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Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Study Supplement No. 10

- 1. Member Donations Fund
Discretionary Assistance Ministry**
by Joseph Tkach
- 2. Tomatoes and churches**
From Randal Dick
- 3. Why Were You Born?**
by Michael Morrison

Study Supplement No. 10

Something worth thinking about

by Joseph Tkach



Member Donations Fund Discretionary Assistance Ministry

I want to thank our members for their generous and consistent giving as we continue our journey of transformation in the Worldwide Church of God. I also want to update you on certain aspects of our progress in that journey.

I want to acquaint you with another significant centralized ministry funded by your donations. We refer to this ministry as the discretionary assistance program. This program assists qualified retirement-aged former employees of the Worldwide Church of God who meet certain ecclesiastical criteria as determined by the board of directors using its spiritual judgment in light of the tenets of our faith. We are currently helping to support about 240 such former employees at a total cost of about \$350,000 each month. This cost is distributed proportionally among our 450 U.S. congregations based on each congregation's financial resources.

The discretionary assistance program is a vital ministry of the church. Most recipients of the program have put their life's energy into the work of the church and need our financial support for the twilight years of their lives.

In the past, the Worldwide Church of God in the United States and elsewhere made no provision for the retirement of its employees. This was a decision made by others before the current administration and was inherited by us.

In addition, because of our former doctrinal positions, many U.S. employees were exempted from the Social Security system. Some have criticized ministers who opted out of Social Security, but this opinion overlooks two facts.

First, in the early years, the church itself was not subject to Social Security (although secular employers were) and thus did not pay Social Security on any employees, ordained or not.

Second, when an employee or minister did not pay Social Security, the church also did not pay into Social Security on behalf of the lay employee (under the law the employer pays one half the tax), nor help offset the burden on ministers (who must pay both of halves of their Social Security bill, unlike lay employees who pay one half and the employer pays one half). Thus, when an employee or minister did not pay Social Security, the church also saved money and the saved money went into our mission. As a result, many former employees now have no pension, Social Security or Medicare to fall back on.

The results of these unfortunate policies in our past are now being remedied. We are making plans to enrol U.S. church employees in a retirement plan funded by proceeds from the sale of the Pasadena property. When that sale occurs, current beneficiaries of the discretionary assistance program will be transferred to the retirement plan, and the need for the discretionary assistance program will cease.

In the meantime, the assistance program is providing a vital ministry to real people with real needs. Recipients of your generosity include men and women whom we have known and loved for decades. They include Dean Blackwell, Bill and Lois Quillen, Richard and Virginia Rice, Herman and Isabell Hoeh, Frank and Esther Schnee, Norman and Charlene Smith, Ken Swisher and many others.

I want to thank you for your support of this ministry, and the folks receiving the assistance also want to thank you—as some of them do in the sidebars to this article.

Please continue to pray for the completion of the sale of the Pasadena property and for God to guide us as we continue to take positive steps in the transition into our new financial system. Thanks again for your generosity and consistency in giving—a wonderful work is being accomplished in and through our church, even as we wrestle with some of the obstacles that stand before us.

Comments On The Discretionary Assistance Ministry

Randy Bloom, superintendent of the U.S. Central district, comments: "As I travel the Central district, I have been taking extra time to hold town hall meetings with members as well as meetings with advisory councils. I take time to explain how members' donations help with the important need that discretionary assistance meets. Discretionary

Study Supplement No. 10

assistance has to do with people—men, women, widows, who served many years in our church. These people have faces—and real needs. They are without any income other than that which we give them, which is not much.

"Many members are moved when they hear about the 240 plus former employees and wives or widows receiving discretionary assistance. Many members have not been aware of the critical needs of these people. Oftentimes our discussions revolve around the Pasadena property and how it is keeping us from doing what we want with our donation income. But I point out that member donations serve a far greater purpose than the upkeep of property.

"Our members are to be thanked for their great patience and generosity as they continue to support our church with their prayers, service and donations. This is a time of testing and it is stretching us all. God is with us and wonderful things are happening all the time in our fellowship. And it is a result of our wonderful members yielding themselves to their Lord."

Comments From Recipients

Dean Blackwell

LONGVIEW, Texas—Having worked for the Worldwide Church of God for 50 years, moving 24 times, we did not pay Social Security, so I don't receive Social Security or Medicare.

I had seven quarters on file with Social Security when my late wife, Maxine, and I returned to Texas when I was 68. I have a part-time job at Dillards department store in Longview, mainly so I can have a tithe to help the church.

Thank God for the support of the church through discretionary assistance for us old-timers. At present I teach a discipleship class weekly in the Longview church, give a Bible study in Big Sandy each month to 20 to 25 senior citizens, preach regularly in Longview, Tyler and Texarkana, Texas, attend regional conferences in Dallas, and serve on the WCG board of directors, the Advisory Council of Elders, and a few other boards of the church.

Richard and Virginia Rice

BATON ROUGE, Louisiana—Having been associated with the church since 1947 and an employee for more than 40 years, I have had a close connection to the Worldwide Church of God for three fourths of my life.

Thirty-eight years have been joyfully devoted to the ministry. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to retire from the active part I so enjoyed in the church. But several health conditions began to

surface, including degenerating vertebrae disks, which forced me to drastically slow down activities.

In 1972, I was asked to become manager of the Mail Processing Centre, where I worked for 25 years. I have also been blessed to serve on the church board of directors and council of elders.

When the crisis in the church loomed in 1994 because of the doctrinal changes, I was asked to move into the Church Administration Department, where I assisted Joseph Tkach Jr. It was during this time that several recurring health problems began to take their toll. When Dan Rogers became the head of Church Administration, I sought his counsel along with other top administrators, to determine if retirement was the expedient path to take. The outcome of their counsel is now history. In the summer of 1996, Virginia and I moved to Baton Rouge, where we now live.

We cannot thank the church enough for its kindness in putting us on discretionary assistance. Most of us in the early ministry never signed up for Social Security. This was thought unnecessary and even discouraged. No retirement program was set up to care for our future needs, as the church believed the end time was near.

As my heart still beats for the church, I give sermons when able, conduct Bible studies, attend prayer meetings, give contributions and do computer work to help our son, Anthony, who pastors three churches here in southern Louisiana. But the wheels grind slowly.

Speaking for all retired ministers, wives and fellow employees who've laid down their lives in God's service, we humbly and gratefully want to thank the members for standing by our side.

By Joseph Tkach

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Study Supplement No. 10

Window on the World



**From Randal Dick,
Superintendent of Missions**

I received the following from Charles Fleming, regional director for the Caribbean and Latin America.

Tomatoes and churches

What do tomato plants and churches have in common?

Structure! They both need to be supported by well-chosen structures that allow them to grow and bear fruit.

Years ago, one of my hobbies was planting tomatoes. I soon found that as each plant grew it was important that I strategically place a few sticks to support it. Those plants that I took the time to support with sticks bore more tomatoes than the ones I left to their own devices.

Too often the fruit on the unsupported plants would weigh so much that the plant would bend, the fruit touch the ground and then either rot or be eaten by bugs. Taking the time to put proper support structures was both effective and efficient. Structure made the tomato plants more fruitful.

In a similar manner, churches are better able to bear lasting fruit when they take the time to set up structures that protect the fruit and promote the growth of the church. Pastor General Joseph Tkach's desire is that we restructure in such a way that our new structure becomes an effective means whereby we may live out the grace of God in everyday life.

In this column I wish to share with you just a few of the things the regional directors have been doing to answer this simple question: How does a church scattered in countries across the globe work together in unity so as to fulfil the mission of living and sharing the gospel?

Restructuring to help us to work together to share the gospel

First, a little background may be helpful. As you will recall, nearly a decade ago our loving God challenged us to correct our doctrinal errors

and to change our ways of relating to him. That challenge led to the radical doctrinal transformation that has dramatically changed us individually and as a fellowship.

With God's blessing we are becoming a fellowship that is Christ-centered, Spirit-sensitive and even more surrendered to the Father than ever before. Increasingly, we are seeing the fruit of this approach: more and more of our members around the world are taking the initiative to serve, not passively waiting to be asked; more and more members are involved in evangelism, in discipleship programs, in outreach activities and in small groups; more and more of our members are actively involved in worship, which has become more heartfelt and transformational; more and more of our members are effectively working together with Christians in other denominations and so bringing great glory to our God.

The increasing spiritual growth in our congregations shows that, in more and more congregations, we are well on the way to becoming a true priesthood of all believers—a church in which our members are actively involved in the mission Christ has given his church. But such a church requires a different organizational structure than we have had in the past.

A family of national churches

As we look at what God is doing it is obvious that we are becoming a family of national churches. As a result, we have made a commitment to ensure two things. First, that each national church has the flexibility to fulfil God's mission to us. Secondly, to ensure that each national church will be accountable to the denomination for living true to our doctrines and values, and according to our Code of Ethics.

As members of the WCG, we all share the same goal and all desire the same key results. However, as a worldwide church, we live in different situations. Dr. Tkach envisions a structure where we would all be held accountable to the same Lord, the same gospel, the same results, but where there is the flexibility to determine the best way to preach the gospel. Here are some changes in approach that will make this desired outcome possible.

This process of empowering various national churches means that we must design new structures as well as train and appoint leaders to take on this increased level of responsibility. This is made even more challenging by the fact that different countries have different cultures and different legal traditions. We need to be flexible in designing the structures, because what will work in one country may not work in another.

Things we ask you to pray about

We ask for your prayers that God would give us the wisdom to design governance and administrative

Study Supplement No. 10

structures that are appropriate for each country but which, at the same time, allow members to effectively live and share the gospel.

We also request your prayers for discernment in selecting, training and appointing national leaders. In each country we seek to empower a core of leaders at the national level who are what you might call the stewards of the *ethos* of the denomination. That is, men and women who deeply believe our doctrines, share our values, promote our mission and live true to our ethical commitments.

Pray with us for leaders who are fully equipped to take the denominational vision and refine it by determining the best strategies for success at the national level. One way of understanding the authority granted to national leaders is to remember the six questions that journalists ask those they interview: who, what, when, where, why and how?

When it comes to taking the gospel to all the world, denominational headquarters is authorized to answer the what, why and some of the how questions. National leaders are authorized to answer the when, where and some of the how questions.

Let me explain. Denominational headquarters is responsible for answering the following: What do we as a church believe (our doctrines)? Why do we do (what are our core values and what is our sense of mission—what are we all about)? How do we live out our beliefs and values (what are our ethics)? Our denominational leadership has provided

answers in our Statement of Beliefs; our overall Vision and Mission statements; our Core Values; and our Code of Ethics.

National leaders have no authority to change these. As I mentioned before, they are to be people who deeply believe our doctrines, share our values, promote our mission and live true to our ethical commitments. Their responsibility is to be the custodians, within a nation, of these beliefs and values.

As promoters of our mission, they are authorized to answer these all-important practical questions: When and where do we do kingdom-building activities? How do we best present the gospel to the people in our nation? How do we best teach our members to be more Christlike?

To help you in your prayers I have prepared a summary in the box below.

Being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit

In Ephesians 2:22 Paul stresses that we are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Ultimately, it is the indwelling presence of the Triune God in each of us that enables us to work together in unity. But, as humans—with a life to live and a gospel to share—we must take Spirit-led steps if our efforts are to be as fruitful as God would want them to be. Taking the time to let God guide us into a new structure is crucial to our future fruitfulness. Please pray for God to arrange "the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he want[s] them to be" (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:18).

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Study Supplement No. 10

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	Old Structure	Emerging Structure
Administrative Structure	Centralized, with major decisions made at headquarters	National church empowered to refine denominational vision for national level and to determine best strategies
Financing	Most counties dependent to some degree on subsidies from headquarters	Each national church lives within its means
Management philosophy	Control driven. The belief that God revealed his will to one person, the pastor general, led us to organize the church so that headquarters controlled all significant decisions.	Mission driven. Joining God in saving unbelievers means that the best operational decisions will be those made closest to where people are working.
The Ties That Bind	Loyalty to the pastor general and to the work he felt called to do	A shared heritage of living in Christ and a common commitment to fulfil the mission of sharing the gospel
Legal Ties	Whenever possible, function as a branch of the California Corporation	Statements in our national by-laws that formally state the ties between the national church and denominational headquarters.

Prayer List for Restructuring

Specifically, pray for:

- God's guidance as to the structures we set up in each country—that they would represent cultural and legal needs while enabling our leaders to live out our values and beliefs.
- National leaders who will feel personally moved to respond to Jesus' challenge to take the gospel to unbelievers and to make disciples, who, in turn, make disciples.
- Our leaders to be truly Christlike, servant leaders. Who have the maturity to operate with the level of authority that goes with the responsibilities they've been given.
- Us to set up the appropriate levels of accountability within each nation and between the national churches and the denomination.

***By Charles Fleming**
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Study Supplement No. 10

Why Were You Born?



By Michael Morrison

You were born for a purpose! God created each of us for a reason—and we are happiest when we are living in harmony with the purpose he has given us. You need to know what it is.

Many people have no idea what life is all about. They live, and they die, searching for some kind of meaning, wondering whether their lives have purpose—where they fit, whether they really matter in the grand scheme of things. They may have put together the finest bottle collection in Ohio, or they may have been voted "most popular" in high school, but all too soon, youthful plans and dreams evaporate into anxiety and frustration over missed opportunities, failed relationships or countless other "if-onlys" and "might-have-beens."

Many people lead empty, unfulfilled lives, lacking in solid purpose and meaning beyond the short-lived gratification of money, sex, power, respect or popularity, none of which means anything, especially when the darkness of death approaches. But life could be much more than this, because God offers each of us much more. He offers us true significance and purpose—the joy of being what he created us to be.

Part 1: Made in God's Image

The first chapter of the Bible tells us that God created humans "in his own image" (Genesis 1:27). Men and women alike are created "in the image of God" (same verse).

Obviously, we are not in God's image in terms of height or weight or skin colour. God is spirit, uncreated, and we are created of matter. Still, God has made humanity in his own image, which means that there are essential ways in which he has made us to be like him. We are self-aware; we can

communicate, plan, think creatively, design and build, solve problems, and be a force for good in our world. And we can love.

We are to be "created like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). Yet, often in those very ways, people are not much like God at all. In fact, people can often be rather ungodly.

In spite of our ungodliness, however, there are certain things we can be sure of. For one thing, God will always be faithful in his love toward us.

A perfect example

The New Testament helps us understand what it means to be made in the image of God. The apostle Paul tells us that God is remaking us into something that is perfect and good—the likeness of Jesus Christ. "He also predestined [us] to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 8:29). In other words, God intended from the beginning for us to be like Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh.

Paul says that Jesus himself "is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4). "He is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). He is the perfect example of what we were created to be. We are God's children, in his family, and we look to Jesus, God's Son, to see what that means.

One of Jesus' disciples asked him, "Show us the Father" (John 14:8). And Jesus answered, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (verse 9). In other words, Jesus says, "What you really need to know about God, you can see in me".

He is not talking about skin colour, clothing styles, or carpentry skills, per se, except as we understand and use such things in ways consistent with the image of God.

Jesus is talking about spirit, attitude and actions. God is love, John later wrote (1 John 4:8), and Jesus shows us what love is, and how we are to love as people being conformed to his image.

Since humans were made in the image of God, and Jesus is the image of God, it is no wonder that God is conforming us to the image of Jesus. He is to be "formed" in us (Galatians 4:19). Our goal is "attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). As we are changed into Jesus' image, the image of God is restored in us, and we become what we were made to be.

Maybe you aren't very Jesus-like right now. That's OK. God already knows about it, and that is why he is already working with you. If you let him, he will change you—transform you—to be more and more like Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). It takes patience—but the process fills life with meaning and purpose.

Study Supplement No. 10

Why doesn't God do it all in the blink of an eye? Because that wouldn't take into account the real, thinking and loving person he made you to be. A change of mind and heart, the decision to turn to God and trust Christ, may take only a moment, like deciding to go down a certain road. But the actual journey down the road takes time and may be filled with obstacles and troubles. In the same way, it takes time to change habits, behaviours and ingrained attitudes.

Besides, God loves you and wants you to love him. But love is love only when it is freely given, not when it is demanded. Forced love is not love at all.

It gets better and better

God's purpose for you is not only to be like Jesus was 2,000 years ago—but also to be like Jesus is now—resurrected, immortal, filled with glory and power! He "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). If we have been united with Christ in this life, "we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Romans 6:5). "We shall be like him," John assures us (1 John 3:2).

If we are God's children, Paul writes, then we can be sure that "we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:17). We will be given a glory like Jesus Christ has—bodies that are immortal, bodies that never deteriorate, bodies that are spiritual. We will be raised in glory, Paul writes, and raised in power (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). "Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven"—we will be like Christ! (verse 49).

Would you like to be like Jesus Christ? Would you like to have glory and immortality? God has made you for this very reason! It is a wonderful gift that he wants you to have. It is an exciting and wonderful future—and it gives life meaning and purpose.

When we see the end result, the process we are in now makes more sense. The troubles, trials and pains of life, as well as the joys, make more sense

when we know what life itself is all about. When we know the glory that will be given to us, the sufferings of this life are easier to endure (Romans 8:18). God has given us exceedingly great and precious promises.

Is there a problem here?

But wait a minute, you might think. I'll never be good enough for that kind of glory and power. I'm just an ordinary person. If heaven is a perfect place, then I don't belong there. I've made mistakes; my life is messed up.

That's OK—God already knows that, but he isn't going to let it stop him. He has plans for you, and he has already planned for problems like that to be overcome. That's because everybody has blown it; everybody's life is messed up, and nobody deserves to be given glory and power.

But God knows how to save people who are sinners—and no matter how many times they mess up, he knows how to rescue them.

God's plan centres on Jesus Christ—who was sinless in our place and who suffered for our sins in our place. He represents us before God and offers us the gift of eternal life, if we will accept it from him.

Part 2: The Gift of God

We all fall short, Paul says, but we have been justified, or set right, through the grace of God. It's a gift! We can't earn it or deserve it—God just gives it to us out of his mercy and righteousness.

People who are doing fine on their own don't need to be saved—it is people who are in trouble who need to be saved. Lifeguards don't "save" people who are swimming OK on their own—they save those who are drowning. And spiritually speaking, we are all drowning. None of us measures up to the perfection of Christ, and without that, we're as good as dead.

Many people seem to think that we have to be "good enough" for God. Suppose we ask them, "what makes you think that you'll go to heaven, or that you'll have eternal life in the kingdom of God"? Many people will respond, "Because I've been good. I've done this, or I've done that".

The truth is, that no matter how much good we have done, we are never "good enough" to earn a place in a perfect world, because we are not perfect. We have all fallen short, but we are set right by God's gift, because of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Not by good works

God has saved us, the Bible says, "not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace" (2 Timothy 1:9). "He saved us,

Study Supplement No. 10

not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5).

Even if our works are very good, they are not the reason God saves us. We need to be rescued because our good works are not enough to save us. We need mercy and grace, and God gives us exactly that in Jesus Christ.

If it were possible for us to earn eternal life through good behaviour, then God would have told us how. If rule keeping could give us eternal life, Paul says, then God would have done it that way.

"If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (Galatians 3:21). But the law cannot give us life—even if we could keep it.

"If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:21). If people could earn their way into salvation, then we wouldn't need a Saviour to rescue us. There would be no need for Jesus to come to earth, or to die and be raised again.

But Jesus came to earth for this very reason—to die for us. Jesus, calling himself the Son of man, said that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). His life was like a ransom payment, given to rescue us, or redeem us. The Bible repeatedly says that "Christ died for us" and that he died "for our sins" (Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 15:3; Galatians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:10).

"The wages of sin is death," Paul says in Romans 6:23, "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." We deserve to die, he says, but we are saved by grace through Jesus Christ. We don't deserve to live with God, since we aren't perfect, but God saves us through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Descriptions of salvation

The Bible explains our salvation in several ways, sometimes using financial terms, sometimes

sacrificial words, sometimes family or friendship words. In financial terms, he has paid the price to free us.

He took the penalty (death) that we deserved, paying the debt that we owed. He takes our sin and death, and in return, he gives us his righteousness and life.

God accepts Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf (after all, he is the one who sent Jesus to give it), and he accepts Jesus' righteousness on our behalf. Therefore, though once we were opposed to God, now we are friends (Romans 5:10).

"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight" (Colossians 1:21-22).

Because of Christ's death, we are holy in God's sight. In God's book, we have gone from a huge debt to a huge reward—not because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus did for us.

God now calls us his children—he has adopted us (Ephesians 1:5). "We are God's children," Paul writes (Romans 8:16). And then he describes the wonderful results of our adoption: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (verse 17). Salvation is described as an inheritance. "He has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light" (Colossians 1:12).

Because of God's generosity, because of his grace, we will inherit a fortune—we will share the universe with Jesus Christ. Or rather, he will share it with us, not because of anything we have done, but because he loves us and wants to give it to us.

Received through faith

Jesus has qualified us; he has paid the penalty not only for our sins, but for the sins of all human beings (1 John 2:2). But many people do not yet understand this. Perhaps they have not yet heard the message of salvation, or they heard a garbled version that didn't make sense to them. For some reason, they have not believed the message.

It's like Jesus has paid their debts for them, and given them a huge bank account, but they haven't yet heard about it, or don't quite believe it, or don't think they had any debts in the first place. Or it's like Jesus is throwing a party, and he gives them a ticket to get in, and yet some people decide not to come.

Or they are slaves working in the mud, and Jesus comes along and says, "I have purchased your freedom." Some people don't hear the message, some people don't believe it, and some people would rather stay in the mud than find out what freedom really is. But others hear the message, believe it, and

Study Supplement No. 10

step out of the mud to see what a new life with Christ might be.

The message of salvation is received by faith—by trusting Jesus, by taking him at his word, by believing the good news. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). The gospel is effective for "the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). If we don't believe the message, it won't do us any good.

Of course, there is more to "faith" than just believing certain facts about Jesus. The facts have some dramatic implications for us—we have to turn away from the life we've created in our own image and turn instead to God who made us in his.

We have to admit that we are sinners, that we haven't earned the right to have eternal life, and that we don't deserve to share in an inheritance with Jesus Christ. We have to admit that we'll never be "good enough" for heaven—and we have to trust that the ticket Jesus gives us is indeed good enough to get us into the party. We have to trust that he did enough, by dying on the cross, to pay our spiritual debts. We have to trust in his mercy and grace, admitting that there is no other way to get in.

A free offer

Let's bring the discussion back to our purpose in life. God says that he made us for a purpose, and that purpose is that we become like him. We are to be united with God's family, brothers and sisters of Jesus, sharing in the family fortune! It's a wonderful purpose and wonderful promise.

But we haven't done our part. We haven't been as good as Jesus—that is, we haven't been perfect. Then what makes us think we'll get the other end of the deal—the eternal glory? The answer is that we have to trust God to be as merciful and full of grace as he says he is. He has made us for this purpose, and he is going to see it through! We can be confident; Paul says "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

Jesus has paid the price and done the work, and his message—the message of the Bible—is that our salvation comes by what he has done for us. Experience (as well as Scripture) says that we can't trust in ourselves.

Our only hope of salvation, of life, of becoming who God made us to be, is to trust in Christ. We can become like Christ because he, knowing all about our failings and shortcomings, says that he will bring it about!

Without Christ, life is pointless—we are stuck in the mud. But Jesus tells us that he has purchased our freedom, he can make us clean, he offers us a free

ticket to the party and full rights in the family fortune. We can accept his offer, or we can dismiss it and stay in the mud.

Part 3: You're Invited to a Banquet!

Jesus looked like an insignificant carpenter in an insignificant village in an insignificant part of the Roman Empire. But now he is widely regarded as the most significant person who ever lived. Even nonbelievers recognize that he gave up his life to serve others, and this ideal of self-sacrificial love reaches into the depths of the human soul and touches the image of God within us.

He taught that people could find true and abundant life if they are willing to give up their own faltering hold on existence and follow him into the life of the kingdom of God. "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39).

We have nothing to lose but a pointless life, a frustrating life, and Jesus offers us a fulfilling, joyful, exciting and abounding life—for eternity. He invites us to give up pride and worry, and we gain peace of mind and joy of heart.

The path of Jesus

Jesus invites us to join him in his glory—but the journey to glory requires humility, through putting other people before ourselves. We have to loosen our grip on the things of this life, and fasten our hold on Jesus. If we want a new life, we have to be willing to let go of the old one.

We were made to be like Jesus. But we are not just copying a respected hero, such as Buddha or Confucius. Christianity is not about religious rituals or even religious ideals. It is about God's love for humanity, his faithfulness to humanity, and his love and faithfulness made visible in human form in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, God demonstrates his grace; he knows that no matter how hard we try, we will never be good enough on our own. In Jesus, God gives us help; he

Study Supplement No. 10

sends the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to live within us, to change us from the inside out. God is making us to be like himself; we are not trying to be Godlike on our own.

Jesus has for us an eternity of joy, not a return to vague, impersonal nothingness like some Eastern religions offer. For them, it seems, the purpose of life is to blend without personal identity into the rest of the cosmos. But in Christianity each person's life as an individual, as a child in the family of God, has purpose and significance—an eternity of life. We were made for eternal glory, and the path to glory is Jesus, who himself is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6).

For Jesus, it meant a cross. He calls us to join him on that part of the journey, too. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). But the cross was followed by the resurrection to glory.

A celebration banquet

In some of his teaching stories, Jesus compared salvation to a banquet. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father threw a party for the rebellious son who finally came home. "Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:23-24). Jesus told the story to illustrate the point that all of heaven rejoices whenever anyone turns toward God (verse 7).

Jesus told another story about a man (illustrating God) who "was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests" (Luke 14:16). But surprisingly, many people ignored the invitation. "They all alike began to make excuses" (verse 18). Some were worried about their money, or their work; family matters distracted others (verses 18-20). So the master invited poor people instead (verse 21).

So it is with salvation. Jesus invites everyone, but some people are too busy with the cares of this world to respond. But those who are "poor," who realize there are more important things than money, sex, power and respect, are eager to come celebrate true life at Jesus' banquet.

Jesus told another story comparing salvation to a man (illustrating Jesus) who went on a journey. He "called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability" (Matthew 25:14-15). The money could represent various things that Christ gives us; let's look at it here as representing the message of salvation.

After a long time, the master came back and asked for an accounting. Two of the servants showed that they had accomplished something with the master's money, but one person simply handed it back (verse 25). He hadn't accomplished anything with it; he had not let it work in his life. He had declined the offer.

The first two servants were rewarded: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (verses 21, 23).

You are invited!

Yes, Jesus is inviting us to share in his happiness, to share in the eternal joys God has for us (Psalm 16:11). He is calling us to be like him, to be immortal, incorruptible, glorious and sinless. Our spiritual bodies will have supernatural power. We will have a vitality, intelligence, creativity, power and love far beyond what we know now.

We can't do this on our own—we have to let God do it in us. We have to accept his invitation to get out of the mud, and come to his celebration banquet.

Have you thought about accepting his invitation? If you do, you may not see amazing results right away, but your life will definitely take on new significance and meaning. You'll gain purpose, you'll understand where you're going and why, and you'll be given new strength, new courage and great peace.

Jesus is inviting you to a party that lasts forever. Will you accept the invitation? Talk to him right now—give him your old and pointless life, and ask him to create in you his new life, a life full of purpose and joy.

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