

When God Moved Into The Neighbourhood

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Glory, All-In-All

I think our view or perspective of God and His intentions may have been shaped by many things, but the Bible seems to set the narrative straight pretty much right away, declaring His intent and purpose from the beginning. We read in Genesis 1:6 that God said *"Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."* Further, God declares in Numbers 14:21 that *"the whole earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD."*

God's desire has always been for us to be like Him and for Him to dwell with us, utterly and completely.

He intended us to not only be like Him but for us to also rule over His good creation on His behalf, exhibiting his justice, goodness, and truth throughout the earth. Affirming God's sovereignty, reflected in the way we choose to live like Him, gives shape and purpose to the role for which humanity was created (and, later in scripture, why and how [the church](#) also finds her purpose).

How amazing – the King of all the earth desired to make us in His image and in His likeness so that we might reflect His glory – the weight and splendour of all that He is, and so that everywhere one might look – east, west, north or south – all that can be seen and felt is God.

God dwelt with us once, long ago, in a garden. His glory and splendour could be seen then, as humanity and God walked together in perfect harmony and everything was *very good*. Only one thing remained in order to make this eternal; the application of our free will to partner with God and undertake this rule on His terms, a display of obedience and commitment to Him.

This isn't what the first humans choose, though, and the third chapter of Genesis starkly illustrates the terrible outcome; banishment from His presence and separation from His glory.

The book of Genesis is a means to a theological end; its purpose to illustrate in historical-mythological language God's relationship to creation and His intention of dwelling with us. *"The whole purpose of Genesis 1 is to set the ideal human community – a place in which the image of God, or the imitation of God, is actually going to be realised. That, of course, gets distorted in Genesis 3 when humans disobey God. But the first chapter is outlining the ideal."* (Professor C. John Collins).

Genesis 1–11, then, is the founding story of humanity, ending in crisis. These narratives give a real and true assessment of God's initial purposes and the human plight. Genesis 12–50 is the founding story of the nation with whom the covenant is eventually made at Sinai. The covenant establishes the relationship to Abraham and his descendants, provides the structure for living in God's presence, and lays the foundation for God's presence to be established on earth. – Biologos

The Purpose Of Israel

The people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, were the chosen people through whom God intended for all the world to learn of Him and be invited into a restored relationship with

Him. After their epic deliverance from slavery in Egypt and a desperate flight through the Red Sea, the book of Exodus tells the story of Israel's journey under the leadership of Moses to Mount Sinai. There, they find its summit is wrapped in thick smoke and access to its base must be limited *because the Lord had descended on it in fire*.

Through rolling thunder and lightning, God makes solemn promises to them in that place. He intends to make of them a *"holy nation, and a kingdom of priests"*, contingent on their faithfulness to His covenant. He gives them ten commandments, so they might understand His holiness and His laws, by which their lives and worship of Him were to be governed. They will be witnesses to the nations around them of the glory and sovereignty of the God, who not only rules over them but also dwells with them.

It was also at Mount Sinai that *the tabernacle* – the *residence or dwelling place of God* was to be constructed. Designed to be able to be transported, it was to be a reminder that God was with them always, dwelling in their midst and travelling with them throughout all their journeys. Housed within *the holiest of holies* inside the tabernacle would be *the ark of the covenant* – a pure, gold-covered wooden chest with an elaborate lid, ornamented with two golden cherubim, called *the mercy seat*. Inside the ark would be placed the *two stone tablets of the ten commandments*.

Swathed in an impermanent, transitory wrapping of tapestry curtains covered in images of cherubim, the glory of God descended and *tabernacled* amongst them. A large cloud of light and mist settled overhead, signaling God's presence was there in their midst. They would know it was time to set out when the cloud lifted but until then, they waited and rested in the presence of the Lord.

God had moved into the neighbourhood.

Solomon Builds A Temple

The tabernacle was an itinerant dwelling place, as the people of Israel would be on the move, as it turns out, for 40 years. When they finally reached the end of their wilderness wanderings and settled in the promised land, it would be many more years before a permanent structure was built to welcome God's glory.

Under the reign of King Solomon the Wise, son of the great [King David](#), a glorious temple was constructed, some 480 years after the Great Exodus. Built with exquisite craftsmanship, using masterfully quarried stone blocks, and cedar and cyprus timbers from the great forests of Lebanon, it was a magnificent building dedicated to the God of Israel and intended as the place in which He would dwell with His people in a more permanent way.

Solomon's words at the dedication of the temple are beautifully moving to read:

"I have built this Temple to honor the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. And I have prepared a place there for the Ark, which contains the covenant that the LORD made with our ancestors when he brought them out of Egypt. Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the entire community of Israel. He lifted his hands toward heaven, and he prayed, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in all of heaven above or on the earth below. You keep your covenant and show unfailing love to all who walk before you in wholehearted devotion. You have kept your promise to your servant David, my father. You made that promise with your own mouth, and with your own hands you have fulfilled it today. And now, O LORD, God of Israel, carry out the additional promise you made to your servant David, my father. For you said to him, 'If your descendants guard their behavior and faithfully follow me as you have done, one of them will always sit on the throne of Israel.' Now, O God of Israel,

fulfill this promise to your servant David, my father. But will God really dwell on earth? Why, even the highest heavens cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"
| 1 Kings 8:20-27, NLT

Solomon asks an important question. Will God really dwell on the earth, with us?

The answer is yes, but as humanity would come to understand, the living God desires to dwell not in temples made of wood and stone but in a living temple, in a structure softer and more pliable than stone, more ancient and beautiful than Solomon's temple or the wilderness tabernacle before that.

He longs to dwell *with us, in us*, utterly and completely.

The people of Israel, however, struggled with their unique and privileged identity. They would worship and serve God for a season and then, when things were going well, they would become complacent and selfish, turning aside to worship gods made of wood and stone, like the nations around them. They abandoned their covenant with God, over and over again.

They paid little heed to the warnings from prophets like Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and Ezekiel about the impending doom that would come upon Jerusalem, should they remain feckless and unfaithful.

Finally, Ezekiel is given a sobering vision of the end; of the moment that God's glory will leave the presence of His covenant people.

"Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the house, when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. And the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim

was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks. Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.” | Ezekiel 10:4-5, 18-19, 11:22-23

The God Who Dwells With Us

The nation of Israel had forgotten that God is not tethered to a building and His desire is not to dwell in a place, *but in a people*.

The final pages of the Old Testament come to a close with the prophetic words of Malachi, written around 460-430 BC. We find the people of Israel have now returned from nearly 130 years of exile and are back in the land of their ancestors. Yet the nation is vastly diminished. The temple has been restored under the leadership of Nehemiah but it is a much smaller building than the previous, gloriously constructed temple of King Solomon's days. Despite Ezekiel's later vision which seemed to offer the promise of God's presence (Ezekiel 43:2), the glory of the Lord has not returned to this temple.

Yet there is still hope to be found. Isaiah speaks these comforting words to Israel around the time of their return from exile in Babylon:

“Comfort, comfort my people”, says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that

her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." | Isaiah 40:1-5, ESV

John the Baptist deliberately echos these words, over 700 years later, to announce the arrival of Jesus Christ (found in John 1:1-18).

The gospel of John (the Apostle, not Baptist) opens with an otherwordly prologue regarding Jesus and his origins; specifically, the identification of Jesus as the Word, who was with God and was God in the beginning, through whom all things have been brought into being, who is the light and life of humanity, and who *became flesh and dwelt among us*.

He concludes his origin account with a brief explanation as to his role. "I am", he simply says "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord".

As author and theologian, Eugene H Peterson puts it (and where the title of this article is taken from), God had moved into the neighbourhood (Zechariah 2:10, John 1:14).

"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish." | John 1:14

God's Temple Is A Person

The glory of the Lord had returned to dwell among His people.

But this time it was wrapped in a perishable, temporary covering [of flesh and bone](#). This was the true temple of the living God, the house of God in which there are many rooms, and which, though it would be destroyed, would be rebuilt again in just three days, an eternal life-giving spirit for all who would enter in (John 2:19-21, John 14:2).

A temple with just a single door, larger on the inside than on the outside, where worshippers as numerous as the stars of heaven would find sacred space.

A place where people could fully enter instead of only just drawing near. A place where the dividing wall would be broken down and peace would be found instead of hostility. A place where there once had stood a wall, but now there would be a way; many brought near by the blood of Christ himself.

A place where people and God could meet, at last, face to face and be reunited.

A place where there once had been two, but now there would be one; humanity reborn in this holiest of places with God dwelling utterly and completely in and with His people.

All the narratives of the Old Testament had been simply shadows and markers, one-dimensional illustrations intended to point the world to the real story God had been writing all along, to the reality that God had intended from the beginning. God would dwell, as He has always intended, among people, *in people*; in a kingdom of priests ransomed to Him by the precious blood of the lamb slain before the foundation of the world.

The glory of God dwelt among us, *tabernacled with us* in the person of Jesus Christ, God-With-Us, and it's in the truest of all temples – Jesus – that all things become possible.

He was all things; the presence of God dwelling fully with us, the glory of God in our midst, the way, the gate, the faithful

shepherd, the life, the resurrection and victorious conqueror of death itself, our priest, our peace, the bright and morning star, and the true temple of the living God into whom we can fully enter, through the power of the blood of the cross (Colossians 1:20).

“Therefore, brethren, we have boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus.” | Hebrews 10:19, Weymouth

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” | Ephesians 2:18-22, ESV

Worthy To Enter Into Glory

It's strange – the more I read the Bible, the more complex it seems, and yet the simpler it becomes. Sure, it's full of strange visions and obscure prophecies, lamentations and poetry, passages offering wisdom for life, and chapters delving into deep theological insights about God and humanity.

Reading the vivid and apocalyptic language of Revelation, for example, stirs our blood while immersing ourselves in the trials and tribulations of faithful Job pulls at our hearts.

The Bible is a completely magnificent book, the traverse of which is the journey of a lifetime.

But there really is only one take-home point in all of it. God wants to *dwell with us*, all-in-all, utterly and completely, in glory.

It's what we were created for, yet humanity, left to ourselves, is unable to echo God's holiness, His perfection, His righteousness, and His supreme goodness. The nation of Israel, first specifically chosen to be God's people, showed the truth of this. Their faithless, inconsistent example and half-hearted desire for God are a reflection of all humanity.

We could never enter into God's temple, into the very presence of His glory without help. And Jesus was sent to be that help, to make a way, to break down the wall, to bring us back to God. Holy, innocent, unstained and exalted above the heavens, he is the guarantor of a superior covenant; both the presence, the pardon, and the promise of God.

Jesus makes everything possible.

All of scripture, in a million different ways, is simply telling us the truth of this; that in Jesus, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

And *that* is a story worth telling.

"Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near." | Hebrews 10:19-25, ESV

The Pauline epistles are just brimming with thoughts on this subject, too numerous to comment on here. I'm conscious I've only just scratched the surface and hope I have managed to do it some small justice. If you're looking to soak a little longer in these thoughts, I'd recommend heading on over to the book of Hebrews and starting there with a read-through of chapters 1-10...

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The Holy Spirit | This Same Power

*"If the **Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you**, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" | Romans 8:11, ESV*

*"...This is my [Paul's] prayer. That God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and the all-glorious Father, will give you spiritual wisdom and the insight to know more of Him: that you may receive that **inner illumination of the Spirit** which will make you realise how great is the hope to which He is calling you—the magnificence and splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians—and how **tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God**. That power is the same divine power which was demonstrated in Christ when He raised him from the dead and gave him the place of supreme honour in Heaven—a place that is infinitely superior to any conceivable*

command, authority, power or control, and which carries with it a name far beyond any name that could ever be used in this world or the world to come.” | Ephesians 1:18-21, JB Phillips

The Spirit has been intricately linked with humanity's story, from the very beginning. It was God's Spirit that brought the world into being (Genesis 1:2). It was God's Spirit that empowered men and women in both the Old and New Testament times to prophesy, decipher dreams, possess extraordinary talent and knowledge, and undertake great feats of courage and action (Genesis 40:8, 41:38, Exodus 31:1-6, Judges 3:10, Judges 6:34, Luke 2:25-26, Luke 2:36-38). It was God's Spirit that sparked conception in Mary's womb, bringing about the birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30-37). Jesus' veracity as God's Son and the revelation that he was sent 'to take away the sin of the world' were both affirmed by the Spirit (John 1:29-34). And it was the Spirit of God that [raised Jesus from the dead](#) (Mark 16:9, Romans 8:11).

This same Spirit, the Apostle Paul assures us, dwells in all those who have [surrendered to Jesus](#) as their King and Saviour, empowering and transforming their lives too (Romans 8:11, Ephesians 1:18-21).

Our story, when we choose to become Christian believers, echos the incredible story of creation and the work of the Holy Spirit in the very beginning. The story of creation is our first glimpse into a story that is retold throughout the Bible; that of bringing life and light out of darkness, through the action of God's Spirit, and often connected with the medium of water.

The Creation Of The World

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over

the waters.” | Genesis 1:1-2, NIV

The heavens and the earth lay empty. We're not told how they came to be this way. We're only given a description of complete nothing-ness – a wasteland of darkness. The Hebrew words used in these verses convey the idea of desolation (*ṭō·hū*), an undistinguishable ruin (*wā·bō·hū*). Yet, where we would see hopelessness, God sees possibility. Out of chaos, disorder, and darkness, He brings order, light, and life.

It's into this dark chaos that the Spirit of God breaths. Hovering over the waters like a bird brooding over her young ones, the Spirit of God moves over the face of the deep, poised to begin His creative work.

The Hebrew word for 'spirit' (*wə·rū·aḥ*) can refer to a number of different things. We may tend to think of it as simply breath or wind and sometimes it does mean that. But it's also used to convey more. Energy, vitality, strength, breath (as in, animating power), mind, or even life can all be meant by the word *wə·rū·aḥ*. The Biblical authors also used this word to describe God's personal Presence. Just as wind or breath is invisible, so God's Spirit is invisible; just as wind has power, God's Spirit is powerful; just as we're kept alive by breath, all things are sustained by God's Spirit (Micah 3:8-10, Ecclesiastes 11:5, Acts 2:1-5, Job 34:14-16).

The use of the word *hovering* or *brooding* in Genesis (also translated as '*fluttering lovingly*') gives us a clue as to the more complex nature of God's Spirit. God's Spirit is not just energy, like some kind of electrical current, but is His divine personal Presence, the sum of all His will, His consciousness, His emotion, His character, and His power. His Spirit is of Him and *is* Him. He is everywhere by His Spirit. As the Psalmist poetically exclaims, there is nowhere we can go where God's Spirit is not. This is a concept not easily understood by our human minds.

“Where can I flee from your Spirit? Or where will I run from your presence? If I rise to heaven, there you are! If I lay down with the dead, there you are! If I take wings with the dawn and settle down on the western horizon, your hand will guide me there too, while your right hand keeps a firm grip on me. If I say, “darkness will surely conceal me, and the light around me will become night,” even darkness isn’t dark to you, darkness and light are the same to you.” | Psalm 139: 7-12, ISV

God personally inhabits the creative work that takes place in Genesis. It is His Spirit that empowers life, light, knowledge, beauty, creativity, joy, goodness, fruitfulness, and blessings (Genesis 1:31). It was His Spirit that brought life and order out of chaos and darkness. Everything seen and unseen is called into being by His Spirit and continues to exist by being connected to His Spirit (Job 34:14-16).

“By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; their starry host by the breath of His mouth.” | Psalm 33:6, NIV

‘Whereby The World That Then Was Being Overflowed With Water Perished’

This good world that God breathed into life did not remain that way for long. Genesis 6 paints a grim picture of a world that had fallen once more into chaos, disarray, and spiritual darkness.

Some 1600 years after creation, the world had become so evil that God regretted He had ever made humans (Genesis 6:6). In fact, it broke His heart. His Spirit, everything that is good and right, was sustaining a creation that was ‘rotten to the core’ (Genesis 6:5) and which was actively striving against God’s Spirit (Genesis 6:3). The Hebrew meaning behind Genesis 6:5 is that it was not only the imagination of humans that had

been corrupted but their purposes and desires too. They had brought darkness and ruin into the world to the point where God's Spirit, which sustained all things, including humanity, would no longer choose to sustain such evil.

Genesis 6-8 provides the narrative of the catastrophe that came upon humanity. The 'world that then was' was completely erased by water and all in whom the 'spirit of life' resided perished (Genesis 7:22).

"And every living thing on the face of the earth was destroyed – man and livestock, crawling creatures and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth, and only Noah remained, and those with him in the ark." | Genesis 7:23, BSB

"...that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished." | 2 Peter 3:5-6, AKJV

Only Noah, who had '[walked with God](#)' and his family were saved (Genesis 9:6). The phrase 'walked with God' recalls, perhaps, the original unity of the relationship between humanity and God, where God had 'walked in the cool of Eden's garden' alongside humans (Genesis 3:8). This unity was disrupted when Adam and Eve, grasping at equality with God, acted in opposition to God's will, resulting in them being banished from the garden and God's Presence. 'Walking with God' is often used throughout the Bible as an expression of returning to a unified relationship with God. It's what we were created for and what God has always intended for all of humanity.

"For we are His creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them." | Ephesians 2:10, NIV

Born Again Of Water And Spirit

It is over this vast emptiness of water that we once again see a bird hovering, signaling God's Presence (Genesis 8:8-17). 'The world that then was' had been born again of water and spirit, washed clean and ready for hope and the regeneration of life.

*"Then he [Noah] sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was **a freshly plucked olive leaf!** Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him." | Genesis 8: 8-12, NIV*

Centuries pass. The Spirit of God moves powerfully through the ebb and flow of the history of humanity. His intention for His creation will not be thwarted and He will walk with humanity again in a whole and restored relationship. The way He will accomplish this is, of course, through His Son, Jesus.

Jesus | The New Creation

God steps personally into our drama by sending His Son. The Word, the expression of God, the sum of all His will, His consciousness, His emotion, His character, and His power was poured out and made human (John 1:14).

John, the author of the fourth gospel account in the New Testament, deliberately parallels the Genesis account when beginning his record of this pivotal moment in human history;

[the arrival of Jesus, the Son of God](#). He tells us that ‘*in the beginning was the Word (logos), and the Word was **with** God, and the Word **was** God*’ (John 1:1). The use of the word *logos* here is deeply connected to who God is, to the very nature and essence of God, containing within itself the ability to intelligently and lovingly create and sustain life.

Interestingly, perhaps because of the lofty and soaring theology contained in his writings, the apostle John is often symbolised by an eagle, reminding us once again of a bird, brooding over dark waters, poised and waiting to create.

That ‘Word’, and all that is contained by the expression, became a human and ‘dwelt among us’. He was ‘*God-With-Us*’ – and anyone who saw him saw all the radiance of God’s glory; the exact representation of His being (Hebrews 1:3, John 14:10-11). In him, was life and the light of men (John 1:4). He is the Light that shines in the darkest places of the human heart, bringing peace to the chaos and order and beauty again. That human, of course, was Jesus.

“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6, KJV

Jesus was human like us. And yet, there was something different about him too. [He was a man, but not merely a man](#). In him, ‘the entire fullness (completeness) of God dwelt in bodily form’ (Colossians 2:9). [Jesus was a new kind of creation](#), a new kind of human and he came to show us how we can be a new kind of human too.

“The first man was named Adam, and the Scriptures tell us that he was a living person. But Jesus, who may be called the last Adam, is a life-giving Spirit.” | 1 Corinthians 15:45, NIV

Jesus came preaching the good news of salvation, of reconciliation with God, of being able to walk with God in complete harmony again. Jesus enters the tablet of human history like a blazing fire, burning away all that is false and bringing to light that which is true (Malachi 3:2-3).

There is a new reality, he affirms, one where God rules completely in the hearts of humanity and this reality, he proclaims, is right now! The kingdom of God had arrived and this new kind of living would ignite like fire in people's hearts (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:15)

It is early in his ministry that Jesus demonstrates how this new kind of living begins. He comes to Jordan, where John the Baptist was preaching the baptism of repentance. John's baptism was first intended to bring people to an acknowledgment and repentance of sin.

But John also tells the crowds that a little water would mean nothing if they weren't prepared to change their lives. Baptism needed to ignite the kingdom life within a believer, renewing men and women from the inside out. They needed to be 'born again', of [water and of spirit](#).

Jesus showed exactly what this looked like. Although He didn't need baptism for the forgiveness of sin – he never committed any, he still participated in the baptism of repentance, to 'fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). He demonstrated clearly what would be required of all humanity (the act of [belief and baptism](#)) to be able to participate in this new kingdom life.

Upon rising from the water, the Spirit of God came to rest upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaiming '*this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*' (Matthew 3:16). This was a public demonstration of not just the validity of Jesus as God's son but also how all believers who participate in this new creative work would

experience rebirth by God's Spirit.

Not long after his baptism, Jesus confirms the significance and importance of being 'born again of water and spirit'. He speaks with Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee and leader of the Jews. Nicodemus believed Jesus to truly be a teacher who had come from God and Jesus takes the opportunity to reaffirm that being reborn of water and spirit is an essential part of becoming a new creation, and 'entering the kingdom of God' (John 3:5).

The baptism of Jesus is another beautiful echo of the story first told to us in Genesis, where God's Spirit hovered like a bird over the waters, before beginning His incredible creative work. It also recalls the story of the washing and regeneration of the world in Noah's day and the new life that was signaled by the flight of a dove above the waters.

New Life By The Spirit

The truth is, what really needs washing clean is the human heart. The innermost part of humanity, where God wants to be completely at one with us, was separated from God by Adam and Eve's choices. The human heart lies in darkness and chaos and only God's Spirit can bring life and light to this disordered place (Jeremiah 17:9, Mark 7:21-22).

As it was *in the beginning*, the chaos and darkness that is in our lives can be washed clean and reordered. Regeneration, to be born anew, is the termination of people of the old creation with all their deeds and the germination of them in the new creation with the divine life. We take all of the darkness, failure, chaos, and ruin of our life and surrender it to God, who erases it in the water of baptism (Matthew 3:15, Matthew 10:28, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12, Mark 16:16, Matthew 28:19-20, Ephesians 4:4-6).

Light enters the darkness. That light is Jesus and he brings

the knowledge of God into our hearts.

“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6-7, ESV

New life is ignited in us and the new human is reborn. Yet this new life does not come without the promise of help (Ephesians 1:13-14). Jesus tells his disciples that God will send them a comforter to teach and guide them in this new kingdom life. They will be empowered and sustained by nothing less than the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit; the same power that raised Jesus from the dead!

*“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and **He will give you another Helper to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.** The world cannot receive Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you do know Him, for He abides with you and will be in you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” | John 14:15-16, 26, ESV*

*“Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, **and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** This promise belongs to you and your children and to all who are far off – to all whom the Lord our God will call to Himself. With many other words he testified, and he urged them, “Be saved from this corrupt generation.” Those who embraced his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to the believers that day” | Acts 2:38-41, BSB*

*“He redeemed us in order that the blessing promised to Abraham would come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive **the promise of the Spirit.**” | Galatians 3:14, BSB*

When Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the good news to the world, making disciples of all nations, he gave them the following instruction:

*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in **the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” | Matthew 28:19-20, NIV*

Holy Spirit | This Same Power

The mechanism by which we are renewed, as Christians, is no different from that in the past. It is God's Spirit, which has been **with** God and **is** God since the beginning, and by which everything seen and unseen was created.

Having surrendered our own self-will, we are instructed to ask, as little children would from a parent, for the gift of God's Spirit to come and 'make His home with us' (Luke 11:13, John 14:23). In our new kingdom life, we are directed by God's Spirit in the face of evil and doubt and are strengthened by the teachings of His written Word, the Bible (John 14:16-17, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We are filled with faith and hope, because of the love of God which has been shed in our hearts by His Spirit (Romans 5:5). We rejoice in the Lord, and in the strength of His might, acknowledging that even in this renewing and regeneration, the work is not ours but His (Philippians 2:13, Ephesians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 4:6-7). We are comforted, despite our Saviour's absence (John 14:18-25), walking in the path of light by God's

Spirit (Romans 8:14, 1 John 1:7).

Our bodies become temples of the living God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), where His Spirit is pleased to dwell (Romans 8:9) and we wait, with patience in this life, for the final redemption of our mortal bodies by that same Spirit at Jesus' return (Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:53, Romans 2:7, 2 Corinthians 5:4).

"None of us has anything which he did not receive. To begin with, God gives to all life and breath, and in Him we live and move and have our being. Then, fallen creatures as we now are, God gives the blessing of His Son to open out the way of life; and He gives His Word to tell of His purpose which culminates in that Son. To follow that, He promises all needful help from above to answer the needs of His servants and strengthen them on the way of pilgrimage to the Kingdom of His glory. The apostle [Paul] bids disciples offer their bodies a living sacrifice to God that, by His power and blessing, they may be both strengthened to do them and as the essential road to their own salvation, that they may be "transformed by the renewing of their mind, that they may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God", who through Christ their Lord, "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us." | Alfred Norris, The Holy Spirit and the Believer Today

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Regeneration + The Holy Spirit

“Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” | 2 Corinthians 4:16, NIV

There can be a tendency to reduce the work of the gospel to simply to a culture of ‘making us nice’. That is to say, that being a Christian equates to a program of basic self-improvement. Yet there are plenty of nice people who aren’t Christians; people who do good things for others without having Jesus in their life. And while Jesus does, of course, make a difference in the lives of believers, it’s more than just ‘making us nice’.

New Not Nice

Jesus didn’t come to *improve us* – he came to *save us*!

We were made to [walk with God](#) and dwell in His presence. God, who is the source of all life, made humans in His image and in His likeness, with the potential and capability to be like Him, to reflect His glory throughout the earth.

But the effects of sin entering the world were dramatic and far-reaching. Humanity died that day – not physically or immediately, but spiritually. Our union with God was severed and we became separated from God’s presence. And just as we have inherited physical life from our parents, we also inherit spiritual death. Every human who is born comes into the world physically alive but spiritually dead. Without our spiritual connection with God, we are nothing more than ‘dead men walking’, living in darkness and far from the eternal life God intended for us.

And no amount of ‘nice’ can fix this.

“With the Lord’s authority I say this: Live no longer as the Gentiles do, for they are hopelessly confused. Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity. But that isn’t what you learned about Christ. Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.” | Ephesians 4:17-24, ESV

The Christian life doesn’t start with reformation. You cannot reform a dead heart. The Christian life starts with a radical regeneration. From spiritual death comes a resurrected life, a new nature, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

A truly gospel-shaped life is one that begins in death. [Baptism](#), the Bible tells us, is a symbol of the death that Jesus experienced. And by his death, he destroyed the power of sin and death; those things which keep us separated from God and the life He has purposed for us. Through Jesus, it becomes possible for us to be reconciled again to God’s good life and His life-giving spirituality. We’re told, if we die with Jesus (in baptism), we will also live with him, participants in his resurrection life. That life starts right now, the very moment a believer rises from the waters of baptism.

“That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we’re going in our new grace-sovereign country. Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with

Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word."
| Romans 6:3-10, MSG

If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his [life-giving resurrection](#)! Not just as some future hope or aspirational thought but as a reality, right now! Our dead spirituality is reborn, renewed, and regenerated in Jesus. It's into the darkness of spiritual death that God has shone His glorious light of life, the knowledge of the glory of Himself expressed in Jesus.

This is why Paul can so confidently say in his letters to the churches at Colosse and Corinth:

"For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory..." | Colossians 3:4, ESV

"For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." | 2 Corinthians 4:6, KJV

Saved Not Sincere

When we accept [the truth of our situation](#) and choose to do something about it, the Bible doesn't tell us to 'believe and be sincere'. The Bible tells us to believe and [be saved](#). That's not to say that sincerity isn't important. Of course it is. But the emphasis – the first word about the action that takes place – is about the activity of God. It's God who is

saving us and it's God who is renewing us. It's God who accepts our belief in the sacrifice of Jesus and sends [His Spirit](#) into our lives to regenerate us as new creatures in His Son.

God graciously gives salvation to those who repent and believe. It is **His** action in our lives that makes the difference. **He** transfers us from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of His son, **He** adopts us as His children and **the Spirit** himself bears witness to this new identity.

The work of saving is entirely God's and this is why we can confidently preach 'that we are saved by grace through faith alone and not by our works'. [Grace is what saves, faith is the instrument through which it is effected.](#)

This is vitally important because when we believe our faith is what saves us*, we begin to measure our faith (and others') by the intensity of it (or the lack thereof). We begin to think of faith as a single act, rather than a life of orientation.

"Faith isn't an emotion God evaluates by its intensity. Faith is trust and it's only as good as the object of its trust. So the question isn't, "do you truly believe?" but "who do you believe in?" We must point continually to God in Christ, who is good and generous and amazingly gracious. We trust Him and His grace for our salvation, not the strength of our emotions." | Michael Lawrence

Faith trusts that this work isn't ours – it's God's and He's doing it for His glory. [He saves not because of who we are but because of who He is.](#) Why? Because He loves us.

"Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with every good thing to do His will. And may He accomplish in us what is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory

forever and ever. Amen.” | Hebrews 13:20-21, NIV

“For it is God who works in you to will and to act on behalf of His good pleasure.” | Phillipians 2:13, NIV

“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore you, secure you, strengthen you, and establish you. To Him be the power forever and ever. Amen.” | 1 Peter 5:10 BSB

Disciples Not Decisions

Our resurrected life is not dominated by decisions that come and go but by faithfully following Jesus. Every Christian's life starts at a certain point, with a decision, but that one decision alone is not enough to make us a disciple. Resurrection life continues as a life marked by discipleship. Every day, the mission is the same: a commitment to follow Jesus, regardless of the cost.

Having faith does not mean *'being spiritual'* or *'belonging to a faith community'* or *'seeking spiritual direction'*. Of course, it may involve those things but having faith is wholehearted trust that God will keep His promises, and this trust is constantly affirmed and demonstrated by a transformed life.

It's examining ourselves, not just on Sunday, but every day, to see if we are *'in the faith'*.

It's waiting on Jesus.

We must be committed to not just making *'a faithful decision'* on any given day, but to being disciples – life-long followers of Jesus who take up their cross, enduring hardship, because our trust is in Jesus' sacrifice and God's promise to us in

this.

But we are not alone in our resurrected life.

“If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” | Romans 8:11, ESV

“...This is my [Paul’s] prayer. That God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and the all-glorious Father, will give you spiritual wisdom and the insight to know more of Him: that you may receive that inner illumination of the Spirit which will make you realise how great is the hope to which He is calling you—the magnificence and splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians—and how tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God. That power is the same divine power which was demonstrated in Christ when He raised him from the dead and gave him the place of supreme honour in Heaven—a place that is infinitely superior to any conceivable command, authority, power or control, and which carries with it a name far beyond any name that could ever be used in this world or the world to come.” | Ephesians 1:18-21, JB Phillips

God’s own Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are His children. Our existence is now framed by Christ’s life – who is, himself, a life-giving Spirit.

“The first man was named Adam, and the Scriptures tell us that he was a living person. But Jesus, who may be called the last Adam, is a life-giving spirit.” | 1 Corinthians 15:45, NIV

This resurrected life comes with the promise of help (Ephesians 1:13-14) from the Spirit of God Himself. Jesus tells his disciples that God will send them a *comforter, counsellor, advocate or helper* (παράκλητος (paráklētos) to

teach and guide them. The spark of new life that has been lit in their hearts will grow and be sustained by nothing less than the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit; the same power that raised Jesus from the dead!

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot receive Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you do know Him, for He abides with you and will be in you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” | John 14:15-16, 26, ESV

“Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise belongs to you and your children and to all who are far off – to all whom the Lord our God will call to Himself. With many other words he testified, and he urged them, “Be saved from this corrupt generation.” Those who embraced his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to the believers that day.” | Acts 2:38-41, BSB

“He redeemed us in order that the blessing promised to Abraham would come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” | Galatians 3:14, BSB

Led By The Spirit

Christianity is a relationship, not a [ritual](#) or a religious code of ethics. It's living in [communion](#) with the Father and His Son and being constantly led by the Holy Spirit in our discipleship. It's living in freedom from the power that sin

and death formerly had over us.

This freedom is one of the most precious realities of our regenerated life.

In no way does this deny the continuous struggle believers still have with sin, but we can have trust and confidence that we have been transferred out of sin's dominion and into the kingdom of Jesus; that we are a child of God and that, day by day, we are being renewed and transformed into the likeness of His Son.

Not only this, the blood of Jesus is able to cleanse us from all sin. If we confess, He is faithful and just to forgive.

“For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves.” | Colossians 1:13, NIV

“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” | Romans 8:9-11, NIV

“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?” | 1 Corinthians 3:16 – NIV

We are empowered to live a fully reconciled '[kingdom life](#)', both with God and to each other, brought together as [family and community](#) through the precious blood of our saviour. Together, believers become the church of Christ – his body;

fellow citizens with the family and household of God, and a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Our greatest hope and expectation is that Christ, who is our life, will one day appear and change our corruptible bodies to incorruptible bodies and we will be forever with our Lord ([Romans 8:11](#), [1 Corinthians 15:53](#), [Romans 2:7](#), [2 Corinthians 5:4](#)).

God always intended to dwell with His people and, through Jesus, this became possible. The Holy Spirit works powerfully in us to change our hearts. Christians are now connected, in a deeply spiritual way, to the source of eternal life for which we were always purposed. Our faith, hope, and love grow more each day in similarity to the One who empowers our life and we begin to look more and more like Him.

The power and truth of the gospel are displayed when people begin to live differently, empowered by God's Spirit. We become a community that can only be explained by a gospel that truly converts and changes lives.

For those of us who may have been out of step with the Spirit, now is the time to open our hearts and our lives to the transforming and regenerating work of the Spirit. Ask, as a child would from a parent, for the gift of the Spirit to come and create in you a new heart.

Now is the season to discover how to walk alongside the Spirit, not expecting God to do all the work, nor trying to do it all ourselves. Being led by the Spirit is following Jesus in faithful discipleship, in partnership with God in His great kingdom mission, fully empowered by His Eternal Spirit.

"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" | Luke 11:13, NIV

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you

trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” | Romans 15:13, NIV

“And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” | Romans 5:5 – NIV

***If faith doesn’t save, then why does James make such a big deal about faith and works? When he wrote his letter, James was actually concerned with counterfeit Christianity of another kind – the unauthenticity of a life that is ‘Christian’ in name only. James is talking about those who make a ‘one-time decision’ to ‘be a Christian’ and yet nothing really changes in their lives. He is tackling a different, yet no less dangerous distortion of the gospel of grace, the idea that believers can ‘continue in sin that grace may abound’. That is to say, that nothing about the way the believer behaves or lives after being [saved](#) needs to change, that verbally expressing our faith in Jesus is enough, and that we don’t need to ‘do better’ because God’s grace covers all our shortcomings anyway. James is talking about a half-gospel, one that possibly makes us ‘feel better about ourselves’ but doesn’t convert our hearts or demonstrate true [discipleship](#) by a transformed life.**

The truth, James says, is that *yes, we are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless it’s demonstrated by an active, loving response to God’s grace. This is, as Paul agrees, “faith working through love.” (Galatians 5:6), demonstrated by a Christian in ‘what they do’. This is what discipleship is all about.*

You can read more about the Faith | Works Conundrum [here](#) or Discipleship [here](#).

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