7-20<sup>10</sup>

Look! See! He who is fully human, archetype of all humankind, comes.<sup>11</sup> He to whom The Glory has given

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<sup>4</sup> The churches to whom John wrote were under fire—their people were under general cultural and specific political persecution. The Revelation is not written to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians wanting to know a timeline for the future but to 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians needing pastoral encouragement to endure in the face of massive trials! In chapter one John begins his encouragement by focusing on the person at the center of all things: The Glory found through Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek text uses *tachei genesthai*, which means “immediately happen” and is often translated as “soon come to pass.” This raises the issue of time perspective in The Revelation, which has clear references to past events (e.g. quoting Jesus’ words from the cross 16:17, 21:6 and Paul’s writing to the Thessalonians 3:3, 16:5), present-at-the-time-of-writing references to Rome (e.g. 18:11-15), as well as what appear to be future events (e.g. Revelation 21-22). The inclusion of past, present, and future lead most mainline interpreters to adopt what is known as the “amillennialist” view, which interprets The Revelation as focusing on the timeframe between Jesus’ Cross and his return (i.e. Parousia). The amillennialist view is used in this interpretive paraphrase (see extended note 1 in Appendix A).

<sup>6</sup> Greek has two words for “time.” *Chronos* depicts linear, chronological time. *Kairos* depicts the key moment when transformation comes (e.g. when the expecting mother tells her partner, “It’s time.”)

<sup>7</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>8</sup> IRL: In Real Life.

<sup>9</sup> c.f. Amos 5:24.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter one proclaims the fundamental message of Christian hope: Jesus has defeated sin, death and the grave. He was before Caesar and will be after Caesar. Caesar can take your life, but only Jesus holds the keys to death and the afterlife. However, the chapter also raises the existential question that plagues John’s people: How can it be that the followers of Jesus are suffering persecution? The chapter is the beginning of John’s response to this existential question. Note to the reader: John clearly does not mind mixing metaphors! In fact, his style is to pile symbol upon symbol to hammer home his point: The Glory is in their midst, even though their present circumstances might suggest otherwise. Take hope, therefore, because The Glory who has redeemed the beloved will restore them.

<sup>11</sup> c.f. Daniel 7:13: In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

all authority arrives for all to see; even those who crucified him will behold his majesty.<sup>12</sup> All humankind will grieve their broken ways, for he will teach them to desire the God-life. So shall it be! Amen!

“I am that I am,” says The Glory.<sup>13</sup> “I will be who I will be. I have always been and will always be—the eternal present who yet arrives, the Sovereign over all sovereigns.”

I, John, your brother who shares with you the *koinonia*<sup>14</sup> of suffering, kin-dom, and enduring patience in Jesus, was on the Isle of Patmos because of my devotion to The Glory’s Word and trust in Jesus’ witness. On the day of resurrection (the day after the Jewish sabbath), I was overwhelmed by the Spirit and given a vision mystic and transcendent. The voice of a trumpet declared, “Write! Put down into words what you see and send it to the seven churches who live in central and western Turkey.”<sup>15</sup>

I turned to see the voice and encountered The Glory in the throne room of heaven.<sup>16</sup> Standing beside The Glory was Jesus, the Son of Humanity to whom The Glory had given all authority in heaven and on earth. He was a sight to behold. Jesus was dressed like the High Priest<sup>17</sup> yet looked like the Ancient of Days.<sup>18</sup> No clay feet for Jesus, but rather feet of bronze that would endure, a sign of his eternal kin-dom.<sup>19</sup> His voice thundered like the sound of a raging river<sup>20</sup>—a sure sign that he is the God of Israel—and a sword<sup>21</sup> was in his hand—the prophetic word of judgment that requires people to choose whom they will serve: The

Glory or another. Jesus’ presence shined like the radiance of the sun.<sup>22</sup>

When I saw him, I fell at his feet, utterly overwhelmed. Jesus placed his hand upon me and said, “Be not afraid. I am the beginning and end of all creation, from A to Z.<sup>23</sup> Though once dead, I live. Look! See! I live forever. Death and the afterlife are my possessions, for I have authority over them. I have the keys to unlock every door that leads through death to life.

“Write what you have seen. Describe what is, has been, and will be. Let my people know that they are not alone! My celestial messengers watch over each church. Their gatherings become the place The Glory is revealed; their worship becomes the very throne room of heaven.”

*The eye beholds  
only what it can imagine.*

*The heart hopes  
for all that it can see.*

*Look! See!  
It is Jesus.*

*God, it’s me. John’s vision begins in heaven’s throne room, and we are directed to cast our vision toward Jesus. He is the center of our hope, always has been*

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<sup>12</sup> c.f. Zechariah 12:10: And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

<sup>13</sup> c.f. Exodus 3:14: God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”

<sup>14</sup> The Greek word *koinonia* translates as “fellowship” and also conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship. *Koinonia* was a hallmark of early Christian communities and a cause for Roman suspicion of their motives—the Romans assuming something political must be the source of the Christian community.

<sup>15</sup> The seven churches are in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

<sup>16</sup> The text refers to seven golden lampstands, which could be found in the Tent of Meeting and, later, in the Jerusalem Temple. The lampstands symbolize The Glory’s presence; c.f. Exodus 25:31-40, especially 25:31: Make a lampstand of pure gold... Then make its seven lamps and set them up on it so that they light the space in front of it. Its wick trimmers and trays are to be of pure gold.

<sup>17</sup> c.f. Exodus 28:4: These are the garments they are to make: a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a woven tunic, a turban and a sash. They are to make these sacred garments for your brother Aaron and his sons, so they may serve me as priests.

<sup>18</sup> c.f. Daniel 7:9: As I looked, “thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze.

<sup>19</sup> c.f. Daniel 7:31-45, especially verses 44-45: In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

<sup>20</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 43:2: I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory.

<sup>21</sup> c.f. Isaiah 49:2: He made my mouth like a sharpened sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.

<sup>22</sup> c.f. Exodus 34:29: When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.

<sup>23</sup> c.f. Isaiah 44:6: This is what the LORD says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.”

and always will be. Beyond pandemic panic, Jesus stands. Through wars and rumors of war, Jesus stands. Alongside inflation and election debates, Jesus stands. We are drawn to him as the center of our vision, for only he unlocks the door to your presence and peace. May I rest in Jesus today.

#### **Revelation 2:1-7<sup>24</sup>**

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Ephesus; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus,<sup>25</sup> who directs the messengers and holds his churches by the hand.

You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy through your good works and perseverance through pain. You do not tolerate deception and manipulation from those who claim to be sent by Jesus but who practice depravity. Instead, like the tortoise, you continue ever forward for my name's sake. You endure for the sake of the God-life.

Yet you struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow. You have lost your first love! The first blush of passion you once had for me has become blasé. Reignite the flame of your love, for without love passionately expressed you cannot shine my light. I know you are trying—you reject the followers of “The Destroyer,”<sup>26</sup> who lure you to indulge your most base appetites without even a hint of chagrin. Good for you that you reject them, but you can do better than merely rejecting what destroys you.

If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches! I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. To whomever prevails against their

most base appetites, I will give eternal nourishment: You shall eat from the tree of life!<sup>27</sup>

*“Love is a marathon, not a sprint.”*

*Deepening over time,  
a flower blossoming, blossoming, blossoming  
into bloom.*

*“Yes, but sometimes lovers need to run.”*

*Across a meadow,  
into each other's arms,  
falling into ecstatic embrace amidst your  
blooming flowers.*

God, it's me. I remember my first love of you. I was 17 and wrote a seven-page letter to my parents about why they should believe in Jesus. I am older now, wiser. My faith is both deeper and more cynical. I would gladly return to that first blush of love, especially if I could leave behind my impetuous youth. What does it look like to return to my first love? How would I act if my first love of you were to return?

#### **Revelation 2:8-11**

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Smyrna; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, who was before the beginning and will be after the end, who died and was raised to life.

You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy, even as you suffer persecution and poverty. Yet you are rich in the God-life! I know about those who claim to belong to The Glory but actually serve the Accuser, a gathering of abusers. Be not afraid regarding

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<sup>24</sup> Revelation 2-3 contain seven letters to seven churches. Interpreters use different lenses through which to understand these letters (see endnote 2 in Appendix A). The lens through which we look either distorts or clarifies that which we see. I paraphrase chapters 2-3 as referring to seven historical churches. It has the advantage of speaking a message of challenge and comfort to the churches of the first century, but any church in any century can hear all of these messages as if they are spoken to them and be challenged and comforted. Ockham's Razor is a famous philosophical tool which says, “Take the simplest viable solution.” This third lens meets the test of Ockham's Razor.

<sup>25</sup> I repeat in the paraphrase certain phrases (this first sentence and a half among them). In the Greek text, some of these phrases are actually repeated for each of the seven churches, while some of them are implied by the rhetorical structure of the message. The

common themes embedded in Jesus' message to the seven churches are (1) All churches are filled with grace and please God, (2) all churches are filled with sin and must grow, (3) God promises grace and life to all who endure, and (4) The Spirit speaks to these seven churches, and through them, to all churches.

<sup>26</sup> English translations say, “Nicolaitans,” followers of Nicolas, whose name means “conqueror” or “destroyer” in Greek. Scholars debate the sin of the Nicolaitans, but the majority opinion (guess) is they practiced and taught that engaging in the indulgences associated with Greco-Roman culture was acceptable (under the false argument that Christian liberty allowed license).

<sup>27</sup> c.f. Genesis 2:9: The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

what they are about to heap on you. I speak truth: the Accuser's servants will imprison you. You will be tested and learn anew your trust in The Glory brings you strength.<sup>28</sup>

If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches! I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. The second death<sup>29</sup> cannot touch you.

*I wake up anxious.*

*Did I really have a final exam for a class I never attended?*

*No, thankfully, it was just a dream—nightmare actually.*

*I am awake now and concerned.*

*What if the test is not a dream but reality—  
the world unhinged, coming for me, for you, for us?*

*God, it's me. It's easy to feel dread these days—just watch the news or mention politics, gender or the climate with someone from "the other side." It's easy to be concerned, even anxious, about inflation, the stock market, and one's job. I wonder if the historians who predict a civil war is on the horizon are correct. O Glory, save me from the time of testing! Or, better yet, make me strong when the test comes, that I will shine the life, light, and love of Jesus to all whom I encounter—friend or foe.*

## **Revelation 2:12-17**

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Pergamum; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, whose two-edged sword inflicts punishment and forces a choice between friend or foe.<sup>30</sup>

You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy. You live amidst pagan temples devoted to Zeus, Apollo, Athena, Dionysus, Aphrodite, and Aesculapius, which lay together in the grove called the Nicephorium;<sup>31</sup> you are surrounded by the Accuser. Yet you all abide in me—remaining true to the character and integrity by which I am known. You abided in me rather than abandon your trust, even as your bishop, Antipas, was martyred.

Yet you struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow. There are some among your gathering who seduce people into idolatry and sexual immorality. There are some also who indulge in the license of Greek culture and teach others to do likewise, as Balaam did.<sup>32</sup> Turn around! Turn toward me! If you do not, I will confront you with my words; my splendor will overcome you.<sup>33</sup>

If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches! I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere, and I will reveal to you The Glory's mysteries and The Glory's provision.<sup>34</sup> I will give you a white stone<sup>35</sup> and declare you innocent and new: made whole and complete, your true selves. You will be vindicated!<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> c.f. Daniel 1:12-15: "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So the king agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

<sup>29</sup> The Palestinian Targums are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible and written in the 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries C.E. Though contemporaneous with the writing of The Revelation (and later), the Targums give a rough approximation of how the term "second death" was used during this time period, c.f., for example, Targum Jeremiah on Jeremiah 51:17: "They shall die the second death and not live in the world to come."

<sup>30</sup> c.f. Psalm 149:6-7: May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples....

<sup>31</sup> The texts says, "Where Satan has his throne," which, scholars believe, may have been inspired by the Nicephorium's many pagan temples.

<sup>32</sup> c.f. Numbers 31:16: "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the LORD in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the LORD's people."

<sup>33</sup> c.f. Isaiah 49:2: He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."

<sup>34</sup> The text uses the symbol of manna. c.f. 2 Maccabees 2:4 where Jewish tradition held the ark of the covenant was not lost but hidden, and within the ark, among other things, would be a sample of manna from the desert wanderings.

<sup>35</sup> Roman courts would display a white stone to symbolize acquittal.

<sup>36</sup> c.f. Isaiah 62:2: The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

## Revelation 2:18-29

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Thyatira; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, in whose sight justice comes and cannot be averted,<sup>37</sup> whose kin-dom lasts for eternity.

You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy. Your *agape*<sup>38</sup> and your trust, your service and perseverance continue to grow.

Yet you struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow even more. You tolerate those<sup>39</sup> who, like Jezebel,<sup>40</sup> lead people astray into sexual immorality and the indulgences of Greek culture. Such people even claim to be guided by the Divine Spirit! I have given them time and space to turn away from their immorality. They refuse. Therefore, I will give them over to themselves. They will suffer through leaping into their avarice, betrayal, and corruption, which lead to death—spiritually, morally, and often physically. The gatherings of my people will then recognize I search hearts and minds and let justice have its day.

To those in Thyatira who do not tolerate “Jezebel” I say this: Good for you for rejecting the teaching that leads you astray! You have rejected the so-called mysteries of the Accuser; therefore, the only obligation I place on you is to keep on keeping on. Continue to walk the long obedience that leads to the Day when my kin-dom will be revealed in its fullness.<sup>41</sup> I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. When the Day of my unveiling comes, I will share with you my moral authority over the nations,<sup>42</sup> and you will shine like the brightness of the

heavens<sup>43</sup> and lead many into right relationships. If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches!

*I've been watching Handmaid's Tale on Hulu:  
Why are women always blamed  
(as if no man in Thyatira was a "Jezebel")?*

*Handmaid's Tale is set in mythical "Gilead,"  
yet depicts authoritarian violence against women.  
Where is the Balm in Gilead?*

*Long ago, men turned away from The Glory's justice:  
Giving ourselves over to desire,  
my wife, my daughter, and my sisters suffer.*

*God, it's me. I repent of my assumptions about my primacy of place in a society designed by and for men. I try not to be "that guy," yet know I am (at times). O Glory, may I grow ever more honest in my relationships, ever more self-aware, ever more willing to serve not to be served. As I walk away from the indulgences of this culture, may I lead others to join me—may we journey together until there is a balm in Gilead.*

## Revelation 3:1-6

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Sardis; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, who is imbued with the seven<sup>44</sup> spirits—symbol of the fullness of the Divine Spirit—and holds the seven stars—

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<sup>37</sup> The paraphrase conveys the meaning of the symbols “eyes like blazing fire” and “feet are like burnished bronze”; c.f. Daniel 5:6: His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.

<sup>38</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including, *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *phelos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is “The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is empathy or a close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

<sup>39</sup> Scholars debate whether “Jezebel” refers to a particular woman or symbolically to people who lead others astray. The majority opinion sides with a symbolic interpretation, so I refer to them in the plural rather than to her in the singular.

<sup>40</sup> c.f. 1 Kings 16:31: He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel

daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians and began to serve Baal and worship him; c.f. also 1 Kings 18:19: Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.

<sup>41</sup> c.f. Psalm 2:7-9: I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”

<sup>42</sup> c.f. Numbers 24:17: I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel....

<sup>43</sup> c.f. Daniel 12:3: Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

<sup>44</sup> Generally in biblical numerology the number 7 refers to the divine perfection.

symbol for each gathering and the whole Body—in his hand.

You struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow. I know who you are; you're not fooling me. You have a strong reputation as "The Church Alive" and "The Happening Congregation" but it's all a mirage. Your hearts are dead. Wake up! Stir yourselves from your slumber!<sup>45</sup> Nourish what is about to die—the God-life within you and your true selves (which remain incomplete, not fully formed). Recall what you have seen. Recite what you have been told. Remember to embrace the Way of Jesus. If you do not awaken to the God-life, you will remain in your slumber and miss the moment of my unveiling.

Yet a few of you in Sardis, who I know by name, make The Glory happy. You refuse to pollute yourselves but seek purity and integrity in how you live the God-life.<sup>46</sup> I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who live the God-life in this way. Your names are written forever in the Book of Life!<sup>47</sup> As you endure and persevere, continuing to trust in me, I will speak your name before The Glory and all heaven. If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches!

*I get concerned  
when like a roller coaster my faith ascends  
only to descend again.*

*Mercurial as my faith may be  
the time to worry is when my faith descends  
never to ascend again.*

God, it's me. I pray I will live until I die—live in you, live for your justice and joy, live until the shalom of Jesus escorts me into your unveiled presence. Until that moment, help me to hear "The Shema,"<sup>48</sup>

practice Micah's to-do list,<sup>49</sup> and walk the way of Jesus.<sup>50</sup> Though I may fall, help me not to fail. When I slumber, awaken me with your trumpet call.

### Revelation 3:7-13

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Philadelphia; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, who is holy and true, who alone is given authority and dominion over David's House to welcome and to cast out, to usher in and prevent from entering.<sup>51</sup>

You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy. I know what you do—you have but meager strength, yet you struggle to keep my Word and honor my Name. Look! See! I have opened the door to David's House to you and no one can shut it. Fear not the crowd surrounding the Accuser, who claim religion yet practice deceit, manipulation, and cruelty. I will see to it they are humbled and acknowledge the truth: I love you! As you have obeyed my exhortation to endure and persevere, I will surround you, guard and protect you, and keep you from the trials that test every human heart upon the whole earth.

I will be unveiled for all to see. Embrace the God-life you have and trust that no one can take it from you. I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. I will establish you and in me will be your strength.<sup>52</sup> Never again will you leave my presence. I will inscribe The Glory upon your heart and Jerusalem upon your hands; indeed, the New Jerusalem shall be your home.<sup>53</sup> I will make you new creation.<sup>54</sup> If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches!

*Word to the oppressed:  
Come you who are weary,  
whose labor degrades, whose dignity is denied.*

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<sup>45</sup> c.f. Proverbs 24:33-34: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

<sup>46</sup> c.f. Ezra 9:10-11: But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: "The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other."

<sup>47</sup> c.f. Daniel 12:3: ...at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.

<sup>48</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

<sup>49</sup> c.f. Micah 6:8.

<sup>50</sup> c.f. Luke 4:18-19, among many.

<sup>51</sup> c.f. Isaiah 22:22: I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

<sup>52</sup> c.f. 2 Chronicles 3:17 where the Temple's two pillars are named, Jachin and Boaz, which mean "I will establish" and "In him is strength" in Hebrew.

<sup>53</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 48:35b: And the name of the city from that time on will be: The Lord is there; c.f. also Jeremiah 33:16: In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.

<sup>54</sup> c.f. Isaiah 65:17: "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."

*I AM with you.*

*I WILL BE always with you.*

*I open the door of my heart to you.*

*Good luck to anyone trying to shut it.*

*Ain't never going to happen.*

*The door to my heart is always open—to you.*

God, it's me. I receive comfort hearing these promises, yet I acknowledge they are written for people other than me: those whose labor degrades, whose dignity is denied. They are written to those around the globe and in my own community who live paycheck to paycheck, who live in food deserts, whose vote is denied. Though they may feel as if their prayers are not heard, I know you hear and heed each word they speak, even the sighs too deep for words. O Glory, may I be your instrument of blessing to answer their prayers.

### **Revelation 3:14-22**

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Laodicea; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, who says it and it is so, for he is trustworthy and true, the sovereign over all the Cosmos.

You struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow. I also know what you all do, that your “yes” means “maybe” and your “no” means “we’ll see.” You are neither passionate nor apathetic, neither fire nor ice. You must choose the God-life! So because you dance the God-rhythms tentatively, because you embrace the God-life with restraint, I will vomit<sup>55</sup> you out of my mouth, until you choose not to defile yourselves.

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<sup>55</sup> c.f. Leviticus 20:22: Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out.

<sup>56</sup> c.f. Genesis 3:7, 9-10: Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid”; c.f. also Isaiah 47:3: Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance; I will spare no one.

<sup>57</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:2-3a: But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and

You think that because you are wealthy and have every luxury you can want, need, or imagine that The Glory holds you in high esteem. You say to yourselves, “We are living the good life!” But you are not living good lives. More than this, the lives you are living are actually just sad: misery and sorrow embrace within you, ignorance and shame are your best friends. You are naked.<sup>56</sup> Hear me! Heed my words! Seek what belongs to The Glory, for it cannot be destroyed. Open yourselves to the Refiner's fire<sup>57</sup>—that the dross of your false self might be purged and only your true self remain. Then you will be clothed in glory, The Glory will be your covering.<sup>58</sup>

Be not disheartened. I seek to compel and to convince, to educate and train<sup>59</sup> those whom I love. So be eager and enthusiastic about the God-life. Dive into the deep waters that renew and refresh. Open your minds to new ideas and your hearts to fresh experiences. I am right here before you! I am waiting, just waiting, always waiting! Whoever opens themselves to me, I will join them for Sunday dinner, and it will be a feast to remember. Even better, it will change the way you are living.

I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. You will sit beside me in heaven just as I sit beside The Glory. What a celebration that will be! If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches!

*The rain came early to the desert.*

*The man stepped on to his patio—*

*not quite cool yet absent the promised heat to come.*

*Absent the brutality of an Arizona summer,*

*the man sipped his coffee.*

*“Life is good,” he thought. “Comfortable.”*

*The maid delivered his oatmeal a few moments later.*

*“Just the way I like it,” he complimented her.*

purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.

<sup>58</sup> c.f. Zechariah 3:3-4: Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.” Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.”

<sup>59</sup> The Greek words used are *elencho* and *paideno* which are usually translated as “rebuke” and “discipline.” However, *elencho* also means “to compel or convince” and *paideno* also means “to educate or train.” I lean into these latter definitions for the paraphrase because the words of Jesus seek to invite growth rather than convey punishment.



*“Berries, nuts, and not too hot, not too cold.”*

*The man smiled at her.*

*The maid averted her eyes, lowering her head, returning the man’s gesture as best she could.*

*“Yes, quite comfortable,” he thought.*

*“Complacent,” she thought.*

*“Complicit,” say the prophets.*

*God, it’s me. Help me repent of complacency and complicity—to see others in their dignity and humanity, to act with compassion and advocate for justice. Help me look beyond my own comfort to the cries of others. May I choose not to defile myself. May I choose you.*

### **Revelation 4:1-11<sup>60</sup>**

After hearing the angel speak Jesus’ words of encouragement and challenge to the seven churches, I continued in my vision mystical and transcendent. I looked and saw beyond the veil that separates earth from heaven—the curtain between them was open to me! And the voice of the trumpet spoke to me again, saying, “Come! Enter! I will show you the divine necessity,<sup>61</sup> that which The Glory has proclaimed must happen—what is, has been, and will be.

I was taken by the Spirit into the throne room of The Glory. On the throne sat The Glory, whose radiance shone with holiness and passion,<sup>62</sup> with an emerald rainbow—symbol of the Messiah—encircling the throne.

Worship of The Glory was the foundation of both heaven and earth.<sup>63</sup>

Surrounding the throne were the elders of Israel and the Church—all The Glory’s people together as one voice and singing praise to the One who sits upon the throne. They had been made pure, their true selves, and wore golden crowns upon their heads. From the throne came lightning and thunder,<sup>64</sup> as on the mountain when Moses stood before The Glory: the presence, the radiance, the splendor overwhelmed! Seven Spirits, representing the fullness of the Divine Spirit, encircled and permeated the throne, which was set upon baptismal waters<sup>65</sup> and The Glory’s promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood.<sup>66</sup>

In the center of the throne were four living creatures covered with eyes.<sup>67</sup> They see all—behind and before, above and below, within and between—and represent The Glory’s omniscience. The four living creatures were like the best from among all creation: the noblest like a lion, the strongest like an ox, the wisest like a human, and the swiftest like an eagle. Each living creature had six wings: with two they covered their face to convey reverence, with two they covered their feet to convey humility, and with two they flew like the wind to accomplish the Glory’s will.

The four living creatures live for all eternity to worship before the throne. Day and night they sing, directing all to the deeper dimensions of worship—rooted in eternity and pointing to The Glory’s sovereignty, a political act of rebellion against the alleged power and control of Caesar, both divine decree and human necessity.

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<sup>60</sup> In Revelation 4-5 we see that worship precedes the “Great Battle” between The Glory and evil (Revelation 6 – 20). Before the battle, the Body prepares through worship.

<sup>61</sup> The Greek word is *dei*, which is translated as “necessary” and has the connotation of being a divinely ordained event.

<sup>62</sup> The text refers to carnelian and jasper, which are precious jewels associated in ancient cultures with holiness and passion.

<sup>63</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 1:26-28: I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

<sup>64</sup> c.f. Exodus 19:16: On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.

<sup>65</sup> The phrase “baptismal waters” is interpretive, as the symbol refers to a huge bowl, like a baptismal font, that stood at the

entrance to the Jerusalem Temple and was called “the Sea”; c.f. 1 Kings 7:23-25: He made the Sea of cast metal, circular in shape, measuring ten cubits from rim to rim and five cubits high. It took a line of thirty cubits to measure around it. Below the rim, gourds encircled it—ten to a cubit. The gourds were cast in two rows in one piece with the Sea. The Sea stood on twelve bulls, three facing north, three facing west, three facing south and three facing east. The Sea rested on top of them, and their hindquarters were toward the center. It held two-thousand baths.

<sup>66</sup> c.f. Genesis 9:11: “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

<sup>67</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 1:4-6: I looked, and I saw...an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings.

The four living creatures never pause their worship of The Glory as they sing:

Holy! Holy! Holy!<sup>68</sup>  
The Glory!

Who was before the beginning of time,  
Who will be after the end of all things,  
Who is in every moment in between—  
the eternal present!

As the four living creatures sang of glory and honor and thanksgiving to The Glory, the elders of all the people fell to their faces. They removed their golden crowns and lay them at The Glory's throne to proclaim their allegiance, their worship, and their confession of The Glory as the true sovereign over all the Cosmos. The elders also sang:

Worthy! Worthy! Worthy!  
The Glory—our Lord and our God!<sup>69</sup>  
No Caesar lays hold of authority, honor and power!<sup>70</sup>  
The Glory created all things: praise be forever!

*Lightning and thunder  
convey glory, honor and authority  
to speak without interruption.  
To whom is such power given?  
I am silenced before the One  
to whom glory, honor and authority  
cannot be taken away.*

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<sup>68</sup> c.f. Isaiah 6:2-4: Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

<sup>69</sup> The song the elders sing is deeply subversive. In the text, the elders proclaim The Glory to be “our Lord and our God,” which usurped the title by which Caesar was known.

<sup>70</sup> The elders also proclaim the attributes of “glory, honor, and power” belong to The Glory, when Roman culture argued they are Caesar's exclusive possession. Again, the song the elders sing is deeply subversive!

<sup>71</sup> In chapter five John offers his persecuted parishioners encouragement: The Glory is in control of history, even though their lives reflected otherwise. It is neither Caesar nor any other political, economic, or social oppressor that ultimately guides the

God, it's me. Too often our worship is shallow. Too often our worship is about us rather than you. Too often we enter worship asking what it will do for us rather than what we will do (and become) for you. Too often we neglect to remember that worship brings us into your direct presence. Too often do we forget that we do not worship alone but with the communion of saints! Forgive us! Renew our worship that it may be a sacred act. Free us through our worship to live only for you.

### **Revelation 5:1-14<sup>71</sup>**

As I continued to look into The Glory's throne room, I saw someone holding a scroll with writing on both sides, a symbol of The Glory's power!<sup>72</sup> But the scroll was sealed, not just with one seal but seven seals. No one could read it,<sup>73</sup> for no one in heaven or on earth could open the scroll! I heard a celestial messenger, mighty in voice and visage, cry out, “Who can open the scroll that holds the names written in the Book of Life? Who can open the scroll that foreshadows the divine necessity that The Glory has proclaimed must happen— what is, has been, and will be? Who controls the destination to which the arc of history must bend?”<sup>74</sup>

I looked, expecting someone to come forth. I looked upon the strongest and wisest in human history, but they could not. I looked upon the idols and deities of the Romans, but they could not. I looked upon the fearsome force of nature itself, but it could not. I wept, for nothing

destinies of life and death. In chapter five no one can be found to open the scroll (of unfolding human history) except the Lamb that was slain (Jesus) because the scroll was sealed with seven seals (completely and utterly closed except to Jesus' will.)

<sup>72</sup> Ancient papyrus was woven together and so was smooth on one side and bumpy on the other side. Therefore, people only wrote on the smooth side. That this papyrus was “written on both sides” symbolizes an act of The Glory's power; c.f. Ezekiel 2:9-10: Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

<sup>73</sup> c.f. Isaiah 29:11: For you this whole vision is nothing but words sealed in a scroll. And if you give the scroll to someone who can read, and say, “Read this, please,” they will answer, “I can't; it is sealed.” c.f. also Daniel 12:4: But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.

<sup>74</sup> The Greek text does not indicate what is written on the scroll at this point in The Revelation. However, c.f. Revelation 6 ff.

nor no one could open the scroll. No one was able. No one was worthy.

Then one of the elders from among the tribes of Israel and the sent ones<sup>75</sup> of the Church called out to me, “Weep not, my child, but look! See! The Lion of the tribe of Judah<sup>76</sup>—Protector and Strength from David comes, the Root of David<sup>77</sup> upon which the House of Israel is built approaches. He has won the victory over death and the grave; he has proved victorious over all the schemes of the evil one. He can do it. He can open the scroll. Seven seals are no match for he who is sovereign over all human history.”

I turned toward the One to whom the elder pointed, expecting to see a great lion. Instead I saw Jesus, like a lamb that had been slain.<sup>78</sup> Though slain, he had all power and authority. Through his sacrifice, the Divine Spirit was sent to the four corners of the earth. Jesus, the Lion who looked like a Lamb, strode forward and took the scroll from the right hand of The Glory. The four living creatures and the elders fell prostrate in worship with songs, prayers and incense ascending.<sup>79</sup> The four living creatures sang a new song:

Worthy! Worthy! Worthy!

Taking the scroll and breaking the seals – Yes, he can!

You, O Crucified Messiah,  
ransomed people from their slavery,  
from every tribe and clan and nation,  
from every tongue and dialect!<sup>80</sup>

You form and transform them into a kin-dom  
to bring people to The Glory,

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<sup>75</sup> The Greek word *apostoleos*, which usually is translated as “apostle,” is from the verb meaning to send; thus “sent one.”

<sup>76</sup> C.f. Genesis 49:9-10: You are a lion’s cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

<sup>77</sup> c.f. Isaiah 11:1: A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

<sup>78</sup> c.f. Leviticus 4:32-33: If someone brings a lamb as their sin offering, they are to bring a female without defect. They are to lay their hand on its head and slaughter it for a sin offering at the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered.

<sup>79</sup> c.f. Psalm 141:2: May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.

to serve not to be served,

to join you in the work of bringing heaven to earth!

Then I looked and heard the voices of the heavenly host—celestial messengers numbering in the thousands and ten-thousands,<sup>81</sup> a multitude that seemed to go on forever. They encircled the throne and were joined by the living creatures and the elders. All of them joined together in singing praise to the Lamb:

Worthy is the Lamb!

Though slain he lives:

to him is given sevenfold doxology!<sup>82</sup>

Then their voices were joined by every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth as together they sang:

To The Glory and to the Lamb:

Doxology!

Praise to the four corners of the earth!<sup>83</sup>

The four living creatures said, “So be it!” And the elders once again fell prostrate in adoration.

*The couple sat anxiously  
waiting for the oncologist to join them.  
The small, well-lit room  
not matching their spirits.*

*The mother watched as her infant  
failed to latch on to her breast.  
Glassy eyes presaged  
dread, sorrow, and a mother’s lament.*

<sup>80</sup> c.f. Isaiah 42:10: Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, you islands, and all who live in them.

<sup>81</sup> c.f. Daniel 7:10: A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened; c.f. also Psalm 148:7-14: Praise the Lord from the earth...kings of the earth and all nations, Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.

<sup>82</sup> The text translates as “power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” The significance of their being seven acclamations is to convey the divine perfection of their doxology.

<sup>83</sup> The text translates as “praise, honor, glory, and power.” The use of four symbolizes the act of praise goes throughout the earth, to the four corners.

*Rage for a time, O Elite!*

*Lift your voices in haughty self-congratulation.*

*The kairos is coming when the Lion stalks and the Lamb is no longer prey.*

God, it's me. I sometimes forget that I am not in control of my own life, and certainly not history. I may control a certain, few choices, yet I am acted upon more often than I act—the river of culture, with me in its midst, flows to places I prefer to avoid. How much more are the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized acted upon? How much less influence and autonomy do they have? O Glory, I trust that you direct the course of history. I trust that when the river of culture flows toward turbulent falls, even there and especially there, you embrace me with your love. O Glory, do not let me go!

#### **Revelation 6:1-17<sup>84</sup>**

I continued to watch and saw the Lamb open the first of the seven seals from the Book of Life, and then heard one of the four living creatures command in a voice like thunder, “Go forth to battle!”<sup>85</sup> I looked and saw a white horse,<sup>86</sup> the animal of war!<sup>87</sup> Its rider held a bow and wore a crown. He rode out as a conqueror committed to triumph<sup>88</sup> over the riders who were to follow.

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<sup>84</sup> The battle begins! Having prepared us for the coming conflict in previous chapters, the Revelation now enters into a description of that conflict between The Glory and evil. For John's flock, who are living in the midst of persecution, Annie Dillard's question reverberates: “What in Sam Hill is going on?” Revelation 6-7 answers Dillard's question.

<sup>85</sup> The Greek word *erchomai* can mean either “come” or “go,” so scholars argue whether the “four horseman of the apocalypse” are coming or going, and, whichever it is, from where are they coming and to where are going? Are they coming from heaven or earth? Are they going to heaven or earth? The interpretive paraphrase conveys the rider on the white horse as going from heaven to earth and as the other riders coming from earth to heaven to engage the battle between them. The invitation for the riders to come is less a command and more a sense of resignation, “What you do, do quickly” (c.f. John 13:27).

<sup>86</sup> In Revelation 19:11-16 the rider on the white horse defeats the Dragon and two Beasts.

<sup>87</sup> In the symbolism of the 1<sup>st</sup> century the ox was the animal for farming, the donkey the animal for transportation, and the horse the animal for war.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, the second living creature called out, “Come do what you must.” I looked and saw a red horse<sup>89</sup> whose rider was given the power of war; social evil was the arrow in his quiver. He had the power to rob the earth of its peace and inspire murder and mayhem (and he was good at his job). The sword in his hand was drunk upon bloodshed.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, the third living creature called out, “Come do what you must.” I looked and saw a black horse whose rider was given the power of famine; ecological evil was the arrow in his quiver. He revealed when food was scarce and mocked those who could not pay inflated prices for their basic food supplies.<sup>90</sup> Yet he was not allowed to touch the oil or the wine; deep roots he could not touch for limits had been placed upon him.

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, the fourth living creature called out, “Come do what you must.” I looked and saw a pale horse whose rider was given the power of disease and plague;<sup>91</sup> biological evil was the arrow in his quiver. The rider had a name, Death, and the afterlife followed closely behind him. The riders were granted the power over only a portion<sup>92</sup> of the earth, for The Glory also placed limits upon the extent to which their evil could be inflicted.

When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, I saw under The Glory's altar all those who had been slain for being steadfast and true to the Word; for giving testimony on behalf of justice and joy their lives were taken. “How long, O Glory, sovereign over all the Cosmos,” they cried out,

<sup>88</sup> c.f. Psalm 45:3-4: Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one; clothe yourself with splendor and majesty. In your majesty ride forth victoriously in the cause of truth, humility and justice; let your right hand achieve awesome deeds.

<sup>89</sup> c.f. Zechariah 1:8-10: During the night I had a vision, and there before me was a man mounted on a red horse...I asked, “What are these, my lord?” The angel who was talking with me answered, “I will show you what they are...They are the ones the LORD has sent to go throughout the earth...”

<sup>90</sup> The text refers to wheat and barley.

<sup>91</sup> c.f. Leviticus 26:25: And I will bring the sword on you to avenge the breaking of the covenant. When you withdraw into your cities, I will send a plague among you, and you will be given into enemy hands; c.f. also Ezekiel 14:21: For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals!

<sup>92</sup> The portion delineated in the text is one-fourth. The point is less about the percentage and more that it was limited in scope (c.f. also a similar use of proportional limitations in chapter 8).

“until we are vindicated?”<sup>93</sup> How long must we wait until our oppression is overturned and we see your justice and joy?” Each of them was given a pristine robe, symbol of their purity and integrity, and encouraged to endure a little longer and wait patiently until the full number of their siblings could be gathered, all who will be slain for dancing the God-rhythms and living the God-life.

When the Lamb opened the sixth seal, I saw heaven’s power burst forth as a kaleidoscope of light and wind, as if The Glory’s own Breath was rushing through the midst of the earth. Sun and moon and stars were darkened.<sup>94</sup> Mountains were brought low and islands displaced.<sup>95</sup> No one could escape The Glory’s call for justice and right relationships. All who had once scoffed at The Glory’s command to let justice roll down like a river and right relationships like a never-ending stream<sup>96</sup> were found hiding in dark corners and the crevices of caves. The Elite of the earth—captains of industry and rulers of nations, the famous and the fabulous—could not escape having to give an accounting for their actions. Overwhelmed by it all, they cried out, “Who can stand in this Day?”<sup>97</sup>

*Wars and rumors of wars,  
famine and global warming,  
pestilence and plague,*

*Who will stand in their way?  
Who will stand against their fomenting chaos?  
Who will stand for the least, the last, and the lost?*

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<sup>93</sup> c.f. Psalm 43:1: Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation. Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked.

<sup>94</sup> c.f. Joel 2:28-32, especially 2:31: The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD; c.f. also Isaiah 13:10-11: The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and humble the pride of the ruthless.

<sup>95</sup> c.f. Haggai 2:6-7: This is what the LORD Almighty says: “In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,” says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>96</sup> c.f. Amos 5:25.

<sup>97</sup> C.f. Malachi 3:2: Who can stand the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? c.f. also Nahum 1:6: Who can

*Only One who is faithful and true,  
who sets boundaries and limits lest all be destroyed,  
who looks like a Lamb yet roars like a Lion.*

God, it’s me. Though I seek peace, may I stand with you against war and famine and disease. Though I desire only to live under your shalom, may I stand with victims of abuse, betrayal, and corruption for whom your shalom is a mirage. Though I trust “you got this,” may I stand with you as you overturn injustice and oppression. O Glory, even more than wanting to be on “the right side of history,” I want to be on the right side of your will.

### **Revelation 7:1-17**

I continued to watch and saw four celestial messengers standing at the four corners of the earth. They were holding back the four winds<sup>98</sup> that harm and destroy, for The Glory had commanded them to protect those who belong to the kin-dom from dangers that would come were it not for The Glory’s providential will. The messengers have the authority to release the winds, but I heard the messenger from the east command them, “Wait! Do not allow any harm to come to the gatherings of The Glory’s people until they are properly sealed with the sign<sup>99</sup> that they are part of the kin-dom who belong to The Glory.”

I heard the number of those who were sealed with the sign of their being chosen, beloved, and anointed: 144,000<sup>100</sup>—symbol for the fullness of those whom The Glory has chosen and called from before the beginning of

withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? Yet, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees the answer to this question.

<sup>98</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 49:36: After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.

<sup>99</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 6:8: Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads; c.f. also Ezekiel 9:4: “...Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.”

<sup>100</sup> In Hebrew numerology, the number 1,000 represents a veritable infinity similar to the English usage of “oodles” or “gajillion.” The number 144,000, therefore, is 12 tribes of Israel times 12 apostles of Jesus times a gajillion (12 x 12 x 1,000 = 144,000). That 144,000 is a symbolic number for “all those who belong to The Glory” is indicated in 7:9 where the crowd is said to be “too numerous to count.”

time! They came from among all the twelve tribes of Israel and were the fruit of all the twelve sent ones of Jesus, not just a few but a vast multitude too numerous to count. They had been gathered from among every race and nation, every tribe and clan and family, every tongue and language. They wore the pristine robes of purity and integrity and waved palm branches<sup>101</sup> of exultation and celebration. But what was most remarkable to me was this: They were standing!<sup>102</sup> They were able to stand for the Lamb had made them whole and complete. And so they sang their praise:

Rescue and healing come from The Glory,  
who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!

The innumerable gathering of heavenly beings and earthly vessels fell prostrate in worship before The Glory, as they continued to sing the seven-fold doxology:

Amen! Amen! Amen! Amen! Amen! Amen!  
Forever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever and ever!

Then one of the elders surprised me by asking me a question, “This vast gathering in pristine robes, who are they and where do they come from?”

“Surely I do not know!”

“They are those who have been chosen and called from before the beginning of time—who belong and have always belonged to The Glory. They have fought the good fight and run the race to completion. They have endured persecution and overcome it. They wear pristine robes that have been washed by the Lamb himself, just as they have been made clean, whole and complete. Enoch spoke of them when he said,

Before The Glory they will sit,  
serving before the throne,  
sheltered by the One who is Eternal Light.<sup>103</sup>

“The truth-teller Isaiah also spoke of these who wear pristine robes and stand before the Lamb,

Hunger never again! Thirst never again!<sup>104</sup>  
Though the sun beat down upon you,  
and scorching heat wither you,  
the Lamb will be your shepherd;  
the Lamb will lead you to springs of living water;  
the Lamb will wipe away all your tears!  
Death shall never again have dominion over you.”<sup>105</sup>

*“Great is Thy Faithfulness” is not my favorite hymn.  
Hard to sing, for me,  
usually pitched just a wee bit too high for my voice.*

*As I stood in the basketball venue,  
with 19,000 others—beloved of Jesus all,  
singing “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” became easy.*

*The God-life  
intended to be lived  
in community.*

*God, it's me. Thank you, O Glory, that I can stand before Jesus and stand with him. Thank you that I do not stand alone but with a great cloud of witnesses and together with brothers and sisters. Together we sing your praise, seek your kin-dom, and serve your people. May our service bring others whom you have called, whom you love and have always loved, into the eternal gathering that will be our joy to behold. Amen!*

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<sup>101</sup> c.f. Nehemiah 8:14-15: They found written in the Law...that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month...“Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from...and shade trees, to make temporary shelters....”

<sup>102</sup> Here is the answer to the question asked in Malachi 3:2 and at the end of chapter 6: Who can stand when the Day comes?” The answer is all those who have been made whole and complete by the Lamb.

<sup>103</sup> c.f. Enoch 45:4: “And on that day I will cause My Chosen One to dwell among them and I will transform Heaven and make it an Eternal Blessing and Light.”

<sup>104</sup> c.f. Isaiah 48:9-10: to say to the captives, “Come out,” and to those in darkness, “Be free!” They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. They will neither hunger nor thirst...He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.

<sup>105</sup> c.f. Isaiah 25:8: ...He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.

## Revelation 8:1-13<sup>106</sup>

When the Lamb opened the seventh and final seal, thus demonstrating his sovereignty over all the Cosmos, I heard only the sound of silence. No voice. No trumpet. Only a pause as all heaven listened to the peoples' prayers. All the prayers from the four corners of the earth were gathered together by a celestial messenger who held a golden censer<sup>107</sup> in his hand. This messenger took the censer filled with prayer, added to it the passion of The Glory's own Spirit, and flung it to the earth: And Heaven burst forth upon the earth!

Seven of the celestial messengers, who had witnessed the power of prayer to unveil The Glory's will, were handed seven trumpets<sup>108</sup> and prepared to sound them. The first messenger sounded her trumpet and The Glory's justice sprung forth as on the day when Pharaoh was overcome by plagues:<sup>109</sup> hail and fire, mixed with blood.<sup>110</sup> The Glory's justice would have consumed all things but in mercy only a limited portion of the earth was consumed.

The second messenger sounded his trumpet and The Glory's fury was unleashed against all abuse, betrayal, and corruption in the Cosmos, yet once again only a portion was consumed. Had The Glory not withheld the full fury, all creation would have been destroyed.<sup>111</sup>

The third messenger sounded her trumpet, and I witnessed the princes of the earth stripped of their glory

and thrown down from their places of privilege<sup>112</sup>—their power and honor and glory became a mirage. In their arrogance, these princes had polluted the waters of the earth, making all creation bitter. Thus these princes are called "Wormwood," whose name means "bitter."

The fourth messenger sounded his trumpet and earth was undone: day became night.<sup>113</sup> Through the darkness The Glory was revealed, and The Glory's sacred promise made good: oppressors may rise for a time but shall not abide in the kin-dom. The night reigned over a third of the day so only a portion was consumed.

I watched and listened with dread in my heart. Above me flew an eagle<sup>114</sup> pronouncing, "Woe! Woe! Woe!" as in the days of Moses who warned the Israelites and the truth-teller Hosea who warned the kings and priests against arrogance, abuse, and injustice. I dreaded what might come next, for there remained still three messengers prepared to sound their trumpets.

*"Disney Princess Theology"*  
*aligning always with the weak, never the strong,*  
*always the Hebrew slaves, never Pharaoh,*  
*always the exiles, never Babylon,*  
*always the disciples, never the Pharisees.*

*Judgement*  
*of the weak, of slaves, of exiles, and even*  
*good-hearted (if bumbling) disciples*

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<sup>106</sup> In chapters 8-9 John circles back to revisit the same period of time dealt with in chapters 6-7: the time period between Christ's cross and his return. In chapters 8-9 John deals with the issue of conflict between God and evil from a slightly different perspective than that which is found in chapters 6-7. Here in chapters 8-9 John speaks of the spiritual conflict as it relates to prayer, judgment, sin and repentance. See endnote 1 in Appendix A on John's use of time.

<sup>107</sup> The text uses the symbol of "golden censers," which were used in the Temple for prayer, c.f. 1 Kings 7:50. (Not quoted in full as the verse lacks clarity without greater context.)

<sup>108</sup> c.f. Leviticus 23:23-26: The LORD said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites: 'On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of sabbath rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts...The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement';" c.f. also Numbers 31:6: Moses sent them into battle, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, who took with him articles from the sanctuary and the trumpets for signaling; and, c.f. finally, Joshua 6, the battle of Jericho narratives.

<sup>109</sup> c.f. Exodus 9:13-25, especially verse 24: hail fell and lightning flashed back and forth. It was the worst storm in all the land of Egypt since it had become a nation.

<sup>110</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 38:22: I will execute judgment on him with plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him; c.f. also Exodus 7:20: Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood.

<sup>111</sup> c.f. Exodus 12:13: The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

<sup>112</sup> c.f. Isaiah 14:12: How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!

<sup>113</sup> c.f. Exodus 10:21: Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness spreads over Egypt—darkness that can be felt."

<sup>114</sup> c.f. Hosea 8:1: Put the trumpet to your lips! An eagle is over the house of the LORD because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law; c.f. also Deuteronomy 28:49: The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand.

*seems unfair,  
but what if I am none of these?*

God, it's me. I thank you for the gift of prayer. That all heaven awaits my heart is stunning (and encouraging). May my prayers ascend that they may descend, empowered by your Spirit, emboldened by your fury, able to transform your judgment into justice. As I pray, I confess: I am strong not weak, Pharaoh not the Hebrews, Babylon not the exiles, more a Pharisee than a disciple. O Glory, in your mercy forgive. In your mercy renew. In your mercy I find my only hope.

### **Revelation 9:1-21<sup>115</sup>**

The fifth messenger sounded his trumpet and a star descended from heaven to earth—the Accuser thrown out of heaven and down into the abyss. When the abyss was opened it poured forth smoke, as the Accuser unleashed his fire and fury upon the earth. This is the source of persecution of those who belong to The Glory and have been sealed by the blood of the Lamb.

Like locusts<sup>116</sup> overwhelming Egypt during the plagues or the undoing of the heavens described by Joel,<sup>117</sup> so the Accuser's fury and fire tormented people and nations, especially those who belonged to The Glory. The torment was fierce but bounded by The Glory's providence: green grass could not be touched, and the locusts' oppression would die with the swarm.<sup>118</sup> These days

of oppression will be awful to live through. Those targeted for persecution, especially those who belong to The Glory, will wish for death that does not come quickly enough.

Those who swarm like locusts came from the east, from beyond Israel, riding horses prepared for battle.<sup>119</sup> They dressed like ancient enemies: wearing a crown upon their heads, growing their beards like men but braiding their hair like women—all according to the customs of those living beyond Israel.<sup>120</sup> They swarmed with ferocity to do the Accuser's bidding: chaos and anarchy, sorrow and suffering followed in their wake. There was no escape from their wrath, only patient endurance, for they were equipped to accomplish complete destruction, but The Glory limited their power. Their king was the one who slithered up from the abyss, whose name is Destroyer.<sup>121</sup>

This is the first sorrow and suffering, yet there is more to come.

The sixth messenger sounded his trumpet.

I heard a voice coming from the altar in the Temple, from the four horns decorated with gold that mark the four corners of the altar. This is a place of refuge for the guilty. This voice spoke with The Glory's authority, saying, "Release the four messengers who are bound and who come from beyond the great river Euphrates."<sup>122</sup>

With their release evil descended upon evil, and humanity was caught up in the maelstrom. Evil did the Accuser's bidding. The Glory gave humanity over to themselves, to the Accuser, and to the ten thousand times

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<sup>115</sup> Revelation 9 is difficult to paraphrase because several of the symbols lack a clear referent in either the Hebrew Bible or Roman culture. For example, locusts refer back to several passages in the Hebrew scriptures, but the multi-hued locusts do not. Because of this lack of specific referents, interpreters have used chapter 9 to conjecture fanciful meanings (e.g. the colorful locusts are the Ottoman Turks or modern helicopters). Mainline scholarship deems it best to maintain consistency and integrity in form; that is, be consistent in the way one interprets. In the absence of a clear referent, I have chosen to paraphrase broadly: Clearly what John describes is disturbing for his readers, even bleak.

<sup>116</sup> c.f. Exodus 10:1-20, especially 10:4: If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow; c.f. also Joel 1:4: What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten.

<sup>117</sup> c.f. Joel 2:1-2: Blow the trumpet in Zion...Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness...such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.

<sup>118</sup> The text notes the locusts will be at work for five months, which is the typical lifespan for a locust.

<sup>119</sup> c.f. Joel 2:4-11, especially 2:4-6a, in which the horde is depicted as a blend of human soldiers and swarming locusts: They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish....

<sup>120</sup> Scholars suggest the enemies depicted were from the Arabian peninsula.

<sup>121</sup> The Greek text uses the Hebrew name "Abaddon" and its Greek synonym "Apollyon," which mean "Destroyer."

<sup>122</sup> The Euphrates marked the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. Beyond the Euphrates were the "Parthian Hordes" or "Parthian Menace," whom the Romans feared. John seems to be saying here that one day Rome will be overcome by another army "kept ready for this very hour..." The Euphrates is also associated with the first sin (Genesis 2:10-14), the first murder (Genesis 4:16), the first organized revolt against The Glory (Genesis 11:1-9), the first dictatorship (Genesis 10:8-10), and the first war confederation (Genesis 14:1)—so a happy place ☺



ten thousand<sup>123</sup> of the Accuser's servants. The result was brutal, bloody yet boundaried, for The Glory had set limits on what would be allowed.

The Accuser's calvary rode forth with passion and a burning desire to destroy. Looking demonic they rode forth. Speaking demonic desires they rode out. Acting with demonic intent they struck. The Accuser would be found in all that they did, for all was designed to destroy.<sup>124</sup> And destroy they did, even a third of the earth (yet again The Glory would not allow them to go beyond).

Though humanity watched in horror, still they did not turn away from what they saw and heard. As Pharaoh<sup>125</sup> in the days of the plagues, people continued to pursue idolatry, injustice, and oppression of others. People chased riches and ruin and gave themselves over to twisted pleasure, power, and privilege. Though humanity saw and heard all the Accuser's work, they refused to turn away.

### *Eternal battle*

*seen in Dachau and Auschwitz*

*fought in the Donbas*

*famine, disease, the climate itself boiling in rage.*

*Are we to believe evil is boundaried?*

*Do you mean to say it could be worse?*

*But for your mercies, travel all of us, O Glory,  
a pilgrimage to the abyss.*

God, it's me. This is pretty bleak, yet an honest description of "Man's inhumanity to man." The battle rages in every human era, every culture and country, every heart. The battle rages and all seems lost. Where, O Glory, is the rider on the white horse in this

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<sup>123</sup> c.f. Psalm 68:17: The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands; the Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary.

<sup>124</sup> c.f. Psalm 11:6: On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot.

<sup>125</sup> c.f. Exodus 7:2-4: You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites.

<sup>126</sup> The battle pauses for an interlude—a vision behind the scenes in the heavenly courts. After describing the battle between The Glory and evil from two perspectives (chapters 6-7 and 8-9), we see and hear assurance that The Glory has a purpose which cannot be thwarted.

recounting of the battle? Where is the One present between the Cross and the Coming of the Day? Is redemption to come in chapter 10 or perhaps chapter 11? Can the mess we have made of things ever be redeemed? O Glory, in your mercy, give us the patient endurance we need or all will be lost. O Glory, help me endure, for I do not want to lose my way.

### **Revelation 10:1-13<sup>126</sup>**

Then I saw a celestial messenger mighty in appearance, coming down from heaven. Indeed, he was The Glory robed in a cloud as on Mount Sinai<sup>127</sup> with a rainbow<sup>128</sup> as a head covering as seen by the truth-teller Ezekiel. The Glory, whose face shone like the sun and voice roared like a lion, whose feet traversed both land and sea, spoke with the sound of seven thunders—the number of divine wholeness. The voice thundered justice made whole and complete, but I am not allowed to bear witness to what I heard. The voice thundered once again, "Seal up what you have heard, for there are mysteries mortals shall not know nor be allowed to express. What humans cannot imagine is seen clearly by The Glory. This I declare as the One who created heaven and earth and all living things!<sup>129</sup>

"The *kairos* is near when all pause is ended, and the fullness of my purpose will be accomplished. When the seventh messenger sounds her trumpet, the *kairos* of my purpose will be fulfilled, just as foretold by truth-tellers from ages past and sent ones of present times: Jesus will be revealed as sovereign over all the Cosmos and all people made one—the dividing wall of hostility broken down."<sup>130</sup>

After saying this the voice thundered once again, "Take the scroll from the messenger whose feet stand upon land and sea. Take it and eat it. Consume its message. It

<sup>127</sup> c.f. Exodus 14:24: During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion.

<sup>128</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 1:28, previously cited.

<sup>129</sup> c.f. Daniel 12:3-4: This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."

<sup>130</sup> These verses are not referenced specifically in the text of The Revelation; the only reference made is to The Glory's purpose. c.f. Ephesians 1:9-10, 2:14, and 3:4-6.

will taste as sweet as honey upon the lips and then sour the stomach, for the purposes of The Glory are good but difficult.”<sup>131</sup> I took the scroll and ate it, and it did indeed taste sweet in my mouth but then soured my stomach. And I was told, “The days of honey are not yet arrived. There are still difficulties to confront: truths to speak to cultures and countries, to royals and to the rich, to every language and tongue upon the earth.”

*Limits to my vision  
not even Hubble or Webb can see.*

*Mysteries beyond my conceiving  
neither Tolkien nor L'Engle imagined.*

*So I consume your Word  
bitter and beautiful, sweet and satisfying.*

God, it's me. I am told the mystical vision is both transcendent and sublime, that it changes not only a person's perspective but also the person. How I long to see a vision of you robed in a cloud, rainbow upon your head, and hear your voice thunder. Alas, I have only glimpses of your glory—Spirit nudges of assurance or guidance along the way. What I do have, though, is your Word, which I crave. Your Word, which I consume, is indeed both bitter and sweet. Portions of it make my heart sing! Portions make my mind wonder. I will spend my life seeking its understanding, accepting its mystery, and living its truth.

## Revelation 11:1-19<sup>132</sup>

I was handed a reed to use as a measuring rod and told to measure the Temple, just as the truth-teller Ezekiel has once measured the Temple.<sup>133</sup> I was told to measure all of the Temple, including its worshipers, who know The Glory and are known. I was surprised because the Romans had destroyed the Temple two decades before my vision (though what is *chronos* to The Glory). Then I remembered the Temple is not built of bricks and mortar but of those who have been chosen and called, those in whom the Divine Spirit dwells. I was to measure only the inner courts of the Temple for The Glory had given the outer courts over to the nations to do what they must.

The nations will trample Jerusalem and destroy all they are allowed to destroy but only for a time. Like the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes IV, whose reign of destruction and blasphemy was limited to three and one-half years,<sup>134</sup> so the nations will be limited. Yet in the midst of these three and one-half years, The Glory shall maintain two witnesses to the truth, even if what they speak is filled with grief and lament.

These two witnesses are Moses and Elijah—who represent the Torah and the truth-tellers from throughout the ages. They are the ones the truth-teller Zechariah called “the two olive trees” and “two lampstands who serve The Glory before the whole earth.”<sup>135</sup> The two witnesses speak truth and bear witness to The Glory's purpose, that all will be made whole and complete. When they speak, The Glory's truth burns away all falsehood.<sup>136</sup> When they speak, The Glory's truth is enacted. When they speak, The Glory's truth transforms what is not into what can be.<sup>137</sup> In

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<sup>131</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 3:1-3: And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

<sup>132</sup> The interlude, or pause, begun in chapter 10 continues in chapter 11 and does not cease until 11:14. Beginning with 11:15, the second depiction of the battle between The Glory and evil (described mostly in chapters eight and nine) resumes and is consummated with The Glory's victory in 11:14-19.

<sup>133</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 40 in which Ezekiel was given a vision while in exile of the Jerusalem Temple, which lay in ruins, being rebuilt and restored for the people's worship of The Glory.

<sup>134</sup> “Three and one-half years” (or 42 months or 1260 days) is the length of Gentile rule under the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who desecrated the Temple (“the abomination of desolation”)

by, among other things, hanging icons of himself in the Temple and placing a carved image of a pig on the Temple altar!

<sup>135</sup> c.f. Zechariah 4:11-14: Then I asked the angel, “What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?” Again I asked him, “What are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil?” He replied, “Do you not know what these are?” “No, my lord,” I said. So he said, “These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth.”

<sup>136</sup> c.f. 2 Kings 1:10: Elijah answered the captain, “If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!” Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.

<sup>137</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 37:1-14, especially 37:4-5: Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.’”

their words, The Glory's justice is unleashed not by might but by the Divine Spirit.<sup>138</sup>

Yet the Accuser will not be easily dissuaded. The Accuser will persecute and kill through the power of moral decadence as in Sodom, political power as in Egypt, and religious oppression like those who crucified Jesus. The persecution will be fierce, even to the point of desecrating the dead<sup>139</sup> and gloating about their ways!

Yet neither will The Glory be easily dissuaded. The persecutors will think they have won victory, but The Glory is the One who breathes new life into the dead, even those like Jesus and Lazarus who were three days and four days dead.<sup>140</sup> When the time of the nations is brought to an end, Moses and Elijah will lead a parade into heaven, into The Glory's throne room itself. The earth will tremble and quake<sup>141</sup> before The Glory's justice, which will be made whole and complete. All in heaven and those upon the earth will be struck with awe and revere The Glory—some in praise and others in anguish.

This is the second sorrow and suffering, yet there is still a third to come.

The seventh messenger sounded his trumpet and praise burst forth in heaven, a multitude of those whom The Glory has chosen and called sang,

The kin-dom in heaven and earth have become one!  
The Glory and Jesus the Anointed reigning forever!

The twenty-four elders who were seated on thrones surrounding The Glory fell prostrate, singing,

We give thanks to The Glory,  
who was before the beginning of time,  
who will be after the end of all things,  
who is in every moment in between,  
the eternal present.

The nations raged yet your justice prevailed!  
*Kairos* has become *chronos* for renewal and reward.

The *kairos* for accountability has arrived—  
to depose the destructive forces that destroy.

I saw heaven unleashed and unbound, the fullness of The Glory unveiled: thunder, lightning and hailstorms from heaven.<sup>142</sup> The nations trembled, the powers were overturned, the principalities undone.

*Moral arc of history  
bending then breaking  
shattered by avarice, betrayal, corruption*

*How long, O Glory,  
shall you forget  
those for whom Jesus died?*

*Into swirling chaos steps  
a whisper  
that sets free.*

*Chaos ignores but cannot  
mute the whisper—  
its voice guarded by the One who repairs the broken arc.*

*God, it's me. Give me a voice to use for justice,  
compassion, and peace. May my voice not be silenced—  
neither by the Accuser nor my own fear. May my voice  
whisper in hidden corners and shout in the streets. May  
my voice comfort the afflicted and afflict the  
comfortable. May my voice bear witness to Torah and  
prophets' truth until the nations rage no more.*

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<sup>138</sup> c.f. Zechariah 4:6: So he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."

<sup>139</sup> The text uses the symbol "three and one-half days," which refers to the custom of ensuring that a corpse was buried properly within three days. To leave a corpse unburied for longer than three days was a grave insult (double entendre intended). I paraphrase this as "desecrating the dead."

<sup>140</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 37:14: I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.

<sup>141</sup> c.f. Psalm 18:6-7: In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. The earth trembled and quaked and the foundations of the mountains shook....

<sup>142</sup> c.f. Exodus 9:23: When Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, the LORD sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground. So the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt....

## Revelation 12:1-17<sup>148</sup>

With the echo of praise from the twenty-four elders ringing in my ears, I saw a great sign in heaven: the woman<sup>144</sup> foretold by Isaiah the truth-teller—she who is the instrument of our deliverance, before whom even her own people will give reverence.<sup>145</sup> The *kairos* was at hand for her to give birth—our Deliverer approaches! Then another great sign appeared: the Accuser, like a giant, red<sup>146</sup> Dragon. The Accuser, now looking monstrous with seven heads and ten horns, wearing seven crowns,<sup>147</sup> sought to usurp The Glory's authority. It spoke arrogantly and multiplied his arrogance, creating an entire system of abuse and oppression that permeated all I could see, even to the horizon, and infected all it touched. The Accuser mimicked The Glory through its displays of power.

The red Dragon, its giant maw spread wide, squat in front of the woman about to give birth; it prepared to consume her child the moment it was born. (You who remember Herod know that of which I speak.)<sup>148</sup> Yet the child was The Glory's will and set resolve and so was rescued from the mouth of the Dragon, swept into heaven

and The Glory's embrace. The woman's son was also The Glory's Son, as the Psalmist proclaimed:

Ruler of all Nations! Dispenser of Justice!  
He whose rule scatters the wolves of oppression.  
He who shatters systems of tyranny.<sup>149</sup>

For three and one-half years the woman was in the wilderness, protected by the Divine Spirit. The great, red Dragon could not touch the woman. To say the Dragon was angry is an understatement. War erupted in heaven! It wasn't a fair fight.

The celestial messenger Michael led an army of messengers to fight the Dragon. The Dragon and its army fought back and were no match for Michael. The great Dragon—the ancient serpent,<sup>150</sup> the devil, Satan, the Accuser—who seeks to obscure the God-life from all humanity, was thrown down, thrown down, thrown down, thrown down!<sup>151</sup> Heaven would never again be home to the Dragon.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven: “Now is the *kairos*, the kin-dom come, earth becoming as it is in

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<sup>143</sup> Chapter 12 begins the third depiction of the battle between The Glory and evil that occurs between the Cross and the Coming of Jesus to restore the kin-dom in its fullness. Please note as a reminder that this is the same battle described in chapters six and seven (depiction one) and then in chapters eight and nine, ending in 11:15-19 (depiction two). In chapters 6-7 the key image was a rider on a white horse waging war against three horses symbolizing war, disease, and death. In chapters 8-9 the key image was trumpets being sounded, which alludes to Joshua and the battle of Jericho narrative (Joshua 6). Here in chapter 12 the third depiction begins with a symbolic reference to the birth of Jesus and establishment of the Church.

<sup>144</sup> Scholars most often interpret the “woman” to be either Mother Mary or the Church, though the reference in Isaiah is to Jerusalem. I paraphrase the woman as a reference to Mary giving birth to Jesus. For the Isaiah reference, c.f. Isaiah 66:6-13, especially 66:7, 11: “Before she goes into labor, she gives birth; before the pains come upon her, she delivers a son... For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance.”

<sup>145</sup> c.f. Genesis 37:9: Then Joseph had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”

<sup>146</sup> Red (or scarlet) was the color associated with Roman power.

<sup>147</sup> There is no clear referent. Daniel 7 is the most likely referent, though even in Daniel 7 the symbolism is unclear. Lacking specificity and clarity, this symbol (these symbols) lead to interpretive mischief. There is robust debate among literalist

interpreters regarding the meaning—from arguing they depict different departments within Roman government to listing ten, specific emperors who could be the intended meaning (with the list of ten differing from commentator to commentator). Caution is advised. In the interpretation I lean toward the non-literalist interpreters who understand the symbols and numerology to refer to the way oppressive human systems (as Rome was) tend to multiple and become pervasive.

<sup>148</sup> This sentence is not in the text but added as an interpretive note because the symbolism refers to Herod's “slaughter of the innocents” in Matthew 2:16-18.

<sup>149</sup> c.f. Psalm 2:7. Note that I interpret the reference to “rod of iron” in the Psalm as associated with Psalm 23, the work of a shepherd to guard the flock.

<sup>150</sup> c.f. Genesis 3:1: Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”; c.f. also Isaiah 65:25: The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.

<sup>151</sup> Four times in the next five verses the Greek verb *ballo* is used, which means “cast, hurl, or throw.” The use of repetition creates emphasis in the text. Admittedly, my use of “thrown down” four times *in the same sentence* is excessive, but I bet, O Gentle Reader, you remember the point. Shout out to my friend, the Rev. Dr. Doug Kelly, for his “Berkeley Banana Bombs” sermon on Revelation 12 that informed my understanding of the text.

heaven! The Accuser of our beloved, who accuses them before The Glory day and night, has been thrown down out of heaven! Our beloved have triumphed over the Accuser through the gift of love shed by the Lamb and the gift of his teaching the kin-dom Way. Our beloved loved The Glory and the Lamb more than life itself. They did not betray their ideals even in the face of death! Therefore rejoice and shout thanksgiving you who dwell in The Glory's embrace! But sorrow and suffering to the earth, for the Accuser has been thrown down from heaven and is in your midst. Be wary and aware! The Accuser's fury is filled to the brim and overflowing. Its fury spills upon the ground itself, into lakes and rivers; its fury distorts human thinking and hunts human hearts. The Accuser knows its time is short."

When the Dragon saw that it had been thrown down from heaven, never again to be allowed into The Glory's direct presence, it pursued the woman.<sup>152</sup> The woman, and all whom she represents—the fullness of the Body—were lifted up on eagles' wings<sup>153</sup> and carried into the wilderness<sup>154</sup> to be cared for by the Divine Spirit. For three and one-half years, the Body (whom the woman represents) was guarded from the Dragon, who was not allowed to touch them, though not for lack of trying. The Dragon attacked and sought to engulf the Body with flood waters but was prevented—the earth itself swallowed the flood—for the Body was protected throughout this time.

Stifled for a time, the Dragon's fury boiled to overflowing and was unleashed on the woman's offspring—all those who abide in Jesus, following the Way, who have not seen Jesus in the flesh yet trust the testimony about him. These are the persecuted people to whom this vision of hope speaks.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> The symbolic meaning of the "woman" seems to have shifted from Mother Mary to the Church founded in Jesus.

<sup>153</sup> c.f. Exodus 19:4: You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

<sup>154</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 32:10: In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye....

<sup>155</sup> This last sentence is not in the Greek text but would have been understood, assumed, and experienced by John's 1<sup>st</sup> century readers.

<sup>156</sup> John now adds two more personifications of evil to the mix to form an unholy trinity. These two, both called Beasts, are empowered by the Dragon and are given power (ten horns), wisdom (seven heads) and glory (ten crowns), but also carry a blasphemous name. They are ferocious (like a leopard, bear and

*Danny Parsons beat the snot out of me.  
I was seven, and he was eight.  
I remember his fury as if it was yesterday,  
not having lost many fights in my day.*

*Seven-year-old me would have had Danny thrown down  
(if it had been up to me which, thankfully, it was not).  
Now I understand that his fury  
may have reflected his home life.*

*Who is the one who should be "thrown down"?  
Not the Dannels of this world, I think, but  
those for whom abuse and oppression are set resolve,  
those for whom heaven will never feel like home.*

God, it's me. Teach me to see all people with "Jesus Eyes"—seeing them not as they present but as they truly are. Help me to look beyond outer countenance to perceive inner character. Help me to attend with compassion the pleas of the poor and heed the prophet's call for the people, cities, and countries devastated by greed, injustice, and ecological disaster. O Glory, in these days of judgement, make me an instrument of your peace.

### **Revelation 13:1-10<sup>156</sup>**

And I saw one who opposed The Glory and the Lamb, an antichrist that looked like a Beast, rising from the chaos that is the sea. This Beast was most impressive in appearance!<sup>157</sup> It had political power, secular wisdom, and social pizzazz. It derided The Glory and the Lamb. The Beast I saw stalked its prey as Empires have always done,

lion) and the world follows after them (13:1-4). The perpetual question people probe is this: "Who is the antichrist?" to which there are three kinds of answers: (1) a modern politician, (2) generally anyone who opposes The Glory, or (3) Caesar. See endnote 3 in Appendix A for a more in-depth explication of these options.

<sup>157</sup> The text describes the first Beast's appearance as having "ten horns, seven heads, and ten crowns." This passage does not contain an obvious referent. As noted above, symbols without a clear referent in Jewish literature (Hebrew Bible, apocrypha, or pseudepigrapha) or Roman culture induce speculation and conjecture from some interpreters. These symbols seem like they might suggest power (ten horns), wisdom (seven heads), and glory (ten crowns). Please note the humility and lack of declarative phrases in the previous sentence.

just as the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks had done before Rome.<sup>158</sup> The Accuser, looking like a Dragon, collaborated with the Beast, giving it power, privilege and authority to use in its drive to control all policy and all people, both wealthy or wise as well as least and last. The Beast wanted it all for itself, and the Dragon was happy to accommodate it, for the Beast served the Dragon's purposes.

Though the Beast had received a death blow<sup>159</sup> (the power of the emperor having been diminished following Nero's death), yet did the Beast survive (with emperor Vespasian restoring power and dictatorial rule to the Roman throne). In awe and appreciation, all the Empire paid homage to the Beast and followed it willingly. They followed the Beast and worshipped the Dragon, saying, "Who is like the Beast? Who has such power, such authority? Who speaks with lips dripping arrogance and is applauded? No one can stop the Beast!"

The Beast (who is an antichrist who opposes the Way of Jesus) spoke arrogantly, defaming The Glory and ridiculing the Lamb. It was allowed its moment—three and one-half years—allowed to distort the God-rhythms and speak against the God-life. It even spoke against heaven itself! It was allowed to wage war against those whom The Glory had chosen, called, and named. It was even allowed to overwhelm them. Every nation and every country, every language and every tongue, every tribe, clan, and family was overwhelmed by the work the Beast enacted. The whole earth was given over to the Beast and its purposes; all except The Glory's beloved, whose names are written in the Book of Life and who are protected by the Lamb—he who was slain, even Jesus the Anointed.

This is a difficult truth for those who belong to The Glory, who are the persecuted flock of the Lamb. As the truth-teller Jeremiah spoke:

Captivity comes, unwelcome though it may be;  
vengeance sought is vengeance received.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> The text speaks of leopards, bears, and lions. Again we have a symbol without a clear referent. While leopards, bears, and lions populate the pages of the Hebrew Bible, there is no special meaning other than the obvious biological one: they're predators. When given symbolic meaning, leopards, bears and lions refer to The Glory (c.f. Hosea 13:6-7), which is problematic because the predators in chapter 13 are The Glory's enemies. These symbols seem like they might refer back to the previous Empires (before Roman rule) that occupied and oppressed Israel.

<sup>159</sup> The vast majority of interpreters agree this symbol should be taken allegorically. Some spiritualize the symbolism (e.g. Easter resurrection was a death blow to Satan, who yet rallied to wage

This calls for patient endurance from all, especially from those who are chosen, called, and named by The Glory.

*Who has not asked the question,  
humanity's pervasive question,  
the question asked in hospital rooms and funeral parlors:  
Why?*

*Who has not proclaimed,  
the child's sense of the world,  
echoing across playgrounds:  
It's not fair!*

*And what word do we hear from on high,  
if we hear anything at all,  
if any response ever comes?  
Endure.*

God, it's me. I look around at the fundamental unfairness of the world and wonder where you are? As I sip coffee in the mountains, I wonder why you allow others to suffer heat. As I watch the news on my big screen, I seethe to see photos of refugee camps—come on, Glory, what's up with that? On vacation I am dismayed the hotel staff get paid so little. At bedtime, as I tuck my children into bed, praying you would keep them safe from the dangers of violence and addiction, I congratulate myself, thinking, "What more could I do?"

### **Revelation 13:11-18**

Then I saw another who opposed The Glory and the Lamb, (also an antichrist and also looking like a Beast). This second Beast had two horns like a lamb<sup>161</sup> but spoke like a Dragon. It was given authority by the first Beast, to undergird its political and secular power by adding a

war against the Church) while most find a historical referent. When Nero died in 69 C.E. the power of the emperor was diminished (due to Nero being an "unreliable" personality). It was not until emperor Vespasian that the autocratic authority was restored to the role of emperor.

<sup>160</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 15:2: And if they ask you, "Where shall we go?" tell them, "This is what the LORD says: "Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity.""

<sup>161</sup> The second Beast has two horns (rather than ten), the significance of which is that it is utterly normal looking.

religious veneer. It even mimicked the works of the truth-teller Elijah!<sup>162</sup> The second Beast gave speeches and dollars and performed great deeds in service of the first Beast's desire to dominate all the earth. Its influence equaled that of the first Beast and its ability to deceive surpassed it, yet all was done to secure the first Beast's ability to slay and enslave all humankind.

The second Beast empowered the first Beast's use of money as the means for goodness, glory, and blessing. It emboldened the belief that economics define human value. Those who did not bow before the first Beast were killed. No one was spared: great and small, rich and poor, big boss and frontline worker. All had to participate in the unjust systems created by the first Beast. No one could escape. And so it was said that all who had the mark<sup>163</sup> of the Beast upon their head or hands belonged to the Beast, for people's thoughts were defined by these systems and their every action dictated by them.

Understanding this requires wisdom not fear. The Beast is known, and we know the Beast—we see it as it truly is. We are not fooled, not one bit. The number<sup>164</sup> of the Beast is Neron's name: 666.

*The book was scary!  
Innocuous on the outside: white cover with red lettering.  
Inside, though, it purported to name "the Antichrist!"*

*I was 17,  
a newly minted Christian,  
desperate to know the truth,  
intrigued to read the Antichrist was...Anwar Sadat!*

*Months passed,  
Sadat was assassinated.  
Unconcerned about his family or geopolitics,  
I only worried about that book's sales!*

*I stewed.  
How could the book have gotten it so wrong?  
My 17-year-old self took matters into my own hands:  
I read The Revelation!*

*I studied and studied,  
still desperate,  
still intrigued,  
still understood next to nothing!*

*Years passed,  
I browsed curriculum in the Christian Book Store,  
a pastor plum out of ideas, running on fumes,  
when I saw it: The Book!*

*Same white cover, same red lettering,  
like the first Beast with a fatal head wound,  
the book had come back to life.  
Who, I wondered, is the Antichrist now?*

*Less desperate,  
less intrigued,  
I peeked between the covers:  
Saddam Hussein!*

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<sup>162</sup> The text says the second Beast causes "fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people," as Elijah did on Mt. Carmel; c.f. 1 Kings 18, especially 18:38: Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

<sup>163</sup> Roman coins bore the image of Caesar and the inscription, "Our Lord and god." All persons were required to pay an annual tax using these coins as their assent to Caesar's lordship. When Christians refused to pay the tax because they considered the practice idolatrous, they were punished with legal and political consequences, including persecution during the time of The Revelation. These verses caution against how easy it is to let go of the true worship of God in order to participate in the "powers and principalities" of economic and political power. Martin Luther said that we worship anything or anyone we put as a priority before The Glory. In Luther's understanding, the "image of the beast," a coin with which to buy and sell, would be giving ourselves over to the realities of our economic well-being even at the expense of living the God-life.

<sup>164</sup> The Greek and Hebrew alphabets served as numbers as well as letters, so someone's name could be added up to form a number. We all know the number of the beast, right? Of course we do: it's 666. But wait. Some ancient manuscripts put the number of the beast at 666 and others put it at 616! What's going on with the manuscripts? It seems that Nero, the notorious emperor and persecutor of Christians, spelled his name both as Nero and as Neron, depending upon the geographic region of the empire. In those parts of the empire where the name was spelled Neron, the number of the beast is 666. In those parts of the empire where the name was spelled Nero, the number of the beast is 616. This comes as close to proof as possible that John is saying that Nero is the antichrist. But wait. Nero had been dead for 20 years by the time John wrote the Revelation, so how could he be the antichrist? Clearly, John is using Nero as a symbol to convey meaning: the antichrist is that person, any person, who fights against The Glory and persecutes The Glory's people.

*Fool me once,  
shame on you.  
Fool me twice,  
shame on me.*

God, it's me. I admit, no, I confess! I am still intrigued, (still curious at least) about the antichrist. Even though the actual words of your Word point to two "beasts," I still think in Hollywood terms about the one "antichrist." Even though 1 John talks about "antichrists" in the plural,<sup>165</sup> I wonder and can't seem to get it out of my system. Perhaps I am avoiding what your Word means by what it says: The systems created by those who oppose you serve to slay and enslave. Maybe not me, specifically, but billions around the world are caught in the web of economic destruction undergirded by religious deceit. O Glory, it is so much easier to argue for "regime change" of a Hitler, Sadat, Saddam, or Bin Laden than to advocate for systemic change that impact my pocketbook. Is this why I am so enamored of the one "Bogeyman" interpretations about the antichrist? O Glory, help me perceive the ways I am caught in the web. Help me understand the ways I help create the web in the first place. In your mercy, forgive, redeem, and renew.

#### **Revelation 14:1-5<sup>166</sup>**

Then I looked and saw a most glorious sight: the Lamb standing in triumph, standing on Mount Zion!<sup>167</sup>

<sup>165</sup> c.f. 1 John 2:18.

<sup>166</sup> The Revelation's structure has descriptions of conflict (chapters 6, 8-10, 12-13) followed by descriptions of triumph (chapters 7, 11). Chapters 14-15 are the descriptions of triumph that follow the conflict with the Dragon and the two Beasts.

<sup>167</sup> c.f. Psalm 2:5-6: He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."

<sup>168</sup> See note on "144,000" from 7:1.

<sup>169</sup> The majority of subsequent references to the Beast in the text of The Revelation use the singular form to refer to the first Beast. As an interpretive choice, I paraphrase using the plural form to remind readers there are actually two Beasts—a political and religious Beast. While 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians would have been most concerned about the political Beast (Caesar Domitian's persecution), modern readers are reminded of our role either to conform to or confront the pattern of behavior (read: systemic oppression and injustice) of the first Beast.

With the Lamb was all Israel and all the Body,<sup>168</sup> all those who bore the Lamb's name upon their foreheads and hands, whose minds, hearts, and actions defied the two Beasts<sup>169</sup> and served The Glory. These are the gathering of those who dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life.

Then I heard The Glory's voice, which sounded like the roar of rushing waters,<sup>170</sup> as the truth-teller Ezekiel had heard, and loud peals of thunder<sup>171</sup> as the Psalmist proclaims. And I heard all those who were gathered, who were singing praise—their voices a symphony of harps and lyres.<sup>172</sup> They sang a new song to The Glory, a song of praise for joy unending. They sang before The Glory's throne with all heaven listening; the heavenly host rejoiced in their song. Only the gathered in heaven could learn the song, for they had been renewed—made whole and complete, their true selves.

The gathered are those who refused to defile themselves with the two Beasts, refused the invitation to allow idolatry to dine with them at Sunday dinner and turned injustice away when it came calling at their door. They remained pure in heart and so look upon The Glory's face.<sup>173</sup> They danced the God-rhythms and lived the God-life. The Way of Jesus was their life path, and he bought them out of their slavery to the Dragon and two Beasts. These gathered I saw are but the firstfruits of The Glory's harvest (for surely more will join them). The Dragon speaks lies and deceit drips from the lips of the two Beasts. Not so the gathered! They speak and live The Glory's truth and have been made blameless by the Lamb.

*Sing!*

*Sing a new song.<sup>174</sup>*

<sup>170</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 43:2, previously cited.

<sup>171</sup> c.f. Psalm 68:33: to him who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens, who thunders with mighty voice.

<sup>172</sup> c.f. Psalm 150:3: Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre....

<sup>173</sup> The Greek text translates as "remained virgins," which is a reference to Hosea 2:2-8 where the prophet engages in an extended metaphor that Israel is The Glory's unfaithful wife. Thus, the reference to being a virgin is less about one's sexual practice or marital status but symbolizes fidelity to The Glory. Given our culture tends to become anxious when talk turns to sex, I have chosen for the paraphrase to avoid referring to the literal symbol and focus on the symbol's meaning, (c.f. Matthew 5:8).

<sup>174</sup> c.f. Psalm 98:1: Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. c.f. also Psalm 96:1.



*Sing, you who are beloved.*

*Sing, you who are too broken to know your belovedness.*

*Sing, you who are too afraid to hope it may be true.*

*Sing, for you are beloved.*

*Sing the new song about the love who will not let you go.*

*Sing!*

*God, it's me. Rebuke my idolatry of power and privilege; renew my practice of servanthood. Rebuke my toleration of injustice; renew my commitment to seek justice for all. Rebuke my silence; renew my song—may it be of praise for unending joy.*

### **Revelation 14:6-12<sup>175</sup>**

Then I saw three of the celestial messengers flying amidst heaven, each with a message to proclaim to those who live on earth. The first messenger proclaimed the Good News about Jesus the Anointed to all who live on the earth—to every country and every culture, to every language

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<sup>175</sup> The timeline of this passage is essential for its interpretation. The proclamations regarding punishment that follow in 14:9-12 are centered on the “here and now” and not the “afterlife.” Therefore, drawing an inference about “hell” being a place of eternal torment *from this passage* is an exegetical error. See notes in this passage for a fuller description of the interpretive boundaries needed for a proper exegesis of this passage.

<sup>176</sup> c.f. Psalm 24:1-2: The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.

<sup>177</sup> The text only mentions Babylon. However, for the sake of the interpretive paraphrase, I expand the pronouncements against Babylon to also include Rome and all Citadels of power and carry this expanded metaphor into chapter 18.

c.f. Isaiah 21:8-9: Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses. And he gives back the answer: ‘Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!’

<sup>178</sup> The text only names Babylon, but commentators agree the reference is to Rome. Some will ask, “Then why didn’t John just say Rome?” The most likely answer is that Roman authorities would not have taken kindly to having their authority directly confronted, so Babylon, the power that oppressed The Glory’s people 400 years before, is used to represent Rome. In the paraphrase, I carry this representation forward to include all “great cities” who subvert the God-life.

<sup>179</sup> In Pauline thought, the “wrath of God” is not the kind of punishment stylized by Genesis 19:28 (i.e. Sodom and Gomorrah) but a “giving over” of humans to human agency. Three times in Romans 1:18-32 Paul says The Glory’s response to human idolatry is to allow human freedom (c.f. “gave them over” in 1:24, 26, and 28). The consequences of The Glory’s giving humans over

and every tongue, to every city, town, village, and hamlet. He instructed all humankind: “Revere The Glory! Be in awe and wonder! The *kairos* of *shalom* has come; therefore, honor and serve the One who made the heavens and earth, the sea and all that is within them!”<sup>176</sup>

The second messenger then proclaimed: “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!<sup>177</sup> Fallen is Rome the Magnificent! Fallen are all Citadels of human power, glory, and self-importance! They force all humankind to imbibe their adulteries: idolatry and injustice that bring anguish and destruction upon the earth.”<sup>178</sup>

The third messenger then proclaimed: “All who bear the image of the two Beasts and practice its ways in their thinking and doing, they, too, will be given over to The Glory’s wrath,<sup>179</sup> which allows human agency to set its own course. We<sup>180</sup> will drink deeply from the cask of insolence and arrogance until there is no love in our hearts. We will imbibe ignorance and infidelity until we are devoid of mercy. The Lamb and his messengers will watch our torment<sup>181</sup> in grief and sorrow, for it will continue and continue and continue. Our false selves do not have the

to themselves are pervasive. Though most readers focus on sexual immorality, this is merely the most obvious example of The Glory’s “wrath.” The passage climaxes (pardon the pun) with a more comprehensive list of consequences in 1:29-31: “They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.” See the next note for further implication of The Glory’s “wrath” as giving humans over to our own agency.

<sup>180</sup> The transition from the third person “they” to the first person “we” is intentional and interpretive. As mentioned in a previous note, the vast majority of humankind participate in the broken, human systems that allow injustice and oppression; therefore, it seems “meet and right” to include ourselves in the consequences (i.e. “wrath”) of The Glory’s having given us over to human agency.

<sup>181</sup> While the most obvious referent here is to Genesis 19:28, I note the distinction between fire and Sulfur: Both burn but only fire consumes while Sulfur torments but does not consume. This distinction will become significant later in The Revelation (c.f. 20:10 vs. 20:14). In the current passage, the distinction is significant in that Sulfur is said to torment those who think and practice the oppressive systems of the Dragon and two Beasts, which is basically 99.9% of humanity. The Glory’s beloved are not spared participation in the consequences of a society dominated by abuse, betrayal, and corruption, avarice and greed, deceit and manipulation. Moreover, though The Glory’s beloved (you and me, Gentle Reader) struggle against direct practice of these things, we yet participate in the cultural systems created by human agency; the result of The Glory “giving us over” (see previous note).

capacity to end it. Our broken systems will not repair themselves.

This invites chagrin, regret, and repentance from those who belong to The Glory! And accompanying our repentance must be patient endurance, for the world created by human agency, the world guided by the Dragon and the two Beasts, is not an easy world in which to dance the God-rhythms, to live the God-life, or to walk the Way of Jesus.

*Wars and rumors of wars*

*Civil war on the horizon*

*Fires rage and hurricanes rush*

*Creation itself subjected to frustration*<sup>182</sup>

*Where is love?*

*Where is mercy?*

*Who shall endure?*

*Who can escape?*<sup>183</sup>

God, it's me. Forgive my complicity in the world's brokenness, O Glory. Forgive my participation in broken systems that I did not invent but from which I certainly benefit. Forgive my indulgence of that which brings me indulgence. Forgive me that "I wish I could quit" but cannot. O Glory, what shall become of me? What shall become of us?

## **Revelation 14:13-20**

Then I heard a voice say, "Write! Sacred to The Glory are those who die in Jesus. They will rest from their toil—weariness and fatigue shall stalk them no longer, and all the ways they have been a blessing will be carried forward, remembered and celebrated."

I looked and saw before me the Anointed, who represented all humankind and yet also stood in the place of The Glory,<sup>184</sup> as one who is co-equal in power and authority and dominion. One of the celestial messengers called to the Anointed, calling him "Son of Humanity," as the truth-teller Daniel had seen and heard in a mystical vision. The messenger said, "Son of Humanity, it is time for the harvest!" So the Anointed, seated in the place of authority, swung the harvest sickle and justice was fulfilled. The whole earth was harvested with the justice decreed when the Anointed swung his sickle.

Another messenger came out from The Glory's presence, and he also had a harvesting sickle, while another messenger had the Refiner's Fire from the altar that was placed before The Glory. This second messenger said to the first, "Swing! Swing your sickle<sup>185</sup> for the harvest has come—the *kairos* of The Glory's justice is fulfilled. Harvest the grapes of wrath,<sup>186</sup> for The Glory's justice shall fill all the earth, from north to south and from east to west,<sup>187</sup> from head to toe all humankind will be immersed in The Glory's justice. There shall be no escape."

*The Army of the Potomac*<sup>188</sup>

*Patton's Fifth Army*

*Ghandi's reform*

*King's movement*

*More than my daddy's belt*

*Much more than prurient accounting*

*Renewing all*

*Restoring justice*

*New creation*

*As it was in the beginning*

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<sup>182</sup> c.f. Romans 8:20.

<sup>183</sup> See the next verse (14:13) for an answer to this question.

<sup>184</sup> c.f. Daniel 7:13: In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

<sup>185</sup> c.f. Joel 3:13: Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!

<sup>186</sup> c.f. Isaiah 63:3: I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath....

<sup>187</sup> The text refers to "1,600 stadia," which is a term for distance; specifically, the distance between Dan in the north of Israel to the Gulf of Aqaba in the south of Judah (1,600 stadia or roughly 180 miles). The reference is to the totality of the judgment "from top to bottom."

<sup>188</sup> One of the most famous literary uses of "the grapes of wrath" and "trampling out the vintage" comes from Julia Ward Howe's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, which was inspired by the army of the Potomac during the Civil War.

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your peace.<sup>189</sup> Where there is hatred, let me bring love. Where there is despair, let me bring hope. Where there is darkness, let me bring your light. O Glory, let me not seek as much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it is in giving that one receives, it is in pardoning that one is pardoned, it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

### Revelation 15:1-8<sup>190</sup>

Then I looked and saw yet another great phenomenon in heaven: the fulfillment of The Glory's justice. Seven<sup>191</sup> celestial messengers, each with a judgment to be poured out, consummated The Glory's wrath—the joy of redemption—that had begun by giving us over to ourselves. It was finished.

And I saw a huge, bronze bowl, like the one that had stood before the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem. The bowl contained water for cleansing and fire for purging and looked like a great, glassy sea.<sup>192</sup> In this sea all who belonged to The Glory could swim and be refreshed, renewed, and celebrate their victory over the two Beasts. They celebrated for they did not succumb to the Beasts' ways of thinking and transactional practices of relating to one another. Instead, they endured with patience, trusting The Glory would restore *shalom* to the earth. The people stood upon the shores of the sea with musical instruments, with harps and lyres, and sang the song of Moses,<sup>193</sup> servant of The Glory, and the song of the Lamb.

Amazing the works!  
Wondrous the ways!

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<sup>189</sup> c.f. The Prayer of St. Francis.

<sup>190</sup> Chapter 15 continues the depiction of The Glory's triumph and promises The Glory's presence, comfort, and love.

<sup>191</sup> The number seven is prominent in this chapter: seven messengers, seven judgments, seven golden bowls. As a reminder, seven is the symbolic number for divine completeness, wholeness, and perfection.

<sup>192</sup> c.f. 1 Kings 7:23-26: He made the Sea of cast metal, circular in shape...The Sea stood on twelve bulls, three facing north, three facing west, three facing south and three facing east. The Sea rested on top of them...It held two thousand baths.

<sup>193</sup> c.f. Exodus 15:1-8: I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.

<sup>194</sup> c.f. Exodus 40:34-35: Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle; c.f. also 1

The Glory is just and true!  
The Glory is sovereign over the nations!

Who fills all with awe!  
Who leads all to reverence!

All nations will honor and adore The Glory,  
for The Glory's justice has been unveiled.

After this I looked and saw the dwelling place of The Glory—like the Tent of Meeting in the desert and the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>194</sup> In that place the *shekinah*<sup>195</sup> overwhelmed all who encountered The Glory and yet they were able to endure. From this dwelling place came the consummation of The Glory's justice—the seven messengers each with a judgment to be poured out—but now they were dressed in honor with golden sashes,<sup>196</sup> as Aaron and the priests had been dressed. One of the four living creatures gave the celestial messengers seven bowls, like those upon the altar in the Tent of Meeting and the Jerusalem Temple, the bowls that are used for cleansing the people and proclaiming their forgiveness.<sup>197</sup> The bowls were filled with justice from The Glory, the One who lives and has always lived and will always live. In the presence of The Glory, the throne room filled with smoke<sup>198</sup> from the might of his power, and no one could enter until The Glory's justice was made whole and complete, the creation made new when all would live the God-life.

*Subtle the difference*

*Fire that destroys*

*Fire that purges a forest.*

Kings 8:10: When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD.

<sup>195</sup> *Shekinah* is a Hebrew word meaning “dwelling” and refers to the experience of being in the direct presence of The Glory.

<sup>196</sup> c.f. Exodus 28:39-41: Weave the tunic of fine linen and make the turban of fine linen. The sash is to be the work of an embroiderer...put these clothes on your brother Aaron and his sons, anoint and ordain them. Consecrate them so they may serve me as priests.

<sup>197</sup> c.f. Exodus 24:6-7: Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.”

<sup>198</sup> c.f. Isaiah 6:4: At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

*Significant the distinction  
Judgment that punishes  
Justice that restores.*

*Salvation:  
made empty  
to be made whole.*

*God, it's me. Your justice forces a recognition: our world is not as you would have it. I am not as you would have me. I need a swimming lesson: in the great, glassy sea where cleansing and purging refresh and renew. I need immersion into the deep waters of baptismal mercy that forgiven I may be free from the powers that distort my thinking and lead me to relate to others only according to the benefit they give me! I need your forgiveness, O Glory, that I may be free to live as you would have me live. O Glory, in your mercy, hear my prayer.*

#### **Revelation 16:1-21<sup>199</sup>**

Then I heard a loud voice from the throne room commanding the seven celestial messengers to make whole and complete the fulfillment of The Glory's justice. The voice sent the messengers, saying, "Go! Pour out my justice upon the land and sea, upon rivers and springs, upon the sun and the two Beasts. Let it pour out upon Babylon, upon Rome, and upon all Citadels of human oppression. Let it open the floodgates of restoration. Nothing shall remain untouched; all shall be renewed."

One by one five of the messengers poured out upon the earth their bowls, which had been filled with The Glory's justice. As in the days of Moses when The Glory confronted Pharaoh, The Glory's justice flowed.<sup>200</sup> With blood and darkness and death it flowed. With festering sores, fire and scorching heat it flowed. Upon those who practice the ways of the two Beasts it rained. Upon the living and the dead it rained. Upon all those who, like Pharaoh, understood the power and majesty of The Glory yet refused to turn toward the God-life it rained. Even when

it was understood that the ways of the Dragon and the two Beasts led to sorrow and suffering, they refused to turn away! Their distorted thoughts had become entrenched, and their broken practices had become addictions. For them, there was no turning back, no turning back.

Then I heard the voice of the messenger in charge of the waters shout,

Harmony and hope come from The Glory,  
who is the eternal present,  
who lived before all time.

Those who shed the blood of the beloved,  
who opposed those who spoke truth to power,  
have drank the cup prepared by their deeds.

And I heard those gathered around The Glory's throne respond:

Amen! Just and true is The Glory's justice,  
which restores all things,  
which brings new creation.

Then I looked and saw the sixth celestial messenger pour out her bowl on the great river Euphrates,<sup>201</sup> which boundaries Rome's eastern border and holds back the dreaded Parthian hordes. When The Glory's justice was poured out, the water dried up, and Rome's protection disappeared.

Rome fought back. I saw three unholy messengers, who bore the image of the Dragon and the two Beasts upon them and croaked like frogs. Their croaking was a crescendo of cacophony as they spewed deceit and manipulation that rallied their armies. They manufactured alliances and honed their skills for battle as they prepared for war against The Glory.

And I heard the Lamb proclaim:

Watch! Be alert! I come like a thief in the night.<sup>202</sup>  
Blessed is the one who abides in me, who stays awake  
and remains clothed in the robes with which I dress

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<sup>199</sup> Chapter 16 begins the fourth conflict with evil / victory cycle as an extended "midrash" (or commentary) on the Exodus narratives that tell the story of the ten plagues inflicted upon Egypt.

<sup>200</sup> c.f. The plague narratives in Exodus 8-12.

<sup>201</sup> The sixth bowl poured out is on the River Euphrates (16:12), was the area of the Parthians, who were the people on Rome's

eastern, hostile border. When the judgment is poured out even on the Euphrates, it "prepares the way for the kings from the East" (i.e. for Rome's destruction).

<sup>202</sup> c.f. 1 Thessalonians 5:2: ...the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

you. You will not go about in the world naked or ashamed.

Then the armies of the Dragon gathered for battle in the valley of Megiddo,<sup>203</sup> the place of many battles throughout Israel's history, what is known in Hebrew as *Har-Meggedon*.

Then the seventh messenger poured out his bowl and so consummated the fulfillment of The Glory's justice. "It is finished!"<sup>204</sup> proclaimed the voice from the throne. The Glory, power unleashed and majesty unbound,<sup>205</sup> descended with flashes of lightning, peals of thunder and an earthquake<sup>206</sup> that transformed creation and made all things new.

The nations shattered and scattered into parts and pieces,<sup>207</sup> each seeking its own salvation. The Glory triumphed over Babylon and Rome and all Citadels of self-importance. The wine of his justice filled the cup to the brim, and The Glory's *shalom* touched all the places where the cup overflowed—not one place was spared, for the wine of that cup flows forever. Nothing remained untouched; all was renewed.

*"It is finished!"*

*Words from the Cross—  
past event projecting forward,  
the arc of moral history finding its compass.*

*The battle is won,  
even as it is still being fought,  
nothing remains untouched,  
all will be renewed.*

*God, it's me. It's hard (for me) to read the images in The Revelation and not see them as literal expressions of your anger and fury, our just comeuppance for*

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<sup>203</sup> c.f. Judges 5:19: Kings came, they fought, the kings of Canaan fought. At Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo....

<sup>204</sup> c.f. John 19:30.

<sup>205</sup> c.f. Joel 3:16: The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the heavens will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel; c.f. also Exodus 19:16ff.: On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast.

<sup>206</sup> c.f. Matthew 27:50-54, 28:1-2 and Hebrews 12:26-28.

<sup>207</sup> c.f. Daniel 2:44-45: In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the

tolerating injustice and welcoming oppression. Where, O Glory, is the line between literal and symbolic, between prose and the poetic? I trust the prophets, truth-tellers from ages past, who spoke in symbols and used them to provoke imagination and evoke repentance. I trust, even more, that your character is love. You may love us just as we are but too much to let us stay that way. May your justice begin with me, O Glory, and may I be even a minor character in the narrative that leads toward the horizon of your victory.

### **Revelation 17:1-18**<sup>208</sup>

Then one of the seven celestial messengers came to me and said, "Come! I will show you the sentence handed down for the Great Prostitute whose power rests on many waters and might lays upon many lands.<sup>209</sup> She sells herself for human oppression. The powerful purchase her and pretend she means something. The rich use her to satisfy their lusts that are never sated. Influencers get intoxicated on the access she brings."

Then the messenger carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness where I saw the Great Prostitute of our time. I saw the way it lied about The Glory and paraded around in self-importance. I saw its bling, meant to impress with its wealth—layer upon gaudy layer of gold, precious stones, and pearls. Its purple and scarlet outfit<sup>210</sup> gave away the secret of its identity as much as the name inscribed on its forehead:

Babylon,<sup>211</sup> Rome, and All Citadels of Power  
Whores Who Pretend to Give Love  
Liars about What Really Matters

meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

<sup>208</sup> Chapter 17 includes the famous quotation associating "Babylon the Great" with "the Great Prostitute." As previously noted, references to Babylon are clearly intended as references to Rome (see notes in this section)..

<sup>209</sup> Rome's greatness, like empires before it, was described as "sitting on many waters."

<sup>210</sup> Purple and scarlet were colors traditionally associated with Roman clothing, especially its governmental and military leaders.

<sup>211</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 51:7: Babylon was a gold cup in the LORD's hand; she made the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore they have now gone mad.

The Great Prostitute was drunk on the blood of The Glory's beloved, having persecuted those who bore witness to Jesus.

I was astonished when I saw the Great Prostitute, for its opulence was not what I expected. Then the messenger explained to me, "What you see is an illusion. The Great Prostitute mimics but cannot become The Glory."<sup>212</sup> It exults in its power but cannot match The Glory's majesty. It brags of its riches but what is any human wealth compared to the beauty of the earth and skies that belong to The Glory? It boasts that it will yet become as The Glory already is, but to its proud, 'Not yet!' The Glory responds, 'Not ever.' It was born of death and into death it leads all who follow it, whose names are not inscribed in the Book of Life that was written before the beginning of time.

"This calls for wisdom and discernment yet let me be clear: The Great Prostitute is 'the city on seven hills.'<sup>213</sup> It knows great power—it's military sits on many waters—yet its time is coming to an end. Its rulers have reigned over many peoples yet never been sovereign over heaven and earth. Caesar Nero, 'the beast who once was, now is not, and is yet to come' will not actually return—*Nero redivivus*<sup>214</sup> is urban legend not something real. There is only one who has died and returned to life: Jesus the Anointed. Indeed, Caesar Domitian is like all others before him—destined for destruction.

"The Great Prostitute will rule human affairs for yet a while longer. For a moment she lingers but for eternity she is doomed. For this moment she has but one purpose: to wage war against the Lamb, but her purpose is folly and her destruction assured. The Lamb will triumph for he is Sovereign over all creation; he is Sovereign above Caesar. With the Lamb will be all whom he has chosen, all whom he has called to himself, all who have abided in him through trust."

Then the messenger said to me, "Here is the divine irony: The waters you saw where the Great Prostitute sits refer to people—gatherings great and small, even nations. They lie with the Great Prostitute yet despise her, drink of her cup only to spew it out when she looks away. When the *kairos* arrives, the peoples of this earth will leave her naked, ashamed, and unable to cover herself, for she will serve their purpose no more. The Great Prostitute

is the Citadel that rules over the peoples—for now only and only for this moment."

*Lying about life—  
no joining of lives  
only genitals.*

*Deceptive fantasies—  
fundamental impoverishment rather than  
gift with sacramental qualities.*

*Promise of success, ecstasy, and meaning  
that we can get for a price of a  
depersonalized identity.*

*Using a gift to do evil—  
the problem is not the pleasure but the belief:  
love can be purchased.*

*Worship under the Great Prostitute—  
spiritual sacrilege  
transactional salvation that cannot transform.<sup>215</sup>*

God, it's me. Guide me to protect my mind, that I would perceive the significance of ideas and beliefs that define meaning. Lead me to guard my heart, that I would not share it as a transaction but only give myself to another for transformation. Strengthen me to safeguard my will, that I may live more deeply into my true self, honoring your image within me.

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<sup>212</sup> The text of 17:8 says, "who was, now is not, and is to come," which is similar to 4:8, "who was, and is, and is to come."

<sup>213</sup> This is the clearest and most direct reference linking Rome with the Great Prostitute.

<sup>214</sup> Nero Redivivus: some Romans believed a superstition that Nero would return to life or that Domitian was Nero reincarnated, as both Caesars were renown for their enmity against Christians.

<sup>215</sup> This poem is adapted from Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. (New York: HarperOne, 1991), pages 147-148.

## Revelation 18:1-24<sup>216</sup>

After this I looked and saw another celestial messenger coming down from heaven. She radiated authority and grandeur as she proclaimed:

Fallen! Fallen are Babylon and Rome and all Citadels of human glory, honor, and power.<sup>217</sup>

These cities have become wastelands of idolatry and toxic dump sites of injustice. The stench of their corruption has become unbearable!

All the nations have caroused with them: drinking their maddening wine,<sup>218</sup> succumbing to the seduction of their beds and fevered dreams of affluenza.<sup>219</sup>

Then I heard another voice from heaven, saying:

Come out of these Citadels, my beloved! Run from their broken ways.<sup>220</sup> Flee their abuse, betrayal, and corruption. Do not get mired in their greed or weighed down by the accumulation of their evils, for the accounting of their debts and trespasses is piled as high as the heavens.<sup>221</sup>

They will receive double payment<sup>222</sup> for their debts and the serving of their grief shall be supersized. They will gag on the luxuries with which they gorged themselves. In their hearts they boasted, “I am the queen bee

forever,”<sup>223</sup> and, “No harm will ever come to me,”<sup>224</sup> yet their ruin will come in an instant—the height of their success will see their collapse. They are more fragile than they imagined and less mighty than The Glory to whom justice is owed.

First the rulers and politicians will tremble when they see the Citadel’s ruin, for they will recall all the ways they fornicated with her through idolatry and tolerance of injustice. They will seek to distance themselves from the Citadel, crying out,

Sorrow and sadness! Guilt and shame!  
 The mighty Citadel a shadow of its former glory!  
 In a single hour its *kairos* arrived—  
 swift and thorough its destruction.<sup>225</sup>

Then the industrialists and influencers will watch the Citadel’s destruction with fear, as they recall nights of seduction followed by mornings of regret. They will weep over their lost opportunities, for no more can they extort the Citadel over its greed and avarice. They will watch in horror as luxury markets vanish and their profit margins disappear; even their ability to exploit workers will fade away.<sup>226</sup> They, too, will cry out,

Sorrow and sadness! Guilt and shame!  
 Purple and scarlet—the colors of

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<sup>216</sup> Chapter 18 concludes the fourth conflict with evil / victory cycle as a diatribe against the political and economic oppression of “Babylon” (which John intends for his readers to understand refers to Rome and which I extend the metaphor to encompass “all Citadels of human power”). Of note is that chapter 18 appears to be a *midrash* (or commentary) on large portions of Ezekiel 27 and Jeremiah 51 (see notes in this section).

<sup>217</sup> c.f. Isaiah 21:9: Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses. And he gives back the answer: ‘Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!’

<sup>218</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 51:7-8a: Babylon was a gold cup in the hand of the LORD, making the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore the nations have gone mad.

<sup>219</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 28:4-5: By wisdom and understanding you have gained your wealth and amassed gold and silver for your treasuries. By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, but your heart has grown proud because of it...

<sup>220</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 51:45: Come out of her, my people! Run for your lives! Run from the fierce anger of the LORD.

<sup>221</sup> c.f. Ezra 9:6: I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

<sup>222</sup> This seems to be an allusion to—yet reversal of—the comfort given Judah while in exile; c.f. Isaiah 40:2: Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

<sup>223</sup> c.f. Isaiah 47:7: Yet you said, ‘I will be a queen forever.’ These things you did not consider nor remember the outcome of them.

<sup>224</sup> c.f. Isaiah 47:8: Now then, listen, you lover of pleasure, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, “I am, and there is none besides me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.”

<sup>225</sup> The set of “three woes” found in 18:9-20 (from kings, merchants, sea captains) are an extended reflection on Ezekiel 27:30-36. Here, c.f. Ezekiel 27:30-31: They will raise their voice and cry bitterly over you; they will sprinkle dust on their heads and roll in ashes... They will weep over you with anguish of soul and with bitter mourning.

<sup>226</sup> This single sentence paraphrases 18:11-15, which scholars describe as an accurate depiction of the economic consequences that occurred when Rome’s economy collapsed.

glory, honor, and power—have become symbols of ruin, disaster, and death.

In a single hour its *kairos* arrived.<sup>227</sup>

Finally every sea captain will look away from the Citadel's ruin and turn their gaze to other shores. They will see the once prosperous Citadel no longer holds the promise of prosperity and will exclaim, "Their loss is our loss!" They, too, will cry out,

Sorrow and sadness! Guilt and shame!  
So much wealth upon the seas—gone forever.  
In a single hour its *kairos* arrived.<sup>228</sup>  
Rejoice, beloved of The Glory.  
Rejoice, sent ones and truth-tellers.  
The judgments with which the Citadels punished you  
have been inflicted on them.  
The meal they served their prisoners  
has become their feast.

Then a celestial messenger of great strength picked up a millstone of heavy burden that lay around the necks of the beloved, removed it from them, and tossed it into the sea, for the oppression of the Citadel was no more. The messenger said,

Thrown down is the Citadel of oppression;  
thrown down the city of injustice.<sup>229</sup>

Never again shall the Citadel rise;  
never again shall it trample the beloved.<sup>230</sup>

No joy shall be found in all the Citadel<sup>231</sup>—  
neither music nor singing,

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<sup>227</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 27: 32-34: As they wail and mourn over you, they will take up a lament concerning you: "Who was ever silenced like Tyre, surrounded by the sea?" When your merchandise went out on the seas, you satisfied many nations; with your great wealth and your wares you enriched the kings of the earth.

<sup>228</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 27:35-36: Now you are shattered by the sea in the depths of the waters; The merchants among the nations scoff at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.

<sup>229</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 51:48: Then heaven and earth and all that is in them will shout for joy over Babylon, for out of the north destroyers will attack her," declares the LORD.

<sup>230</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 51:64: Just so shall Babylon sink down and not rise again because of the calamity that I am going to bring upon her; and they will become exhausted.

neither love nor laughter,  
nor the enchantments used to seduce the nations.

For in you was found murder and mayhem—  
the blood of truth-tellers flooded your streets,  
The Glory's own beloved were slaughtered.

*Aquinas, great doctor of the Church:*

*"One who is not angry at injustice is immoral,  
for anger looks to the good of justice.  
If you can live amid injustice without anger,  
you are immoral as well as unjust."*

*Doctor, what is your diagnosis of my condition?*

*God, it's me. COVID has shown us: We are vulnerable—  
not just to disease but to dis-ease. We are uneasy with  
each other, uneasy with our jobs, uneasy in our common  
life, uneasy in our churches, uneasy with ourselves  
(many of us). O Glory, I do not ask to return to an  
"easy" life but to a life made whole and complete  
through your love. I ask to return to a life in which all  
dis-eases are confronted by a commitment to do justice,  
love mercy, and walk humbly with you.<sup>232</sup>*

### **Revelation 19:1-10<sup>233</sup>**

After seeing the millstone of heavy burden lifted  
from the necks of the beloved, I heard the sound of a great  
crowd rejoicing:

<sup>231</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 25:10: I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp.

<sup>232</sup> c.f. Micah 6:8.

<sup>233</sup> Chapter 19 describes the conflict with evil – victory cycle with two metaphors: the marriage meal (19:1-10) and military battle (19:11-21). The marriage meal bespeaks relationship, connection, and intimacy, while military battle bespeaks overcoming enemies, being set apart, and valor. There are parts of our true selves that connect with the marriage meal: the connection with Jesus, being Jesus' beloved. Other parts of our true selves connect with battle: struggle and courage in the Christian life. The marriage meal challenges one toward a deeper intimacy and communion with Jesus. The image of battle challenges one to recognize that we do not live in a spiritually benign culture, for there are people and values that war against Jesus.



Hallelujah!  
Wholeness and God-life are birthed of The Glory!  
In The Glory comes the splendor of transformation!

Hallelujah!  
Integrity and faithfulness are born of justice,  
and the Great Prostitute is exposed for all to see.

Hallelujah!  
The blood of those who belong to The Glory  
drips from the Prostitute's lips and is upon her hands.

Again the great crowd rejoiced:

Hallelujah!  
The Great Prostitute's judgment is forever!

And the twenty-four elders of Israel and the Church, along  
with the four living creatures, fell prostrate in worship  
before The Glory. They, too, rejoiced:

Hallelujah!  
Amen and amen!

Then a voice came from the throne itself, quoting  
the words of the Psalmist:

Praise The Glory, all who are beloved!  
Praise The Glory, all who are in awe!  
Praise The Glory, all who are great or small!<sup>234</sup>

And I heard The Glory's voice, which sounded  
like rushing waters and peals of thunder,<sup>235</sup> join with the  
great crowd's rejoicing:

Hallelujah!  
The Glory is sovereign above the earth!  
The Glory is sovereign above the Cosmos!

Rejoice and sing praise!

The wedding<sup>236</sup> of the Lamb has come,  
his bride has prepared herself for this *kairos*.

Rejoice and sing praise!  
The bride has dressed herself in purity and integrity,  
through right relationships and acts of justice.

The celestial messenger said to me, "Write this  
down: Sacred joy is reserved for those invited to the  
wedding supper<sup>237</sup> of the Lamb, for they will experience  
knowing and being known. They will share their hearts,  
and the Lamb will be with them forever." And then he  
added, "This isn't a guess, and I'm not making this up.  
These words are direct from The Glory's lips."

Upon hearing this stupendous message of hope,  
encouragement and invitation to joy, I fell prostrate at the  
messenger's feet. "Stop!" he commanded. "I am but a  
fellow servant with you and all the beloved who bear  
witness to Jesus. Worship only The Glory, for it is the  
Divine Spirit, who speaks the truth about Jesus, who gave  
me these words."

*The groom waited.*  
*Joking with friends in a back room.*  
*High fives when the preacher arrived: "Kairos!"*

*The bride prepared.*  
*Friends admiring and encouraging.*  
*Getting ready for "The Walk."*

*Their eyes met from opposite ends of the aisle.*  
*Joy danced in the soft light.*  
*Journey to consummation being fulfilled.*

*God, it's me. What a great metaphor! Who doesn't like  
a good wedding feast? May my heart rejoice with  
friends and neighbors celebrating your eternal love  
that makes all things new. Who hasn't felt joy at the  
beauty of two hearts bound together? May my heart  
be bound together with Jesus—now and forever. Who*

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<sup>234</sup> c.f. Psalm 135: Praise the LORD. Praise the name of the LORD; praise him, you servants of the LORD; c.f. also Psalm 115:13: he will bless those who fear the LORD— small and great alike.

<sup>235</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 43:2 and Exodus 19:6 (previously cited).

<sup>236</sup> c.f. Hosea 2:19-22: "I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD; c.f. also Ephesians

5:25: Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

<sup>237</sup> c.f. Isaiah 25:6-8: On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.

doesn't desire to know and be known—love deepening over time, teaching us our true name? May I learn anew that my true name is Beloved of The Glory.

## Revelation 19:11-21

Heaven opened before me, and I saw once again the rider on the white horse. His name was Trustworthy and True. He rode to wage war against the Dragon and the two Beasts. He rode to wage war against the Citadels of oppression and injustice. With justice he rode, for right relationships were his determination and *shalom* his destination.<sup>238</sup> His eyes bore the look of fire,<sup>239</sup> burning with a desire for equity and equality that would not be denied. There was a deep truth about him that no human could ever comprehend. Though he himself was the king and wore a golden crown, still did he lead his army of celestial messengers into battle. The messengers' armor was fine linens of purity and integrity.

The rider was dressed in a robe splashed with his own blood,<sup>240</sup> for his power had been revealed in weakness and his glory unveiled in humiliation. His sword was sharp, for it was the Word of God, and he wielded it to bring down nations, as the Psalmist declared:

Sovereign is the Anointed one whom The Glory has chosen. He will rule the nations with moral strength—with equity and equality will break all chains.<sup>241</sup>

With ferocity of intent he trampled upon the grapes of oppression. The strength of his winepress transformed them into the wine of justice, and all heaven and earth finally knew his full name:

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<sup>238</sup> c.f. Isaiah 11:4-5: But with righteousness He will judge the poor and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be the belt about loins and faithfulness the belt about His waist.

<sup>239</sup> c.f. Psalm 97:3: Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side; c.f. also Isaiah 66:15: See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.

<sup>240</sup> c.f. Isaiah 66:1-3: Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save." Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? "I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I

Sovereign above all sovereigns!  
The Glory that outshines all glory!

And I saw a celestial messenger standing, with the sun blazing behind him as if he was born of it. He cried out to the scavengers encircling the carnage of the battle, "Come and eat until your stomachs are full, for the battle is over and The Glory's victory complete."<sup>242</sup> And the vultures of the air feasted upon the Vultures of the Earth—on the rulers and politicians, on the industrialists and influencers, even on every sea captain who once called the Citadel home port.

Still the Beasts and their minions were not finished venting their anger. They waged useless warfare that would lead to one and only one conclusion: their defeat. The first Beast was captured—its secular power stripped from its paws. The second Beast was also captured—its religious veneer exposed for the lies it proclaimed. Both were thrown into the lake of sulfur<sup>243</sup> that burns but does not consume. Their torment is forever. Those who followed them in their thinking and acting (those who bore the Beasts' mark upon their heads and hands) were defeated by the Word spoken by the rider on the white horse. Their defeat was absolute.<sup>244</sup>

*It shall not always be this way—  
children going hungry,  
wives trembling in fear,  
fathers sneaking across the desert.*

*It shall not always be this way—  
white faces assuming cultural deference,  
billionaires claiming the tax system impoverishes them,  
nations transgressing sovereign boundaries.*

trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.

<sup>241</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 23:29: "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? c.f. also Psalm 2:9: You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery."

<sup>242</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 39:17: Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals: 'Assemble and come together from all around to the sacrifice. I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel. There you will eat flesh and drink blood.

<sup>243</sup> See note 180 on the distinction between fire and sulfur (Revelation 14:10).

<sup>244</sup> Note, however, they are not thrown into the lake of sulfur.

*It shall one day be different—  
parents unafraid while their children to play in the park,  
health and wellness a human right,  
elders cared for with dignity and tenderness.*

*It shall one day be different—  
the lion will lie down with the lamb,  
the earth will be filled with the knowledge of The Glory,<sup>245</sup>  
the moral arc of history arriving at its horizon.*

God, it's me. I do not value war, *per se*, but then this is no ordinary war—no land grabs, no supply lines, no political support or strategic timing required. The weapons—being trustworthy and true, Jesus' Cross and Word—define the kind of war being fought: the battle for justice and right relationships. This battle is not a military battle but a spiritual one, a battle for hearts and minds. This is a battle for my heart and my mind. O Glory, I give to thee. I give to thee. Take my heart, use my mind, let me give my life to this battle, for it must be won. It must be won.

#### **Revelation 20:1-15<sup>246</sup>**

And I looked and saw a celestial messenger coming down from heaven, holding the keys to Death and the afterlife and a chain in his hand with which to imprison the Dragon and the two Beasts. The messenger grabbed the Dragon—the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, the

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<sup>245</sup> c.f. Isaiah 11:6-9.

<sup>246</sup> Revelation 20 describes a “1,000-year reign,” which commentators interpret in one of three distinct ways, using the terminology of Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism. See endnote 1 for further discussion.

<sup>247</sup> The text says, “1,000 years,” which is symbolic. c.f. Psalm 90:3-5: You turn people back to dust, saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.” A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—they are like the new grass of the morning....

<sup>248</sup> c.f. Daniel 6:17: A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed; c.f. also Job 12:13-15: Wisdom and strength belong to God; counsel and understanding are his. What he tears down cannot be rebuilt; the man he imprisons cannot be released. His. If He holds back the waters, they dry up, and if He releases them, they overwhelm the land....

<sup>249</sup> The Greek word used is *mikron*, indicating something very small.

Accuser—and imprisoned it for the enormity of time.<sup>247</sup> The messenger took the Dragon and threw it down, threw it down, threw it down—into the realm of Death, locked away with a seal upon the lock.<sup>248</sup> It was powerless except for the briefest<sup>249</sup> of moments when its mayhem and manipulation distracted people from the God-life.

I saw the thrones of those given the authority to pronounce The Glory's justice. Behind and around them were gathered those whose lives had been martyred for their witness to Jesus and the truth of the Word. These martyrs had not worshiped the Beasts, nor participated in the thought-life and ways of living that conformed to the pattern of this world; that is, they had refused the mark of the Beasts upon their heads and hands. Though they had been martyred, they were alive, standing beside Jesus. With Jesus they will govern for the enormity of time. (The rest of the dead would remain so for the same enormity; that is, forever.) For the martyrs, this is the first resurrection, for they were raised to live with Jesus. Sacred joy embraced them, and holy comfort pervaded their true selves that had been made whole and complete. The second death—the annihilation—will have no power over them, but they will stand with Jesus and celebrate the God-life for the enormity of time.

When The Glory determines the *kairos* has come for the fulfillment of the kin-dom—for the horizon of hope to live fully present in human hearts and communities—the Accuser will be permitted a final stand, and it won't be nearly enough. Nations will come from the north—Gog and Magog as the truth-teller Ezekiel foretold<sup>250</sup>—as Israel's

<sup>250</sup> Gog and Magog do not refer to two specific nations, but the nations aligned against The Glory's people, who are innumerable “like the sand on the seashore” and “from the four corners of the earth.” (“Magog” in Hebrew literally translates as “place of Gog,” so some translators see this as not two locations but one.) As is John's custom, Gog and Magog are used as an archetype of those who would oppose The Glory's people. That Gog and Magog come from the north is a nod to the nations who conquered and oppressed Israel and Judah: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—all of whom invaded from the north. Interpreters who believe Gog and Magog are actual nations (e.g. “Christian Zionists”) look for a battle, which in turn distorts political alliances and theology toward Israel in the Middle East. Conversely, interpreters who understand Gog and Magog as archetypes accept that there are innumerable enemies and innumerable ways for people to battle against The Glory, thereby preparing one for spiritual conflict without inculcating political views that see nations, *a priori*, as enemies. c.f. Ezekiel 38-39, especially 38:14-16: Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘In that day, when my people Israel are living in safety, will you not take notice of

invaders have always come. They will appear invincible, numbering in the oodles and gajillions. They will seem ubiquitous, thick upon the ground like so many cockroaches in a hot and humid Texas summer. They will be defeated by the fiery might of The Glory.<sup>251</sup> And their leader, by whatever name it is called—the Dragon, the serpent, the devil, Satan, the Accuser—will be thrown into the lake of sulfur<sup>252</sup> along with the two Beasts, their defeat consummated for the enormity of time.

Then I saw a throne of purity and integrity<sup>253</sup> and the One sitting upon it,<sup>254</sup> who said, “Let there be *shalom*,” and it was so. Before this sovereign One even the heavens and earth receded, fleeing from the presence of one so majestic and radiant.<sup>255</sup> But the dead, whether rich or poor, powerful or peasant, weren’t afraid to stand with the One. Regardless of status, the dead stood beside the One on the throne as people’s stories were told.

A second book, the Book of Life, was also opened. Together these books told the story of The Glory’s justice—each person’s life told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about how they lived the God-life (or not). And when every story had been told and every accounting given, Death and Hell were tossed into complete, utter darkness. Never again would these twin devils harm or destroy on God’s holy mountain. Never again would Death or Hell be allowed to dominate people’s going out or coming in. Death and Hell were thrown into the lake of fire to be consumed. This is the second death, which is reserved for those whose names are not inscribed in the Book of Life. The second death is the final chapter of the story.

*Knowing the story  
without reading the last page.*

*Confident of a happy ending  
even though the chapters are foreboding.*

*I open the book  
with One reading over my shoulder.*

*This story is scary!  
And I am not afraid.*

*God, it’s me. I am encouraged! Knowing the end of the story emboldens me to write each chapter with hope and each page with courage. Seeing the horizon of my destiny makes me want to get up in the morning—Let’s do this! But you know, O Glory, that my poetic heart sometimes battles with my pragmatic head, so help me find a balance, for I don’t want to be “so heavenly minded that I am no earthly good.” What kind of story would that be? Help me to know that, on this day, it is enough that I seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you.*

### **Revelation 21:1-8**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,<sup>256</sup> for the first heaven and first earth had departed, and the sea, known among the ancients as the place of chaos, was no more. I saw the new Citadel—called Trustworthy and True, David’s city, Jerusalem reborn—descending in beauty from the foundations of heaven. The new Citadel was not like

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it? You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army. You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land....”

<sup>251</sup> c.f. 2 Kings 1:10: Elijah replied to the captain of fifty, “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.” Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

<sup>252</sup> See note 180 on the distinction between fire and sulfur (Revelation 14:10). Note they are thrown into the lake of sulfur.

<sup>253</sup> c.f. 1 Kings 10:18: Then the king made a great throne covered with ivory and overlaid with fine gold.

<sup>254</sup> c.f. Daniel 7:9-11: As I continued to watch, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took His seat. His clothing was [pure] as [newly fallen] snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from His presences. Thousands upon thousands attended him, and myriads

upon myriads stood before him. The court was convened, and the books were opened. Then I kept watching because of the arrogant words the horn was speaking. As I continued to watch, the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire....

<sup>255</sup> c.f. Psalm 114:3-7: The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; the mountains leaped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why was it, sea, that you fled? ...Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob...; c.f. also Psalm 18:15: The valleys of the sea were exposed, and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke, LORD, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.

<sup>256</sup> c.f. Isaiah 65:17: “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind”; c.f. also Isaiah 66:22: “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure.”

the Citadel that served the Dragon and the Beasts, for it was dressed in a wedding gown<sup>257</sup>—the Lamb’s bride prepared for intimacy and communion. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! See! The Glory’s presence overshadows the beloved—the *kairos* of salvation has become the *chronos* of new creation. The Glory will abide with the people and the people with The Glory.<sup>258</sup> Never again will their brokenness destroy right relationship. Always and forever they will dance the God-rhythms with The Glory. The Glory will remove all sorrow; tears shall not be seen nor lament heard anymore, for The Glory has destroyed Death.<sup>259</sup> New creation has come and will live forever.”

The Glory, who sat upon the throne, then said, “Let there be new creation!” And it was so. And The Glory said, “Write these words, which are trustworthy and true: It is finished!<sup>260</sup> I am the first and the last, the One who was before the beginning of time and who will abide after the end of all things. To those who thirst I will give water without cost<sup>261</sup> from the spring that bubbles up from the water of life. To those who endure and persevere I will give the inheritance of a new heart and new home.<sup>262</sup> But to those who pervert justice and themselves, who practice deceit and manipulation, who claim the power of life and death is in their own hands, they will be sent to the only home their hearts have ever known: away from my presence. They will be thrown into a lake that burns with fire and sulfur.<sup>263</sup> This is the second death—annihilation—and they shall be no more.

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<sup>257</sup> c.f. Isaiah 61:10: I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels; c.f. also Isaiah 62:4-5: No longer will they call you Deserted or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah (my delight is in you) and your land Beulah (married); for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

<sup>258</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 37:27-20: My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.”

<sup>259</sup> c.f. Isaiah 65:19: I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more; c.f. also Isaiah 25:6-8, previously cited.

<sup>260</sup> c.f. John 19:30, previously cited.

*Why*  
*focus on*  
*the second death*  
*when offered as promise*  
*is new heaven and new earth?*

*Why*  
*be enthralled*  
*with burning lake*  
*when The Glory’s presence*  
*will be direct, personal, intimate?*

*Please people: get your priorities straight!*

*God, it’s me. I rejoice in the promise of new heaven and new earth. I praise your name for the promise of new creation. That I will be part of that new creation astounds and amazes me. That I will be new creation fills my heart with wonder. May the awe I feel as I contemplate such wonders inspire my courage, direct my speech, temper my actions, and guide my living that I may seek your honor in all that I do.*

### **Revelation 21:9-27**

Then one of the celestial messengers said to me, “Do you want to see something cool? Let me show you the Lamb’s bride!” And the messenger carried me away in yet a deeper vision mystic and transcendent,<sup>264</sup> and I saw up close the new Citadel called Trustworthy and True, descending in beauty from the foundations of heaven to

<sup>261</sup> c.f. Isaiah 55:1: Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

<sup>262</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 24:6-7: My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.

<sup>263</sup> The Greek text describes the lake into which people are thrown as *kaiomene puri kai theio*, which translates as “burning with fire and sulfur” and not as the NIV translates, “fiery lake of burning sulfur.” This suggests a more severe punishment than found in 20:14 (where only fire is mentioned); however, this verse still refers to a fire that consumes.

<sup>264</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 3:14: The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the LORD on me.

the highest place on earth, above all mountains, supreme in its majesty and splendor.<sup>265</sup> Like precious jewels, it appeared priceless.<sup>266</sup> Like Fort Knox, it appeared perfectly safe, with high walls on every side guarded by The Glory's own messengers.<sup>267</sup> All who had been chosen and who belong to The Glory were present there—from the 12 tribes of Israel to those who received the testimony about Jesus from the 12 sent ones of the Church.

The messenger who spoke to me took out a measuring rod to measure this new Jerusalem. The city measured with precision and perfection exactly the same as the Holy of Holies in the old Jerusalem Temple<sup>268</sup>—the place where The Glory's *shekinah* had been known, the place where immediacy became intimacy and nearness became oneness. Now this thin place<sup>269</sup> had become thick, with The Glory's presence imprinting upon all who lived in the city.

The city itself was majestic and beautiful.<sup>270</sup> Its walls were made of holiness and integrity; its streets paved to endure and never tarnish, as smooth as glass. Even the foundations of the walls were majestic and beautiful, filled with priceless things to evoke wonder, capture the imagination and swell the heart. The gates were made of a pearls so huge a camel could walk through the gate. There was no duplicity anywhere to be found.

I looked around but saw no Temple in the city, which perplexed me at first. Then I realized the city doesn't

need a Temple, for The Glory and the Lamb are present there. Neither does the city need the sun or moon for the light and splendor of The Glory and the Lamb shine upon all who abide there.<sup>271</sup> Even the nations will see the city's light and be guided into *shalom*, and the rulers and Elite will bring their riches to share among all—returning their power and reversing their privilege. The city gates will never close, so all who long to become their true and best self might find refuge there,<sup>272</sup> all who desire to dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life will be welcome there. But those who refuse to be redeemed, who bathe in deceit while wallowing in abuse, betrayal, and corruption, will never live there. Their names are not inscribed in the Book of Life.<sup>273</sup>

*“Heaven is a cube!”  
proclaimed the literalist preacher.*

*My youth group kids turned to look at me,  
perplexed looks upon their faces.*

*Tracy silently mouthed the words,  
“A cube?”*

*Later that night we debriefed our day at church camp,  
a robust and rousing conversation it was!*

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<sup>265</sup> c.f. Isaiah 2:2: In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

<sup>266</sup> c.f. Tobit 13:16: For Jerusalem shall be built up with sapphires and emeralds, and precious stone: thy walls and towers and battlements with pure gold.

<sup>267</sup> c.f. Isaiah 26:1: In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; God makes salvation its walls and ramparts. Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter; c.f. also Zechariah 2:5: “And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,” declares the LORD, “and I will be its glory within.”

<sup>268</sup> I omit the exact measurements but acknowledge they suggest a cube-shaped city. However, it is too literal to exclaim, “Heaven is a cube!” as one literalist preacher so exclaimed at a church camp I once attended. In Hebraic culture, a cube was considered the perfect geometric shape. The symbolism is that the new Jerusalem will be a place of wholeness and peace.

<sup>269</sup> Spiritual writers use the phrase “thin place” to describe certain locations around the world where the veil between heaven and earth seems thin (e.g. Iona for Scottish Presbyterians, the Vatican for Catholics, or Sedona for New Age Arizonans).

<sup>270</sup> In 21:18-21, a series of precious stones is listed, including jasper (walls), gold (streets), sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, turquoise, jacinth, and amethyst

(foundations), and pearls (gates in the walls). Most of these precious stones do not have a specific symbolism attached to them other than that they are, well, precious. c.f. Ezekiel 28:12-13: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: carnelian, chrysolite and emerald, topaz, onyx and jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared; c.f. also Isaiah 54:11: “O afflicted one, storm-tossed, *and* not comforted. Behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and your foundations I will lay in sapphires. Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies, and your gates of crystal, and your entire wall of precious stones.

<sup>271</sup> c.f. Isaiah 60:19: The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.

<sup>272</sup> c.f. Isaiah 60:11: Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession.

<sup>273</sup> c.f. Isaiah 52:1: Awake, awake, Zion, clothe yourself with strength! Put on your garments of splendor, Jerusalem, the holy city. The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again.

*What is heaven?*

*What is the longing of your heart?*

*Beware, preachers, when describing the afterlife!*

*No eye has seen nor mind imagined*

*the glory that awaits.<sup>274</sup>*

God, it's me. I am thankful you make me worthy of heaven—not that I deserve it but that I am loved with a love that will not let me go. I am thankful that heaven's gates remain wide open—that the hope belongs not just to folks like me but to others as well (and perhaps others first and foremost). I can't wait to get there—what a reunion it shall be! Just not today, O Glory. Until that day, make me your servant that heaven may be found on earth. In my life may I evoke wonder, capture the imagination, and swell the hearts of those who hear your Good News.

## **Revelation 22:1-21**

Then a celestial messenger showed me the Garden, restored beyond its original perfection. The river of the water of life ran through it,<sup>275</sup> with fish from every sea. The throne of The Glory and the Lamb were the headwaters for its clear as crystal water, which ran through the middle of the Citadel, refreshing all who live there. On each side of the river were trees that delighted the eyes with their colors and the nose with their aromas—twelve different kinds of fruit were harvested every month!<sup>276</sup> Never again would there be hunger, and the fruit of the trees healed the nations. The curse of Adam had been reversed.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> c.f. 1 Corinthians 2:9

<sup>275</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 47:9: Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live; c.f. also Joel 3:18, Zechariah 14:18, and Psalm 105:41.

<sup>276</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 47:7, 12: When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river... Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.

<sup>277</sup> c.f. Genesis 3:17: Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life; c.f.

The throne of The Glory and of the Lamb will be the center of the Citadel, and all who are called to serve will serve—it will be their heart's joy. They will see The Glory and the Lamb face to face,<sup>278</sup> and they will be transformed—the Lamb's character will be their character, the Lamb's thoughts will be their thoughts, his ways will be their ways.<sup>279</sup> Fear will disappear like the morning mist, never again to hold hostage the heart. The light that brings security and peace, that shields the heart with *shalom*, will be The Glory and the Lamb, who will reign sovereign above the Cosmos forever and ever.

Then the messenger said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. You can count on them, assured they speak the truth as The Glory has decreed it—the same One who inspired the truth-tellers from ages past inspires these words of what is, has been, and will be.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lamb cry out, “Look! See! I shall be unveiled when *kairos* and *chronos* embrace! Sacred comfort is given to those who embrace these words. Sacred joy will be shared by those who live them.”

I, John, heard and saw these things in a vision mystic and transcendent, yet as real as my own birth. Upon hearing them I fell prostrate at the messenger's feet. “Stop!” he commanded. “I am but a fellow servant with you and all the truth-tellers and all who will live according to these words. Don't worship me. Worship only The Glory!”

Then the messenger told me, “These words are not to be sealed up. Write! Write these words for the *kairos* is near.<sup>280</sup> There are some who can neither hear nor heed these words—that is not your concern. There are some who are unable or unwilling to dance the God-rhythms—they are not your concern. Let those who choose defilement live defiled. Let those who choose right relationships live with integrity and *agape*.<sup>281</sup>

also Zechariah 14:11: It will be inhabited; never again will it be destroyed. Jerusalem will be secure.

<sup>278</sup> c.f. Isaiah 52:8b: When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes; c.f. also Job 19:26: And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God....

<sup>279</sup> This is a reversal of Isaiah 55:8-9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

<sup>280</sup> c.f. Isaiah 30:8: Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness.

<sup>281</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 3:27: But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, “This is what the

The Lamb said again, “Look! See! I shall be unveiled when *kairos* and *chronos* embrace! I bring with me the fulfillment of what each person has done.<sup>282</sup> What is precious remains, and what is dross is discarded. I am the beginning and the end of all creation, from first to last and from A to Z.<sup>283</sup>

“Sacred joy is given to those who allow me to wash their robes, for they will be pristine and nap beneath the shade of the tree of life. They will freely enter the gates of the Citadel, and no one will stop them or check for their papers. Left beyond the gates will be those who had no desire to dance the God-rhythms or live the God-life. They degraded themselves and others, destroyed themselves and the creation, and refused to dance.

“I, Jesus, sent my celestial messenger to give you these words for the churches. They are for their comfort, encouragement, and hope. I am the Root of David and David’s Branch,<sup>284</sup> the Bright Morning Star. My testimony is trustworthy and true.”

The Divine Spirit and the beloved—they who are the Lamb’s bride—say together, “Come! Welcome! Be at peace in this place. Let the one who is thirsty come and drink from the water of life, for which there is no cost;<sup>285</sup> drink from the spring that will never run dry.”

I warn those who hear these words: Do not add to them<sup>286</sup> but speak the message of comfort, encouragement, and hope found within them. The Glory will add plagues to the life of the one who adds to the words of this scroll. The Glory will remove that person from the Citadel, and they shall neither walk its streets nor nap beneath the shade of the tree of life.<sup>287</sup>

The Lamb, who gives personal, eye-witness testimony to the truth of these words, says, “Yes, my *kairos* is near.”

Amen! Come, Jesus. Come, Anointed One!

May the lovingkindness of Jesus the Anointed be with all The Glory’s beloved.

*God wins.*

*Love wins.*

*Justice wins.*

*Joy is birthed.*

*Hope is fulfilled.*

*Trust is rewarded.*

*Justice wins.*

*Love wins.*

*God wins.*

*God, it’s me. My heart bursts in anticipation of the moment when longing transforms into fulfillment, when hope turns into your presence, and I see you face to face. Teach me that this burst of anticipation is not intended exclusively for me, for it is a communal hope. Indeed, it is a hope for new creation—heaven and earth restored. Teach me to live more deeply into this hope for new creation that my daily life may be a part of the life of your kin-dom—on earth as it is in heaven. Give me the strength to dance your God-rhythms and live your God-life until present hope turns into eternal joy.*

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Sovereign LORD says. “Whoever will listen let them listen, and whoever will refuse let them refuse; for they are a rebellious people.”

<sup>282</sup> c.f. Isaiah 62:11-12: The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.’” They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.

<sup>283</sup> c.f. Isaiah 44:6, previously cited.

<sup>284</sup> c.f. Isaiah 11:1: A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit; c.f. also Zechariah 6:12-

13a: Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne.”

<sup>285</sup> c.f. Isaiah 55:1, previously cited.

<sup>286</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 4:2: Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.

<sup>287</sup> Confession: As one writing an interpretive paraphrase, this verse gives me some trepidation. I only pray my efforts have been faithful and will be judged with grace.



## Appendix A: Extended Endnotes

### 1. How does John understand or use time? Is The Revelation focused on the past, present, or future?

The Revelation projects both backward, forward, and to the present time (as understood by John, the author). It describes the past: the birth of Jesus, slaughter of the boys of Bethlehem, and the holy family's escape to Egypt (12:1-6); Jesus' words on the Cross (16:17, 21:6); and Paul's description of the return of Jesus (3:3, 16:5). It describes the 1<sup>st</sup> century present by addressing actual congregations (chapters 2-3) as well as describing Roman economic practices (18:11-15). It describes the future hope of a transformed heaven and earth (c.f. 21-22).

The reality that past, present, and future are all described argues strongly that readers look not only for "future attractions" in The Revelation but understand that John is addressing his contemporaries. Readers will benefit from understanding the scope of John's focus encompasses (1) Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, and ascension; (2) Jesus' return (what commentators sometimes call the Parousia, after the Greek word meaning "return"); and (3) the years *between* Jesus' Cross and Parousia.

Understanding John's scope and focus helps readers understand the ancient literary form I described in the introduction as a diamond approach—looking at the same event from different perspectives. As noted in the introduction, chapters 6-20 describe from multiple perspectives the spiritual conflict that occurs between The Glory and evil. This conflict was "finished" on the Cross, yet the battle continues toward the inevitable fulfillment of The Glory's ultimate victory.

A second area of debate among commentators revolves around what happens when Jesus returns. Revelation 20:2 describes the Dragon as being bound for "1,000 years" and then released. Commentators use three different interpretive lenses to understand what is meant by 1,000 years, with their perspectives being shaped by their relative literalism versus their comfort with interpreting the text symbolically. Here are the three interpretive lenses used regarding the 1,000 years:

A. *Premillennialists*: Jesus will come to establish 1,000 years of peace, after which the Accuser will be released so that he and Jesus can go mano-a-mano in a final battle. Theological tone: pessimism.

B. *Postmillennialists*: Jesus will come after 1,000 years of peace brought about by the Holy Spirit and the Church's preaching. Jesus is present spiritually during this time, followed by his Parousia (second coming). Theological tone: optimism.

C. *Amillennialists*: Jesus already reigns because of his cross and resurrection, so the 1,000 years is symbolic, representing a very long time. During this entire period, the Accuser's power is limited (Luke 10:18) even though the "last days" have begun (Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:2). Jesus will restore all things at the end of this 1,000 years of his kin-dom's rule (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). Theological tone: realism.

The premillennialist view seems to look for a physical battle where there need not be one, which distorts one's social and political perspective. The postmillennialist view seems hopelessly out of touch with reality, although it raises its voice periodically throughout history. The last time postmillennialism was in vogue in the U.S. was during the Progressive Era around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both the postmillennialist and premillennialist views have the difficulty of explaining how Jesus can reign for 1,000 years and then have everything "go to hell." Contrasting these views, the amillennialist view conforms to the general scope of the rest of the book (a symbol is a symbol is a symbol...) and solves the difficulty of having to explain the reemergence of the Accuser after the victory of Jesus. In the amillennialist view, the victory of Jesus on the cross and through the resurrection is the kin-dom "now" while the final, post-1,000-year victory is the kin-dom "not yet."

### 2. The three interpretive lenses used by scholars to understand the messages to the seven churches are:

A. *Seven Epochs in Church History*: Some interpreters divide the church into seven, distinct time periods. However, these time periods are constantly changing and, therefore, quite arbitrary. The "seven epochs" of an interpreter in 900 C.E. look very different from an interpreter today or an interpreter 1,000 years from now.

B. *Seven Kinds of Churches*: Some interpreters distinguish between different church archetypes.

However, it is virtually impossible to assign churches to a category with sufficient theological perspective and cultural humility. If there is an interpreter with such skills, this “lens” could be valid.

C. *Seven Historical Churches*: Some interpreters say the letters were written to the seven churches in Asia Minor with which John the Elder was known to have associated. These were actual, historical churches for which we have evidence both in the New Testament and extra-canonical writings. John’s message of challenge and comfort coheres with the known needs of these churches, which is helpful if John’s purpose in writing was to minister to his flock.

The lens through which we look either distorts or clarifies that which we see. The first two lenses have the disadvantage that they force the interpreter to see church epochs, church denominations or individual churches judgmentally, “Oh, that church on the corner is a Thyatiran kind of church because the pastor’s spouse is like a Jezebel.” The third lens, however, has the advantage of speaking a message of challenge and comfort to the churches of the first century, but any church in any century can hear all of these messages as if they are spoken to them and be challenged and comforted. Ockham’s Razor is a famous philosophical tool which says, “Take the simplest viable solution.” This third lens meets the test of Ockham’s Razor.

### 3. Who is the Antichrist / Beast?

#### A. *Answer #1: a particular political figure*

A particular person, such as the author who made the case for Anwar Sadat being the antichrist in a book that I read about a month before Sadat was assassinated. Other traditional favorites include: the current pope (mostly it is fundamentalist Protestants who put this forward), the current leader of Russia or the current strong man of the Middle East (e.g. Saddam, the Ayatollah, Bin Laden, etc.).

#### B. *Answer #2: generally anyone who opposes The Glory*

In a general sense, the antichrist is anyone that opposes The Glory’s purposes, especially those in positions of secular power, beginning with Rome and continuing into our time with Nazism, Communism, radical Islam, and (perhaps) Christian nationalism. Note that there are actually two Beasts: one is clearly the secular power (13:1-10), while the second beast is a power that speaks with a religious veneer (13:11-18) yet is used for the Dragon’s purposes.

#### C. *Answer #3: Caesar*

A third option is that the antichrist is the Roman Caesar (c.f. note 164), which is how I paraphrase chapter 13. However, option #3 does not preclude one of the other options from also being correct, so.... Let the eternal debate continue, but please be kind to one another.

## Appendix B: Suggested Study Guide

### 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Bible Study

#### Format

1. *Choose a facilitator.* The person who leads can be the same person each week or rotate among participants. The facilitator's job is not to teach but to create a safe space for everyone to share their perceptions and understanding of the material without being interrupted, talked over, or argued into silence.
2. *Round 1:* Write<sup>288</sup> and then share five (5) "I NOTICE..." statements about the passage's textual or literary content (e.g. "The word joy is repeated," "The speaker is Moses," "The younger son went to a distant country"). Focus only on the text's content but not meaning or ethics (e.g. Not, "I think this means," or, "What I hear God saying is..."). There will be an opportunity to focus on meaning and action in later steps. Focus = DATA and DETAILS.
3. *Round 2:* Write and then share four (4) "I WONDER ABOUT..." statements or questions. Questions can focus on textual content, theological meaning, or ethical expression (e.g. "I wonder about how this passage relates to Psalm 119?" "I wonder why David was so angry?") Focus = WONDER.
4. *Round 3:* Write and then share three (3) "I THINK..." statements about what this passage means. These three statements are the cognitive and intellectual expressions of your engaging Scripture (e.g. "This passage expresses God's mercy," "God hates injustice."). Focus = CLARITY AND COHERENCE.
5. *Round 4:* Write and then share two (2) "I VALUE..." statements that describe the two values to which you are being called by the passage (e.g. "I am called to express humility," or, "God wants me to value corporate unity"). There may be many values implicit in the passage, but only write the two values to which you are most strongly being called today. Focus = CORE CONVICTIONS.
6. *Round 5:* Write and then share one (1) "I COMMIT..." statement that says one action to which you will commit as a response to this passage (e.g. "I will give you my full attention when you speak," "I will honor the sabbath this week by...").
7. Close by praying for each other!

#### Eight Week Study Plan

- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| Week 1: | Who is God? (Chapters 1, 4-5)                         |
| Week 2: | What is God's Message to the Churches? (Chapters 2-3) |
| Week 3: | What is spiritual conflict like? (Chapters 6-7)       |
| Week 4: | What is spiritual conflict like? (Chapters 8-11)      |
| Week 5: | What is spiritual conflict like? (Chapters 12-15)     |
| Week 6: | What is spiritual conflict like? (Chapters 16-18)     |
| Week 7: | What is spiritual conflict like? (Chapters 19-20)     |
| Week 8: | What is God's Victory? (Chapters 21-22)               |

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<sup>288</sup> Writing can be done either before or during the study.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The one exception is The Revelation. However, see below regarding its Jewish literary style.

<sup>2</sup> Each book or letter's Jewish perspective is summarized in brief in the next column and more fully in each work's introduction.

### Hebrews

<sup>3</sup> Adherents include Hippolytus, Origen, and Luther.

<sup>4</sup> Adherents include Justin Martyr, Augustine, and Barth. This is often called economic supercessionism.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 247 and 249, (2013).

<sup>6</sup> c.f. notes 35, 36, 59, and 73 for specific examples of interpretive choices.

<sup>7</sup> Jewish adherents do not speak God's name out of respect. Instead, they substitute *ha shem*, which in Hebrew means The Name. In this work I experiment with using The Name when speaking of the divine and rotate using masculine and feminine pronouns by passage.

*The Name* is Aramaic (the common language Jesus likely spoke) for "daddy," while *The Name* is Aramaic for "mommy." In an attempt to be gender inclusive, I rotate between the use of The Name and The Name by passage.

<sup>8</sup> *Dunamis* is the word translated as "power" but from which we get dynamite and dynamic. I paraphrase the Greek with the Greek, for we become more dynamic when we release our power to allow God's dynamite to unlock opportunities and overcome challenges.

<sup>9</sup> HELPS Word Studies 2512: "*katharismos* ("to purge") – purification resulting from God removing undesirable admixtures (eliminating impurities)."

<sup>10</sup> c.f. Psalm 2:7.

<sup>11</sup> c.f. 1 Samuel 7:14.

<sup>12</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 32:43 in the Septuagint (Greek) text.

<sup>13</sup> c.f. Psalm 104:4.

<sup>14</sup> The Greek word used is *dikaïosune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaïosune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tsedakab* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior. ☺

<sup>15</sup> c.f. Psalm 45:6-7.

<sup>16</sup> c.f. Psalm 102:25-27.

<sup>17</sup> c.f. Psalm 110:1.

<sup>18</sup> c.f. Genesis 18:10-15.

<sup>19</sup> c.f. Luke 1:19-20.

<sup>20</sup> c.f. Luke 1:35.

<sup>21</sup> The Greek word used is *akousthesin*, which is often translated as "hear" and is where the English "acoustics" comes from.

<sup>22</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love,

including: *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *phelos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is "The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is empathy or a close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

<sup>23</sup> c.f. Psalm 8:4-6.

<sup>24</sup> Most interpreters would argue the Psalmist intends the words in Psalm 8 to refer to humanity, yet the author of Hebrews refers these verses to Jesus. This is an example of the ways New Testament authors use Scripture differently than modern commentators. It seems as if the author of *Hebrews* used the common literary device of speaking of an individual in corporate terms, as representative of all.

<sup>25</sup> These two sentences are not in the Greek text and are added to provide cultural context. The passage transitions from arguing Jesus' superiority to angels even though he was human (1:1—2:9) to begin to reason why it was necessary that a human be the agent of salvation.

<sup>26</sup> The Greek word used is *eprepon*, often translated as "fitting" yet also connotes "conspicuous."

<sup>27</sup> The Greek word used is *archegon*, which may convey "author" and "originator," and suggests the English "archetype."

<sup>28</sup> c.f. Psalm 22:22.

<sup>29</sup> c.f. Isaiah 8:17.

<sup>30</sup> c.f. Isaiah 8:18.

<sup>31</sup> Literally, "in meat."

<sup>32</sup> The Greek word used is *katargeo*, which Strongs defines as "(a) I make idle (inactive), make of no effect, annul, abolish, bring to naught, (b) I discharge, sever, separate from." (Strongs: 2673)

<sup>33</sup> The author uses the Greek word *oikos* throughout this passage as an extended metaphor. *Oikos* can mean either "family" or "house."

<sup>34</sup> Here is a simple bit of translation with significant consequences. The Greek word here is *ean*, which often is translated as "if," but also means "as." "If" conveys a conditional deal and suggests something that we lose, or worse, will be taken away in a punitive manner if we do not live up to our "part of the bargain" (i.e. Hebrews 11:1 trust, etc.). However, "as" conveys a sense that Jesus will continue to be our dwelling place while we trust in him. When we stop trusting, etc., we will no longer experience Jesus as a dwelling place, but this is no longer something taken from us and something we have relinquished. By renewing trust, etc., we will once again experience Jesus as a dwelling place.

<sup>35</sup> c.f. Psalm 95:7-11.

<sup>36</sup> c.f. Psalm 95:7-8.

<sup>37</sup> This passage suffers from an excess of theological accretion, like mussels attaching themselves upon a boat or pier. Theologies of the afterlife have attached themselves to the word *katapansis*, which is usually translated as "rest." Centuries of Christian interpretation have conflated "rest" in Hebrews 4 with our eternal rest in the resurrection. The effect of this conflation is to reinforce punitive supercessionism (see Introduction): "Jews who don't

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believe won't get to heaven," being the implied message. I notice, however, that Hebrews 4 connects "rest" not to eternal destinies but to the historical example of entering Canaan. It is a misreading of Hebrews to amplify the "rest" the Israelites missed experiencing to all things, all times, and all places (especially eternal ones). Further, *katapausis* also translates as "dwelling" or "habitation." Therefore, the opportunity the Israelites (and we today) miss experiencing through a lack of trust is the experience of dwelling or abiding in The Name.

<sup>38</sup> c.f. Psalm 95:11. The NIV translates this as "shall never enter my rest," which is an example of the theological accretion and amplification noted above. The Greek word *ei* is usually translated as "if." I translate *ei* as a simple negation, and the NIV amplifies this negation as "never." Lack of trust is a prophylactic against connection and intimacy with our Creator yet it does not mean the Israelites in the desert were for all times (and into eternity) prohibited from such communion.

<sup>39</sup> The Greek word used is *apatheian*, usually translated as "disobedience" or "obstinate" but also is a cognate of "apathy."

<sup>40</sup> c.f. Psalm 95:7-8.

<sup>41</sup> c.f. Exodus 28.

<sup>42</sup> Scholars dispute the dating of the composition of Hebrews. If written before 70 C.E., the Jerusalem Temple would still have been standing and the Temple priests would have been standing to offer sacrifices. If Hebrews was written after 70 C.E., the Temple would have been destroyed by Rome and this verb would need to be past tense.

<sup>43</sup> c.f. Psalm 2:7.

<sup>44</sup> c.f. Psalm 110:4. The Greek text says Jesus is priest in the order of Melchizedek, which is a Hebrew compound word of king (*melek*) and righteousness (*tzedek*).

<sup>45</sup> The phrase translated as "listen attentively" here and below is from the Greek word *hupakoe*, which is often translated as "obedience." *Hupakoe* has as its root *akouo*, "to hear," and so has nuances that focus not just on following a rule (our ordinary sense of being obedient) but of submission to what is heard or listening attentively to the word that must be followed, the word that compels.

<sup>46</sup> Commentators debate the meaning of 6:4-6. At issue is the question of "assurance of salvation." Hebrews appears to be saying that once grasped by The Name and drawn into her embrace, one can turn away and leave—lose one's salvation. Other commentators point to the fact the Greek verbs are all present tense, with none being future oriented, and argue that believers' "turning away" is provincial and temporary and that after The Name's "purging fire" (a reference to Malachi 3:2-3) they will be restored. The paraphrase leans into the former interpretation.

<sup>47</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:2-3, which is NOT in the Greek text. However, 6:6 speaks of "fire that burns" and appears to reference Malachi 3, although, admittedly, the reference is somewhat obscure.

<sup>48</sup> The "Balm in Gilead" is a reference from the Old Testament, but the lyrics of the well-known spiritual refer to the New Testament concept of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Balm

of Gilead is interpreted as a spiritual medicine that is able to heal Israel (and sinners in general) in spite of their worst sin.

<sup>49</sup> c.f. Genesis 22:17.

<sup>50</sup> Chapters 7-9 are an extended discussion comparing Jesus' "priesthood" and Jesus as "High Priest" with the Levitical priesthood and the lineage of Aaronic High Priests. As a reminder, the High Priesthood descended from Aaron while the Levitical priesthood descended from Levi (c.f. Numbers 1:53; 3:6, 9). By the first-century C.E., the High Priest had become an appointed position and detached from Aaron's lineage. The author of Hebrews' focus bounces between discussion of the functions of the High Priest and the Levitical priesthood in a somewhat arbitrary manner (or, at least, it is difficult for this interpreter to follow).

<sup>51</sup> This paragraph is an admittedly obscure argument the author of Hebrews makes and references the ancient belief that the father's sperm carried 100% of the DNA required to create human life (in ancient belief, the mother was the receptacle for the father's seed). I am less concerned about whether the biology is correct (it isn't) but am fascinated by the way Hebrews' author seeks to convey the "logic" of ancient beliefs about procreation to demonstrate Melchizedek's primacy over Abraham (first), Levi (second), and by extension the Levitical priesthood (third).

<sup>52</sup> c.f. Genesis 14:18-21.

<sup>53</sup> Melchizedek is a combination of the Hebrew words *melech* (king) and *tzedakah* (righteousness or justice).

<sup>54</sup> c.f. Numbers 1:53; 3:6, 9.

<sup>55</sup> In this passage, the author of Hebrews plays with variations of the Greek word *metathesis* which is a compound word of *meta* (meaning "change") and *thesis* (meaning, well, "thesis") and often translated as "change," "transform," or "transpose." I lean into interpretation in this passage to highlight the dynamic comparison between Melchizedek and the Levitical priesthood and the transformative impact of the former over the latter that Hebrews seeks to convey.

<sup>56</sup> The Greek word used is *anistemi*, which the NIV and NRSV translate as "appears" but which is translated as "rise" or "be raised" in Gospel passages (c.f. Mark 16:9, Luke 24:46). The author of Hebrews clearly wants to associate Melchizedek with Jesus and references Jesus' resurrection to elevate the priesthood of Melchizedek over the Levitical priesthood. Therefore, to translate *anistemi* merely as "appears" seems rather anemic, lacking the power of the original Greek.

<sup>57</sup> c.f. Psalm 110:4.

<sup>58</sup> c.f. Psalm 110:4.

<sup>59</sup> Throughout this passage the Greek word *horkomiasias*, translated as "oath," has been used without adjectival modification. However, in Hebrews 7:28, the author modifies oath with the Greek word *logos* (*ho logos de tes horkomiasias*). *Logos* is most famously used in John 1:1 (In the beginning was the Word/*Logos* and the Word/*Logos* was with God and was God) and famously has rich, varied, and philosophical connotations. *Logos* conveys "purpose," "meaning," "logic of the universe," "first principles," and "word."

<sup>60</sup> c.f. Exodus 26ff.

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<sup>61</sup> This verse is an excellent example of the temptation to read supercessionism into the text. The key Greek words are *diaphoros* and *kreittosin*, which the NRSV translates as “more excellent” and “better.” However, *diaphoros* and *kreittosin* can also be translated as “differing or varied” and “stronger or more certain.” The NRSV’s choice of the former creates an unnecessary hierarchy of form. Obviously, the author seeks to argue for the validity of Jesus’ priesthood but negating the Levitical priesthood is not necessary for a faithful translation of the text.

<sup>62</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 31:31-34.

<sup>63</sup> The Greek text names the House of Israel and the House of Judah. The interpretive paraphrase seeks to reflect that at the time Jeremiah wrote Israel and Judah had been divided from one another by civil war and both nations (“Houses”) were in exile.

<sup>64</sup> This couplet reflects Hebrews 8:11 where the Greek words *ginosko* and *eido* are used. Both words translate as “know” but *ginosko* conveys the nuance of personal experience (e.g. “to know another in ‘the biblical sense’”) and *eido* conveys perception and intuition. Jeremiah invites his hearers beyond merely cognitive knowledge.

<sup>65</sup> The Greek used, *teleios synedesin*, literally means “to complete (or fulfill, accomplish) the moral conscience.” It is disappointing that some English versions translate this phrase as “cleanse” or “clear” the conscience, which focus exclusively on what is taken away. However, *teleios* has a positive, formative connotation of what is created or that which becomes. The NRSV comes closest to the Greek nuance when it translates this phrase as “perfect the conscience.”

<sup>66</sup> *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for “time” and conveys the transformative moment when change occurs.

<sup>67</sup> c.f. John 17:21.

<sup>68</sup> c.f. The Prayer of St. Patrick.

<sup>69</sup> These sentences are not in the Greek text but provide context for what is found in 9:16-28. These are the questions being answered in the verses that follow.

<sup>70</sup> Some English translations focus on Moses’ giving of the Law (e.g., Ten Commandments) but the section to which this passage refers (c.f. Exodus 19 ff.) describes the giving of the covenant. A covenant requires obligations upon both parties (i.e., The Name’s blessing and the people’s obligation). Commandments were part of an ancient covenant, what scholars call a Suzerain-vassal treaty, of which Exodus is a form, but the emphasis in any covenant is the relationship that is established rather than mere obedience to a proscribed list of behaviors.

<sup>71</sup> c.f. Exodus 24:8.

<sup>72</sup> The Greek word used in this verse is *aphesis*, which is usually translated as “forgiveness.” Thus, many English translations say something like, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness,” (English Study Bible) which seems to suggest a punitive *quid pro quo*: something must die for us to live. However, *aphesis* also conveys “releasing, letting go, and sending away,” which I interpret as pointing to the spiritual rhythm of emptying to be filled, letting go to embrace, losing our life that we may find it (c.f. Matthew 5:3-10; 10:39; and Philippians 2:6-11).

<sup>73</sup> *Chronos* and *kairos* are the Greek words for “time.” *Chronos* conveys chronological time, and *kairos* conveys the key moment when transformation happens.

<sup>74</sup> I pray, Gentle Reader, that you hear this prayer as satire. I seek, Friend, to convey the hubris of modern readers in our judgment of the ancients while remaining blissfully in denial that our era is far more barbaric (though we pretend otherwise). I am reminded, Sibling in Jesus, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s distinction between “cheap grace” and “costly grace” in his *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Macmillan, 1980).

<sup>75</sup> Many English translations insert “only” into their translation (c.f. NIV, NRSV, ESB) without justification from the Greek text. The resulting translations reads, “The Law is only a shadow.” That the Greek *skia* means “shadow” is correct, yet it can also translate as “outline.” Given the word “only” is absent from the Greek text, rather than denigrate the Law (called Torah in the paraphrase), I hear the author making a “yes, and…” comment: “Yes, Torah is wonderful—it outlines the ways of God!—and yet is not the fullness of what God is doing.”

<sup>76</sup> c.f. Psalm 40:6-8.

<sup>77</sup> The English text seems to suggest continual sinning negates the effects of Jesus’ sacrifice (“no sacrifice for sins is left,” ESB). However, this directly contradicts the previous verses specifically (c.f. 10:19ff.) and the entire book generally. Therefore, I have paraphrased 10:26-27 as targeting our choices that “miss the mark” (Greek *harmatia*) and which The Name gives over to judgment so that only our true self remains (c.f. next note).

<sup>78</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:2, which uses the image of a metal smith separating the precious metal from the dross—only that which is precious remains.

<sup>79</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 32:36 and Psalm 135:14.

<sup>80</sup> c.f. Isaiah 26:20, Habakkuk 2:3.

<sup>81</sup> c.f. Habakkuk 2:4.

<sup>82</sup> English translations say Sarah “considered God faithful.” The Greek word used that is usually translated as “considered” or “of the opinion,” is *hegomai*, which can mean these English phrases but links linguistically to *hegemon* which conveys one who is a thought leader or who leads the opinions of others (often used of government officials). It seems to me the author of Hebrews isn’t merely conveying the notion that Sarah had a particular opinion but that her trusting The Name was particularly powerful and has led others to trust as well.

<sup>83</sup> The passage shifts in focus from stories of success, faithfulness, and blessing to stories of trust in the midst of hardship.

<sup>84</sup> The Greek word used in this verse is *agon*, from which we derive the English “agony.” The author is exhorting listeners to accept discomfort and embrace difficulty for the sake of growing into our true self.

<sup>85</sup> Seven times in this passage the author uses a form of *paideia*, translated by the NIV as “discipline.” However, *paideia* is also the word from which we get the noun *paidagogos* (c.f. Galatians 3:24). In Greek culture, a *paidagogos* refers to a tutor or mentor for the children of a first-century Hellenistic family. Technically, the *paidagogos* was responsible for moral and educational training. The author is wrestling with the issue that has often perplexed people

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of faith: What is the purpose of suffering and why does God allow it? I have chosen to frame my interpretive paraphrase using the context of the cruciform ethics and spirituality of Jesus' example.

<sup>86</sup> c.f. Proverbs 3:11-12.

<sup>87</sup> c.f. note 83 regarding the author of Hebrews' use of *paideia*.

<sup>88</sup> c.f. Proverbs 4:26.

<sup>89</sup> c.f. Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 9.

<sup>90</sup> This passage and the next repeatedly use the Greek word *meine*, and its variants. *Meine* can be translated as "abide, remain, or stay with," (compare similar usage in John 4:40 and 15:4ff.).

<sup>91</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 4:24 for the direct quote. However, c.f. also Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the "Redeemer's Fire." Rather than Dante's "fire as punishment," the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

<sup>92</sup> c.f. Psalm 46:1, 3, with slight revisions.

<sup>93</sup> The Greek word used is *philos*, meaning "brotherly or sisterly love," and from which we get Philadelphia, the "City of Brotherly Love."

<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, the Greek work *kakucheo* is used twice in this sentence and can be translate as "tortured" or "mistreated," which seems like a fairly large gap in terms of how one suffers. I have chosen to use both in the paraphrase.

<sup>95</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 31:6.

<sup>96</sup> c.f. Psalm 118:6-7.

<sup>97</sup> The author returns to the Greek word *meine* ("remain, stay, or abide," see note 89) to convey the sense of permanence of the city to which The Name sends us.

<sup>98</sup> The NIV translates this passage as "doing good and sharing with others." However, the Greek word used here is *koinonias*. The Greek word *koinonia* translates as "fellowship" and also conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship. *Koinonia* was a hallmark of early Christian communities and a cause for Roman suspicion of their motives—the Romans assuming something political must be the source of the Christian community. The author, therefore, expresses a sense of what today we call "missional theology" in that the author calls for us not merely to do good for people but to do it in partnership and spiritual fellowship with those whom we seek to serve.

<sup>99</sup> This paragraph has a homiletic quality to it, so I have crafted a version for use when speaking the text publicly. As I imagine the text as spoken Word, I hear the phrases within each paragraph expand upon what comes before to build toward a crescendo.

The Name's peace rest upon you. The Name's power work through you. The Name's purpose inspire your vision and direct your service.

The same The Name who spoke a sacred promise. The same The Name who raised Jesus from the dead. The same The Name who designated Jesus to be the Good Shepherd of her sheep.

May The Name equip you for all you will do. May The Name empower all your doing. May The Name be pleased by all you have done, through Jesus the Anointed, to whom all doxology is sung today and into all tomorrows. Amen.

## James

<sup>100</sup> Compare James 2:21-24 with Romans 4:1-3.

<sup>101</sup> Compare the following:

James 1:26-27 with Matthew 12:6-8;

James 2:5 with Matthew 5:3;

James 3:10-12 with Matthew 7:15-20;

James 3:18 with Matthew 5:9;

James 5:2-3 with Matthew 6:19-20; and

James 5:12 with Matthew 5:33-37.

<sup>102</sup> The Greek word for "wisdom" is *sophia*, which is a name in western cultures. As well, wisdom is personified as a woman in Proverbs 8.

<sup>103</sup> The Greek word used is *dipsychos*, which literally means "two souls" though it is often translated as "double-minded."

<sup>104</sup> The Greek word *anōthen* is used and is usually translated as "above" but can also refer to "origin" or "anew." When combined with two words in 1:18, *bouletheis* and *logo* (see note 7), there is a sense of purposefulness and intentionality that is conveyed in this passage.

<sup>105</sup> The Greek word used is *parallage*, which is usually translated as "change." Thus, *ouk parallage* means "no change." This is problematic in that it conveys the message "God never changes" and leads some theological traditions to paint God as static, intractable, and rigid (c.f. The Westminster Confession of Faith). Yet we see God changing God's mind in Exodus and other places, so faithful interpretation must account for those passages that convey the permanence of God's character and fidelity with moments of impermanence of God's emotions, choices and, seemingly, God's means of connecting with God's people. A modern theological perspective known as process theology suggests a solution: God's character and faithfulness are unchanging while God allows the unfolding of God's relationship with the creation to influence God's process—yet always moving toward the horizon of God's love. (For an orthodox introduction of process theology, see Anna Case-Winters, *God Will Be All in All*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2021.)

<sup>106</sup> Compare with note 5: *bouletheis* is translated as "chose" while *logo* is translated as "word" by the NIV. Both of these words, however, convey a sense of intentionality—*bouletheis* can also mean "intend" while *logo* can also mean "purpose or foundational principle."

<sup>107</sup> The Greek word *poiētas* is usually translated as "doer" or "maker" but also translates as "poet."

<sup>108</sup> The emphasis in these two verses is placed on the Greek word *threskos*, which is translated as "religious" or "religion" in the NIV. However, *threskos* in its Jewish context connotes "ritual or ceremonial observance." James 1:26-27 echoes Jesus' words in Matthew 12:6-8ff.

<sup>109</sup> The Greek actually says "widows in their distress." I have refocused the object of the call to care to connect the ethical obligation of care to all those in distress rather than limit the obligation.

<sup>110</sup> c.f. Matthew 5:3.

<sup>111</sup> The Greek word used is *katadunasteno*, which is a compound word meaning "according to tyranny" or "according to dynasty."

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<sup>112</sup> The Greek word used is a cognate of *teleos*, which conveys the sense of “fulfillment, accomplishment, and wholeness.”

<sup>113</sup> The Greek word used is a cognate of *agape*, which conveys a holistic sense of perfect, unconditional love.

<sup>114</sup> c.f. Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>115</sup> c.f. Exodus 20:13, 14.

<sup>116</sup> This passage presents a choice for translators centered on the Greek word *mellontes*, which can be translated either as “to be about to” or “intends.” The Greek has an interesting intersection of *mellontes* with the words for “freedom,” and “judgment” (*eluetherias* and *krinesthai*). Greek syntax allows *mellontes* to be connected to either freedom or judgment (but not both). The NIV and ESV translate *mellontes* as “about to” and connect it to judgment: “...those who are going to be judged.” (ESV) However, I connect *mellontes* to freedom to translate *mellontes* as intends: i.e. “freedom is the intention for which the law is given.” Thus, in my paraphrase I reject the insinuation that the motivation for obedience is a fear of judgment and seek to convey the Jewish perspective of the Torah (law) that sees it not as a list of obligations but as a path toward personal, community, and national liberation—this is who Sophia intends for us to be and what she intends for us to do.

<sup>117</sup> “Mercy exults over judgment” is a literal translation of the Greek of 2:13.

<sup>118</sup> The Greek word *arge* translates as “useless, worthless, or injurious.”

<sup>119</sup> c.f. Genesis 15:6.

<sup>120</sup> c.f. Joshua 2:1-16.

<sup>121</sup> The Greek word used is *didaskaloi*, which means “teachers.” The Presbyterian Church (USA) calls its clergy “Ministers of Word and Sacrament.”

<sup>122</sup> *Gebenna* was the name of the valley outside of Jerusalem where garbage was burned.

<sup>123</sup> c.f. Matthew 7:15-20.

<sup>124</sup> c.f. Matthew 5:9.

<sup>125</sup> The Greek word used is *polemai*, which can be translated also as “conflicts” or “fights.”

<sup>126</sup> The Greek word *hedonon* (or a conjugated variant) are used twice. The ESV translates the Greek as “passions” and “pleasures,” which is technically appropriate but seems to miss the nuance implied by *hedonon*.

<sup>127</sup> The Greek word used is *zeloo*, ordinarily translated as “jealous” or “covet,” but which HELPS Word Studies defines as “(an onomatopoeic word, imitating the sound of boiling water) – properly, to bubble over because *so hot (boiling)*.”

<sup>128</sup> A quote attributed to Russian philosopher and anti-Soviet activist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, source not known.

<sup>129</sup> A quote attributed to theologian and Christian Education H. Richard Niehbur, source not known.

<sup>130</sup> For those who are Madeline L’Engle fans: the antagonists in *A Wrinkle in Time* were called *ekthrois*, which is the Greek word used here meaning “hostility.”

<sup>131</sup> The Greek word used is a variant of *oikeo*, which refers to the Greco-Roman “household.”

<sup>132</sup> c.f. Proverbs 3:34.

<sup>133</sup> The Greek word *hyperephanos* is a compound word ordinarily translated as “proud,” but literally means “over-shine” (*hyper/over* + *phanos/shine*).

<sup>134</sup> This is the literal meaning of the Greek word *tapeinoo* which is usually translated as “humble.”

<sup>135</sup> The Greek text does not give a reason for the admonition to grieve, mourn and wail. Under the rubric of “interpretive paraphrase” I added the reason to grieve, as the context seem to imply these are the concerns James has for his readers.

<sup>136</sup> Fun fact unrelated to Scripture: the Greek word for “laughter” is *gelos*, which sounds like it could be the etymological source for the Italian gelato. While most linguists connect gelato with the Latin word for cold, I am intrigued and love to imagine that gelato really means laughter 😊

<sup>137</sup> St. Benedict listed 12 steps of descent as necessary to journey the “upward way.”

<sup>138</sup> *En shallab* is an Arabic expression common in the Middle East, which means “If God wills....”

<sup>139</sup> The Greek word *kalon* can also mean “good.” In my first draft, I paraphrased this verse as “See the do and do the good.” Though the wider context of Hebrews 4 suggests “good” may be a better choice for translation, I chose “beautiful” as a means to stimulate wonder about the passages meaning.

<sup>140</sup> c.f. Matthew 6:19-20.

<sup>141</sup> c.f. Genesis 4:10.

<sup>142</sup> c.f. Exodus 3:7.

<sup>143</sup> c.f. Exodus 15:23-24 and 16:2-3 ff.

<sup>144</sup> This phrase is not in the Greek text but is added as an interpretive frame for 5:12. Given the context of chapter 5, James’ instruction to speak a simple “yes” or “no” is a response to the hardships his readers encountered as followers of Jesus in Roman culture.

<sup>145</sup> c.f. Matthew 5:33-37.

<sup>146</sup> The Greek word *egerei* can mean “awake, arouse, or raise.” In the context of being sick, it makes sense that most English translations choose to translate as “raise.” My paraphrase wonders what this verse suggests if a different, yet linguistically acceptable, definition is chosen.

<sup>147</sup> The Greek words in this sentence all use the middle voice. In Greek, there are three voices: active (I do), passive (I have done to me), and middle (I and you do together). In using the middle voice for the words translated as “pray” and “heal,” James suggests the healing that occurs is between and among the participants; that is, praying for and with each other heals the “us” that is our relationship, our being community in Jesus.

## 1 and 2 Peter

<sup>148</sup> c.f. 1 Kings 17-18.

<sup>149</sup> c.f. 1:10 and 14, 2:10, and 4:3.

<sup>150</sup> Here is my confession. I noticed throughout the writing process a peculiar phenomenon: 1 Peter uses the title of Christ (23 times) more often than he uses Jesus’ name (8 times). I was mildly uncomfortable with this imbalance as I wrote this interpretive paraphrase. Having concluded the work on 1 Peter, I counted my own usage of “Anointed” and “Jesus” and discovered I used them



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in roughly equal numbers when paraphrasing 1 Peter. (2 Peter uses the names and titles in approximately equal number.) What does it say about my spirituality and faith perspective that I lift up the name of Jesus even when the Greek text does not? Knowing a writer's bias is important. You now know mine.

<sup>151</sup> The Greek word *apostolos* literally means “one who is sent,” from which we get the word “apostle.”

<sup>152</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the title that will be used for God in *Praying 1 and 2 Peter* is “The Sovereign,” which conveys that a significant message in the Petrine letters is Peter's insistence that Jesus is Lord (or sovereign) and not Caesar.

<sup>153</sup> The Greek word *parepidemos* is usually translated as “exile.”

<sup>154</sup> The five locations identified in the Greek text are, in order, Pontus, Galatia, Asia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia. Scholars agree this is likely the route 1 Peter was transmitted as a “circular letter.”

<sup>155</sup> The allusion to the Temple is implied in the reference to “blood sprinkled.”

<sup>156</sup> Kin-dom is a gender-neutral alternative for kingdom, reign of God, or rule of God.

<sup>157</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the “Redeemer's Fire.” Rather than Dante's “fire as punishment,” the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

<sup>158</sup> The Greek text uses *exezetesan* and *exeraunesan* back to back, which are translated as “seek” and “search for, investigate.” I attempt to capture Peter's emphasis in the paraphrase.

<sup>159</sup> The following sentences describe the economic, market context that define the meaning of “redeem.”

<sup>160</sup> c.f. Leviticus 16:8-10.

<sup>161</sup> The Greek text uses both *philia* and *agape*, both of which translate as “love.” The former connotes familial love while the latter connotes a love without condition.

<sup>162</sup> c.f. Isaiah 40:6-8.

<sup>163</sup> Shirin McArthur, “Psalm Flight for Psalm 119,” *Psalm Flights: Engaging with Scripture through Poetry and Prayer* (Unpublished manuscript shared with the author, April 27, 2022, Microsoft Word file.

<sup>164</sup> “...bring the people to The Sovereign and The Sovereign to people” is the literal description of what it means to be a “holy priesthood.”

<sup>165</sup> c.f. Isaiah 28:16.

<sup>166</sup> c.f. Psalm 118:22.

<sup>167</sup> c.f. Isaiah 8:14.

<sup>168</sup> c.f. Exodus 19:5-6. This verse is an example of how interpreters can either combat or conform to supercessionism (the idea that the Christian Church supersedes Israel; c.f. the introduction of *Praying Hebrews*). I have interpreted the Greek text as suggesting the Church continues and enhances the ongoing work of Judaism rather than replacing Judaism with Christianity. Israel remains a royal priesthood, a holy nation, etc. (c.f. Romans 11).

<sup>169</sup> I lean heavily into interpretation here. This sentence and the next two are not found in the Greek text but describe the first-century social context for the reasons Greeks and Romans accused the followers of Jesus of unethical behavior and lifestyles.

<sup>170</sup> It is the nature of authoritarian regimes to be suspicious of “odd” behavior, especially gatherings of people who would ordinarily not associate with each other.

<sup>171</sup> This poem is inspired by the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who is reported to have said,

People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway. If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway. For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

<sup>172</sup> The Greek word used is *hupotasso* which is ordinarily translated as “submit” or “obey.” However, *hupotasso* is a compound word that literally translates as “under/arrange.”

<sup>173</sup> The Greek word used is *agape*.

<sup>174</sup> The Greek word used is *timao*, which translates as “value at a price” or “assign value.”

<sup>175</sup> The Greek text uses the word *doulos*, which translates as “slave” or “servant.” I lean into interpretation to paraphrase this for our 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural context. In this passage, Peter is not saying that slavery is the way things *should be* but responding to the way things *are* in Roman culture.

<sup>176</sup> Some translations seem to suggest suffering is a command. Such translations do not acknowledge the realities of Roman culture and the necessity for Peter to respond to the culture *the way it is rather than the way we prefer it would be*. The paraphrase seeks to acknowledge the reality of suffering for Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> century who were usually poor and always a religious minority.

<sup>177</sup> c.f. Isaiah 53:9.

<sup>178</sup> This is a paraphrase of St. Gregory's famous quote in his letter to Cledonius arguing the significance that Jesus' incarnation was fully human (contra Docetism, which argued Jesus only seemed human—Greek *doceo*, “to seem,”—and therefore he didn't really suffer).

<sup>179</sup> c.f. Isaiah 53:4-6.

<sup>180</sup> In this passage, as in the last passage, I lean into interpretation for the paraphrase. Whereas Peter gives distinct counsel to wives and husbands, I merge Peter's meta message about caring, faithful relationships and apply it to both partners in a marriage.

<sup>181</sup> c.f. Ephesians 5:21, which is not in the Greek text but seems to be assumed by Peter as he attempts to be egalitarian in his counsel.

<sup>182</sup> Peter offers a counter-cultural example in this paragraph. Though in the Greek text Peter says Sarah “listened to, hearkened or obeyed” Abraham, the emphasis in his statement (and his use of Sarah's life as an illustration of the larger point) revolves around how Sarah's value came from her trust in The Sovereign rather than her being Abraham's property.

<sup>183</sup> This is the opposite of what Jesus said about himself in Mark 10:45, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve....”

<sup>184</sup> c.f. Psalm 34:12-16.

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<sup>185</sup> c.f. Isaiah 8:12-13, though only Isaiah 8:12 is in the Greek text. Allusion seems to be made to Isaiah 8:13 though it is not quoted specifically.

<sup>186</sup> This phrase is not in the Greek text, but Peter's paragraph in chapter 3 is clearly a summation of the hope we are to be prepared to share.

<sup>187</sup> What follows is interpretive paraphrase and offers a description of an atonement theory (re: explanation of what happened on the Cross) known as *Christus Victor*, which was the Church's dominant theory for the first 1,000 years. *Christus Victor* emphasizes Jesus' victory over sin, death, and evil and contrasts with atonement theories that presume a judicial framework. Theories of atonement that emphasize a judicial perspective are known as either satisfaction theory or penal substitution theory, which are more common and better known within Protestant churches. (The third major theory is known as the moral exemplar theory, and there are variations on the theme for each atonement theory.) The New Testament hints at each of these theories but does not specify any of them as the sole, perfect explanation of what happened when Jesus went to the Cross. It is best to remember the ancient axiom: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, diversity. In all things, charity."

<sup>188</sup> The Greek and Hebrew words for "spirit" also mean "breath" or "wind."

<sup>189</sup> c.f. Genesis 6-9.

<sup>190</sup> The Greek of 4:1 is difficult to translate because of the use of passive verbal forms ("I am acted upon"). Particularly difficult is the use of *pepautai*, translated as "done, finished, ceased," which appears in passive form only once in the New Testament (thus, literally: "I am ceased upon," which is a non-sequitur in English). Adding to the difficulty are the two uses of *pathon*, translated as "suffer," but whose meaning actually implies a passive form (even when grammatically constructed as an active verb!); thus, *pathon* means "acted upon in a way that causes one pain." My attempt in the paraphrase is to capture the sense of loss of agency being described in the early Christians' lives and Peter's focus on the one choice for which they still have agency: their intention or resolve about how they will respond to "being acted upon."

<sup>191</sup> i.e. "death and taxes."

<sup>192</sup> The Greek word used is *telos*, which can mean "end, purpose, fulfillment or complete." While it is more common to translate 4:7 as "end" to suggest the cessation of linear time, I chose to wonder what happens in the text if "end" is understood in the sense of "The Great Ends of the Church," aka "purpose."

<sup>193</sup> c.f. Exodus 14:7-12. Peter here makes an allusion to the Israelites "grumbling" or "murmuring" in the desert.

<sup>194</sup> The Greek word *xenizo* can mean either "entertain a stranger" or "startle, bewilder."

<sup>195</sup> c.f. Matthew 5:10.

<sup>196</sup> The Greek word *kairos* means "time" and is used to convey "the key moment" or "the transformational moment." *Kairos* contrasts with the other Greek word for time, *chronos*, which conveys chronological or linear time.

<sup>197</sup> c.f. Proverbs 11:31.

<sup>198</sup> This line refers to the events of May 15, 2022, when 10 were slaughtered in a mass shooting at a Buffalo, NY supermarket and three killed while attending a post-worship luncheon of the Taiwanese congregation of Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, CA. See also note 81.

<sup>199</sup> Redlining is the practice of denying a creditworthy applicant a loan for housing in a certain neighborhood, usually for racial reasons.

<sup>200</sup> The Greek text uses the noun form, *koinonos*, translated as "partaker" by the ESB.

<sup>201</sup> This is a variation on Julia Ward Howe's *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. As you read the poem, I hope you "heard" the music in your head.

<sup>202</sup> c.f. Psalm 100.

<sup>203</sup> c.f. Proverbs 3:34.

<sup>204</sup> The Greek word used is *merimnan*, which the NIV translates as "anxiety" (Cast your anxiety...). *Merimnan* has the connotation in Greek of being divided in mind and heart, so it is understandable why translators chose to describe this phenomenon as anxiety. However, in our therapeutic culture, anxiety is something different than *merimnan's* sense of being a divided self that lacks wholeness.

<sup>205</sup> The Greek uses *antistete stereoi* back-to-back at the beginning of the sentence, which creates emphasis. Both words can mean "stand," so the paraphrase leans into the value Scripture places on standing. In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, "Who can stand?" This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible, when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, "Who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when, at the end of chapter 6, the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes (Revelation 6:17). Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord (Revelation 7:1, 9).

<sup>206</sup> The Greek word used is *kalesas*, which can mean either "call" or "name." I allow my Reformed theological heritage to influence the paraphrase ☺

<sup>207</sup> This is likely a coded reference to Rome, which is why I added quotations.

<sup>208</sup> I am being somewhat playful here. The Greek translates as "holy kiss," which obviously meant something different in 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean culture than it does today. Heck, it means something different for my wife's Italian family than in my Scottish roots!

<sup>209</sup> c.f. Mark 3:16.

<sup>210</sup> The Greek word *apostolos* literally means "one who is sent," from which we get the word "apostle."

<sup>211</sup> *Dunamis* is the word translated as "power" but from which we get dynamite and dynamic. I paraphrase the Greek with the Greek, for we become more dynamic when we release our power to allow God's dynamite to unlock opportunities and overcome challenges.

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<sup>212</sup> The Greek word used here and in the next verse is *dedoremenos*, which translates as “give” or “bestow generously.” Significantly, both verbs use the Greek middle voice (“I and you do together”).

<sup>213</sup> The noun form of *koinonia* is used and can be translated as “partakers of the divine nature.” *Koinonia* translates as “fellowship” and also conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship.

<sup>214</sup> The Greek word used is *pareisenkantes*, which the English Study Bible translates rather prosaically as “make.” However, it has the connotation both of “close beside” and “bring deeply into,” which I try to convey in the paraphrase.

<sup>215</sup> The Greek word used is *parousia* which translates as either “presence” or “coming.” I choose the former because this verse seems focused on present blessing and strength. Later in the letter, Peter’s focus seems to be on *parousia* as “coming.”

<sup>216</sup> c.f. Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35.

<sup>217</sup> Commentators remark this is an early example of what would become the Christian typology of “apostles and prophets.”

<sup>218</sup> This is a paraphrase of a quote from John Calvin, source read in seminary and long since lost. But the quote was memorable, so the paraphrase stayed with me. ☺

<sup>219</sup> In the second and third paragraphs of 2:1-11, I adapt the order of the Greek text for the sake of the paraphrase. Whereas the text’s structure is A-B, A-B, A-B, I order Peter’s words as A-A-A (second paragraph), B-B-B (third paragraph) in the paraphrase.

<sup>220</sup> This sentence contains the literal translation of the Greek word *aselgeiais*, often translated “depravity.”

<sup>221</sup> c.f. Genesis 19:1-29.

<sup>222</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, “Who can stand?” This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, “Who can stand when he appears?” (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

<sup>223</sup> c.f. Numbers 22-24.

<sup>224</sup> The Greek refers to non-productive natural phenomena (e.g. spring without water). I lean into interpretive paraphrase to convey the sense of this paragraph for modern readers.

<sup>225</sup> c.f. Proverbs 26:11.

<sup>226</sup> Reformed theology highlights the three-fold nature of the Word of God: Jesus is the Living Word incarnate, Scripture is the Word read that bears witness to the Living Word, and Sermon and Sacraments are the Word proclaimed and enacted in the power of the Spirit.

<sup>227</sup> c.f. Genesis 1:7.

<sup>228</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the “Redeemer’s Fire.” Rather than Dante’s “fire as punishment,” the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

<sup>229</sup> This stanza refers to the mass shootings in May 2002 in Buffalo, New York, Laguna Woods, California, and Uvalde, Texas.

<sup>230</sup> This is one of the chapter titles from Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 1989). This quote is, obviously, not in the Greek text but conveys the sense of what Peter writes and how he uses the culminating words of chapter two to call forth focus and behavior.

<sup>231</sup> The Greek word *spendo* can mean either “hasten, speed along” or “desire earnestly.” The interpretive paraphrase incorporates both meanings but leans toward the latter definition in its emphasis. As a Reformed pastor, my theological orientation trusts what The Sovereign does more than what we humans do! However, I am aware that both the progressive Social Gospel movement of the early 1900s and the fundamentalist, dispensationalist preachers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. John Hagee) interpret *spendo* as “hasten” and believe their efforts can speed along the culmination of all things.

<sup>232</sup> The Greek word used is *kataiikesai*, which is a cognate of *oikeo* with its rich connotations of residing, abiding, and home. The verb, translated as “dwells,” has a rich, biblical history, beginning with the stories of Israel’s Tabernacle (c.f. Exodus 26-27ff.) in which the Lord’s presence was said to dwell. The “dwelling place of God” transitioned to the Solomonic Temple (c.f. 1 Kings 8ff.) and later God’s presence “dwelled among us” in the Word made flesh (John 1:14) and promises to dwell in “spirit and truth” (John 4:23) among all people.

<sup>233</sup> The Greek word used is *ekpipto*, which can translate as “fall away” or “become ineffective.” Falling away has been co-opted by some theologies to suggest eternal peril for those who have been claimed by Jesus. However, *ekpipto* in Greek culture has a nautical connotation as in “off course,” suggesting believers may stray like lost sheep (c.f. Luke 15:1-8) or wander from the truth (c.f. James 5:19-20) but that such is not eternal peril.

### 1, 2, and 3 John

<sup>234</sup> The separatist movement known as the Essenes and the community in Qumran, possibly associated with the Essenes, give examples of Jewish dualisms. I do not intend to say that John was part of the Qumran community but rather the Dead Sea Scrolls, as Qumran’s written expression, give evidence of this form of cultural adaptation. The same adaptation is found in the Johannine letters, that are not written from Qumran yet similarly express dualisms.

<sup>235</sup> Greek has two words for “time.” *Chronos* depicts linear, chronological time. *Kairos* depicts the key moment when transformation comes (e.g. when the expecting mother tells her partner, “It’s time.”)

<sup>236</sup> *Koinonia* translates as “fellowship” and conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship.

<sup>237</sup> The Greek text reads *ouk estin oudemia*, which translates literally as “no is none.” I attempt to capture the enthusiasm and emphatic negation in the paraphrase.

<sup>238</sup> The Greek word *katharizo* (from which we get the English “catharsis”) is ordinarily translated as “purify” or “cleanse,” which

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suggest the ceremonial or liturgical context of the Jewish Temple. My paraphrase frames *katharizo* as more dynamic, in keeping with its English term, as more than merely taking something away but creating something new.

<sup>239</sup> *Agape* is one of seven Greek words for “love,” of which the New Testament uses four. *Agape* means love that is whole, complete and offered without reservation.

<sup>240</sup> In *Praying the Jewish-Christian Letters*, I have paraphrased *Christ* as “the Anointed.” However, here I break my pattern (a) because I just love alliteration, and (b) because John’s literary and theological style likes to link Genesis and Exodus to the new creation and new exodus unveiled in Jesus. This was an opportunity to mirror that style.

<sup>241</sup> Verses 2:12-14 in the Greek text read as two triplets of exhortation (A-B-C, A-B-C), which I have paraphrased as three doublets (A-A, B-B, C-C).

<sup>242</sup> The Greek text of 1 John speaks of the devil, the antichrist (singular), and antichrists (plural). My paraphrase refers to an antichrist and antichrists. I chose to use a term that focused on their work: to be in opposition to Jesus’ influence and ongoing activity within the Church and in the world.

<sup>243</sup> The Greek text changes the primary verb used for “knowing” or “knowledge” from the previous section. The last section used *ginosko*, which conveys knowing as “intimacy and personal experience.” This section uses *eido*, which conveys knowing as “to remember or appreciate.”

<sup>244</sup> There are several, nuanced interpretations of this verse but two are primary. One primary interpretation assumes a rather linear progression that downplays the significance of the word “like”: (A) see Jesus, (B) be Jesus. The paraphrase conveys the other primary interpretation and emphasizes the significance of the word like: (A) just as Jesus was his best, truest self as a human, so (B) we will become the best version of our self (our true self) as The Love created us to be.

<sup>245</sup> The Greek word *anomia* is a compound word (*a – nomia*) that literally translates as “not law.” However, the meaning of *anomia* can refer either to the act, “lawlessness,” or the result, which I have paraphrased as chaos and anarchy (c.f. HELPS Word Studies 458: “the end impact of law-breaking”).

<sup>246</sup> c.f. Genesis 4:3-7 and Leviticus 7:14-15.

<sup>247</sup> The Greek text, *kleise ta splanchna*, literally translates as “close your intestines.” This idiom could be paraphrased as “If your guts don’t pour out” because of others’ pain. My paraphrase seems tame—I may change it in future editions 😊

<sup>248</sup> The heart of this passage in the Greek text centers on whether Jesus came in the flesh (the theological word “incarnate” literally means “in meat”) or only seemed to have taken on human flesh (c.f. the Docetist heresy, from the Greek word *doceo* which means “to seem”). This question was generated by Greek culture’s dichotomy between the material and immaterial worlds, where, according to Greek philosophy, the material world was corrupt because it changed, and the immaterial world was honored for its permanence. Thus in the early Church there were some who resisted the claim that Jesus came in the flesh. In the early second century, this heresy evolved into Gnosticism, which amplified the

spiritualized version of Jesus and the Gospel. The Church has struggled throughout its history with this dichotomy between flesh and spirit (e.g. the Social Gospel vs. Spiritual Gospel movement of the 1900s). I attempt, therefore, to lean into interpretation with this paraphrase to address these questions: What is the significance of affirming Jesus as incarnate? How does this differ from preaching that so spiritualizes the Gospel that it downplays Jesus’ incarnation (i.e., being so heavenly bound as to be no earthly good)?

<sup>249</sup> The Greek text uses *pneuma*, ordinarily translated as “spirit,” throughout this passage. I used the metaphor of wind, an alternative translation of *pneuma*, in the paraphrase to explore how using a metaphor opens meaning and understanding of the passage. While one may justifiably critique this choice, I note that Jesus also used metaphors from time to time to express meaning.

<sup>250</sup> c.f. Matthew 25:40.

<sup>251</sup> c.f. Luke 10:37.

<sup>252</sup> c.f. Luke 4:19.

<sup>253</sup> Most readers are more familiar with Paul’s connecting of atonement to the cross. Here in 4:9-10, John connects atonement to Jesus’ incarnation—not just the cross but the fullness of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

<sup>254</sup> The Greek word used is *hilasmos*, which can mean “atoning sacrifice or propitiation.” There is a sense in *hilasmos* of The Love’s anger or vengeance needing to be satisfied, which is the familiar connotation adopted by many Protestants. Critics of this perspective suggest this sounds like divine child abuse. Further, such vengeance-as-motivation is at odds with other passages in the New Testament that imply The Love’s motivation is born out of mercy (c.f. 2 Peter 3:9, John 3:16). The paraphrase seeks to walk the tightrope between justice and mercy in a way similar to Romans 3:26, which declares The Love to be “just and the one who justifies....”

<sup>255</sup> This is an awkward sentence in English, in my humble opinion. I chose not to make the paraphrase smoother because the Greek text is also awkward; indeed, the Greek text’s awkwardness seems to be intentional. Variants of the verb *gennaō* (“born or begotten”) are used three times in this single verse of 5:1.

<sup>256</sup> At this point in the paragraph, the Greek text only mentions “water and blood”; what is meant by water and blood engenders substantial debate. The paraphrase suggests water and blood refer to baptism and the cross; however, commentators interpret this to mean a variety of things: the water and blood that flowed from Jesus’ side on the cross (Augustine), a reference to the cross and baptism in Jesus’ name (Tertullian), a reference to John’s baptism and the cross (Baur), the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Luther), physical birth and spiritual death (some modern scholars), or birthing images (feminist scholar Deborah Sawyer). In the spirit of this enterprise of interpretive paraphrase, I invite you, Dear Reader, to choose the interpretation that makes the most sense to you (but keep an open mind and open heart toward others who may disagree).

<sup>257</sup> The emphasis in the Greek text is on holding those within John’s community accountable rather than focusing outside the Christian community to judge others.

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<sup>258</sup> The Greek text uses the phrase *hamartian me pros thanaton*, “sin leading to death.” What is this sin? The answers are plentiful, as commentators disagree. Commentators speculate the apostle refers to Old Testament sins whose punishment was death (e.g. Numbers 18:22); to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (e.g. Matthew 12:31); to something that leads to physical death; to actions that, when one persists in practice, lead to spiritual death; or to the state of being one has that leads to sin. As always when confronted with a phrase impervious to clarity, humility is encouraged.

<sup>259</sup> The heresy John confronts is called “Docetism,” after the Greek word *doceo*, which means “to seem.” The Docetists taught that Jesus only seemed to take on human form but remained only and exclusively divine.

<sup>260</sup> This phrase is not in the Greek text but is taken from the Apostolic Fathers and Mothers and is attributed to Origen as well as Gregory of Nazianus.

<sup>261</sup> c.f. Jürgen Moltmann, “This is God, and God is like this. God is not greater than Jesus is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than Jesus is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than Jesus is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than Jesus is in this humanity.” *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 295.

<sup>262</sup> c.f. Isaiah 58:3-12.

## Jude

<sup>263</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1937), 45.

<sup>264</sup> The Assumption of Moses and 1 Enoch (see notes below).

<sup>265</sup> c.f. Sirach 16:7-10, Damascus Document 2:17-3:12, 3 Maccabees 2:4-7, and Testament of Naphtali 3:4-5.

<sup>266</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

<sup>267</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>268</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including: *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *phelos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is “The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is empathy or a

close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

<sup>269</sup> YOLO: You Only Live Once.

<sup>270</sup> c.f. Numbers 14.

<sup>271</sup> c.f. Revelation 20:10.

<sup>272</sup> c.f. Genesis 19:1-29.

<sup>273</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the “Redeemer’s Fire.” Rather than Dante’s “fire as punishment,” the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious. However, here Jude seems to mean fire as punishment.

<sup>274</sup> c.f. *The Assumption of Moses* (1st century CE). Though the precise quotation cannot be found in existing papyrus manuscripts, it is presumed to have existed because it is cited here and by other ancient sources. c.f. Zechariah 3:1-2 for the quote that appears to be the original source for *The Assumption of Moses*.

<sup>275</sup> c.f. Genesis 4:1-15.

<sup>276</sup> c.f. Numbers 22-24.

<sup>277</sup> c.f. Numbers 16.

<sup>278</sup> c.f. 1 Enoch 1:8 for the quotation and Deuteronomy 33:2 for the source of 1 Enoch’s quote.

<sup>279</sup> The Greek word *apostoleos* means “sent ones,” so apostles are literally those who are sent.

<sup>280</sup> The Greek word in the text is *diakrino*, which the ESB translates as “doubt,” but which ordinarily is translated as “distinguish or judge.” *Diakrino* also has connotations of “separate, waver, be hesitant.” The paraphrase plays with several of these connotations.

<sup>281</sup> c.f. Isaiah 42:3.

<sup>282</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, “Who can stand?” This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, “Who can stand when he appears?” (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).