

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BECOMING LIKE CHRIST



Session 6: Becoming like Christ in difficult times: choosing hope and honesty in the battles of life – part two.

How should I feel about God judging me and others?

If Jesus has overcome evil, why is there still so much suffering?

How do we become like Christ in suffering?

How can God really suffer and how does this help me?

Does everything happen for a reason and is doubt a bad thing?

How honest can I be about my pain to God?

Do I pray to the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit?

What does “God’s discipline” mean and how do I resist temptation?

How can I live with hope as a disciple?

Why is Jesus’ ascension essential for disciples?

How should I feel about God judging me and others?



Heaven and earth can only be fully reunited when all that currently separates us has been destroyed, and we are fully restored. The way the Bible describes this process is judgment.



The writer to the Hebrews says that, "...people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment..." (Hebrews 9:27) This is because even for disciples if we are to fully live in the light of God's love as resurrected people it will first be necessary for us to have been freed and cleansed from anything that still fails to reflect His character and glory.



As we have seen, it is impossible for any darkness of sin to survive in the light of His holy love. So, the final return of Christ brings about this final judgment in preparation for a renewed heaven and earth.

For many people throughout history, God's judgement is something they long for. Many psalms and prophetic writings cry out for God to put the world right. Those who suffer injustice eagerly await the time when "the earth and everything in it will be laid bare". (2 Peter 3:10) Just as flawed human justice is nevertheless a good aspect of our nature, God's perfect justice reveals His goodness. Jesus promises, "...will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly." (Luke 18:7-8)

For many of the victims of history, God's judgment will mean that for the first time their voices will be heard. Cardinal Basil Hume tells this story: "A priest started his homily at a funeral saying: 'I am going to preach about judgement'. There was dismay in the congregation. Then he went on: 'Judgement is whispering into the ear of a merciful and compassionate God the story of my life which I had never been able to tell'".

Yet the language of judgment and of hell, which Jesus uses more than all the other biblical writers put together, can cause fear and a picture of God which can make people run away from Him. Jesus talks about "eternal fire and punishment" (Matthew 25:41,46), "fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22) and "outer darkness" (Matthew 25:30).

He told a parable in which a rich man who had refused to help the poor was in permanent agony in eternal fire, visible to those in 'heaven'. (Luke 16:19-24) (Some early Christians interpreted this to mean that, "...we will watch the just damnation of the unredeemed, and it will be part of our joy." (Aquinas))

He tells his disciples, "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28)

The word Jesus uses for 'hell' is 'Gehenna', a valley outside Jerusalem in which rubbish was constantly burned along with the corpses of those whose families could not bury them.



It is fair to ask questions like: How could an all good God, who IS love torture people in hell eternally? In what way is it loving to keep people alive and burning? Doesn't the idea of eternal punishment seem to reverse the consistent picture in the Bible that God's anger burns for a moment, but His love endures for ever? How could Jesus, who revealed God's heart on the cross by being willing to die for His enemies, tolerate their eternal punishment?

How can God be all in all, and victorious over evil, in a new creation in which there is no more sorrow, dying, or evil, if satan is still torturing people in hell? How can eternal pain, without any restorative point, and no hope of being relieved, be compatible with even human versions of justice? And, if we take the parable literally, how could I enjoy being in God's presence if, for example, I could see someone I love in hell?

It is not surprising that, as one writer puts it, "Millions of people, young and old, have given up on Christianity because our way of talking about hell sounds absolutely wacky. 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,' we say, 'and he'll fry your butt in hell forever unless you do or believe the right thing'... No wonder Christianity - or that version of it - is a dying religion in so many places in the world."

It is important to know that even the early Christians wrestled with these questions in various ways - trying to bring together:

The good hope that God will deal with evil once and for all

It is just as impossible for light and darkness to coexist as it is for sin to come into God's presence. (That is why as soon as Jesus was present in the world there was a sense of unavoidable judgment already beginning: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed." (John 3:19-20))

The revelation that God IS agape love, and that there is no shadow side to Him at all.



The necessity and anguish of the cross

Jesus experienced the hell of separation from His Father. The longer, deeper, and more intimate the relationship, the more tortuous is any separation. The result of Jesus becoming alienated from the source of pure love was therefore that He went as far as possible in the opposite direction.

Without acknowledging the possibility of such darkness, we lose our sense both of the amazing love of God revealed through the cross, and the knowledge of our true value as those for whom He died. His love is not sentimentality but expressed through action.

Some Christians, then and now, attempt to hold these ideas together in different ways in order to try and understand what judgment means.

Some believe that God will indeed judge people and fallen spiritual beings through suffering which is eternal and conscious

(Lots of ideas we have inherited from medieval art portray this). They would emphasise the examples we have looked at as to be taken literally.

Some believe that judgment will mean that some will simply cease to exist (known as 'annihilationism' or 'conditional immortality').

They would emphasise that human beings are not essentially immortal – that can only be a gift. That while the wicked are referred to as, for example, being “destroyed forever” (Psalm 92:7), this does not have to mean that they are forever being destroyed. Scripture’s references to an “unquenchable fire” refer to the finality of judgment (nothing can reverse it, not its duration.

That the language of parables such as in Luke 18 must be read as narrative devices rather than literal, just as, for example we might talk about “St Peter at the pearly gates”. That even if He wanted to, God in theory couldn’t save anyone who had the freedom to choose to resist His love.

In this view, if God judges people in the sense that He allows them the choice to let evil run its course, He allows evil to lead to its unavoidable self-destruction.

Some believe that all creatures will go through a purifying process which will ultimately mean that everyone will be saved – in the widest sense of the word. (This is known as 'universalism'.)

They would emphasise that even though everyone will be judged by the “burning heat of God’s love”, nevertheless as Paul wrote the aim will be so that, “their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.



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If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.” (1 Corinthians 3: 13-14)

While the fruits of our lives may need to be purified, this would not mean our complete end. The fire that lovingly purges all that it can and justly destroys all that it has to is the same fire.

Pope Benedict XVI describes how this ultimate purifying will enable us to become fully transformed: “Before His gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with Him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves... His gaze, the touch of His heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation 'as through fire'. But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of His love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God.”

Whatever view we have, it is important as disciples that we can hold them in humility and love, and that we hold on to some key ideas about our picture of God, ourselves and others:



Our picture of God. God IS love.

As we have seen, it is impossible for God to act against His own nature in any way towards us other than through self-sacrificial love – there is no hidden side to Him, or split personality. “...in him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5)

His everlasting essence is the love that is revealed on the cross. This means that when the Bible talks about God’s “wrath” it is not describing vengeful anger, but it can only be reflecting how evil, rebellion, or hardened hearts naturally experience and react to that love.

It is clear that God doesn’t want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Thus, whatever understanding we might have of judgment, if there is any way that God could save all, He most certainly would save all. Ultimately our understanding needs to be consistent with our trust in God’s character. Do we believe God to be more loving, just, fair and wise than we could ever be? As the Bible says, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25)

Looking towards my own judgement, and that of others.

With all these things in mind, a disciple can look forward to judgment and prepare for it: “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.” (2 Peter 3:11)

The gift of God is that we can have “confidence on the day of judgment” because “in this world we are like Jesus.” (1 John 4:17) Because of the cross, we are forgiven and our covenant status before God restored – we stand before Him “in Christ”. Thus Jesus tells us we do not have to “worry about tomorrow” (Matthew 6:24) We do not need to be afraid because God judgement through perfect love is not about punishment, but about healing. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18)

The point of the Bible’s many and different images about judgment are less about giving us crystal-clear information about the mechanics of the end of this age so much as inspiring us to live as disciples in the present.



As we have seen, Jesus’ died and rose again not to provide an escape route after death, or an insurance policy, but to invite human beings to live in God’s kingdom, enjoying the covenant-relationship God desires to have with us today.

Understanding that the language of judgment highlights the enormous chasm between God’s holiness and our condition is helpful as it helps us realise we cannot come to God in our own merit or strength. It calls us with seriousness to live eternally by placing God at the centre of our lives, rather than ourselves.

But in our own discipleship, and in our sharing with others, fear of judgment can never be a motivator either for coming to love God, or for changing behaviour. In sharing our faith, for example, it is helpful to know that there is no one in the Bible who claims to know that another person is in hell. The only person’s judgment I am called to pay attention to is my own.

Rather than being anxious about those we love who have not yet placed their trust in Christ’s sacrifice and victory, we can trust that God will judge them, like us, with love and truth more than we can comprehend. We can be confident and eager for God’s future.

The last words of the Bible end not with words of fear about the “Day of the Lord” but longing and reassurance. Jesus “who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.” (Revelation 22: 21-22)

If Jesus has overcome evil, why is there still so much suffering?



Through His life, death and resurrection Jesus brought the healing of God's kingdom and won the decisive battle over sin, evil and death.

He came to "destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8) and declared, "Now is the ruler of this world cast out." (John 12:31) But our lived experience is that in many ways we already live in the light of God's victory – His kingdom is among us now. But the complete fulfilment of God's plan is 'not yet'.

This is why an enemy still walks about like a hungry lion trying to eat us (1 Peter 5:8) and we still have to struggle with the pain and battle of a fallen world – with death, suffering, temptation and against the "powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12) As disciples, we are waiting for that work to be complete, for God's kingdom to come in its fulness as heaven and earth are fully reunited. We still pray "your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven." At the end of the age we will receive it in its completion.

The Swiss writer Oscar Cullmann famously compared this to the end of the Second World War, saying that Jesus' first coming was like D-Day, on June 6th, 1944. On that day the Allies broke into enemy territory, securing a victory which made the end of the war inevitable – the power of the German forces was effectively overcome.

Nevertheless, it was not until nearly a year later (May 8th, 1945, V-E Day) that the Germans finally surrendered. Between D-Day and VE-Day the battle continued, in some ways becoming more intense as the war neared its end. Cullmann says that while Jesus' first coming broke the power of the enemy (D-Day), we are living in a time when we are still waiting for the war to be over (VE-Day) and for evil and death to be completely destroyed.

We can have confidence in God's victory (now), but we still long for its completion (not yet). As disciples we are called to continue to confront evil and suffering (we explore this more in module 3) in a world in which that battle can feel as intense as ever. Paul says that this affects not only us, but the whole world which is "groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time". The universe longs for 'VE-Day', when "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." (Romans 8: 19-22)

That's why traditional language describes God's people as still having to be "militant, here on earth", like soldiers, standing up against evil through self-sacrificial love, until we can be the "church triumphant". When we suffer, we do so in hope and in certainty of final victory. Every time we share bread and wine we "proclaim the Lord's death – until he comes." We remember that Christ has come, but that He is coming again, and we are strengthened to persevere between the "now and the not yet".



How do we become like Christ in suffering?



Even as we have begun to see some of the roots of suffering and evil in the world, the persistent question as to how God can be loving and yet allow suffering to exist can remain the largest stumbling block to our discipleship.

Yet the difficult times of our lives can also be those in which we can most learn to rely on God, allowing Him to be at the centre of our lives and to shape our characters.

This is not a new question for Christians - one of the earliest-written books in the Bible (Job) is a meditation on why God allows suffering, and why He seems silent during it. For early Christians suffering was not a surprise, but, as we have seen, part of the expected result of a world still in conflict.

Alongside this understanding there are resources for us to be able to grow through suffering both in our understanding and in our experience.



How can God really suffer and how does this help me?



“Only a suffering God can help.”
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer). It is essential for any disciple to know that, through Christ, God suffers with us.

It helps our *understanding*, because, while no answer can fully take away or explain our suffering, our picture of God now includes one in which suffering is at the centre of who God is.

It helps our *experience* of suffering because we know we are not alone in it, but God is with us.

The picture 'The Tortured Christ' gives us a visual sense of the reality of God's agony on the cross. The depth of the physical, emotional and spiritual sufferings of God in Christ on the cross are hard to describe. (See three page handout from Tim Keller's book on the sufferings of God).

One writer portrays it as the ultimate darkness we can imagine: have no need to fear, since I am with you.”

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He was without any comforts of God — no feeling that God loved him — no feeling that God pitied him — no feeling that God supported him. God was his sun before — now that sun became all darkness...

He was without God — he was as if he had no God. All that God had been to him before was taken from him now. He was Godless — deprived of his God...This is the hell which Christ suffered. The ocean of Christ's sufferings is unfathomable...” (Robert Murray McCheyne)

The story 'The Long Silence' (see handout) imagines billions of victims of history who stand before God, asking, “Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?”

They come to a conclusion: Before God could be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured...They “sentence” God to suffer as they have. Yet, “when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word. No one moved. For suddenly, all knew that God had already served His sentence.”

Through the cross, God understands suffering. Not only that, but the book of Hebrews suggests He has allowed Himself to be shaped by it: “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered...” (Hebrews 5:8) Historically, people have struggled with the question as to how a God who cannot change experience suffering.





But Richard Bauckham notes how "...it has often been said that if God is personal love, analogous to human personal love, then he must be open to the suffering which a relationship of love can bring." (See his five page article on God's suffering.) The fact that God IS love means that God can choose to be vulnerable, without losing His power.

While not understanding suffering fully, disciples can know that on the cross God shares in, and protests about, our suffering.

The photo 'Corona Jesus' also speaks of how Jesus is present with us in our sufferings.

He is with those who are most disgraced, having been crucified "outside the city walls" - in other words in an unclean rubbish dump. (Hebrews 13: 12-14)

The holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's famous story of witnessing the execution of a child at Auschwitz makes this point powerfully. "...he heard someone behind him groan: 'For God's sake, where is God?' And from within me, I heard a voice answer: 'Where is He? This is where - hanging here from this gallows.'"

Often when we look for God in our sufferings, the answer to our prayer can be less that He rescues out of a situation, and more that He parachutes in to be join us in the midst of it.

In the Bible, God does not say, "Do not fear, I will take away all your pain." Rather, we hear, "You have no need to fear, since I am with you."



Does everything happen for a reason and is doubt a bad thing?



The Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that everything happens for a reason – that every event, good or bad, exists to shape our lives in some way.

It is common for Christians to echo this thought in the face of difficulty or suffering, perhaps as a way of interpreting the well-known verse from Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him...” Or to offer it as an instinctive word of comfort.

Yet in a world in which both human and spiritual beings have genuine free will, in which there remains a spiritual conflict that is often invisible to us, or in which someone’s prayer for rain (farmer growing crops) may at the same time be another person’s misfortune (groom on a wedding day), it is often impossible for us to truly know why certain things happen.

The phrase “everything happens for a reason” can do damage both to an individual in pain, and to our picture of God. The more we see God as being behind every sickness and tragedy the harder it is to know that He truly loves us. Romans 8:28 is not saying that all things are good in themselves, or God’s will. Rather it is saying that *whether circumstances are good or bad*, God can continue to work for our good.

What is very important for us to know is that God never wants human beings to suffer. This was demonstrated, for example, by Jesus consistently healing every sick person who came to Him. He never suggested that God wanted anyone to remain sick for a reason.

Some worry that effectively saying some things lie out of God’s control in this way is risking making God too small. What God’s ‘power’ means, and the way in which God can order what comes to pass is an ongoing debate.

Yet as we have seen, by taking the risk of being human, and being crucified, God willingly shows His true power by giving up the ability to control everything. His true greatness is not by being able to make “everything happen”, but being able to work out His purposes *even if things do not always go His way* because of, for example, our freedom to make bad choices.





While Christians ultimately know that God will reunite heaven and earth – the end of the story is certain - some would say that perhaps God can work for the good through all things not by overriding human or spiritual beings' decisions, but by being able to anticipate all possible outcomes and adapt accordingly. This is known as "open theism". (See handout).

For disciples this means that often (as in the case of Job) there may not be a 'reason' for evil or suffering. It is the reality of living in a universe still waiting for God's complete rule to be present. This also means that having questions and doubts does not have to be the opposite of faith, but a necessary part of it.

If faith is 'psychological certainty' then it will be hard for us to face events which are challenging, or to grow in trust. But faith in the Bible is demonstrated by Israel, whose name means "one who struggles with God". It is about keeping trust with God as a covenant-partner in the face of uncertainty.

A faithful relationship with God is more expressed by people feeling confident enough to express their complaints, confusions, or even accusations to God, rather than never having them.

Paul was confident enough to write that, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face." (1 Corinthians 13:12) Jesus expressed His love for His Father by asking why He had forsaken Him. The more mature our faith, the more confident we will be with the things we cannot understand.



How honest can I be about my pain to God?



The relationship God invites us into is honest, intimate, and trusting. As such, the Bible gives us many examples of how God does not want us to censor our feelings or our words before Him.

The Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila was once travelling by horse and trap to see a convent of nuns. The vehicle had an accident, and she was thrown into a puddle of mud. Feeling embarrassed that she would greet the nuns in a muddy habit, she looked up to the heavens and said: "God, if this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few."

The ability to express grief, sorrow and frustration is necessary for genuine healing and wholeness, and so it is notable that Jesus gives us an example of grief, in weeping at his friend Lazarus' tomb. For Paul, the experience of grief will be different for those with the hope of resurrection. "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope." (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

But because that hope is to be fully realised, Jesus shares with us in the tears at the frustration and loss of bereavement that is our experience in this age. Tears can be a gift of healing.

As well as the reality of grief, the Bible is also full of examples of lament before God. While there are sometimes elements of complaining in lament, while a complaint is an accusation against God that maligns His character, lament is an appeal to God based on confidence in His character.

Many of the Psalms (over one-third of them) and the prophets ask questions, express doubts and even challenge God to be faithful and just. "How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? Remember how fleeting is my life. For what futility you have created all humanity!" (Psalm 89: 46-47).



"How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?" (Habakkuk 1: 2-3) Job feels able to ask God, "Why did I not perish at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?" (Job 3:11) Jeremiah cries out, "Why is my pain continuous, my wound incurable...?" (Jeremiah 15:18)



Lament is a direct way of praying. Jesus “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.” (Hebrews 5:7) It says that things are not right, they need to be changed, the situation is intolerable and God needs to be faithful to His character and change things.

Lament is not an absence of faith, but an act of faith. Deep down we know that our relationship with God counts; it counts to us and it counts to God. This kind of brutal honesty is expressed in a prayer read by an Orthodox priest while he was with a couple whose two-year-old daughter was dying:

“We confess to You that we cannot see Your divine hand in the suffering of Madeline. Help us, we beg You, to see that in this evil there is some purpose, beyond our grasp and comprehension. Our minds are confused. Our hearts are in distress. Our wills are lost and weak, and our strength is gone...” (The whole prayer is available as a handout)

Lament is also a place in which we can say things that are not 'right' but need to be brought to God. Lament psalms about enemies ask God to do unimaginable things. “Happy the man who shall repay you the evil you have done us! Happy the man who shall seize and smash your little ones against the rock!” (Psalm 137:8-9)

While these feelings are wrong, bringing them to God in this way means that they are not pushed underground, to emerge later in more destructive ways.

Most of the lament psalms end with praise. Only by lamenting and expressing pain, can healing begin. It is not our final prayer, but a prayer for the moment, while we wait for resurrection. We know that sorrow does not have the last word.

In the midst of the pandemic of 2020 N.T. Wright wrote, “It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what’s happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain —and to lament instead.

As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell.”





Do I pray to the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit?

Grief and lament, rather than denial, are a healing gift in the middle of difficulty. Wright's quote also tells us something about how we pray and to whom we pray.

We can wonder whether we are to pray to the Father, the Son or the Spirit? A handout explores this in more detail, but distinctively Christian prayer will involve the Trinity.

Paul writes that, 'Through him [Jesus] we have access to the Father by one Spirit' (Ephesians 2:18). Anglican collects (written prayers) are often addressed to God "through Jesus Christ our Lord".

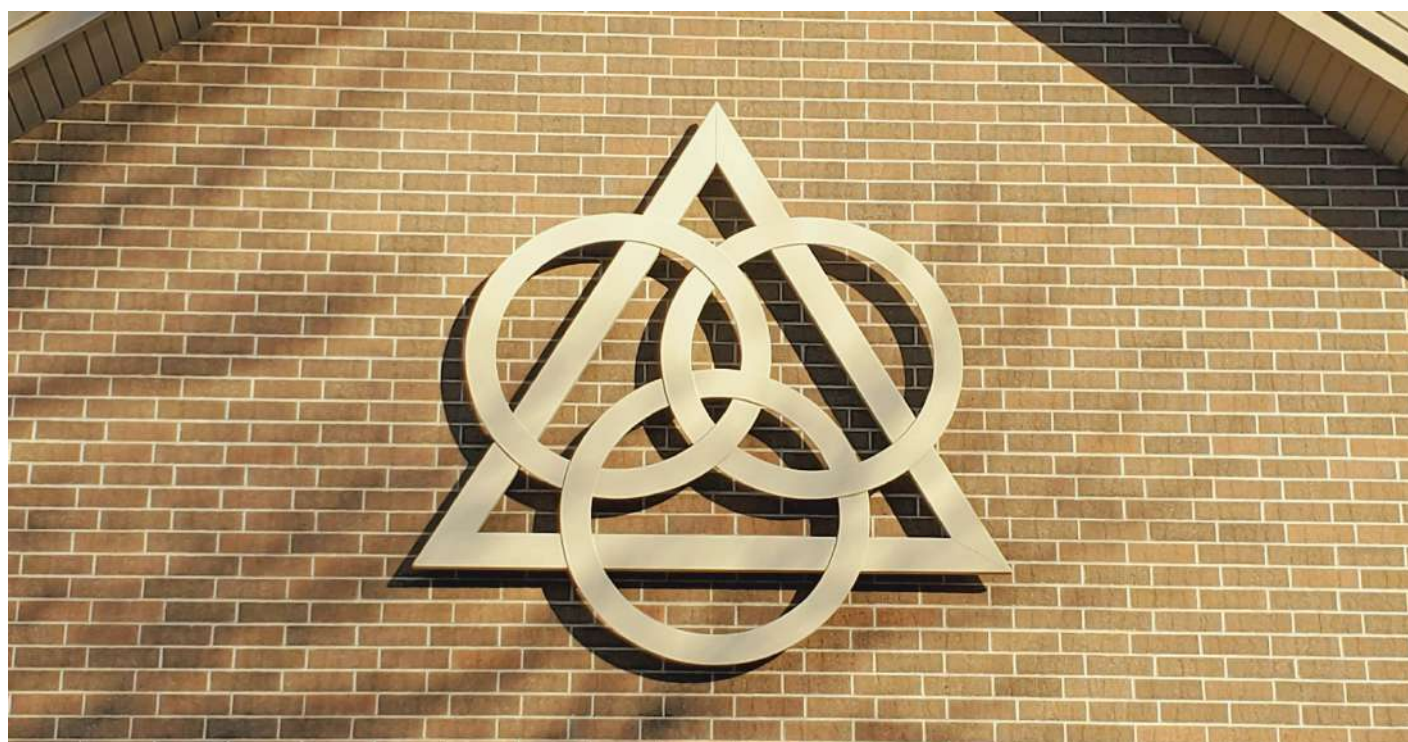
But some are addressed to Christ, and a few to the Holy Spirit. In prayer we can come to a loving Father, accompanied by a Saviour and Lord, and inspired by His Spirit.

In terms of lament and grief, the encouragement here is that God's Spirit is at work in us to help us pray when we do not know what to say.

"Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter.

“

He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God.” (Romans 8:26-27)





What does 'God's discipline' mean and how do I resist temptation?

Jesus' brother James saw suffering as the greatest opportunity for us to grow in our discipleship: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds...

...because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1: 3-4)

Our struggles can sharpen our sense that God alone is all that matters. But discipleship does not mean we need to seek out ways in which we can be tested – that is why we pray, "Lead us not into temptation" (or testing).

James is also clear that God, who is agape love, never deliberately sends testing our way. "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed." (James 1: 13-14)

Nevertheless, the more we can approach suffering as an opportunity for "the Lord's discipline" to shape us, the more we will grow as disciples. The letter to the Hebrews encourages us to, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?" Our human parents "disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness."

God's discipline is never punishment related to our behaviour, but it can be the way that God can use the sometimes random and meaningless suffering and difficulties we endure to grow our dependence upon Him and shape our characters, if we allow Him to do so.

While God never wants suffering, He wants us to grow in His love, and inasmuch as trials can be an opportunity for this to happen, Hebrews is saying that we can experience them as discipline for our own ultimate good. "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:7-11)

As St Catherine of Siena wrote, "Nothing great was ever done without much enduring."

Jesus' experience of temptation in the desert echoes the three most common ways in which we can try and substitute God – by putting our own appetites first, or by living to please others rather than Him, or by seeking power and influence apart from Him.

These short-term addictions for appetite, approval or ambition can be the biggest challenges to our discipleship.

Our ability to resist addiction begins long-before the moment of temptation in the shaping of our characters as we allow God's Spirit room through the practices we have been exploring. Long-term change is always an indirect result of the rhythms we live by because our own willpower will never be enough.

The aim of discipleship is for us to become like Christ through practices, so that over time we naturally become the people who will respond as He does – in good times and in bad. But Jesus offers a simple lesson in resisting each temptation in the moment by being able to do two things.

He recognises the lie behind what the temptation offers. And He can replace the lie with God's truth by recalling what God has said in Scripture. The more our thinking is being regularly shaped by God's story, the easier this becomes.



How can I live with hope as a disciple?

Most human beings do not live easily without hope for the future. Though some may say that this world, and the short span of life we have in it, are all that there is, and that everything we are and have will quickly disappear, it is hard for most people to live instinctively as if that is true.

Human beings seem wired for hope.

Genuine hope is the only source of lasting peace.

For disciples, the hope of the reuniting of heaven and earth is “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf.” (Hebrews 6:19)

In his first sermon, Peter said that because he saw this hope King David was able to say, “I will not be shaken...my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.” (Acts 2: 25-28)

We are offered the promise as well that we are not alone but that we are “surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses”. (Hebrews 12:1) There are many disciples who have gone before us who are pictured as cheering us on as they wait for the final resurrection. Remembering particular disciples who have gone before, at particular times of the year, can be a regular source of encouragement, inspiration and hope in our own discipleship.

Genuine hope motivates us to care for the world, not use it for ourselves.

Karl Marx wrote that the church used Christian religion like a drug to keep people passive in this world by making them focus on the next.

But, as we have seen, Jesus announces that God’s healing kingdom has already arrived, and that our hope is not to ‘go to heaven’, but to see the world transformed in preparation for when that hope will be complete.

So when someone asked Martin Luther what he would do if Jesus was returning tomorrow he replied, “I would plant a tree.”

If this life is all there is, the temptation to use the world and others as much as we can, clinging to as much as we can, may be greater.

But hope of resurrection prevents us both from being passive about looking after the world – because we are seeking God’s coming kingdom on earth - and gives us the best reason to avoid grabbing hold of it while we can.

The greater our hope, the easier it becomes to not treat the world now as if it all that there is.





Genuine hope is about living in the future promise today.

In the light of the future, one way of viewing our purpose and calling in life today is to join in with God in making the present world look as much like it will be when heaven and earth are fully reunited. In module three we will explore in more detail how our mission and choices of what is right and wrong are shaped in large part by the vision we have of God's future.

Because, for example, in God's future every tribe and nation will worship together, we seek that reality as much as possible today by resisting racism.

Because in God's future there will be no more sickness and pain, we look for that to be happening as much as possible now by praying for the sick and developing medicine.

Because in God's future the earth will be renewed, we join with Him in caring for it today.

When Jesus offered His disciples "eternal life" He was talking about the quality of resurrection life that begins today - before our physical death. We have "our citizenship in heaven", (Philippians 3:20) not because we are simply waiting to go there, but because we are representatives of God's heavenly life now, wherever we are.

To live in genuine hope is to join in with God in pulling His promised future into present experience wherever possible. Every act of healing, prayer or renewal can be a sign of that hope - creating 'pockets of heaven', world-transforming communities, or as Celtic Christians say, 'thin places', where the barrier between the life of heaven and earth is beginning to be lifted. It also says that evil does not have the last word.

Vedran Smailovic is known as the 'Cellist of Sarajevo'. During the siege of Sarajevo he became famous for playing his cello, dressed in his full orchestral clothes, in bombed out buildings, often under threat of snipers. After a mortar bomb killed 22 people who were waiting for food in a market-place in Sarajevo, he caught the world's attention by going there and playing Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor for twenty two days, once for each victim.

In the same way, among the ruins of the world, disciples are called to seek God's beautiful kingdom by replacing destruction with the music of hope - with signs that evil does not have the last word.





Why is Jesus' ascension essential for disciples?

In this module we have explored Jesus' life, His death and resurrection.

But His ascension (going up) to be with God the Father is in many ways the ultimate statement about His identity and purpose.

Luke sees it as so significant that he records it twice – at the end of his gospel and at the beginning of the book of Acts.

The ascension shows that Jesus' earthly work was complete – He had accomplished all that He needed to do. Now He could finally "sit down at His Father's right hand."

It was the final demonstration of His victory. He returned to His heavenly glory and was lifted up by His Father with honour, receiving the "name above every names"- the reigning king over all powers in all ages.

Early Christians would have been familiar with the idea that when a Roman emperor died his 'soul' would go to heaven and he would become divine. But they knew that Jesus' ascension fulfilled the glory of a divine King who rules in a completely different way.

In becoming like Him in the difficulties of life, His ascension can strengthen us in at least three ways.

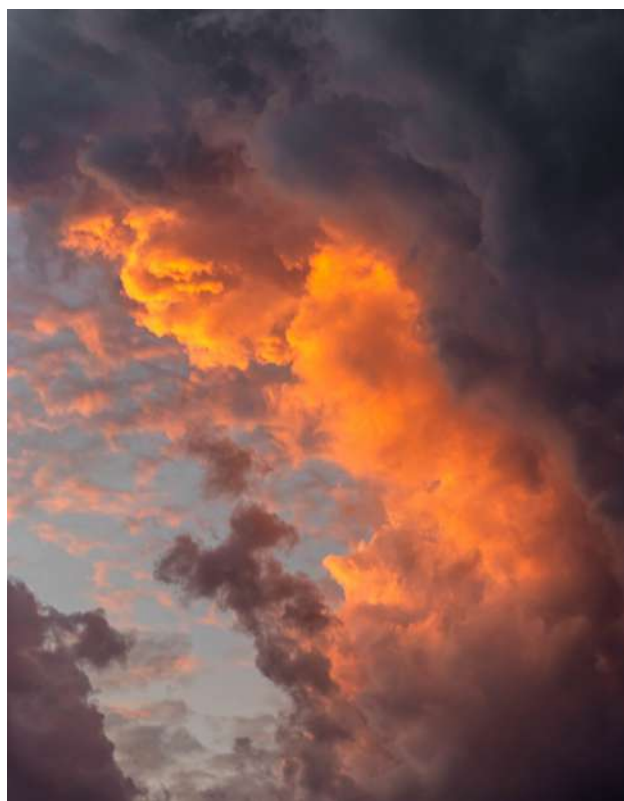
The ascension means that He is with us, wherever we are.

It is difficult to imagine the moment at which Jesus' resurrected body returning to be fully in heaven (God's space) looked like, but it marked the end of His physical, earthly ministry – in one location – and the beginning of His *agape* rule through His church throughout the world, in all places.

The ascension meant that the Spirit of Jesus could now be available to everyone. He had told his disciples that it was good for him to go away, because only then would he send them another Helper, the Spirit of truth (John 16:7-16). Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus and His disciples went to Mount Olivet, near Jerusalem. Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit had come.

On the Day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus' ascension, His Spirit descended on the church with power. Whereas in the old covenant God's Spirit came to certain people at certain times, because of the ascension the Spirit of Jesus is now available everywhere to those who ask.

It is also worth knowing that Jesus' return to 'heaven' does not mean He is removed from us – as we have seen the coming of God's kingdom means that God's space (heaven) and our space (earth) are increasingly overlapping.





The ascension means that Jesus takes our humanity into God and prays for us

The resurrected Jesus was more human, not less, than he was before – human but without frailty and dying. This is a promise of genuine humanity. And we can be reassured of our eternal value by knowing that in His return to God, Jesus does not stop being human, but takes our humanity into God.

God's original plan was always that restored human beings should rule over the creation with justice and wisdom. The ascended, ruling and human Jesus becomes the first in whom that promise can begin to be realised. Not only that but “we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven...(in Him) we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.”

Because humanity is in the heart of God, God now knows our weakness and struggles in His experience, and the ascended Christ can open the way for us to come as we are to God. Because of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, “Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

The ascension gives us the power to do the whole work of Jesus' through His gifts

Paul connects the ascension with the arrival of the gifts God gives each of us to carry out Jesus' work on earth. He quotes a Psalm which prophesies that “When he ascended on high...he gave gifts to his people.” (Ephesians 4:7)

Because none of us can individually carry out the full ministry of Jesus, various gifts are shared out to everyone, for example, teaching, pastoring, leading, sharing good news, and listening to God. Only when these gifts are all present in a church community can we “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12.)

In the 'Way of Servant-Leadership' two of the sessions help us to discover our particular gifts. In module three of 'Way of Discipleship' we look at the calling on each one of us as disciples to join in with God's Spirit in using these gifts to see the world become more as God wants it to be – on earth, as it is in heaven.

