

# **PASSION, POWER, PROXY, RELEASE**

**SCRIPTURES, POEMS, AND DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS**

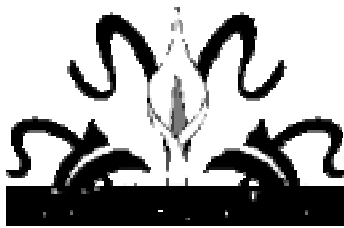
**FOR**

**COMMUNION AND WORSHIP SERVICES**

by

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## Introduction

For years now I have been writing poems about the experience of the communion service, and the correlative subjects of the sufferings of Christ, and my own identification with Him in my own personal trials. For many years, on Good Friday, I would write a poem about the crucifixion. These poems, like most of the others in this volume, were filed away, usually shared with no one but the Lord.

But recently I have been strongly aware of the fact that the communion service, where we partake of Christ in a very real way, has had an increasingly greater effect on my thinking and on my life. I have felt an urgency to share some of these thoughts with other Christians. Those who know me well would say that this must be a strong urgency indeed, to make me open up this private part of myself.

I found as I began to publish these poems in magazines, anthologies, songbooks, and other books that people told me that they, too, were affected by the Lord as they read my poems. I was reminded that a large portion of the Bible is written in poetic form, and that Jesus Himself quoted poetry. Then as I began to study New Testament Greek I found that Christians themselves are referred to as "poem as" in Ephesians 2:10. The New International Version of the Bible translates that word as "workmanship," but my Linguistic Key to the New Testament expands that definition by saying that it also carries the meaning of "a work of art" or "poem."

So I began assembling the poems I have written over the last twenty-five years. In this book, they are arranged as "poem sandwiches: Scriptures, poems, and devotional thoughts designed to be used as a three-part unit. I see most of my religious poems falling into four broad categories.

- **Some dealt with a great desire I had to really visualize the sufferings of Christ during the last few hours of His life.**
- **Others reflected my feeling of the power that is available to me, two thousand years later, as I participate in the communion service.**
- **A third group showed my involvement, my identification with Jesus through the fellowship of pain.**
- **A fourth group stated in various ways the overwhelming faith I have in the great Hero of the Resurrection.**

To put it in a more familiar way, I found that I wanted *to know Christ, and the power of His Resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead* (Philippians 3:10-11.)

I felt a need (and I think others do too) for a touchpoint with His passion; a conduit to His power; vindication for the proxy-pain that my own life has brought; and finally, the release of resurrection and all that it means. To put it in Representational terminology, I want to participate fully and consciously in the present-day representations of facts that took place 2000 years ago. By doing so, 1 Corinthians 11:26 tells us, we

proclaim them, represent them, in the same manner as the heavens proclaim His glory.

What follows is the slaking of my personal thirsts, and my gift of the water of understanding to others who likewise seek the Living Water.

*For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. . . Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.*

--I Corinthians 10:1-4, 14-17

## Part One

### Passion



### I want to know Christ . . .

*This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, or the strong man boast his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD. --Jeremiah 9:23-24*

#### On Knowing Christ

Recently I read John chapter 15 in Spanish. I am constantly amazed at how reading God's Word in a language not natively my own forces me to see familiar concepts in a new light. As I read, it occurred to me that Jesus being the vine, my being a branch, and God the vinedresser means I must have complete contact, nutritional dependence, and limb-to-body relationship to the Savior. God is not the one to whom I should have that relationship--He is the one who will foster and nurture it.

Throughout my years as a Mormon, I depended, like the Old Testament Jews, on the Father exclusively. But I see now that God wanted somehow to wean mankind off Himself, standing aside to take the role of midwife in our spiritual births. I know now that Jesus is not the created junior god-in-training I learned in my childhood. I know I must continually approach the Father in a new way, asking Him to foster my relationship with Jesus, to convert my still-jewish heart to His Son.

The poems that follow in this section reflect my earnest desire to know Christ by trying to visualize the events that surrounded his sufferings and death. Because of them, I see him more clearly, and I dedicate myself to him. I promise to be faithful to this person-- not just to his principles, not just his rules, not just to the blinding light of his Father; but to him, the Person, the Once-a-Man who chose not only the role of sonship, but also chose to bear a body throughout eternity as a reminder of his service here.

**My stunned heart repeats this truth:**

**You didn't have to,**

**You didn't have to,**

**You wanted to**

*When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side was an olive grove, and he and his disciples went into it."--John 18:10*

## **The Conduit**

**In the temple now they are killing the lambs. There  
Two hundred and seventy thousand will die. The air  
Of Jerusalem has been filled with their bleating  
All day, as red-sleeved priests perform their duty of meting  
Out death. One by one, white throats are slit.**

**The temple has the hot, moist smell of blood about it.**

**A conduit drains from the great brass altar down  
To the brook Kidron.**

**But in the dusk-light of this Thursday, the leaves  
Of the olive trees tremble as the wind heaves  
And lunges into them. Men approach the blood-swollen creek  
And cross this bridge, hurrying toward the shade they seek.**

**Why has this lone Man stooped at the Kidron before He crosses,  
His finger just touching the red water, and pauses,**

**Pauses?**

We often speak with passion about privilege we have of "making contact" with the blood of Christ; that point at which we achieve salvation through His blood. We know that it symbolizes something bought at terrible price for us. Just how great that price would have seemed to Jesus, as He made contact with the blood that would symbolize His own death!

*Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"--Luke 23:28-31*

**They are singing, all around me,  
Blithely of  
A cross that is old and rugged.  
I am speechless, songless,  
Stunned by a thought I can hardly bear:  
What if the wood were new,  
And His blood mingled with  
The sap of that tree  
Which itself was alive the day before,  
Each one dying  
For the other**

The interconnection of Christ with the world He'd created should never be taken lightly. He told us that no sparrow, no flower of the field (and by extension, no created thing) is beyond His notice. His sacrifice for us didn't cost only Him--the earthquakes at His death, the anguish of the Roman soldier who watched, the despair of the disciples--all mourned for Him. And even though we know He's risen, we too must mourn for the sin that put Him on that cross.

*.. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).*  
--Mark 15:22

**They called that place  
The Skull  
And how true--  
Here love is stripped  
Of all its softness, all  
Its warmth:  
Skinned alive,  
And reduced to  
A grinning death's head**

Many people in times of crisis speak of how they were able to see things with crystal clarity: to understand a situation, to see a solution, to move unhesitatingly toward action. The death of Jesus gives us that clarity, too. We would never gild a crucifix or paint rosy cheeks on the dying Savior pictured there if we understood what that cross really meant. It meant that at least for a little while, sin and death and Satan had won a victory.

Golgotha, after all, is not the curves and dimples of a face, it is the starkness of a skull.

*A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. -- John 19:29*

**This torture tree has become the peg  
On which I impale my soul.  
For remembrance, I use  
The rosemary of sorrow,  
The mnemonic of proxy-pain:  
I make myself the sponge  
Thirsty for that blood,  
Starved for His presence  
Here, far away  
From that splintered horror**

The fact that we live in a modern, sophisticated world makes many think that it is "barbaric" to think about the gruesome fact of the Cross. Many people want worship to be a light and carefree experience, with music and encouraging sermons. It has never been that way for believers. In the Old Testament, the singing and rejoicing at the Temple dedication were against the backdrop of blood-drenched altars. New Testament believers often met in catacombs, singing their songs of hope with the smell of death and decay all around. It's all about contrasts, really: we can't see the victory of the cross unless we put it up against its shame.

*About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" -- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" . . . And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. --Matthew 27:46, 50*

## **Friday**

**Blood throbbing like muffled drums**

**Tendons stretching like fence-wires: tune-taut**

**But soundless**

**His reproach streaks the silence like**

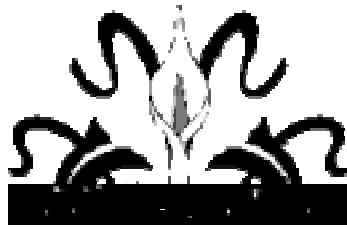
**Lightning in darkness.**

**Two eyes, raging from the sandstorms of a**

**Thousand tears, finally close.**

**The body hangs limp as wet drapery on a limb.**

Perhaps to understand the despair of the crucifixion, we must recall times in our own lives when we have been completely alone. It may involve the memory of being a lost and terrified child. Or finding oneself disoriented, mapless, confused while driving. Or worst of all, a time when there was more to the lostness than just an accident: a time of abandonment by someone you loved, trusted, and depended upon. All the bragging disciples who'd jockeyed for power in Jesus' kingdom left Him when His royal throne's footstool was a single rusty nail; when His hands held only blood. Only John stayed to mourn with the women.



## Part Two



### Power

...and the power of his resurrection . . .

*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"*

--Luke 24:30-32

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He told us to do it in remembrance of him. But Paul reminded us later that we must do this, thinking not only of the sufferings of Jesus' physical body, but also discerning--being acutely aware of--his body, the church. As I commune with him, I often look around me at the other worshippers who have come for the same purpose. I remind myself that these people who surround me are as much Christ's body as the unleavened bread we will all consume. Those who are not there, I mourn: for as a body, we are not completed when we are not complete.

*The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. --Hebrews 4:12-16*

**I have asked  
That the sword-word be a scalpel today  
And that it incise my heart  
And so I open my garments  
Exposing my chest  
Prying apart the breastbones  
Slicing the flesh  
And letting the breezes here  
Blow across my quivering heart  
This chapel has become an  
Operating room; the blood and  
Bread somehow oddly appropriate.  
The covenant I have made is the  
Anesthesia that allows me  
To undergo this coming experience  
Will He cut into me  
Leaving behind an irritant  
That I will coat like a pearl--  
A thing of beauty out of pain?  
Or will it fester inside me  
And kill?  
Or will He pour in wine and oil  
And bind up my wound  
And set me on my feet again?**

We expect when we come to church that the Lord will somehow recognize our effort, see our dedication, and reward us in some way with a "good experience" at church. We speak of coming with empty buckets to be filled, of needs like gaping holes in our hearts that are to be bound up with fellowship, love, and instruction. Most of all, we want something from the Lord Himself--an insight, a comforting, a reassurance. We want, in other words, for Him to be open with us. But because He's a loving Father, He doesn't just pat us on our heads and tell us everything is all right. Sometimes His words hurt; and we recoil because we find to our surprise that we are the ones who have become vulnerable, not Him. Our eternal praise should be to Him who spares us without spoiling us.

*Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*

--Matthew 26:27-28.

**I take the small silver cup  
And hold it expectantly  
Beneath His fingertips,  
The tap from which  
The red liquid trickles  
I tremble at the cost of  
This beverage;  
Ever startled at  
The sweetness of its taste**

What a marvelous time it is, to be able to sit in quietness and peace and think on Jesus without distractions. No matter what the weather, no matter what the political upheaval, we are safe as we contemplate our Lord. This place is a tryst--that which has the kiss of eternity on its brow--and a truce with all outside.

*"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." --John 17:20-21*

**I in them (He prayed)  
And Thou in Me  
That they may be perfected as one**

**My Jesus  
You have been  
The answer to my every prayer  
May I be  
The answer  
To Yours?**

Jesus came to this earth with very few requirements. His birth was humble, his parents simple people. He never owned a home. At the time of His death He only had one change of clothes. People were always helping Him out--with food, with a bed, even with carrying His cross and providing a loaned tomb. Only from an outcast, half-breed woman and from one of His executioners did He ever ask even for a drink of water. What He wanted from people was not their things, but their thoughts. It's true that a church is exactly what you think of it. If you look at it as a group of show-offs and hypocrites, you'll hold yourself above them. If you try to see others as fellow- strugglers, you'll help--and be helped by--them.

*"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." --John 17:17-18*

**Like the flutterings of hundreds of tiny wings  
The Bible pages are turned,  
Parchment rustles, hands  
Slip lovingly over translucent white and  
Black. A word here; a verse  
There, impaled by a fingertip and  
Examined, then stroked and released like  
A rescued creature of the wilds,  
Returned to its natural habitat.**

God, being the Creator of the universe, could have chosen to transfer information about Himself to us in any number of ways. He could have made our bodies with implanted buzzers that would stun us each time we sinned. Or, He could have just "zapped" us with an understanding of Himself right into our brain cells. But instead of that, He lowered Himself to communicate His infinite mind in our paltry words. He, who has the riches of all wisdom and knowledge, chose to package His thoughts in our linguistic limitations. That's why the Bible is such a rich gift: it is the thoughts of God in the language of man. Some people think that the Holy Spirit helped the writers of Scripture to choose just the right words from their vocabularies when they were writing down His communications with them. Maybe-- just maybe--the words of our Bible were created by God just for that purpose (and He lets us use them for other things, too!)

*"And when you stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." --Mark 11:25 (KJV)*

## **Ought Against My Sister**

**They're passing the communion bread now.  
We must break from the same piece.  
It is as if we have been given the same piece of Flesh;  
And like wolves with our teeth on opposite edges,  
We can only see each other's eyes  
Across the meat of this matter.  
Like loaves that reproduced themselves for the five thousand,  
Like grace that multiplies itself to infinity:  
Love, beckoning and irresistible,  
Molds us together  
(the eye cannot say, "I don't need you"  
the hand cannot say, "I don't need you"  
We cannot hurt  
Our own bodies)  
Sister, my sister,  
I love you  
As myself**

A recent attempt to memorize from Matthew the so-called "Lord's Prayer" in koine Greek brought me to a shocking discovery. I had always thought that it was quite equitable that I should forgive those who trespassed against me because God had forgiven my sins: a sort of theological tit-for-tat where I'd try to play catch-up for what He'd done for me. But what a surprise to discover that the Greek said something quite different altogether! It actually says, *"Forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sin against us."* In other words, Jesus invites us to see the implications of not forgiving others in terms of not being forgiven ourselves. That makes a grudge the most expensive thing our souls can buy.

*The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.*  
--1 Peter 4:7

**It is not communion  
But the clutter of things  
That is here.  
It is the clamor of the  
Voices of musts  
That cloud this place.  
Resolutely, I do what  
Must be done.  
I clear the table of my mind  
And set it simply with  
Wine and bread.  
Now,  
Now the Guest  
Can come.**

That first Communion service must have been a study in contrasts. The disciples still had fresh in their memories the excitement of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem a few days before, but Jesus was talking as if something bad was about to happen. Even the group there was a strange combination of personalities and backgrounds: among them uneducated fishermen, a thief, a terrorist, and the modern equivalent of an IRS agent. John reclined on one side, his head on Jesus' chest, hearing His heart beating. And since Judas took the sop from Jesus, he was probably just behind Jesus. Did Jesus hear Judas' treacherous heart beat faster when He told him, "What you're going to do, do quickly"?

*Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!"  
And the guards took him and beat him. --Mark 14:65*

**The room swelled as if filled with something fermenting;  
The walls wanted to bulge and burst--  
My God  
They beat that body (bread-white as it was,  
Holy, and light)  
With biting stings of ropes  
They beat that soul  
With mocks and witty barbs,  
And logic, and irrefutable facts.  
They led that body away  
And there on the stained floor, left behind  
Were the blood-drops of his pain  
Trailing, shining,  
Dark as dregs of summer wine.  
And the Spirit of God circled  
Like a calling bird over the congregation;  
Then rested protectively on that brooding mass:  
Lightly, lightly, lightly.**

Taking the Lord's Supper is not only a matter of eating and drinking. It's not just that our souls depend on how we think about it, how we approach it. It goes much deeper than that. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that how we think about this serious business of communing with God is literally life or death; health or sickness. It's as if God is trying to get us to understand just how much this act of faith means to both Him and us.

*.. devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching. --I Timothy 4:13*

**There is such power in the  
Word  
Spoken, it slits  
Open hearts  
Read, it rips  
And uproots our defenses  
It proceeds like a blast of hot light  
From the mouth of the one who handles it,  
Burning us like chaff,  
Convicting us like a unanimous jury;  
And soothing us like  
A mother's whispered  
Song in the night**

Power and authority, as portrayed in the Bible, are depicted almost as if they had substance that could be conveyed from person to person: like a commodity, or a unit of exchange, or a currency. Jesus tangibly felt power leave His body when the woman with the issue of blood touched His garment in faith--making a "withdrawal" of strength from Him. And when Jesus said, "All authority is mine," that means that anyone who holds any authority got it from Him, and they are only existing with His permission. True, like any currency, it can be abused or misused. But unlike earthly units of exchange, God's power and authority have only one Source. And unlike the world's money, it is unlimited, strictly regulated, and impervious to outside pressures.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

--Colossians 3:16

## **Acappella**

**And now it begins:  
The old widow women  
Chirp the soprano  
With querulous bird-voices  
And the alto is a forgotten heritage  
Of nasal hums  
The children push the notes  
Through rounded cheeks  
And new teeth  
As the songleader pauses  
Poises for the next verse  
With sucked-in breath and belly  
And now it ends  
As gravel-throated old men  
Are prodded by their ample wives  
Out of  
Padded-pew slumber:  
Amen,  
Amen .**

People come in all sizes, shapes, ages, and conditions. It is our privilege to be judged by God by only one standard: like David, we are known to Him by our hearts. The Lord has for some reason beyond our petty wisdom put us together in congregations of unlikely variety. But it is precisely that variety that makes the music of our voices--and our lives--a sweet praise to Him, and a beacon of hope to all outside the Body who, too, are individuals.

*Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. --I Corinthians 11:27-28*

**We rub our souls raw  
With the sackcloth of remembered sin  
And toss the ashes of burned  
Memories into the air  
Where they mat in our hair  
And crust our eyelids  
(How lovely that fountain  
Where the sparkling water  
Washes away  
Even the remembrance of things passed  
Transforming them into  
Things forgiven)**

In spite of all the "feel good" philosophies that recent church growth experts have said are necessary for people to benefit from worship, the basic "needs" of a congregation remain unchanged. Worship has two functions: to glorify God, and to allow men, women and children to participate in that glorification. Participation means that a distinction must be made between the holy and the common; the heavenly and the earthly. Part of that involves our recognition that we are not the holy and the heavenly. A proper deference to a superior Being is not belittling but rather an acknowledgement that our sin both separates us from Him and provides the impetus for Him to reach toward us.

*"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." --John 17:22-23*

**As I sit here  
With the taste of Your Son's flesh  
Still on my tongue,  
His blood still sweet in my nostrils,  
Your Spirit strokes my hair:  
I have become one with You.**

The New Testament word for "fellowship" is *koinonia*, which carries with it the idea of sharing. In the communion service, we share with God in a way that is not possible any other time. William Barclay said in his book, *New Testament Words*, "The cup and the bread are supremely the *koinonia* of the body and the blood of Christ. In the sacrament above all Christians find Christ and find each other." Let's rejoice in the luxury we have as believers--that of intimacy with Jesus through communion.

*When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. --Luke 14:8-11*

**I move among these, my sisters  
 Here in the court of the women  
 Where the altar smoke  
 Drifts out from the  
 Distant and inaccessible altar  
 This is the place of shes  
 The blessing-site, the giving-way  
 I do not strain to see  
 The lampstands, the bowls,  
 The sacrifice;  
 For the light that shines from there  
 Moves toward me:  
 The Priest has brought  
 The rites to me  
 And together we fellowship  
 Here,  
 In the court of women  
 He knows submission  
 Better than I**

The word "submission" is a hateful one in our society, because people assume that submitting to someone else is an admission that you are in some way inferior. But Jesus taught just the opposite. We submit to one another to show honor; not because we are wretched, but because we choose to do so. Submission as a choice is a great source of strength and power--Jesus said the servant of all is the 'greatest of all. When women choose to be silent in worship, they exercise this same kind of power of submission; and mirror the fact that in the Old Testament temple, the court of the women was where all the giving took place.

*From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his children." --Acts 17:26-28*

**I didn't know there were still places like this meetin' house,  
Where the doors stand open in the sultry heat  
And the air is stirred by languid wrists moving paper fans  
from a funeral home.  
Each word in the song  
Is injected with a hypodermic of meaning  
"oh Lord we ne--ed  
A friend .... like .... You"  
They call this a "colored congregation."  
I guess they're right.  
Each face is tinted with heaven.**

We often speak of God's wealth--His limitless resources for those who believe, the abundance of His creation. But most wonderful of all is the richness of the diversity of the people He has created. Not only do we come in all sizes, shapes, and colors; each of us has a unique, one-of-a-kind soul that is precious to Him. We easily acknowledge our diversity when we survey our world with its many peoples. But in looking around the people we worship with every Sunday, we must remind ourselves that though we are united, the uniqueness of each one is something created by God, and is pleasing to Him.

*Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life . . . --Philippians 2:14-16a*

### **To My Friend**

**You have received the hot blast of God's love  
That has channelled to you  
Like a gleaming conduit  
You, like a prism,  
Have broken that love into  
All its joyous elements  
And you have bathed my life  
In that rainbow!**

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul divided the aspects of love into various elements that allow us to see not only what agape love looks like, but how it acts. It's true that all real love has God as its only source. What we give to others, we first received from Him. How gracious He is to allow us the divine prerogative of blessing others with that love.

*Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*

--Colossians 4:12

**Your prayers cloak me  
And I am warmed  
They are my vanguard  
My barricade against fear  
They surround me like a moat  
Bolster me like tent staves  
Support me like my skeleton  
I praise Him  
For you**

When Paul wrote in Colossians 4:12 about his friend Epaphras, he described this man as "always wrestling in prayer" on behalf of the church in Colossae. The word we have in our Bibles translated as "wrestling" is a Greek word that denotes great struggle. It is the same word from which we derive our English word, "agony." It speaks not of casual concern, but of intensity. Epaphras' areas of concern for his brethren were that they know God's will, be confident in it, and be mature in it. What a model for our prayers for our own brothers and sisters!

*Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" --Luke 9:23-25*

**I would give away  
Any hastily-found treasure  
Without ever counting it  
I would turn away any inheritance  
Refuse even  
Blood-earned gain  
Oh that I had a kingdom to abdicate  
Like the king who gave all  
For the woman he loved;  
I would pray for many kingdoms  
Only so that I could give them up,  
Ungoverned  
But I won't renounce  
Would never relinquish  
Cannot abdicate  
My most precious treasure,  
You  
You are  
My ruler  
My riches  
My realm**

One of the purposes of the communion service is to remember Jesus: specifically, to remember His sacrifice for us. This sacrifice has no price that we can repay; no correlative offering that we can make to put ourselves on any equal footing with Jesus. However, though it has no price, it does demand a response. The way that Jesus offered Himself is something we can mirror in our willingness to abandon everything that makes us comfortable in order to follow Him.

*Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you-- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them. In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling. --Exodus 15:11-13*

**The force of your love  
Awe me,  
Like a great mountain I cannot ascend  
But whose warming breezes  
And crags of protection I crave.  
I stand on the beach  
of this limitless sea  
Of forgotten depths:  
I would drown myself  
In its richness.  
Shine forth, great mountain,  
Roll forth, great ocean--  
Your bursts of light  
Pierce my dimmed eyes,  
Your thunderings  
Soothe my sluggish ears  
Your beauty  
Makes my heart sing**

There are many examples in the Bible of how God's people were so overcome with emotion and gratitude for the mighty works of God that they just burst into song. God's power is frightening and threatening to some people. After Jesus healed many people, some of the chief priests and teachers were "indignant," according to Matthew 21:15. But others were exuberant, especially the children whose joy just couldn't be contained: they shouted praises to Jesus. May our hearts be childlike in praise!

*I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith. . . --Philippians 1:20-25*

**Pact**

**At first I mourned our difference.**

**Now I celebrate it:**

**Like the bittersweet toast**

**Of two soldiers who go away**

**To war on different battlefields**

**Not knowing what of life**

**Or death the future brings,**

**Of sorrow or great joy;**

**But who know**

**The cause is worth the danger.**

One thing that the Lord does not want us to do is to become comfortable--assuming that tomorrow will be just like today, like the scoffers of 2 Peter 3:4. This life is not a garden, it is a battleground. Any security we feel is only a foxhole--temporary and confining. When we meet together as a Body, it is to help one another recover from the war we're all fighting --- and to reassure one another that our Captain, Jesus, is worth the fight.

*Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate: whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."*

--- John 10:7-10

**You are the high-banked threshold  
Over which I stepped  
Into such light, such light  
You are the door  
That stands open, open to the  
Inside of multiplied marvels  
Your presence populates this place, for  
You are the many of opposing mirrors  
Reflecting back and again  
Like air, you pervade each moment  
You are the opening  
You are the interior  
You are  
My world**

When Jesus spoke of Himself as a gate for sheep, the image was that of a shepherd who would at night stretch his own body across the opening of a sheepfold to keep predators away. Thus, he became a human barricade of protection. But just as Jesus is a gate of closure against enemies, He is also an open door of passageway to heaven. In John 1:51, He predicted a time when He himself, like the ladder in Jacob's dream, would be the thoroughfare on which angels (the ministering servants for those who believe) would ascend and descend between heaven and earth.

*Jesus heard that they had thrown (the man born blind) out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped him. Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." --John 9:35-39*

**What was, before you,  
Was formless and void  
My eyes were unable to see  
Until you came  
And just your touch  
Has healed me  
And how I treasure the  
Living memory  
That the first thing  
My newly-healed eyes saw  
Was your lovely face**

One of the most beloved hymns of all Christian history is "Amazing Grace." It speaks of the transformation of personality from unsaved to saved; from blindness to sight. The humility and gratitude of the man born blind has much to teach us. When he recognized the face of the One who had healed him, he responded with worship. So, we too, must respond to the one who gave us spiritual life and sight.

*But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower [of Babel] that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." --Genesis 11:5-7*

**Teach me  
The words of your mouth  
Let me think your thoughts  
Let me dream your dreams  
And if our speech is not confounded  
If our language is  
The same  
Oh my love what we  
Can build  
For nothing will be  
Impossible  
For us**

In Titus chapter two, there are two strong statements about the power of the tongue to both harm and to bless. On the one hand, we are warned to "*avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless*" (verse 9) as well as told to avoid divisive people. But we are also reminded that what Titus calls "*soundness of speech*" (verse 7) is something that can unite us against opposition from outside. If we speak with one voice, so to speak, Titus assures us that criticism against us simply won't stick because there'll be nothing bad to say about us.

*On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet . . . I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me . . . When I saw him, I fell at his feet as through dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." . . . After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." --Revelation 1:10, 12, 17-18; 4:1*

### **Frame**

**Like a great window**

**You have opened me up**

**To vistas of wonder**

**Through you**

**The rich breezes of life**

**Tingle the hairs of my scalp**

**And fill my lungs**

**With exhilaration**

**You have shown me**

**A panorama of great beauty**

**A garden of delights and abundance**

**And the marvel thus framed**

**Is you**

**Is you**

When John the Revelator saw the open door into heaven and was invited by Jesus to come up there, the first thing he saw was the throneroom of God. Wasn't it just like Jesus to let that doorway frame the most important thing in heaven--His precious Father--to give Him the glory and supremacy He deserves?

*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident in this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. -- Philippians 1:3-8*

**Your prayers cloak me  
And I am warmed  
They are my vanguard  
My barricade against fear  
They surround me like a moat  
Bolster me like tent staves  
Support me like my skeleton  
I praise Him  
For you**

The most important gift we can give our brothers and sisters in the Lord is not hospitality, not fellowship, not even godly instruction. It is our prayers. Intercessory prayer has been called the highest form of prayer, because it is the most unselfish. It is interesting to note that if you list all the recorded prayers of Jesus, the vast majority of them are not for Himself, but for others. If we would be like Jesus, then praying for others is a good place to start.

*The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" . . . So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet--a vast army. -- Ezekiel 37:1-6; 10.*

**I had a dream and a vision  
I was in a blistered valley  
In Ezekiel's shadow  
And when he said  
"Sovereign Lord,  
You alone know"--  
Then he prophesied  
And when the rattling began  
And bone  
Came to  
Bone  
It was your bone to mine  
My wrist joined your hand and arm  
My breastbone  
To your shoulder  
And the sinews that grew  
Were the  
Power  
Of  
God  
You,  
Bone of my bone  
And flesh of my flesh  
And I  
We have become  
The mighty army  
And we chafe as  
We await our marching orders**

Everyone is familiar with the passage in Ephesians chapter six where Christians are told to suit up for the spiritual battle we all must wage. It is interesting that the Greek indicates instructions to people in the plural (you all, we might say) but the weapons are in the singular (only one shield, one breastplate, etc.) It is as if Paul recognizes us as warriors in the individual sense as we fight our private battles, but also sees us as a giant warrior--more than the sum of our parts--a warrior who carries those special weapons and protections that He Himself provides.

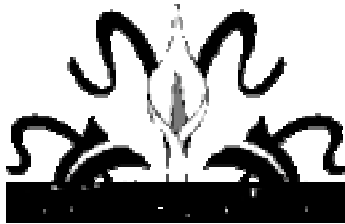
But even a mother, even a best friend, weren't much comfort to Jesus when His Father turned away, too. How lonely the view from the cross.



*.. the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. ..* --Revelation 13:8

**When He walked,  
The shadow He cast  
Was that  
Of a blood-drenched  
Lamb**

The prophet Isaiah made it plain that it wouldn't be the appearance of the Messiah that would draw people to Him. There would be something else--a quality that couldn't be captured in a portrait or a description. Even the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection didn't recognize what was special about Him at the time, just that He'd had a tangible effect on them. How fortunate we are that it wasn't Jesus' looks or even His "charisma" that drew people to Him, for those things no longer are here with us on earth. His words and His power, though, linger like a sweet, persistent perfume, blessing us even two thousand years later.





## Part Three

### Proxy

*The fellowship of his suffering, becoming like him in his death. . ."*

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. --1 Peter 4:12-13.*

## On Suffering

I don't pretend that the trials of my life have been more severe than those of anyone else. In fact, I know that many people have suffered much more than I ever will. But each life does have pain, and perhaps by voicing my own, others can see a way of bearing theirs. Sometimes if we give our pain a name, it is no longer a faceless guerilla that eludes our warfare against it. Sometimes personal pain is particularly hard to bear because it seems purposeless. Though outwardly we will concede that we won't be given more than we can handle, and that we are undoubtedly being trained in some way, our own lives give us no proof of either claim. We bend under unseen whips, stand on promises. At such times, only one thought sustains me: if I can understand nothing about what I am undergoing, I can understand this--

Suffering is a fellowship; a touchpoint with others who hurt. Many of the following poems reflect that fellowship. They tell the truth that being a Christian is painful. That is, I am sure, because we follow One who suffered. If there be no other purpose in our suffering, at least in it we are like him.

*"Do this in remembrance of me." --I Corinthians 11:24*

**Why is it that I can only anchor my thoughts  
To what is real  
By tying my mind to the jarring reality  
Of a nail's impact  
On flesh  
But the two thousand years are getting in the way,  
And so my mind must substitute  
My flesh for His:  
It is I who am flogged  
I who am crucified  
(the fellowship of His suffering  
becoming like Him in His death)  
Each day has scarred over  
This essential remembered pain  
And so I reopen my flesh  
And stab this sacrament again**

It is very difficult to repeat an action over and over without losing its meaning. We often find ourselves partaking of the Lord's Supper without really thinking about what it means, just because the action is familiar to us. However, Jesus asks to be remembered in this specific way; so we must strive to make this ceremony something truly significant. It helps if we remember that all His suffering was something that each of us really deserved, but that He chose to take for us.

*"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." --*  
Matthew 10:37-39

**How many times have I sat this way,  
Head bowed,  
Heart poised;  
And held Your body,  
Then Your blood in my hand  
Ready to partake  
Of You  
I wonder at the despair of yearning You must have.  
Do I know what I ask  
When I offer myself  
To be consumed by You?**

Sometimes the act of eating the Lord's flesh and drinking His blood in the communion service seems a task overwhelming in its significance. While on the one hand, He asks us to partake of Him, we must in the same act allow Him to consume us as surely as any burnt sacrifice, as Romans 12:1 teaches us. But as someone has so aptly observed, the trouble with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar! It is hard to allow God to take us over completely. It is, in fact, impossible without His help.

*So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. --I Peter 4:19*

## **Night Passage**

**This dark night is made tolerable  
Only by you, and the distant light  
That blinds us when we confront it,  
So that we may only proceed  
With eyes lowered.  
The ship beneath us heaves us about;  
We make no pretense of balance  
And now we find we no longer protect ourselves  
From the bruises from impact  
Of timbers and flesh.  
The journey stuns our spirits and senses.  
The destination haunts us,  
Eludes us sometimes like a painful memory.  
But we are on a night-shrouded ship  
Bound for Ninevah  
Because we said we'd go  
Anywhere  
He asked;  
And if I must weep,  
I weep only  
For those who must travel alone.**

No matter how difficult our road on this earth, it is made bearable only through knowing that we do not travel alone. We as Christians have the comfort of knowing that our brothers and sisters care very deeply when we are hurting. But even if they don't understand or feel our pain, we can be assured that Jesus does. He walked this same earth, breathed this same air, and felt the same temptations; and no matter how dark the passage, He has been there before.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade -- kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. -*  
 -I Peter 1:3-9

**I come now to this tenuous juncture  
 Where I must choose to believe.  
 My breast-fed faith  
 Is weakening  
 My presumed and presumptuous tenets  
 Are eroding like river-run flagstone,  
 Sloughing off like mica  
 And each piece is smoky-transparent  
 I see no end to this hurting.  
 I feel no confirmation of this hope  
 I've clutched for these years:  
 Nor do I require any giftings  
 As brideprice for the marriage  
 Of my faith to You.  
 I give You my soul:  
 I am not fit caretaker anyway  
 Resolutely I choose to believe,  
 To fend off the adversary;  
 Even with my failing strength  
 I choose  
 To trust You.**

The longer we live, the more acutely aware we become of the fact that there are situations in our lives that we simply cannot "fix," but must find a way to live with. It is at such a crossroads that we often reassess our faith, and our God. While we acknowledge that God has the power to change any situation, it is true that many times (and often for reasons to which we are not privy) we must adjust to a change that will itself become permanent. But it is our lives that change, not our Lord.

*As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*  
--Luke 9:51

**I set now my face  
Resolutely toward this, my Jerusalem  
That fills me with fascination;  
The Gethsemane that prostrates me with fear.  
What awaits me, I do not know.  
Even now, the inward mockings start, and the scouring of my  
Soul has begun. There is no longer an end in sight, and  
Even the anointings and feasts  
To come cannot compensate for  
The scalding spectre I so dread:  
The cup stands before me, brimming--  
Must I drink from  
The sullen unrelieved crucifixion  
Of my only dream?**

Many times our fondest dreams are dashed, and are lost beyond recovery. Jesus must have felt that way when He acknowledged that His ministry was coming to an end, and there were still so many unsaved people on this earth. We can find fellowship with Him in this, that even the Savior of the world had a cup to drink from that He didn't want.

*To this you were called, because Jesus suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. --1 Peter 2:21*

**The question is not  
Whether we're being led  
Or even  
The destination:  
But the God who leads  
Will suffer no  
Half-hearted followings**

We can learn much about how God feels about wishy-washy Christians from studying His response to the church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation. Of course He loves us when we're "hot," on fire for Him. Even if our hearts are stone cold, at least we and those around us know where we stand. But the hangers-on, the lukewarm, and the half-hearted do more harm than good to the kingdom, because they rot it from inside out. Is my heart hot? Is it cold? Is it lukewarm?

*Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing, and perfect will. --Romans 12: 1-2*

**With tight grim lips  
You have taken me  
To Mount Moriah. We have  
Built the altar together.  
I allow myself to become a compliant offering  
Upon this altar where I  
Do not want to lie.  
The stop-action camera of reality  
Has frozen you  
In the pose of priest with arm lifted--  
The knife glints  
You will not be deterred  
Oh  
Where is the angel?  
Where is the ram?**

The frightening thing about offering ourselves to God as sacrifices is that the moment we crawl up onto the altar, we lose all say in the matter. While the thought of self-sacrifice is a noble one, always the doing of it is much harder--and much more grim--than it seemed before. And while we would like to be like Isaac, who laid beneath his father's knife only to be rescued by an angel; we must resolve ourselves to the inevitable end of every sacrifice, which is of course death.

*So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go until you bless me." --Genesis 32:24-27*

### **The Match (I)**

**Like Jacob and the angel  
 We face each other warily  
 Our eyes never releasing their vision-lock  
 What soundless circling,  
 Sliding of bared feet  
 Upon the mat of my life  
 I have heard the bell  
 For the opening of the match:  
 It rings even now in my brain  
 Insistent, insistent,  
 Sounded by  
 My divine Opponent  
 And I sigh  
 Because I do not know if I have the strength  
 I do not know the outcome  
 (For He with whom I joust  
 Is also judge)  
 My crowded consciousness chants:  
 "Though He slay me  
 Yet will I hope in Him"**

### **The wrestling match Begins**

The walk of the faithful with God is not a trouble-free stroll. In fact, those who become close to God often find themselves struggling with Him in one way or another. Abraham, for instance, bargained with God over the safety of the people in Sodom, wrangling back and forth over numbers. Jacob literally wrestled with God. Paul asked the Lord over and over to remove his "thorn in the flesh," and even this great hero of faith was denied his request. Even our Lord Jesus was told that He must drink from the cup He'd asked repeatedly to have taken away. Throughout the ages of Christianity, people have struggled with God. One believer, Theresa of Avila, once wrote a letter to God in which she told him how difficult her life had become since she had attempted to surrender it fully to Him. "If this is how You treat Your friends," she penned ruefully, "it's no wonder You have so many enemies," So take heart, brother, sister: you can't wrestle with Someone who isn't at least touching you.

*I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; Indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. --*  
Lamentations 3:1-6.

**The hound of heaven has pursued me  
And I coyly hid and cavorted--  
Enjoying the chase  
Even as I lost a finger or a toe;  
Hanks of hair left hanging on  
Limbs I'd left  
Now  
He has cornered me  
And He is devouring my arms and legs  
And the soft parts  
Of my belly  
And I have lost  
The will to run**

Francis Thompson lived over two hundred years ago in London. He was, by his own admission, a failure at everything he did in his early life--in relationships, in understanding, even in his profession as a medical doctor. He reached his lowest point when he became an opium addict and was reduced to living as a vagrant, getting his meals from the garbage of others. "I was," he reflected later, "a broken waif of a man." When he became a Christian, his life changed; but he never forgot how low he'd once sunk. He gave no credit to himself for his salvation, but instead described God as a hound that had pursued him until he caught him. The process of being chased by Someone stronger and faster than you isn't a pleasant one. The only thing that makes it endurable is the fact that God pursues us to save us from ourselves.

*And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with everincreasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. --2 Corinthians 3:18*

**It is no heresy to say  
That the Man  
Who writhes naked on  
Spike-stretched tendons  
Has no flesh  
Until I clothe Him with you;  
His voice is yours, as in a dream,  
Translated from Aramaic  
To love;  
He becomes real to me  
When, under His bristling crown  
I see  
Your face**

Unfortunately, the reality of suffering eludes us all until we come face-to-face with it. Though we'd like to be able to learn the lessons of pain without actually experiencing them, it simply does not work that way. 1 Peter 2:21 teaches a hard lesson, saying that suffering is actually a calling for believers, one that unites us with Jesus as we follow in His steps; and with each other as we experience common pain.

*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were strangers and aliens on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. --Hebrews 11:13-16.*

**I am girded for battle but  
 They have taken away my foe:  
 My shepherd's sword hangs  
 Limp and useless on my thigh  
 And all those old phrases  
 About the right thing  
 Echo like pebbles in a  
 Seasoned leather helmet.  
 The attack has not ceased,  
 I know that:  
 And I dare not step  
 From behind this shield.  
 I dig in for the siege.  
 Nothing to do but wait.  
 And I am not comforted  
 By the growing knowledge  
 That my trench, my hiding place  
 Is behind enemy lines**

Hunkering down and waiting in a foxhole for God is not the image of the triumphant Christian life that we would first present to an unbeliever. But it is often the most realistic picture of the submitted Christian. We human beings like action. We chafe against waiting. But even God waits for us. In the book of Judges is the story of Gideon, who was called from the unlikely position of hiding in a winepress to be the champion of his people. We remember that Gideon asked for two signs with the fleece to confirm his mission, but we often forget that even before that Gideon asked for another sign: he asked God to hang around and wait while Gideon slaughtered and cooked a goat and made bread to offer to Him. And God waited. If the God of the universe can wait on men, why do we find it so hard to wait on Him?

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. --2 Corinthians 1:3-5*

**You are more noble fallen  
Than other men when they stand:  
More strong in debility  
Than others healthy and running.  
Please  
Let me bind your wounds  
With the oil and wine of my love;  
Let me carry your sorrows  
And the good in my samaritan heart  
Mortgages itself  
For all your future needs.**

Sometimes we earnestly pray for God to help us in a difficult situation, and are grateful when He answers our prayers. But Second Corinthians teaches us that we should not regard our bettered condition as the end of the process. Instead, we who have been comforted should see ourselves as conduits of blessing and comfort to others. By example, by word, and by our actions)we can convey to a fellow-sufferer the hope that we ourselves have received.

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. --2 Corinthians 4:7-10*

**As you break,  
Gentle heart,  
You rend the curtain of my soul  
Your tears wash us clean together  
Your agony purges us both  
What you bear on your body  
I cauterize onto my heart  
And I cannot soothe that wound  
I will not  
Soothe that wound  
As you break,  
Gentle heart,  
You rend the curtain  
Of my soul  
My sun is darkened--  
but only for a while  
Then the ground splits beneath my feet  
Everything trembles  
And all the dead, sainted things within me  
Rise again to life.**

One of the hardest experiences of a Christian's life is having to stand by and watch someone we love suffer. It may be physical pain, or the hurt of bitter disappointment or betrayal. We know that God has the power to change circumstances, and we often cannot see why He chooses to change some, and let others remain as they are. John the Baptist must have had some similar feelings. When he was in the prison cell awaiting certain death, he began to have some doubts. He sent his followers to ask Jesus if He were the Messiah, and Jesus answered his question with reports of how the blind and lame and captives had had their circumstances changed. Perhaps that solidified in John's mind Jesus' claims to being the Son of God. But it didn't change John's circumstances --he still went from that prison cell to death. As we encourage those around us who are suffering, may God give us the grace to affirm to them--and for ourselves truly believe-- that knowing Jesus is worth it all.

*Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." --John 4:13-14*

**I read today of the convolute,  
That tiny seaside creature  
Who at birth gulps down a single algae-banquet:  
Never to eat again, it lounges  
Always in the sun  
And feeds off its internal garden  
For the rest of its life.  
My life began when once I feasted on  
Your unbelievable riches;  
And their self-perpetuating bounty within me,  
Nourished by limitless light,  
Assures me that I will never hunger  
For anything else again.**

God has designed us as marvelously-engineered contrivances that must have periods of inactivity and fuel on a regular basis in order to function. In this way, we learn that we are dependent upon Him who commands rest and provides food. But the one thing most essential to our lives--a relationship with Him--is provided free and perpetual to anyone who simply asks. There is no effort involved, only that of submission.



## Part Four

### Release



*"And so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. . ."*

*. . .we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

I Corinthians 15:15b-20.

## On Resurrection

I used to think that when I arrived in heaven I would be like an conquering hero returning to his homeland, banners rippling. But I hadn't lived long enough. Now I believe I will arrive rather unobtrusively, look for a soft place on the divine bosom, and just rest. The fact of my own coming resurrection must be dealt with on a conscious, day-to-day level. For a Christian, it is a reality as inevitable as death, but so much less to be feared. Just answer "build" the quality of our lives, day by day, surely we build our resurrections--or the hope thereof--in the same way.

*Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. --Hebrews 6:17-20a.*

**In Memoriam:  
A Saint Passes**

**Passing:  
Like a little bird breaking  
From small confines  
Into limitless light, shimmering sun;  
Breathless, wings beating,  
Blinded by light, impatient,  
Exhilarated;  
And then  
the joy of  
Recognition  
(waves of translucent luminance like foam on the  
endless, untiring sea)  
Ransom  
Reunion  
Rest--  
(and eternity stretching as far  
as the untroubled sky)**

A promise Jesus made which is the hardest to understand was His assurance in John 11:25. He was standing outside the tomb of His friend Lazarus, speaking to Martha who, though disappointed in Jesus' delay, still had faith in Him. She'd accepted the fact of her brother's death, and when Jesus assured her that Lazarus would rise again, she assumed He meant in the resurrection of the last day. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus responded. "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Then Jesus confronted all her beliefs. He had just told Martha in essence that she herself would not die, and then He asked her, "Do you believe this?" We can't fault Martha--we have trouble believing this ourselves! But Christians don't face death the way others do. For a Christian, it goes like this: you get really sick, or in an accident, and suddenly you go from intense pain into eternal life. Death? It's just a passageway. But for the soul which will not bend to God, the pain of illness or the trauma of injury is followed by a permanent condition we call death. It is eternal separation from God. Jesus doesn't want this for anyone. He wants eternal communion and fellowship with us; and gave His own life to achieve that end.

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!  
As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your  
enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! --Isaiah 64:1-2*

### **Maranatha: A Plea for Advent**

**Won't  
You come back?  
Won't you shred those  
Celestial hangings  
Won't you just step back into  
This cold-bath world  
Ripping open grain bags  
Spilling over wine  
And slapping us back  
Into that perfect primeval form?**

Paul was a realist. Though his writings have been a great source of hope and encouragement to believers for almost two thousand years, he also told us clearly that we are in for hard times if we follow his Master. "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," he wrote in 2 Timothy 12-13, ""while evil men go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." It's no wonder that Christians have tried some really extreme measures to try to endure the difficult time of waiting until Jesus returns. Some have gone off into solitude to become hermits, some have filled up their time with frantic activity, while still others like some in Thessalonica have thrown up their hands and retreated into inactivity. No matter how you look at it, it is hard to wait for Jesus. Come quickly, Lord!

*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. --Deuteronomy 4:5-9*

**How could those Israelites be so stupid--  
In twenty-year cycles  
They sinned and repented  
And yet:  
We pull the sins of our fathers  
Over our heads like sweaters  
And we luxuriate in  
Their comfort  
Thus we protect ourselves  
From the bracing chill  
Of truth**

Whenever we feel inclined to criticize the people of the Bible for their short-sightedness or lack of faithfulness, we can achieve an instant humility by reminding ourselves of our own failed diets, Bible-reading plans, and other broken resolutions. We're not any better or any worse than believers of either the New Testament or the Old Testament age. We're all sinners. We all fall short of God's glory. We all need the saving power of Jesus. The only superiority we have over Bible characters is that we can see how they failed, and learn from their mistakes.

*"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. --Malachi 3:1*

**CHRIST, COME SOFTLY (acrostic poem)**

**Christ, come softly: the uneven way  
Has been prepared. Though angels  
Rampant crowd the skies, each one  
In his own way praising Thee-- Softly,  
Softly come. Through tribulation and joy,  
This night whispers hope.  
(In exultation, my heart's own voice  
Sings! And even the voiceless and deaf rejoice!)  
But silvered silence sighs. The skies are emptied now, and  
Only for now, the Logos-Child speaks not.  
Remembering vows, and veils, and the cup to come, He  
Now sleeps. Softly, softly: Christ.**

How like the gentle Son of God who never owned a home to be unwilling to "put anyone out" even for His birth. Everything we know of His early years bespeaks humility, gentleness, wisdom, and grace. He's the gentleman who gave up His seat for us--a throne in Heaven.



*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. -- Philippians 2:5-7*

## **THE BIRTH**

**The throbbings begin---**  
**The stretching, vague pain,**  
**Then panic and wonder are mixed**  
**Like gall and wine.**  
**I wait, with Mary,**  
**As eternity invades my heart**  
**And the two millennia between us**  
**Efface like the thinning tissues**  
**That frighten her young-girl body.**  
**She gasps, and I do, too;**  
**But for much different reasons:**  
**She is breathless with pain,**  
**I with awe.**  
**The rhythmic pulsings increase for her**  
**And I, too, ride them like a tidal wave;**  
**Anxious for what will break**  
**Upon the shore of eternity**  
**Anxious for Him**  
**To be born again**  
**In my heart**

We often bemoan the fact that Jesus had to be born in a animal's shelter, instead of in one of the inns which turned His parents away. But like every other detail of the lives of His children, God superintended even that circumstance for good. The inns of that time were large, open rooms; and often the most reprobate of criminals stayed in them. Imagine the young virgin Mary, far away from friends and family and no doubt frightened, having to expose herself to give birth in a crowded room of gawking strangers. No, the birth of Jesus in that stable was a private affair. Like the morning star, rising in our hearts, He comes to each of us individually, and allows us the privilege of letting Him live in each heart.

*Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." --John 20:28-29.*

**He is the Mighty One  
He is the Creator,  
The Great One  
He who can bring victory  
Out of the mingled paste  
Of blood and ashes of defeat  
How do I know  
How can I say this  
I stand with my elbows touching  
Those of sorrowing men and women  
Frozen in a slice of Friday-time  
When all the world's hopes  
Were laid in a hastily-washed heap  
In a borrowed tomb  
With no hope  
No hope  
No hope  
Until the first rays of Sunday  
Bathed the empty tomb ledge**

God's power is most evident when everything is past salvaging, when things have gone beyond hopelessness. The Jewish believers in Jesus that we refer to as His disciples would have also identified themselves as children of Abraham. But Abraham had greater faith than any of them: "He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-- the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed, and so became the father of many nations. . ." (Romans 4:17-18.) But we are more blessed than Abraham, or even the disciples who saw the risen Lord. For we have the great privilege of honoring Him with faith that is not sight.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. --Hebrews 12:1*

## **The Race**

**Like two children  
In a three-legged race  
We are bound together  
As we run  
The wind around us  
Doesn't matter  
The shouting of the crowd  
Doesn't matter  
We are consumed by  
The rhythm of our striding,  
By what lies ahead  
All that really matters now  
Is that we keep step  
With each other**

Paul recognized the importance of unity--not just at the level of the Body, but also harmony between individuals. He taught that the way to achieve that harmony was not through compromise with one another, but by compliance to God's way of doing things. In Galatians he told us, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (5:25.) We will keep step with each other to the exact degree that we keep step with God.

*He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert. . . But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. --Acts 7:36, 39.*

**You are the mist that seeps  
Under the Egyptians' door  
But is held at bay  
By lintel-blood  
You are the mirror-imaged  
Cloud that burns at night  
And towers by day  
And You are a pillar to me  
Where I chain myself  
Against the winds  
That would drag me away  
You are the fire within me  
That must be contained--  
And shared**

**You seep into my crevices  
Bringing life, not death  
You invade me; storm me  
Like a walled city,  
And I surrender  
To Your presence**

We can blithely sing, "I Surrender All," and never stop to think what that means. Surrender, from a military point of view, is rarely a joyful situation. It is admission of defeat and the complete expenditure of personal resources. It means acknowledging your own inability to carry out a task that you are giving over to another, while admitting that without surrender you will incur severe penalties. Many times surrender means death, or worse. But for a Christian, it means life, and that of the most abundant kind.

*We live by faith, not by sight. --2 Corinthians 5:7*

## **Tramride**

**This thin thin wire  
Sways in generous bulging arcs  
From breeze to breeze  
Like a child's jumprope  
Or the rippling undulations  
Of a lustrous serpent  
Moving through thick waters.  
We are suspended under  
This snakerope  
And we are pulled along  
By it. There is no escape:  
The mountain floor beneath us  
Is frighteningly distant.  
The trees are miniature layered fans  
And its boulders a pebbled mosaic.  
A ridge rises before us.  
Our eyes tells us there is no  
Way over it, and yet  
The cable passes through a crevice.  
This, then, is faith:  
We know we must follow where the cable has  
Gone, and let our hearts  
Finish the ride,  
Finish the ride.**

Biblical faith is based not upon what we can predict in the future, but what we can read about in the past. it's a risky business, trusting God in this dangerous way. It means turning over the control knobs of our life, the steering wheels of our directions, to an unseen Guide. only by trusting Jesus--someone who's been the route before-- can we have any confidence that we are doing the right thing, for we surely cannot be doing the "safe" thing if we are to follow an unseen God to the death.

*We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of God the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly be united with him in his resurrection.*

--Romans 6:4-5

**It is the whisper of the first breath  
 Drawn through cracked, unused lips  
 It is the rustle of graveclothes  
 Being laid aside, folded and  
 Squared on a cold ledge  
 It is the sound of fingertips  
 Brushing along a hewn wall  
 In predawn darkness  
 It is the rasp of a stone wheel  
 Grating in its track  
 What unearthly stillness  
 Greeted this once-corpse as  
 He surveys the earth  
 That had been His torture-chamber**

**I hear these sounds  
 Across two thousand years, and  
 My lips strain to speak to Him  
 I want to tear away  
 My garments of death  
 I grope through my darkness,  
 My shoulder failing against the weight--  
 This sound I hear  
 This sound I hear  
 Is the sound of my Jesus  
 Rising again in  
 My heart**

The Resurrection of Jesus is an historical fact, attested to by more direct evidence by eyewitnesses to the risen Lord than any other event of ancient history. It happened at a certain time, in a real place, and its effects were witnessed to by as many as five hundred people at a time. But Jesus draws us to Himself one person at a time. Each person who wants to show faith in Him must mimic His death and resurrection (Romans 6) in order to be able to have fellowship with Him, and to be called His child. But resurrection of the soul doesn't take place only in the waters of baptism, it must take place internally as well: in the depths of each soul who enthrones Him there.

*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. --2 Corinthians 1:20*

**This is no vengeful deity  
Who cuts off the outstretched hand  
This is no capricious idol  
Who plays chess with men's souls;  
No eternal checkmate  
This is no prankster god  
Who twists words and  
Impales them upon intents  
This is He  
Who knows needs before they're perceived  
Who grants favors as they're verbalized  
Who invites us to believe  
In what is not  
Just so that He can make it  
So:  
This is the mighty God  
of the perpetual  
Yes**

In times of crisis we tend to re-evaluate our concept of God based on how He is answering our prayers. That is always a mistake. He doesn't want to be judged by us; least of all on the basis of how we perceive His "performance." He chooses, instead, to be known by two characteristics from Psalm 62:12 that are rock-sure: He is strong (strong enough to bring about whatever He chooses) and loving (which means He wants the best for His people.) So when it comes to our spiritual welfare, to our deepest needs, He is always ready to say, "Yes."

