

THE WAY, THE TRUTH & THE LIFE

It has been said that Christianity is not a “what” but a “Who.” In other words, Christianity is not just a bunch of knowledge about Jesus Christ: Christianity *is* Jesus Christ. He made this clear when Thomas asked Him to show him the way to God and Jesus replied, “*I am the way....*” This is why before Christianity was called Christianity, it was called “the way.” It is in Christ alone and BY Christ alone that we are saved from death and hell, as Paul wrote: “*...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*” (Romans 10:9) Jesus is the way—the only way to eternal life.

Now what many Christians don’t realize is that this “way”—Jesus—was there all along. John called Jesus “the Word of life” and wrote: “*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that has been made.*” (John 1:1-3) Jesus was there at the beginning; there was no time when he was not. A thousand years before Jesus took on human flesh and walked among us, he spoke through Solomon, saying “*The Lord brought me forth as the beginning of his way.*” (Proverb 8) A thousand years before that, Jesus appeared to Abraham as the priest Melchizedek, “*...the king of righteousness*” (Gen. 14:17-20) Jesus appeared to Joshua as the “captain of the Lord’s army” before the fall of Jericho. (Joshua 5:13-15) David called Jesus “*my Lord*” and “*the way of the righteous.*” (Psalm 1:6 and Psalm 110:1) Jesus even appeared to pagan Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, who called him “*a son of the gods*” (Daniel 3:25) and He was revealed to Daniel as “*...One like a son of man*” who was given “*...dominion and glory and a kingdom...which shall not pass away.*” (Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus Christ is the heart and soul of the Bible, which is what led Luther to say, “*If you cut the Scriptures at any point they will bleed Christ.*”

When Jesus called Himself “the way,” and when early Christians called their faith “the way,” they were describing a process—not a fixed state of things. A “way” is a path to be followed: it guides us as we move along and takes us where we want to go. In the language of the *Psalms*, it is called “the way of the righteous,” and is opposed to “the way of the wicked.” In our Psalm for today—*Psalm 1*—David writes: “*The Lord knows the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish.*” When he says, “*The Lord knows the way of the righteous,*” he is saying that God will walk with those who place their trust in Him and become part of their lives—of all that they think and say and do. And Jesus wants to do this—to be more than just our Savior, the object of our faith. He wants to be our guide our counselor, our instructor and our companion. He wants us to get to know him better than we do, to trust him more than we do, to seek his companionship more than we do—each and every day of our lives. He wants to walk with us, eat with us, work with us, play with us and rest with us, and it should be the goal of every Christian to strive for this kind of relationship with Jesus.

Unfortunately, in my experience as a pastor I have found few Christians who do actually pursue this kind of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And that’s a tragedy because it’s there for the asking. It doesn’t mean that they’re not saved; it just means that their life

is nowhere near as rich and fulfilling as it could be—or, for that matter, as valuable to God as it could be. For many of them faith is a one-time event—a “done deal.” They say things like, “*I know the day and hour I was saved.*” Or, “*I said the sinner’s prayer and that saved me.*” Or, “*I made a decision for Christ.*” Sometimes it’s just a matter of knowledge: “*I’ve read the Bible and agree with everything it says.*” Then there’s the famous, “*I’m baptized and that’s all I need.*” I saw a movie awhile back called, “*Kill the Irishman.*” It was based on the life of a Cleveland hoodlum by the name of Danny Green. Some of you may remember him: he rose to notoriety in back in the ‘60’s and was ultimately assassinated by the New York Mafia. At the end of the movie they played a clip from an TV interview with the real Danny Green. When he was asked how he had managed to survive several failed attempts on his life he replied, “*I’m a Irish Catholic with God on my shoulder and I ain’t going anywhere till He pulls the string.*” When an unrepentant thief and murderer who has no plans to change his ways thinks he has God on his shoulder to save him, he’s in for a big surprise.

God has given us two gifts which are the best means we have of entering into a dynamic, personal relationship with Jesus. These gifts are His Word and prayer. The best way I know of explaining to you how this works is through my own personal experience.

I spent the first half of my life an atheist. A zealous atheist. I would actually seek out believers and try to argue them out of their faith. But as time wore on, I couldn’t help but notice that I was on a downward spiral. I was headed in a bad direction and I had no clue as to what might change things. You might say that I had the opposite of the Midas touch: King Midas touched things and they turned to gold; I handled them with kid gloves and they turned to *σκυβαλον*. (That’s a dirty Greek word!) I finally ran out of ideas as far as solutions were concerned and decided I had to try something new.

Given my atheistic past, nothing could have been newer for me to try than the Bible, so I decided to read it. That, of course, took some time. I just started with *Genesis* and plowed ahead. I even read *Leviticus*. I didn’t understand it, but I read it. I had a lot of time to read since I was unemployed and Karen was paying the bills, but we agreed that it was a good investment of my time, so I stuck to the program. After awhile, it began to dawn on me that I was dealing with a kind of literature I had never encountered before. Back when I had been in graduate school pursuing an advanced degree in English literature, I had spent four full years in libraries reading poetry, plays and novels as well as articles and books about the poetry, plays and novels. At the end I had read most of the classics and the literary criticism that had been written about them. I had become familiar with the overall range of English literature, but the Bible was something completely new and totally different. Over time, I had noticed that if you looked closely enough at even the best English authors—people like Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton—you could find flaws or inconsistencies in their works. But I could find none in the Bible. Yet here was a book written by 36 different authors who lived on three different continents and wrote in three different languages over a period of over sixteen hundred years—yet they had produced a book which had perfect integrity. This, coupled with the fact that it contained hundreds of prophecies—most of which had already been fulfilled. I was led to the inescapable conclusion that in the Bible I was dealing with God, not man. True, he was communicating with me through human authors, but it had to be God speaking through their lips and pens because no human being—not Chaucer, not Shakespeare, not Milton or anyone else could have crafted so marvelous a book that not only told the whole truth about man and God but also told the truth about the future.

I was hooked—and I remain hooked—on God’s Word. It is more than literature; it is manna in the spiritual wilderness of this world—life-giving and life-sustaining food from God. It saved me, it sustains me, it keeps me growing in faith and connects me daily with God.

And then there is prayer. Now I am ashamed to say that I spent the majority of my Christian life doubting the importance or usefulness of prayer. Even more shamefully, that includes part of the time I served in ministry. I didn’t like praying—it felt like a laborious task rather than an uplifting spiritual exercise. When I tried to pray, I got easily distracted or tired and gave up. I didn’t even have a good idea of what to pray for. As a pastor, I prayed for members of my church, but it was out of a sense of duty or obligation, with very little confidence that my prayers would make any difference. I even tried to rationalize abstaining from prayer, reasoning that God would do whatever was good and right anyway, so why try to impose my flawed opinions upon Him? Clever—huh? Then one day it occurred to me that there was one unavoidable reason why I should pray and that was because God told me to. So I decided I better get with the program and have a prayer life.

As I was considering what things I ought to pray for, I decided to look at the *Psalms*, most of which are prayers. I was struck by the first words of *Psalms 1*: “*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the instruction of the Lord.*” Now the word “instruction” refers to God’s Word, and for the first time it occurred to me that God’s word and prayer belonged together: they were the two means of communicating with God. Like two sides of the same coin, one was speaking to God and the other was hearing what God had to say. David said of the man who delights in the instruction of the Lord: “*He is like a tree planted firmly by streams of water: he yields his fruit in season, his leaf does not wither and in all that he does he prospers.*” When we take God’s words into us we draw nourishment from them, we prosper from being connected to Him. And once my eyes were opened to this, I found it all through the *Psalms*. In *Psalms 32*, for example, God says: “*I will teach you and instruct you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*” God wants to be our tutor, our mentor, our teacher and he wants to do it in a two-way relationship.

Well, that got me pretty excited and so I started crafting a prayer time in which I spent the first half of the time reading God’s word and the latter half praying. I’ve been at it now for quite a few years, and I can honestly tell you that the results are breathtaking. First of all, I have read and prayed my way through times of real trouble and in every single instance, God has brought blessing out of heartbreak. Second, I have prayed for Him to show me myself as I really am—including the vanity, the pride and the flim-flam—and He has done it. It’s painful, but at least I know I’m dealing with truth instead illusion. Third, I have prayed for Him to increase my faith and He has done that in spades: I have absolute confidence that He will answer my prayers in the best possible way because he always has.

These days I find myself spending more and more time praising Him and giving Him thanks. I had always noticed that the *Psalms* are full of praise and thanksgiving to God. (*Psalms 150* has six verses in which the word “praise” occurs thirteen times!) Before I had a prayer life, this seemed overkill to me. Kind of like the Hallelujah Chorus in Handel’s *Messiah*. Once should be enough: why repeat it again and again?

Now I'm beginning to understand. Maybe it's because He's answered so many of my prayers and brought so many blessings into my life. He has certainly caused "...*the boundary lines to fall in pleasant places for me.*" It could be that. But I think it's really because through word and prayer He has shown me that He really is The Way.

Amen.

Psalm 1

¹ Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers.
⁴ Not so the wicked!
 They are like chaff
 that the wind blows away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

John 14:1-6

14 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.
² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going."
⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"
⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.