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Hearing God's voice

God wants to be known, and because God wants to be known, God speaks to us. In fact, God is speaking all the time. Psalm 19 says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge" (vv. 1-2).

But how do we hear God's voice, and what does God say? Does God communicate with us like a lecturer doling out information, or is God's voice more personal than that? Who can hear God's voice? Does God speak to all people or only to Christians? And what kind of message was communicated by Jesus?

God's Voice as Call

As is the case with any form of communication,

people need to listen for God's voice in order to hear it. Even when we are listening, however, hearing God can be difficult. We live in a complex and noisy culture with loud messages screaming at us all the time—from roadside billboards, pop-up ads on our computers, radio broadcasts, movies, and television. God's voice is, by contrast, almost always quiet. God does not compete for our attention by trying to outyell everyone else; God speaks softly. At least, that is what the ancient Jewish prophet Elijah said, describing God's voice not as a whirlwind or an earthquake or a raging fire but as a whisper so quiet it was like the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12). It seems logical to conclude that if God speaks softly, perhaps we should too. If God does not rant at the world, neither should we.

Every time we hear God's voice, it is a gift and never a personal achievement, never a cause for pride. If the word we think we have heard from God prompts pride and arrogance, we either misheard what God was saying or we were listening to a voice other than God's.

When we truly hear God speak, God's voice typically comes to us as a call. God speaks, we listen, and we feel as if we have been summoned and addressed. God

never speaks merely to convey information; instead, God's call changes us. When we respond, we usually do so because God's voice entices us. We follow God's call because the call itself gives us the confidence to respond. But sometimes God's call can be difficult, leading us toward a way of life that may cause us pain or sacrifice in the service of others. Regardless of the nature of our calling, God's voice will, if we heed it, give us the courage and endurance we need.

Have you ever felt a special call from God? Was it different from your usual spiritual experience? What does a call add to simply being a Christian?

Sensing God's leading gives us confidence, and that is a precious commodity in our world. It is important to remember, however, that confidence is not certainty. Certainty brooks no doubts and pays no attention when others express concern or dismay. Certainty forges ahead without restraint. But confidence, while steadfast and determined, is also humble and cautious. Christians are confident because we trust in God, but we are humble because we know the limits of our own abilities. Christians are cautious

because it is risky when God calls us into unfamiliar places that are beyond our comfort zones. Lesslie Newbigin, the British theologian and longtime missionary in India, explains: "The confidence proper to a Christian is not the confidence of one who claims possession of demonstrable and indubitable knowledge. It is the confidence of one who has heard and answered the call that comes from God."¹

God often speaks through the people around us. We hear God in the nurture and advice of loving parents. We hear God in the comments of our friends. We hear God in churches where people worship together and care for one another. We hear God in the needs of our neighbors. We hear God in great works of art and music. We hear God in the warm embrace of a spouse and in the snuffling sounds of our sleeping children. And we hear God in words of counsel and advice from mentors and peers. As God's word comes to us through these other people, it no doubt often needs to be interpreted. We weigh what we hear and strive to discern God's voice in the mix.

How do you distinguish between being properly confident and overly certain? Is it

ever helpful to challenge someone's certitude? Can we really be confident and humble at the same time?

There may be times when God speaks directly to us. That can happen, but it has been a relatively rare occurrence in the long stretch of Christian history. Even if we are convinced that God has spoken directly to us, it is wise to ask others to confirm what we think we have heard. Early in his life, Francis of Assisi heard the voice of God telling him to “build my church.” Interpreting that literally, Francis began to rebuild an old stone chapel, rock by rock, out in the countryside. Only later did he realize that God wanted him to rebuild the church spiritually as the people of God, and he then began the Franciscan movement. It is comforting to know that even a saint doesn't always hear God correctly the first time, but with time we can all discern God's call.

General Revelation

The entire world is full of God's communicative presence. The nineteenth-century Catholic poet Gerard Manley Hopkins described creation as literally “charged with the grandeur of God.” Like static electricity, he said, God's presence in creation is ready at any moment to “flame out, like shining from shook foil.”² In the language of traditional theology, this grandeur and shining—God's constant voice in the world—is called general revelation.

General revelation is knowledge about God that is available to everyone as part of ordinary human experience. It is what leads the great majority of the world's people to believe there is a God. In the United States, opinion polls indicate that belief in God has held steady at well over 90 percent for the last one hundred years, and it is unlikely that the figure will decline markedly in the years ahead. On the global level, at least three-quarters of the world's population believes there is a God.

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faiths, express great love for God, engage in what they believe is the devout worship of God, and seek to discover and do God's will as much as they are able. Christians should be respectful of these practices even when we disagree over doctrines and beliefs.

The apostle Paul can serve as a model. When visiting Athens, he first acknowledged and praised the religious fervor of its residents. He then sought to enlarge and correct some of their views of God, but he did so partly by quoting their own religious authorities back to them. The famous comment that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) is taken from an ancient pagan religious poet. Paul recognized that the Athenians already possessed some knowledge of God. Rather than denounce everything they believed, he based his proclamation of Christian faith on the foundation of their already existing faith in God.

How can we balance evangelism with respect for others? Can we disagree about our most deeply held beliefs and still respect one another? How much do we need to know about other religions? What have you learned from people of other faiths?

Following Paul's example, Christians who study other religions with care and diligence are likely to be both better informed and more gracious in interactions with non-Christian neighbors and friends. And at times, we will find ourselves *learning from*, not merely *learning about*, people of other faiths. This should not surprise us. In Jesus' story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the hero is a member of a heretical sect—a follower of a false religion. That same scenario occurs today: Sometimes people of other faiths act and think more Christianly than people who are followers of Jesus.

Throughout the history of Christianity, Christians have borrowed ideas from people of other faiths and have used those ideas to explain Christian faith to people who have never heard of Jesus. This is sometimes called apologetics, which means explaining why you hold certain beliefs. (It is not about apologizing for holding such views.) Christians engage in the work of apologetics because they believe faith is reasonable as well as true. Because faith is reasonable rather than irrational, it just might be possible to prove the existence of God without special appeal to either the Bible or Christian tradition. Many Christian

philosophers have tried to do just that.

One of the greatest of these philosophers was Thomas Aquinas, who composed many proofs for the existence of God. His famous proof from causality goes like this: Everything that takes place in the world has a cause. This means that every cause itself must have some kind of prior cause. If we follow this series of causes and prior causes back far enough in time, we will ultimately come to the original cause that started everything else rolling. Aquinas called this original cause the “first cause,” and he identified that first cause with God. He was convinced that on the basis of this kind of logic every human being could possess knowledge that God exists.³

These kinds of proofs have never convinced everyone—no philosophic argument can ever do that—but most Christians think general revelation provides enough evidence to make belief in God reasonable, even if the existence of God can never be absolutely proved. It is thus proper for Christians sometimes to argue with other people about their faith, as long as such arguing is civil and reasonable. Graciousness does not preclude debate. What graciousness requires is respect for the other person

and a genuine willingness to listen to what another person is saying. If Christians would consistently model respectful debate with members of other faiths (and, for that matter, with other Christians with whom they disagree), they could become helpful exemplars of civil dialogue for a world in serious need of that skill.

What proofs of God’s existence make the most sense to you? To what degree is Christianity rational, and to what degree must Christianity be taken on faith alone?

Jesus as God’s Word

If everyone already has some knowledge of God, what is it that distinguishes a Christian view of God from others? What does Christianity add to the mix of what humanity has learned about God from reason and nature alone? For the Bible and most Christians, the crucial question has to do with God’s character—*Who* is God?—and the classic Christian answer has always been that Jesus provides us with the purest and

clearest glimpse of God's person and character we will ever have on earth.

Jesus was God incarnate, and everything he said and did reveals God to us. But what a strange revelation this was! When God came to earth, there were no trumpet blasts or accoutrements of power. God did not make a grand entrance like a king or a judge. God did not come demanding worship and honor. God did not come to make the earth shake and people quake. Instead, God came to earth as a little baby born to a young Jewish woman named Mary in a backwater region of the Roman Empire. God arrived in scaled-down size, accommodated to our needs and limited abilities, in a form that was fully human while also fully divine.

The way Jesus expressed himself was similarly unexpected. Instead of giving straightforward answers to straightforward questions, Jesus told stories, and he also offered his followers a variety of short, pithy, and sometimes paradoxical adages to guide them on their way. These parables and sayings are recorded in the four New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

We can picture ourselves as characters in the stories

Jesus told. A widow has lost a coin and will not rest until it is found. Laborers hired late in the afternoon are paid the same as those who worked all day, and the people who worked all day are upset. A traveler is accosted, and a total stranger—a person he would have shunned in any ordinary encounter—helps him. There are stories about weddings and deaths, about kings and paupers, about baking bread and discovering hidden treasures.

In which of Jesus' parables can you most easily see yourself? Which parable surprises you the most or makes you most uncomfortable?

What is the point? Almost all of Jesus' parables require us to evaluate how we would respond in the same situations. They engulf us, turning the spotlight of inquiry on us. Jesus seems to be saying that knowledge of God cannot be held at arm's length. It is not controllable like other forms of knowledge. It knocks us off balance and makes us the object of scrutiny. Instead of putting God under the microscope, the parables of Jesus hold us up for examination.

The short sayings of Jesus have much the same

effect. Jesus told his followers that the first will be last and the last will be first. He said that the meek will inherit the earth. He said that when someone strikes us on one cheek, we should offer our other cheek to be struck as well. He said the best way to gain your life is to lose it. And Jesus told his followers never to worry about what they are going to eat or what they are going to wear and never to judge another human being. These sayings all reverse the normal order of the world. They turn things upside down. Instead of giving answers or information about God, they pose questions to us. And that is exactly the point. Jesus provides knowledge of God that can be known only in relationship, and the relationship that God offers is one that transforms us.

Which sayings of Jesus seem the clearest?
Which are hardest to understand? Which are
the most upsetting to you?

The transforming power of a relationship with Jesus is the thesis of every Christian testimony. The popular writer Frederica Mathewes-Green describes her own transformational encounter with Jesus in her book *At the Corner of East and Now*. She was on her

honeymoon in Europe and, at the time, considered herself a Hindu. Then she came upon a marble statue of Christ in one of the niches on a side wall of a church, and this is what happened:

I was standing there looking at the statue, and then I discovered I was on my knees. I could hear an interior voice speaking to me. Not with my ears—it was more like a radio inside suddenly clicking on. The voice was both intimate and authoritative, and it filled me. It said, “I am your life. You think that your life is your name, your personality, your history. But that is not your life. I am your life.” . . . I stood up feeling pretty shaky. It was like sitting quietly in your living room and having the roof blown off. . . . If someone had asked me a half hour earlier, I would have said I was not sure [Jesus] had ever lived. Yet here he was, and though I didn’t know him, it seemed he already knew me, from the deepest inside out.⁴

What we learn about God through Jesus is like that. In Jesus, we see God as a person, not as an abstract

spiritual power, and as a person who cares deeply about us. Instead of offering quantifiable information about God, Jesus provides relational knowledge of God that can never be fully translated into propositional form. None of this detracts from the factuality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Nor does it minimize the need to think reasonably and logically about what we believe. But the knowledge of God that Christ provides goes deeper. It is living knowledge that invades our lives and changes us forever, moving us in the direction of becoming the kinds of people we were created to be and that, deep inside us, we truly want to be.

Have you ever experienced anything like what Frederica Mathewes-Green describes? Is everyone supposed to have this kind of dramatic religious experience? How might knowledge of God change us slowly?

This kind of knowledge is humbling. Instead of inflating our pride, it deflates it. Knowledge of God is not something we can claim to have obtained by our own effort. It is not like getting an A in a class by means of our own hard work. It is not something we

achieve by our own wits and skill. Instead, it is a gift. God graciously helps us see reality more clearly, including the reality of who God is and who we are. It gives us confidence and compassion simultaneously. It weds knowledge to love and thus draws us closer to both God and our neighbors.

Prayer

Prayer is central to the Christian life. To be at prayer is to be willing to hear what God is saying and to be ready to respond appropriately. Long before it involves our saying anything, prayer is listening. It is attentiveness, being in the presence of God, waiting expectantly for God to speak to our hearts. Alluding to the story in the fourth chapter of John in which Jesus asks a Samaritan woman to give him a drink from a well, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that the mystery of prayer is that Jesus "first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with

ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.”⁵

The ongoing, ceaseless thirst of prayer is not only about listening; it is also about speech. In prayer, we not only listen for God’s voice but also speak: expressing wonder, voicing gratitude, verbalizing our worries, confessing our sins, asking for help. And well we should. Jesus said that God is deeply interested in each of us as persons—he said God knows the numbers of hairs on our heads—and prayer follows the personal contours of our lives. Our prayers reflect our joys and sorrows, our successes and failures, our hopes and fears.

In many ways, prayer is a mystery—everything we bring to God, God already knows—but we are commanded to pray nonetheless. Somehow our prayers flow together with God’s own will to impact the world. At times, it is virtually impossible *not* to pray. We have to cry out to God for help, or to express gratitude for what we have received, or to confess our sins, or to praise the beauty of creation. If we stifle those prayers, we lose touch with our humanity. Put simply, prayer is integral to being human. It is part of our God-given nature and part of our natural and normal response to God and to the world.

But not all Christian prayers are natural, and the most unnatural of all is prayer for one’s enemies. This is, however, a requirement Jesus has placed on us; it is part of the Jesus creed. Praying for our enemies goes against all our gut feelings about the world. Our natural inclination is to damn our enemies, imploring God to crush them on our behalf. But God is not our hired gun. In fact, God loves our enemies as much as us, and that makes everything much more complicated.

How often do you pray? What do you pray for? When has prayer been most meaningful to you? Have you ever prayed for your enemies?

Jesus said that God makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust alike. God treats everyone fairly. God treats everyone mercifully. God loves everyone, and we are called to do the same. This is where prayer and ethics meet. We are not required merely to *act* nicely toward those we hate, forcing ourselves to be civil and polite; we are supposed to genuinely care for our enemies. Learning to pray for them is a necessary first step. Praying for our enemies changes us. It nudges us

—in fact, it sometimes forcefully shoves us—into seeing the world in a new way, closer to the way God sees it.

Prayer can be difficult, and sometimes prayer can run dry. There are times when the universe goes silent and God's presence seems to evaporate. This can happen when a loved one dies, when a marriage falls apart, when we learn we are deathly sick, when a disaster strikes our community, or when evil seems to triumph in war, terror, and injustice. Emptiness and despair are part of the human experience, and Christians are not exempt. These times of suffering and silence are deeply unsettling, but enduring them can deepen our souls and bind us to our neighbors in ways otherwise impossible.

Because we have known the silence of God, Christians can feel compassion for everyone else who experiences that silence. We do not have any pat answers that can magically make things right; only God can end the silence. So Christians weep with those who weep. We pray with and for those who cannot pray for themselves, following the model of Jesus, who asked his disciples to pray with him and for him in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest, when

Jesus himself experienced God's awful silence.

In his recent book *God Has a Dream*, the South African church leader Desmond Tutu says, "Dear Child of God, I am sorry suffering is not optional. It seems to be part and parcel of the human condition, but suffering can either embitter or ennoble."⁶ Suffering is a difficult passageway that can help us become truly gracious Christians. As Christians, we are thankful for every word we hear from God, but God's silence can also be a way of instructing and changing us. In moments of despair, we sometimes have to ask others to listen for God's voice on our behalf. God does not always speak to us directly, but God is always there.

As Christians, we sometimes act as if we are the only people to whom God speaks, but that is not the case. Every person has some knowledge of God, some ability to hear and respond to God's voice. Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, is the most important way God has ever spoken to the world. Yet there are many other ways in which God can and does speak. Gracious Christianity is based, at least in part, on this conviction: God is present in the world ahead of us, speaking all the time, and our task is to hear and follow together.

Has there been a time in your life when God was silent? How did you cope with that experience? Was anyone especially important in helping you?

4

The Fullness of Salvation

In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul describes salvation as involving all the vast and wonderful ways God is redeeming everything that exists, restoring goodness and beauty to the entirety of creation. Salvation, as seen from this grand-scale perspective, includes healing everything that is wrong with the world, but it goes beyond that. The goal of salvation is to refashion the world so that it will eventually become what it was meant to be, to raise the existence of the universe to a level never seen before and never imagined possible (1:3-23).

But salvation is not only about God's plans for the universe as a whole. It is also about us. Salvation reaches down into the smallest crevices of the human heart. When God's saving love enters our lives, we are transformed. In the same way that salvation on the grand scale both restores what has been lost and adds something more, personal salvation heals our broken

souls and lifts us into a new life of love for God, others, and the entire creation.

But how does salvation take place? Is it a process? Is it an event? Is our own effort somehow involved? What makes salvation possible? How does salvation change us and our relationships with others?

Personal Salvation

At its core, personal salvation is the process through which we internalize God's love for us so that we, in turn, can externalize that love to others. When we enter the path of salvation, we are taken up into God's great work of love and re-creation, and we are given the opportunity to become active agents in that process of reclaiming and reforming the world. Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul says, "God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ . . . has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). Salvation restores our relationship with God and allows us to become partners with God in the work of reconciling the rest of creation with the Creator.

A person's experience of salvation is deeply personal. Somehow, in some way, we come to understand that God loves us. And somehow, in some way, we embrace that love. This is an intimate encounter, and no two people experience it in exactly the same way. For some it is emotionally overwhelming; for others it is not. For some the primary feeling is surrender, for others relief, for still others joy.

One thing is certain: Salvation does not come in a one-size-fits-all package that applies to everyone. Reconciliation is the common destination, but the roads we travel to get there can differ considerably. Jesus told many stories about what it means to be reconciled, stories of lost sheep and lost coins that were found, of buried treasure discovered in a field, of people being born again and starting their lives anew. As those multiple images of salvation imply, there is more than one way to experience God's grace and its impact on our lives.

Perhaps the most famous of Jesus' story-descriptions of salvation is the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). This is a tale of a man who has two sons. The older child is thoroughly loyal and

absolutely faithful—always there to help out, always responsible, and apparently always keeping track of just how much he has done for his father. The younger son is a free spirit who wants to get out from under his father's thumb as quickly as possible. So the younger son asks for his inheritance in advance, and his father finally acquiesces.

Money in hand, the young son goes off to live the good life, but soon his funds are gone and he is reduced to poverty. Destitute, he takes up work as a laborer on a farm and eventually even considers eating the garbage he is supposed to feed the pigs. Disgusted with himself and knowing that even the poorest member of his father's staff is better off than he, the young man goes home to see if his father will take him back, not as a son but merely as a servant.

So the prodigal makes his way home, hesitant, embarrassed, and stinky. And what does he find? A cold and distant father who tells him he is no longer welcome? A disgruntled father who tells him to eat with the pigs? An arrogant father who wants his son to grovel at his feet? No, he does not find anything like that. Instead, he finds a father who has hoped for his return every day since he left. A father who runs to his

son and hugs him. A father who welcomes him back with the biggest party he has ever thrown. A father who simply loves him as his own dear child. But the older brother is incensed by this show of affection and refuses to come to the party. He is angry at both his father and his younger brother and sulks away.

This story illustrates both grace and ungraciousness, forgiveness and the failure to forgive, reconciliation and estrangement. The father bestows grace, the younger son accepts grace, and the older son is disgusted by the whole scene. The parable is about the nature of salvation—about the fact that God likes us as well as loves us. We are invited to accept God's grace in our lives in the same way that the prodigal son accepts his father's grace: thankfully, joyfully, and with the full knowledge that this is not what we deserve. It is a pure gift. Grace always is.

Do you identify more with the older brother or the prodigal son? Is it easier to accept grace or extend grace? Can you think of a time when you observed a truly gracious act?

In the story of the prodigal son, salvation is dramatically depicted as a climactic moment when the

father welcomes his son home. But that is not the only way grace can be experienced, not the only way salvation comes to us. Grace can also be gradually infused into our lives, working slowly and almost imperceptibly over extended periods of time, drawing us little by little into deeper fellowship with God and others. We see this alternative in the story Jesus told about a farmer scattering seeds (Luke 8:4-15). Some of the seeds fell on the path where people trampled them, some landed on rocks where they dried out and died before they could sprout, some germinated in places where they were choked by faster-growing weeds, and some landed in good soil where they grew, flowered, and eventually produced a crop of grain.

In explaining this parable, Jesus said the story is about how different people hear the Word of God and receive God's grace. Clearly, the last group in the parable represents the ideal. Of them the text says, "These are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance" (Luke 8:15). There is hardly any hint of drama in this description, no Jack-and-the-beanstalk miracle of sudden growth or miraculous transformation. It is all slow, steady, and gradual

growth: first, the tiny sprout; then the emergence of roots; then the slow maturation of the plant; and finally, the production of flowers and seeds. None of this is rushed; it all takes time. Spiritually, some people are just like that. Grace grows slowly in their "honest and good hearts" and only slowly bears fruit as they wait "with patient endurance" for God's grace to mature in their lives.

This difference between slower and faster ways of experiencing grace is evident in individual biographies. Some people, following the model of the prodigal son, can point to a specific date and hour when they responded to God's saving grace. Others, following the seed parable, testify that God's work in their lives has been slow and gradual but persistent. This difference in personal experience is one of the factors that has encouraged the development of two patterns of baptism within the Christian church. Churches that assume that God's saving grace normally operates in a slow manner over long periods of time (such as the Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran churches) typically practice infant baptism and then nurture their young people gradually into faith. In Christian traditions that assume that God's normal

mode of operating is more dramatic, dispensing saving grace at one identifiable moment (such as most Baptist and Pentecostal churches), individuals are usually baptized as adults after they testify to a decisive experience of conversion.

Are you more familiar with churches that emphasize fast grace or slow grace? What has been your own experience? What is your understanding of baptism?

What Salvation Entails

The pace of grace in our lives is ultimately less significant than what grace does for us. What does salvation entail? Historically, Christians have said that salvation includes three dimensions: forgiveness, renewal, and reconciliation.

Forgiveness is required because we are sinful and imperfect creatures who harm one another frequently by our disdainful thoughts, unkind words, and uncaring actions. It is not just that we make mistakes

—which, of course, we do—but that we choose to harm one another. Sometimes we do this in a premeditated way and at other times on the spur of the moment. Sometimes we do it directly, and sometimes it is indirect. Regardless of the details, this kind of behavior is sinful, and when we sin we incur guilt. We may not always feel ashamed of what we have done because our consciences can malfunction, but we are objectively guilty nonetheless.

In an obvious sense, we are guilty in relation to the people we have harmed, and we need their forgiveness. But we are also guilty in relation to God. Why? Because any intentional harm we do to others is a transgression of the law of love God has woven into creation, and it is also an affront to God's own continuing love for the world. Sin is sometimes defined as an offense against God's righteousness. This does not mean God takes offense because we break some arbitrary rule of religious etiquette. It means God wants what is right for the whole world, and our sins push the world in a different direction, away from God's righteousness toward evil and disorder.

How effective do you think our consciences are in letting us know when we are guilty?

How does feeling guilty compare with feeling ashamed?

The remedy for guilt always involves confession: acknowledging the wrong we have done and taking responsibility for it. People can sometimes forgive us even when we have not confessed our wrongdoing, but we cannot experience that forgiveness unless we admit we need it. We cannot live at peace with others or ourselves if we are not honest about who we are and what we have done. And we cannot be at peace with God either. While confession can be painful and embarrassing, it is the only way forward.

Confession is required, but confession is not what forgives us. Forgiveness is a gift, and its source lies outside us. Forgiveness comes from someone else, and to be forgiven is a wonderful experience. Forgiveness itself, however, does not make us good; it only makes us forgiven. We will sin again, and we will need to be forgiven again. That is why the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther described the Christian life as one of ongoing repentance, a never-ending cycle of confession and forgiveness. This was the first of the famous Ninety-five Theses that Luther nailed on the church door at Wittenburg in October 1517.

Renewal is the second aspect of salvation, and renewal does precisely what forgiveness cannot: It makes us better people. God's renewal of our lives makes us more fully alive and more genuinely good. If we picture ourselves like flat balloons all riddled with holes, forgiveness has the effect of patching up the holes, but it is the renewing power of God's Spirit that then fills us and helps us become the three-dimensional people we were meant to be. In the language of traditional theology, God's forgiveness of sins is called justification, while the renewal of our lives is called sanctification.

This renewal, or sanctification, of our lives takes time. It is a journey, and the goal is genuine holiness. Holiness refers to the fullness of life God intended for us from the beginning of creation, and it has both personal and social dimensions. God's renewal of our hearts and minds pushes us beyond our natural self-focus toward greater awareness of others. Walter Rauschenbusch, who is sometimes called the founder of the social gospel movement (a theological movement in the early twentieth century that stressed that sin and salvation have an impact on social structures as well as on individual lives), once said that

salvation includes “the voluntary socializing of the soul.”¹ True holiness makes us more attuned to the needs of others instead of focused on our own wants and desires.

We will never attain complete holiness in this lifetime. The final goal will always be ahead of us. But just as significantly, our progress in holiness can never be compared with anyone else’s. We are not in spiritual competition with one another. We are not trying to outdo one another in a race around the bases toward perfection. God wants what is best for each of us, and the bases can be laid out in very different patterns. God has a special path for each of us, a special vocation we are called to fulfill, and we will find both holiness and personal meaning as we faithfully follow that path.

Finally, salvation includes *reconciliation*. The grand goal of salvation as articulated by Paul in the New Testament is the reconciliation of every part of creation with every other part and the reconciliation of the whole of creation with God, the Creator. Not only do we experience this reconciliation ourselves, but God also invites us to join in the ministry of reconciliation, participating in the huge and wonderful work of

restoring creation.

Do you have a sense of vocation in your life? What are the characteristics of that vocation? How did you become aware of your vocation? To what degree is reconciliation a part of your Christian calling or vocation?
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The ministry of reconciliation includes evangelism, which breaks down barriers between God and humankind, and it also includes social action designed to break down the barriers of prejudice and injustice that drive people apart. It includes working for peace with people who are our obvious enemies, and it includes mending relationships on a daily basis with those we care about most. It involves learning how to love God better, and it involves loving the natural world too. All of this is included in the salvific work of reconciliation. Salvation is thus extended to all of life and is not limited to the spiritual dimension.

The grand work of reconciliation is, of course, not something we can do on our own. Reconciliation, like forgiveness and renewal, is a gift from God. It is God who will ultimately reconcile all things in heaven and earth in Christ. But God graciously invites us, despite

our flaws and weaknesses, to be part of this great work. Salvation is personal, but it is also social and even cosmic, and the ultimate goal is for all of creation to participate in the mutuality of love that has always existed within the Trinity.

Jesus and Salvation

In the New Testament, Jesus stands at the center of the salvation story. It is Jesus who makes salvation possible. Yet it is the trinitarian God who loves us and saves us, not Jesus alone. Sometimes sermons portray Christ as rescuing us from the unquenchable anger of God the Father, who would prefer to throw us into hell and torture us forever. But anything that implies a Father-versus-Son tug-of-war within the Trinity is misleading. It is the whole God who saves us—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and it is the whole God who loves and forgives us.

Jesus was the incarnation of God on earth for the sake of our salvation, and it is the entirety of his life, teachings, death, and resurrection that saves us. We

are, in some sense, saved by Christ's birth and life among us. We are, in some sense, saved by Christ's teaching and example. We are also somehow saved by Christ's death and somehow saved by his resurrection. Salvation is ultimately a mystery, but we know that Jesus is at the center of salvation and that everything he said and did plays a part.

What is your primary image of God the Father? What is your image of Jesus? Do these images blend easily together, or is there tension between them?

The mere fact of incarnation, that Jesus was willing to be born and live among us, is an important element of salvation. Like a famous guest who honors us by staying at our home or eating a meal with our family, God, in his presence on earth in the person of Jesus, honored the creation and, most specially, honored us as human beings.

Jesus became one of us. According to Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in Egypt during the fourth century, Jesus somehow sanctified whatever he “assumed” (accepted into his own being) in the incarnation. What precisely this means is difficult to

explain, in the same way that it is difficult to explain exactly why we feel honored when an important person visits us. Yet somehow the incarnation reassures us that it is good to be human. It tells us we do not need to be ashamed of being human, and we do not need to be saved from being human. God's presence with us in the baby Jesus and throughout his entire life on earth is a reaffirmation of God's original declaration of human goodness. In the same way that we become more beautiful when someone sincerely tells us we are beautiful, the incarnation is God's way of reminding us that we are good, and that reminder in some sense truly does make us better.

The life and teachings of Jesus also contribute to our salvation. Unlike Jesus, the rest of us are flawed and sinful—everyone of us—every parent, friend, mentor, spouse, and neighbor. So where do any of us find a model that demonstrates a better way? Where do we find an exemplar who can show us how we ought to live? The Christian answer is that we find that model in Jesus.

Several years ago, it was popular for young Christians to wear bracelets emblazoned with the letters WWJD: What Would Jesus Do? That is a good

question to ask in any situation. While we face circumstances far different from those in first-century Palestine, the basic human issues—our relationship with God, our relationships with others, and our personal character—remain the same. The life of Jesus offers a pattern for dealing with those issues today. Christ's moral and spiritual example is itself part of the salvation God offers in Christ.

Salvation is about right living, but it is also about our inner selves, what Christians often refer to as the heart or the soul. The heart is the realm of the emotional. It is the part of us that can sometimes bring us to our knees in anguish and, at other times, practically lift us off the ground with joy. When our hearts are joyful, we feel truly alive; when our hearts are heavy, we feel like we are stumbling toward despair or even death. The heart is the core of our being, and it needs to be transformed in salvation. More than anything else, it is the cross that does this.

On the cross, Christ somehow took all our pain and hurt, as well as all the enormous amounts of sin and evil in the world, upon himself. We have been forgiven through that act, but, just as importantly, we can be emotionally and spiritually healed by Christ's death.

Jesus died on the cross for us in order that we might live. Christ suffered for us in order that we might be made whole. The cross is God's costly offer of grace that speaks to our hearts as much as to our heads. Salvation is holistic. It transforms the center of our being in ways that our minds can sometimes only dimly understand, restructuring the affective perceptions we have of ourselves, God, and the world and clearing the way for restored fellowship.

What dimension of Christ's life, teachings, death, and resurrection is most meaningful to you? Has this changed as you have moved through various stages of life?

One can still validly ask, however, "Why the cross? Why the need for Christ's death?" In response, Christians have often used an analogy taken from the realm of law, explaining that Christ was our substitute on the cross and received the punishment we deserve for our sins. That analogy can be helpful, but the real meaning of the cross is about love, not law. It is God's miraculous way of breaking the power of everything that controls us, of clearing the paths that were blocked, drawing us back into fellowship with God and

all of creation. The cross renews our hearts in a way that is impossible to put into words. It is much better experienced than explained.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the final aspect of Christ's life that provides salvation. The resurrection is God's sign to the world that Jesus really was God's representative on earth. The resurrection validates everything that Jesus said and did, giving us confidence to trust his words and work. The resurrection also demonstrates God's power over the forces of evil, sin, and death. Christ's violent death was not the end of the story; killing Jesus did not get rid of him. The resurrection is a sign that righteousness is stronger than evil and that life will ultimately conquer death. Thus, for us, as for Jesus, the grave is not the end. By God's grace, we are part of a kingdom that is endless, the kingdom of God's boundless love. We do not know precisely what resurrection means—Jesus' resurrected body was not simply his revived corpse; it was a different "glorified" body—but because of his resurrection, we possess the hope that one day we too will be united with God in a glorified body for all eternity.

This hope is described by the pastor, theologian, and

psychological counselor Henri Nouwen as stretching “far beyond the limits of one’s own psychological strength.” Christian hope is not mere optimism but a new evaluation of the nature of reality based on “the historic Christ-event which is understood as a definitive breach in the deterministic chain of human trial and error, and as a dramatic affirmation that there is light on the other side of darkness.”² The resurrection frees us from the fear of death and opens us to the love of others. Christian hope does not make us immune to pain and suffering, and it certainly does not mean that life will always be happy. But because we know that God’s love for us transcends death, we can rest in God.

The power evident in the resurrection can be accessed in the present. This power is not, first of all, the power to work miracles, though it might include that. Instead, it is the power to love. It is love that drove Christ to the cross and love that raised Christ from the dead, and that love, when it finds a home in our own hearts, makes it possible for us to reflect God’s love to others. A recent book by two Indian Catholic scholars describes the salvation made possible by the resurrection: “Jesus’ victory over sin

and death is . . . experienced in every act of love for the poor, the marginalized, the enemy, love of those from whom we expect no reward. Jesus’ victory is present in every fight for justice which is impregnated with love, in every act of courage to protest when human beings are trampled upon . . . in every act of hope that God’s reign will prevail in spite of the power of evil around us.”³ Just as it provides hope for the future, the resurrection provides courage and power to live in harmony with God’s love in the present.

Salvation is both deeply personal and thoroughly social, and these two dimensions of salvation can never be separated. In the same way that the Jesus creed indissolubly links the love of God with the love of others, our personal salvation necessarily connects us more deeply with others. Rather than rescuing us out of the world, salvation redirects us back to the world as agents of God’s goodness and grace.