

Welcome Home



...to the God who loves you.

Dave Browning
Pastor



Welcome Home



Dear Friend,

Everyone is on a spiritual journey. *Welcome Home* can help you get where you need to go. It is a compass pointing to true north: God's love for you. Each chapter surveys a different section of the Bible, and concludes with a prayer whereby you can entrust yourself to God's love, acceptance and forgiveness.

<u>Chapter Title</u>	<u>Bible Passage</u>
The Homecoming	Luke 15
You Matter to God	John 3:16
Why Did Jesus Have to Die?	Isaiah 53
The High Point of the Cross	John 1:12
In a State of Grace	Romans 4:5
Is Christ the Only Way?	1 John 5:11,12
Simple Faith	Psalms 92

When you arrive at a place of faith in Christ, you'll hear God whisper two exhilarating words to your soul: "Welcome Home."

Find a quiet place. Grab your Bible. Step on the welcome mat. As the door opens, get ready to be loved. The journey is personal. The destination is profound – a personal relationship with the God who created you.

God bless you,

Dave Browning
Pastor

The Homecoming

One of my favorite feelings is the sensation I get when I'm heading home. I remember as a kid being elated on the bus ride home from summer camp. As a teenager, coming back from college, I remember well the excitement of reunion with family and friends back home after a semester away. The feelings have only grown as I've entered adulthood. I've become a bit of a world traveler, but there is nothing more exhilarating than finding my car in the airport parking lot and steering it for home.

I now have a family of my own. It has given me another great joy, that of welcoming my own children home. When my kids are away for any extended period of time, I find myself watching the clock, and quizzing my wife, wondering how long until they're home. Now I know how God feels.

In Luke 15 we read that Jesus was criticized for "welcoming sinners and eating with them." In response to that criticism Jesus told three great homecoming stories, all in defense of hanging out with "sinners." The three stories have the same punch line: God's heart is for the lost. You need to become familiar with these stories, because you are in them.

The first story is of a shepherd, who counts his sheep, only to realize that one of them is missing.

Luke 15:4-7

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The story of the lost sheep demonstrates that God's love is attentive. As God looks across his sheep, his eyes run directly to the one who is lost. 99% of his sheep were accounted for, but his eyes search for the lost one, the broken one. He's concerned for that one's well-being, safety and recovery. He goes after the one that's missing.

The second story is of a housekeeper who loses a coin under some furniture.

Luke 15:8-10

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

The story of the lost coin shows us how God's love is persistent. He doesn't give up. He turns the place upside down to get at the object of his affection. He's knows the intrinsic value of what He's searching for..

The third story is of a runaway child, with a father who waits patiently for the boy's return.

Luke 15:11-32

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'"

So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked

him what was going on. "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" "My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The story of the lost son makes it clear that God's love is unconditional. The father runs to his son when he is "still a long way off." He doesn't wait for the son to make it all the way home before He closes the gap. And at the reunion dad doesn't even ask where he's been or what he's done. He's just glad to have him back in the family!

Three great stories. All in defense of hanging out with "sinners." All ending in reunion and rejoicing. All having the same punch line - that God's heart is toward the lost. But each story showcases a little different aspect of that love.

The story of the lost sheep....God's love is **attentive**
 The story of the lost coin....God's love is **persistent**
 The story of the lost son....God's love is **unconditional**

That, by the way, is how God loves you. Attentively. Persistently. Unconditionally.

You might wonder how he could love you this way in light of where you have been, and what you have done. Well, standing by at the reunion of the prodigal son, is the older brother (a bit part that Christ not-so-subtly assigns to his religious critics). The older son is upset because he's been behaving himself, but the party is being thrown for the wanderer. How unfair can that be!?!

Bingo! It's not fair. It's grace. It's undeserved...it's unearned....yet it's given freely. A.W. Tozer defined grace as "the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefit upon the undeserving."

The Bible says: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God doesn't love us because of who we are and what we do, He loves us in spite of who we are and what we do. He doesn't love us because of how good we are, He loves us because of how good He is. It is important for you to know that when you return to God He is going to treat you better than you deserve.

God's love is fixed on you. There is nothing you can do that can make God love you more. And there is nothing you can do that can make God love you less.

Psalm 103:8-13

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

The stories Jesus told in Luke 15 make it clear that God does not view failures as final. The sheep can come back into the fold. The coin can come back into the bag. The son can come back into the family.

In the 1929 Rose Bowl, UCLA played Georgia Tech. Toward the end of the first half, Roy Riegels from Georgia Tech picked up a UCLA fumble and ran for the goal line. Unfortunately for him, he had been spun around in the scramble for the ball and was heading for the wrong end zone. A teammate chased him and tackled him from behind just short of scoring a touchdown for the other team. Georgia Tech could not move the ball, and punting from their own end zone, had the punt blocked. UCLA scored to take the lead just before the end of the half. The Georgia Tech locker room was silent at half time. "Wrong way Roy Riegels" say quietly in a corner with a towel over his head. Then Coach Price spoke. All he said was: "The same team that started the first half, will start the second half." Not a big statement, but an important one for Roy to hear.

We all fall. We all fail. Sheep wander, coins get lost, son stray. But through all of our wanderings, God loves us like a perfect dad should. In the story of the prodigal son, the key character is not the son. It's the father. He doesn't give up on us. He welcomes us with open arms. He rejoices when we come home.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus said, this is how you should pray.... "Our father...." Father is a relational word. Jesus was reminding us that our identity and standing before God is not based on behavior, it's based on birth.

The Bible says in Isaiah 53:6, "We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way." Some stray farther than others, but we're all sinners in need of a savior. God's love extends to people who have lied, cheated, stolen, hated, lusted, gossiped, been self-centered, and unkind. There is hope for the future and forgiveness for the past. Your past is an inadequate predictor of our future.

Welcome Home!

Homecoming Prayer:

God, I have wandered from you, but I'm coming home. Thank you for your unconditional love for me. Thank you for welcoming me home. I receive your love, acceptance and forgiveness.

You Matter to God

Several years ago I had a college professor who gave me an interesting assignment. He set up a scenario of a horrific car accident, in which someone had been critically injured. He then said, "Suppose you are the first to come upon this accident and you realize that this person is about to die. You are not in a position to save their life, but you have time to make one last statement to them before they pass away into eternity. In 25 words or less, what would you say?"

The question is a good one, because it forces you to come to terms with what is critically important, and how to say that in the most salient way possible. Could you say something that would make a difference for eternity?

Perhaps the best you could do, given the time constraint, would be to quote the following verse:

John 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

In 25 words or less, you couldn't say more. John 3:16 is the most precious cluster of words ever to be assembled.

Diamonds are made from carbon, placed under tremendous pressure and crystallized. In this one verse, it is as if God took all of the meaning of the scriptures, and under emotional pressure, compressed it into this shining diamond of truth.

There is for good reason that John 3:16 is the most memorized verse in the Bible. If we were to take this text and place it on one side of vast eternal scales, and on the other place all the works and words that have ever been written, all the writings would be light as air in comparison. That is the value of John 3:16 to the human race!

Let me take the first five words – *God so loved the world* – and restate them in personal terms: You matter to God. This is really what God is trying to communicate to us, to all of us. We matter to Him. We matter so much that He would rather die than live without us.

You may think that you don't matter. Not to God. Not to anyone. When you walk into a room, no one notices. No one understands you...no one cares to. You live your life, a day at a time, in relative obscurity. If you were to die today, very few would be upset tomorrow. Your contribution is insignificant. Or so it seems.

But God says, "Wait a minute! You matter to me!"

One of the world's great psychiatrists recently said that everybody has an inborn feeling of loneliness, and he added, "I really don't know what causes it."

I can tell you. It's called alienation from God. When a man finds God that will cure it.

In the purse of a woman who committed suicide was this note: "If anyone smiles at me today, no one will ever find this note." John 3:16 is God smiling at you. You matter to God.

The Bible says that Adam and Eve, the first humans, were in a perfect environment. But when they sinned against God they ran and hid themselves. They became spiritually separated from God. But God doesn't allow that to be the end of the story. He loves us too much to let that be the end of the story.

Because we matter to Him, God "gave his only Son." Jesus, the Son of God, died on the cross for our sins. If you saw the movie *The passion of the Christ* or even if you've taken a good look at a crucifix, you can probably tell that hanging on a cross was an excruciatingly painful way to die. Why did Jesus, voluntarily, go through that? Because you matter to Him. His eyes were on the prize. He endured pain in the present, for the potential of the future, a relationship with you.

Hebrews 12:2

Jesus....for the joy set before him, endured the cross.

Somewhere in a hospital today, there is a woman writhing in pain. Her feet are up in stirrups. Her nurse is encouraging her. She is bearing down. She is pushing with all her might. Why? For the joy set before her. In moments she will be holding her baby in her arms.

In the corner of the gym a boy is lacing up his tennis shoes. In the next two hours he will shoot five hundred jump shots. He will leave the gym sore from head to toe, but with a dream very much alive....of making the varsity team next year. His eyes are on the prize.

A man walks out the front door, leaving for work. In the driveway is a rusted car. As he opens the door, it squeaks loudly. He sits on a torn seat. He turns the key and hopes that the car will start one more time. He has a good job. He could afford a better car, but every extra dollar is going toward his kids, who are attending the state university. On the way to work he doesn't pray for his car. He prays for his kids. His kids matter to him more than his comfort.

It's three in the morning, but she's still up....burning the midnight oil. She's on her fourth cup of coffee. She turns the page of the physics book and realizes

there is a whole 'nother section to review. She will be up for another hour. But if she does well on this test, she has a good shot at being accepted into med school.

It's 10:30 at night. The shop closed at 8pm, but a woman is restocking the shelves for the morning. This is her first business venture, and it's not going very well...yet. She's putting in sixteen hour days. But she knows that if she can get over this hump there's potential for her to be successful. This matter to her.

A young man walks out of the pawn shop with a smile on his face. He has just hawked his Fender guitar, and he is heading for the mall. In the next hour he will pick up the ring – the engagement ring that symbolizes his love for her. He will miss his guitar, but he can't wait to spend his life with her. She matters more.

Why did Jesus die on that cross? For the same reason that so many others make sacrifices. For the prize. What was the prize for Jesus? You!

A friend of mine went to see a counselor for his marriage. They got to the end of the session, and the subject turned to payment. The counselor, instead of fixing a number asked him to consider "How valuable is your marriage to you?" My friend told, "Dave, based on that I would give him everything I own." Now you know how much you matter to God.

John 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God so loved. The everlasting relationship that God wanted to have with you was worth the life of the son of God. Jesus died because He loves you.

On the fourth of July, 1952, Florence Chadwick, who was 34, set out to be the first woman to swim from Catalina Island to the mainland of California. She was the first woman to swim the English channel. She set out with support boats on either side of her, with guns to protect her from sharks. She swam for nearly sixteen hours against rough water. About a half a mile from shore she hit a solid wall of fog. Suddenly she wanted to stop. Her mother and trainer urged her not to quit, telling her how close she was. But she asked to be taken out of the water. Still thawing her chilled body several hours later, she told a reporter, "Look, I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen land I might have made it." It was not fatigue or cold or sharks that defeated her. It was the fog. She was unable to see her goal.

As Jesus hung on the cross, it was a moment of extreme darkness. But Jesus never lost sight of you. He had one thing on his mind....you.

Earl Willer tells the story of two men, Jim and Phillip, who grew up to be best friends. Though Jim was just a little older than Phillip and often assumed the role of leader, they did everything together. They even went to high school and college together.

After college they decided to join the marines. By a unique series of circumstances they were sent to Germany together where they fought side by side in World War II.

One sweltering day during a fierce battle, amid heavy gunfire, bombing, and close-quarters combat, they were given the command to retreat. As the men were running back, Jim noticed that Phillip had not returned with the others. Panic gripped his heart. Jim knew if Phillip was not back in another minute or two, then he wouldn't make it.

Jim begged his commanding officer to let him go after his friend, but the officer forbade the request, saying it would be suicide. Risking his own life, Jim disobeyed and went after Phillip. His heart pounding, he ran into the gunfire, calling out for Phillip. A short time later, his platoon saw him hobbling across the field carrying a limp body in his arms.

Jim's commanding officer upbraided him, shouting that it was a foolish waste of time and an outrageous risk. "You're friend is dead," he added, "and there was nothing you could do."

"No sir, you're wrong," Jim replied. "I got there just in time. Before he died, his last words were, 'I knew you would come.'"

In every world religion, man pursues God. Only in Christianity does God pursue man. John 3:16 tells us to what lengths God will go.

O long and dark the stairs I trod
 With trembling feet to find my God
 Gaining a foothold bit by bit,
 Then slipping back and losing it.
 Never progressing, striving still
 With weakening grasp and faltering will,
 Bleeding to climb to God, while he
 Serenely smiled, unnoting me.
 Then came a certain time when I
 Loosening my hold and fell thereby;

Down to the lowest step my fall,
As if I had not climbed at all.
Now when I lay despairing there,
Listen....a footfall on the stair,
On that same stair where I afraid,
Faltered and fell and lay dismayed.
And lo, when hope had ceased to be,
My God came down the stairs to me.

Welcome Home!

Homecoming Prayer:

God, I know I matter to you. Thank you for coming to earth to save me. Thank you for loving me enough to die for me. I receive your love, acceptance and forgiveness.

Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

Scripture is clear that Jesus died for us. But what is the plot to the story? Why did Jesus have to die? The prophets of the Old Testament predicted that a Savior would come and be a sacrifice for our sins.

Isaiah 53

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

In many ways, Jesus was a common man. He was a carpenter, and if we could have looked in on some of the scenes of his life, we would have seen him using the carpenter's tools, callouses on his hands and sweat on his brow. Jesus undoubtedly was a terrific worker.

But his greatest work was not as a carpenter, crafting a table and chairs. Nor was it as a miracle worker, though he made the blind to see, deaf to hear, dumb to speak, lame to walk, or even the dead to rise. Nor was his greatest work as a

teacher, though he was an incredible teacher, whose words continue to be life-giving and life-changing. His greatest work was achieved on the cross. Isaiah 53:12 says that Christ is great because "he poured out his life unto death."

Why? Why did Jesus have to die? It must have been something about him, because the nails that were driven into his hands and feet by Roman soldiers could not hold him there, any more than the cords that bound him in the garden, could hold Jesus. After Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, tried to defend him with his sword in the garden, Jesus said, "Put your sword back in its place....Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:52,53). Earlier Jesus had told his disciples, "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." (John 10:18).

Ropes didn't take him to the cross, and nails didn't keep him on it. That day there were other nails, invisible nails, which caused him to stay on the cross when he could have come down from it. The first invisible nail was the nail of love.

1. Love

Prior to Jesus' coming into the world, people had not experienced love in the loftier, spiritual sense. The world was full of hatred. Races hated each other. Slaves hated their masters. Subjects hated their rulers. That hatred pursued Christ. After Jesus' birth, Herod sent out a decree to kill all the children under two years of age. When Jesus started his ministry, the religious leaders hated him because his truth brought their hypocrisy to light. The high priests hated him because of his popularity. The Romans hated Him because of his philosophy of love. The Jews hated him because of his claims to be the Messiah. Yet Jesus loved them – so much that he died for them.

Dying was his reason for living. In John 18 he said, "To this end I was born, and for this cause I came into the world." He had death on the cross as his ultimate and determined goal. There were ominous indicators early on that he was born to die. In the manger he was wrapped in "swathing bands" – the fabric strips used in mummification. When the wise men arrived, one of the items they brought was myrrh, used in the burial process. So there's this dark cloud that hovered at his birth, and according to Isaiah, it continued with him during his life.

Isaiah 53:3

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Steve Brown tells a story of a friend, whose daughter was about to get married. He didn't approve of the person. "If my daughter marries that man, I'll disown

her." Then he noticed Brown's look of shock. "Don't get me wrong, I love my daughter, but..." Steve said: "Nonsense. You don't love your daughter. Love in response to goodness is reward. Love only shows itself in the face of that which is not very loveable."

Twenty-five years ago a sociology professor had his class go into the slums of Baltimore to study 200 boys. Nearly all of these young men faced extraordinary hardships, and on many of the reports there was written "He hasn't got a chance."

Twenty-five years later, another professor found this study, and found 176 of the 200, many of whom had achieved extraordinary success, as doctors, lawyers, etc. They asked, "How do you account for your success?" A consistent answer came back: "There was a teacher...." They found the teacher, an older lady, but still alert, and they asked what the magic was. She said, "It's really very simple. I loved those boys."

Love always seeks the best for it's object, at it's own cost. That is also a very simple answer to why Christ remained on that cross. The invisible nail of love. There's a second invisible nail that held Jesus on that cross, the nail of devotion to His Father's will.

2. Devotion

Jesus was devoted to God's will for His life, even if that meant sacrifice.

Isaiah 53:10

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

As a boy Jesus spoke about being about his father's business. He made constant allusions to the cross, and his impending death. It was his father's plan and he wanted to be obedient.

John 3:14-17

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Christ was willing to accept this assignment. Jesus was devoted to God's plan.

Hebrews 10:5-7

When Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God.'"

Did the Jewish leaders kill Jesus? They were certainly encouraging His death. Did the Romans kill Jesus? They certainly carried out the execution. But according to Peter, a much larger plot was being carried out.

Acts 2:22-23

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

According to Peter, the Jews and the Romans were pawns in a grand plan. Jesus' death was by "God's set purpose and foreknowledge." So Jesus died first because he loved us, second because he was devoted to God's will. And the third nail which held Jesus to the cross was the nail of sin.

3. Sin

Why did Jesus have to die? Isaiah 53 says He did it for us, He did it for God, and He did it because of sin.

Isaiah 53:5,6

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Frank Syszmanski played center for Notre Dame University in the 1940s. He was called to testify in South Bend at a trial. When he took the stand we was asked a series of questions. Do you play for Notre Dame? "Yes." What position? "Center." Are you any good? "I'm the best center Notre Dame ever had!" The courtroom erupted in laughter. Syszmanski's coach Leahy was stunned, but Syszmanski said, "I hated to say it coach, but after all, I was under oath."

We do some good things too, but if we had to take the stand, we would all have to admit that we fall far short. It is those shortcomings that Jesus died for. A few chapters later Isaiah says,

Isaiah 64:6

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

That is the proper diagnosis for our illness: Even our good deeds fall far short. We don't want to go along, but our sins sweep us away. In the sense that Jesus died for sins, we all are responsible for his death.

I have a painting in my office of Jesus holding up a young man who is overcome with grief. When you look closely, you notice that the man is holding a hammer and a spike in his hands. Who killed Jesus? We all did. He died for the sins of the world. Had there been no sin in the world, there would have been no need for the Cross.

1 John 2:2

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 Corinthians 15:2,3

By this gospel you are saved....Christ died for our sins.

Romans 6:23

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Isaiah 53:6

The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

A payment had to be made for our sins. Jesus paid full price on the cross.

Welcome Home!

Homecoming Prayer:

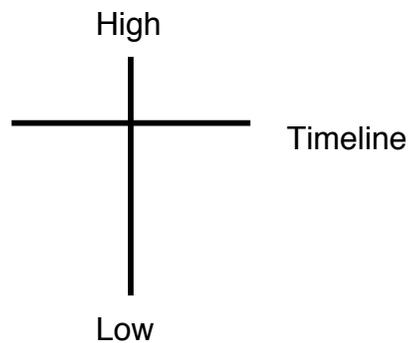
God, I know that I am a sinner, and that my sins required a sacrifice. Thank you for paying full price for my sins. I receive your love, acceptance and forgiveness.

The High Point of the Cross

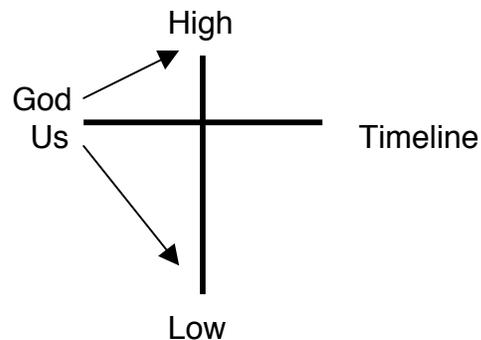
It's the most recognizable symbol in the world. Not the golden arches of McDonald's – although that's #2 on the list. Not Coca-Cola – although their logo is pretty well known, world-wide. The most recognizable symbol in the world, is the cross. You can go nearly anywhere in the world, and people will be able to identify the cross of Christ.

The cross did have a 2000 year head start over McDonald's. But it also stands for a little bit more than a burger, fries, and Coke. The cross represents *the* defining moment in history.

When you think of the cross, think of the horizontal cross bar as the timeline of human history, and the vertical post as a bar graph, with a high point and a low point. Christ dying on the cross was the low point in man's dealings with God, but the high point in God's dealings with man.



If you could plot the relationship, it looks like this. God's line steadily going up over time and peaking at the cross. Our line steadily going down and bottoming out at the cross. The cross is the low point in man's dealing with God, but the high point in God's dealing with man.

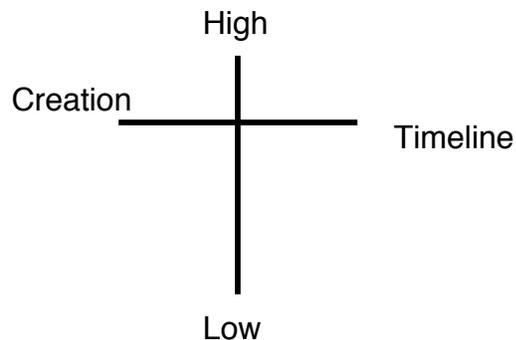


The relationship begins at creation. God created us to love us. And He put us in a beautiful world. It was the first expression of God's love for us. Nat King Cole sang,

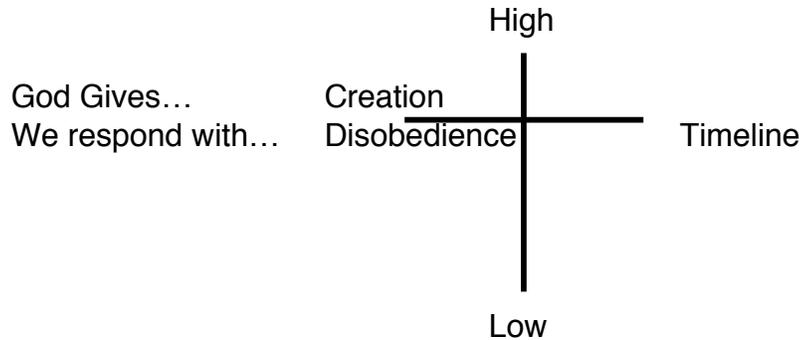
I see trees of green,
 Red roses too
 I see them bloom
 For me and you
 And I think to myself
 What a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue
 And clouds of white
 The bright blessed day,
 The dark sacred night
 And I think to myself
 What a wonderful world

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth as a home for us, and it's a big home – a huge planet in a universe that they can't find the edge of. They did a study a few years ago that if you took every person on earth and laid them down side by side, head to toe, like a carpet. They would take up a space the size of Rhode Island. That's how big earth is. There is enough water in just one major river to satisfy the thirst of everyone on the globe. Yet, there are so many rivers, oceans, mountains on earth. Plenty for us.



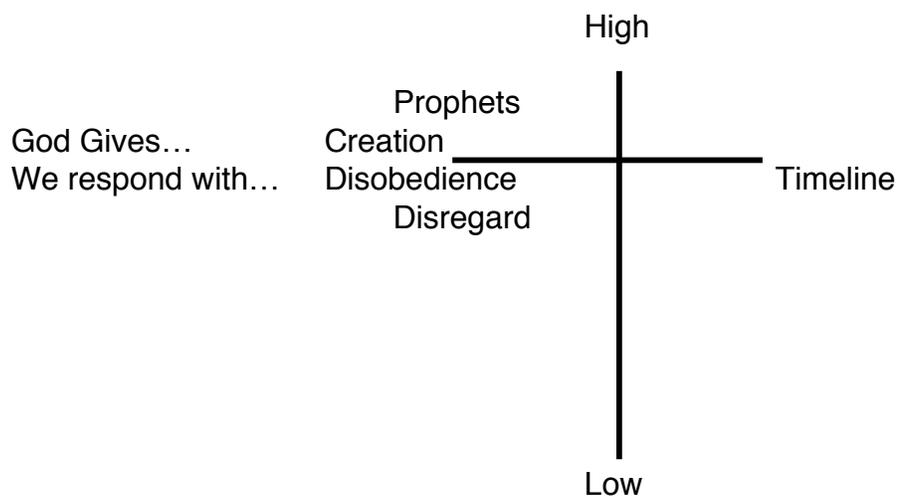
Initially, this world was home for just two people, Adam and Eve. God was present in their tropical paradise. It was truly "Heaven on earth." But mankind's disobedience to God's instructions changed all of that. God had said, "All of this is yours. I just have one request, don't eat the fruit of this one tree." But Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation, disobeyed God, and there began immediately a separation between God and man.



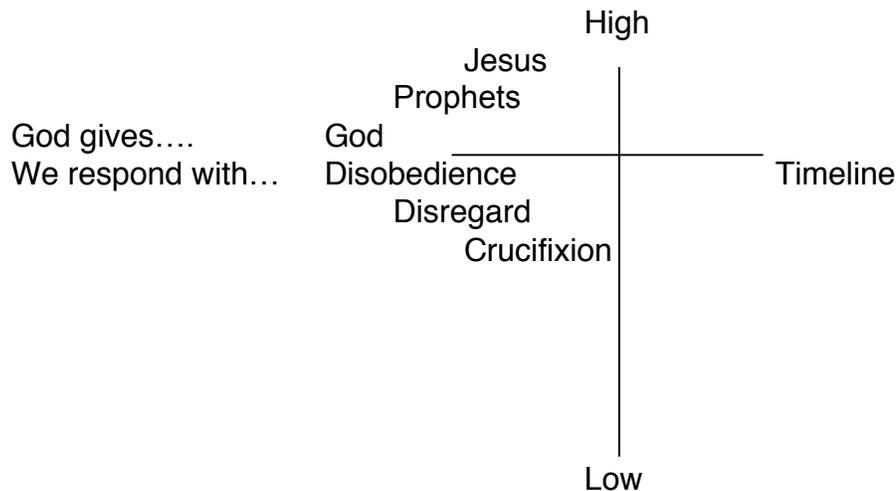
After this failure, it would have been a good time for God to throw up his arms, and say, “Great. It’s over. They blew it. I’m finished with this world. I’m finished with these people.” He didn’t say any of that. God responded in love. D.L. Moody, an evangelist in Chicago in the last century, said,

God has dealt with us always with love, love, love – from the fall of Adam to the present hour. Adam’s calamity brought down God’s love. No sooner did the news reach heaven than God came down after Adam with His love. The voice that rang through the garden was the voice of love, hunting after the fallen one – “Adam, where are you?” For all these thousand years, that voice has sounded.

One of the ways he kept calling to us was through the prophets. In addition to giving us the world. He gave us His word. He sent us Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David, Isaiah. They spoke, they wrote, they were inspired by God. They told us how to regain paradise lost: put God first again, love your neighbor like you love yourself, don’t kill, steal, lie, commit adultery. But we disregarded the messengers and their message.



So God's final and highest expression of love was to send his son, Jesus Christ. Like the story of the king who fell in love with a humble peasant girl. The king could command her to be his queen – but he would never know for sure whether she loved him because she had to, or wanted to. He could bring her into his world – but his world would blow her away – and how would he (or she for that matter) ever know if she loved him for him or for all that he gave her. So he decided to leave his throne, remove his crown, take off his royal robes, and become a peasant, like her. And love her where she is. Christ is a king like that. He lived a perfect life among us. He fed us. He led us. He showed us the way. And he did this all down on our level.



So what was the reward for his love? We said, "All right. We know what we'll do in response. We'll kill you. But first we'll abuse you. Then we'll arrest you falsely. And put you through a kangaroo court. Mock you. Whip you. Spit upon you. Then we'll crucify you. And listen to you, when from the cross you say, 'Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.'"

The cross was the low point in our relationship to God. When we killed Jesus, you would think that that would be the end of God's love. Instead, He rose again. We could not kill God's love for us. After his resurrection He went to the very ones who had doubted him and betrayed him and put his arms around them. And before he left to return to heaven he asked us to let people know that God is not angry with them. In fact, he is quite fond of them.

Someone has said the message of Christ is good news and bad news. The bad news is that we are rats. The good news is that God is not the exterminator. You can boil down the entire story to this three second sound bite: God made us. We blew it. Christ paid for it. We must receive him.

The cross is the highest expression of God's love for man. D.L. Moody said,

“God is continually trying to teach you that He loves you, to win you to himself by a cross of love.” Now it’s your move. God has done everything He can do. Now it’s up to you. Will you love Him back?

John 1:10-12

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Salvation is about receiving. It’s about receiving - Christ’s love, the right to become a child of God.

There is a version of the Cinderella story where the prince sends his servant to pick up Cinderella for the ball. Cinderella is poor, not really in the same league with the prince, and she asks why he would send for her. She’s embarrassed, and asks, “Why me?” The servant says, “My lady, it is because the prince loves you.” Cinderella replies: “Yes, a bird can love a fish, but how are they going to live together?” The servant replies: “Maybe I’m here to give you wings.”

Christ came to give us wings. You become a child of God after understanding just how much you are loved by your creator. Sometimes you choose to love someone, and pursue them. Sometimes someone pursues you and loves you so much, that you feel compelled to return that love.

A few years ago Elizabeth Smart was abducted from her bedroom in Salt Lake City. Her captors didn’t actually take her very far away. They were living in the woods nearby her home. Occasionally they would come into the city for supplies, but they had Elisabeth disguised and scared, and they were just weird enough that people didn’t pay attention to them.

There was a massive manhunt going on for Elizabeth. And many people, in a show of support, tied blue ribbons around the city. Elizabeth’s favorite color was blue.

After she was rescued, Elizabeth Smart said that when they came to town she saw the ribbons and wondered what they were for. She had no idea they were for her.

On necklaces and ear rings, key chains and tattoos, ambulances and hospitals, church steeples and signs, you’ll see crosses. They’re there for you. They’re symbols that God loves you and is searching for you.

Welcome Home!

Homecoming Prayer:

God, I am sorry that I have responded to you with disobedience and disregard. I see the cross as symbolic of the highest expression of your love for me. I receive your love, acceptance and forgiveness.

In a State of Grace

How do you become righteous before God? Is it a matter of doing more good things than bad things? Listen to what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans:

Romans 4:5

To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Years ago I was on the campus of Eastern Washington University at the same time as the Seattle Seahawks (a professional football team) were having their preseason training camp. As I was walking through the gymnasium a group of teenagers came walking toward me, with pens and notepads in their hands. Assuming that I was a pro football player, they were seeking my autograph! (With my chiseled physique I'm sure you could see how this could happen.)

Setting aside an obvious lack of talent, there are a lot of things that I have not done that prevent me from being a professional football player (including, but not limited to, diet and exercise). In most things, to be the real deal, you have to earn it. But Christianity is not like most things. Being a Christian is being in a state of grace.

Romans 4:5

To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

The key word of the Christian life is not do, but done. It's not based on what you do but accepting what God has done. You don't actually do anything but trust. Being a Christian is not like being a football player, where you have to pay the price to earn your place on the team. When we become a Christian we ask for what Christ has done on the cross to be applied to our life.

Salvation is a gift that we receive by grace, not a reward you earn. There is a difference between trying to earn your way to heaven and receiving salvation as a free gift.

Ephesians 2:4-9

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions —it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you

have been saved, through faith —and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.

2 Corinthians 5:21

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In the film "Saving Private Ryan" Army Rangers take Omaha Beach. Then they receive a mission to go deep into enemy territory to save Private Ryan. They hit skirmish after skirmish, and some of them are killed along the way.

They finally get to where Private Ryan is holed up, and they say, "Come with us. We've come to save you." He says, "I'm not going. I have to stay here because there's a big battle coming up, and if I leave my men they're all going to die."

What do the Rangers say? "We'll stay right here and fight with you." They all stay and fight, and it's gory and hard, and almost everyone dies except Private Ryan. At the end, one of the main characters, played by Tom Hanks, is sitting on the ground. He's been shot and he's dying. Private Ryan leans over to him, and Tom Hanks whispers something to him. He says, "Earn this."

I know that's the way many people might think and feel, but not a real Ranger. The Army Ranger motto for 200 years has been *Sua Sponte* - "I chose this." I volunteered for this. One of the most disappointing and unheroic moments of the movie was that moment. If Tom Hanks was really a Ranger he would have said, "Sua Sponte. I chose this. This is free. Costly to me, but free to you. You don't have to pay anything for this. I gave up my life for you. That's my job." That's exactly what Jesus said when He died on the cross.

Salvation is a gift that we receive by grace, not a loan we repay. We make absolutely no contribution to our salvation, either before, or after the fact. You do not have to make payments. You are under no obligation. Not that I shouldn't serve, and give, and love, but my service is not the root of the tree, it's the fruit of the tree. Grateful service is a natural expression of the life, but it doesn't cause the life. Listen to the words of Steve McVey from his book *Grace Walk*:

For many years I believed that to become a "good" Christian a person should do certain things such as attending church, reading the Bible, praying, witnessing to others about Christ, etc. These actions are an integral part of life for one who is expressing the life of Christ. But they should be the result of intimacy with Christ, not a means for achieving intimacy.

Taking a disciplined approach in these matters didn't produce joy in my Christian life. Regardless of how much I did, I never felt as if it were enough. There have been periods of my life when I would arise very early to read the Bible and pray for extended periods of time. I would witness to everything that breathed. I would memorize passages of Scripture. I did everything I believe a Christian should do to please God, and yet it was never enough. I could never experience joy in Jesus because of my focus on the spiritual disciplines undone. No matter how many spiritual miles I traveled, I always saw "ought to's" ahead of me stretching into the horizon. I seldom enjoyed the scenery along the way.

Salvation is a gift that we receive by grace, not an effort we need to match. Someone has said that Jesus gave His life *for* us so that He could give His life *to* us and live His life *through* us. But it is His work, not ours.

2 Corinthians 12:9,10

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The key to experiencing God's grace is personal weakness. God is actually not looking for your strength. He wants you to become so weak that He can express Himself as the strength you need in every situation. God's power shows up best in weak people.

Some time times can be tough. I heard about a farmer had had several bad years. He went to see the manager of his bank, and said to him "I've got good news and bad news." The bank manager asked for the bad news first. The farmer explained how he wouldn't be able to pay on the loans for the machinery, the seed and the fertilizer. "Ok," the banker said. "What's the good news." The farmer replied, "The good news is that I intend to keep on doing business with you."

There's some profound theology in that story if you reverse the subjects. The story of God's salvation is that we are debtors to God, and yet He treats us with grace. The good news is that in spite of our total moral bankruptcy, God keeps on doing business with us.

In Romans 5:20 Paul exclaims, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more." In both phrases, he uses the same Greek root word for "increase." But the second time, in reference to God, he adds the prefix "hyper." The Phillips

Translation of the verse is “Though sin is shown to be deep and wide, thank God his grace is wider and deeper still!”

Max Lucado tells of a staff Christmas party to which everyone was to bring a plate of cookies. Lucado had forgotten to bring cookies that day, so when it was time for the party, he was about to go home, when someone inquired, “Don’t you have cookies for the party?” When he confessed that he did not, a colleague took pity on him. She took some of the cookies that she brought, placed them on a second plate and then gave them to Lucado to bring to the party. He walked into the party like everyone else, but he knew he was there by grace.

The word “grace” (charis) in the bible is related to the word “gift” (charisma). Grace is something that is given to us. It is something we receive. It requires our humility, not our ability. A.W. Tozer said, “Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefit upon the undeserving.” Grace, by definition is undeserved, unearnable and unrepayable. A stanza is a great old hymn, “Rock of Ages,” captures our inability so well:

Could my tears forever flow
 Could my zeal no languor know
 These for sin could not atone
 Thou must save, and Thou alone
 In my hands no price I bring
 Simply to thy cross I cling.

I was once called to a crime scene late at night. A friend of mine had been killed by gunshot, after a dispute with a neighbor. I came over to the house to console his widow. As I left the home, I just happened to look up. It was a clear winter night, and you could see thousands of stars in the sky. The contrast struck me. There are things you can see at night, you can’t see any other time. Those stars stood out against that dark night. While we were killing each other down here, God was still shining bright up there.

God’s grace is a gift we receive, not an effort we need to match. We don’t have to match his love. We can’t match his love. We just stand in amazement over it.

Welcome Home!

Homecoming Prayer:

God, I know that I cannot repay your love for me. You are only asking me to receive it by grace through faith. I receive your love, acceptance and forgiveness.

Is Christ the Only Way?

Are there many ways to eternal life, or is Christ the only way? Scripture answers this question directly:

1 John 5:11-12

This is the record: God has given to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He that has the son has life. He that does not have the son of God does not have life.

As we look at verse 12 there's good news and there's bad news. The good news is: there is an answer. "He who has the Son has life." God has provided a way for man to experience eternal life through the sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. So the good news is there's an answer. The bad news is: It's the only one. The passage ends by saying "He who does not have the son of God does not have life."

The first part of the verse is cause for celebration: "He who has the son has life." It's that last phrase that causes some to hesitate: "he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

This is one of more than a dozen similar statements in the NT saying Jesus Christ is not just a way, but the only way by which a person may receive eternal life in heaven with God. The exclusivity of that statement, raises a difficult question: *Is Christ the only way?*

More than at any other time in history, we're aware of how broadly divergent people are in their religious faiths. Of all the people in the world:

- 40% claim to follow Christ
- 18% are Islamic
- 17% represent no particular religious outlook
- 14% are Hindus
- 7% are Buddhists
- 4% subscribe to some other religion or cult

We all know people who clearly do not believe in Christ as the unique Son of God. In America we are deeply committed to the principle of religious freedom and toleration. We want to guarantee that everyone has the right to believe whatever they want to believe about God and about faith. We are absolutely opposed to the notion that our government may endorse one religious outlook over another. We'll fight for the person's right to believe other than what we believe, even if we disagree with them. That's part of the American way of life. This is a profoundly wise way to govern.

But this outlook of tolerance has led many people to another conclusion, that if all religions are to be equally tolerated, then all religions must be equally valid, true or worthwhile. In fact, the fastest way to be labeled a bigoted, religious fanatic in American society is to say in public that you believe Christ is the only way to God. People are shocked if you say that. They become angry.

If you want to be accepted in contemporary society as a wise and compassionate person you have to take the position that religious faith is like climbing to the top of a mountain. God is at the top and there are many roads you can take to get to the top. Whatever road you take is OK as long as you reach the top. This is a popular notion, but not a biblical one.

One of Jesus' closest disciples was Peter. In Acts 4, when Peter delivers his first sermon, he gives a crystal clear statement about Christ being the only way to salvation.

Acts 4:12

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Where did Peter come up with this? He evidently heard Jesus say it. In John 14, we have the record of Jesus' discussion with his followers, who were troubled that Jesus would soon be going back to heaven. Listen to Jesus' words:

John 14:1-6

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

So what we hear in Peter's sermon and read in 1 John 5:11,12 is completely consistent with what Jesus taught. Christ is the only way. No one comes to the Father except through him.

From the beginning the church has held that a person's only access to God is through Jesus Christ. You see this, for example, in one of the early Christian symbols, the fish. You might have seen the fish symbol on the back of an automobile. The fish was actually an early Christian statement of faith. In Greek, the letters represented "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior." As we logically think it through in light of our experience, can we accept that Christ is the only way?

There are only 2 possible conclusions: 1) Christianity is narrow and is wrong, or 2) Christianity is narrow and is true.

Let's look at the first position, which says that X is narrow and wrong. What we're really saying is Christ couldn't be right for everybody because millions of people believe in other religious faiths. This assumes that if people are sincere in what they believe then what they believe in is OK. But sincerity is not enough. You can be sincerely wrong, through a lack of information or prior conditioning. For thousands of years, people believed that the world was flat, and they were sincerely wrong.

Some people look at Christ as a matter of personal preference. You like the beach. I like the mountains. You like Christianity. I like Buddhism. There are some things to which personal preference does not apply. Facts. Truth is not a matter of personal preference. If you prefer to put water into your car's gasoline tank instead of gas, you are not going to get very far, even though you may prefer the price of water to gasoline. I don't get the option of $2+2=5$.

Yes, you say, but aren't all religions basically the same? Saying, "All religions are the same" is like saying all Asians look alike. They only appear superficially similar if you don't care to get to know them. There are actually vast differences between faiths. Jews and Muslims are monotheistic (they believe in one God). Christians are trinitarian (they believe in the trinity - three persons in one godhead). The Hindu believes that God isn't personal or knowable; he's abstract. Christians and Jews believe you can know God personally. The Jew believes you achieve a relationship with God by living a moral life. The Christian believes that a relationship with God is based on what Christ did on the cross and that we receive eternal life as a free gift through faith in Christ. The Hindu doesn't believe in everlasting life except through incarnation. Can they all be right?

They can't all be logically correct because they are in opposition to each other. If you say the fish on your plate has bones, and I say it doesn't, we can't have it both ways. One is right, the other is wrong. If Christ claims to be the only way to God and Mohammed says there's another way, you can't have it both ways. One is right, the other is wrong.

So a possibility exists that Christianity is narrow and wrong. There is also a possibility that Christianity is narrow, but it's true. This would mean that the reason the scripture says we have to have the son to have life is that we have to have the son to have life. We have to receive Christ's salvation to be saved.

Several decades ago Dr. Jonas Salk developed a serum that would keep people from contracting polio in a time of epidemic all across the country. In schools and

public health facilities, they distributed a sugar cube with a pink syrup on it. It was a vaccine for polio. There was good news and bad news. The good news was, "There's a cure." The bad news was (I guess), "It's the only one." Someone would have been crazy to say, "Dr. Salk seems to be a little narrow to me" or "I don't like how Dr. Salk is saying his cure is the only one."

If someone were to offer us a wonderful new home, and then hand us the key, we would be foolish to reject the offer because we want to believe "there are many different keys" that will open the front door.

One of the crucial truths we must accept is that none of us deserves or has earned a relationship with God. It's a gift that God gives us. We can either take it or leave it.

In January, 1985 a large suitcase, unmarked and unclaimed, was opened in the customs office in Los Angeles. Inside, dead, was an Iranian woman. Upon investigation they found that this woman had applied for a Visa into the country, but didn't receive it, so she chose to package herself in the luggage. Officials were amazed. Even if she had made it alive, she would have been sent home. There's a way to get into the country, and that isn't it!

Some people believe that they will enter heaven their own way. But entry plans of our own design prove not only foolish, but fatal.

1 John 5:11-12

This is the record: God has given to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He that has the son has life. He that does not have the son of God does not have life.

Welcome Home!

Homecoming Prayer

God, thank you for providing a way for me to have everlasting life through your son, Jesus. I realize you are offering me not just *a* cure, but *the* cure for my sins. I receive your love, acceptance and forgiveness.

Simple Faith

There's a peace and contentment that comes from a simple faith in God. The songwriter David speaks of it in Psalm 62:

Psalm 62:1-2

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.

The word rest does not mean a nap. It speaks of serenity, peace, and tranquility. It is the calm after the storm. It is the silence after the last bullet has been fired. It is the quiet after the music has stopped. Only here it is found on the inside, from an exclusive commitment to God: *My soul finds rest in God **alone**; my salvation comes from **him**. He **alone** is my rock and my salvation*

David was experiencing the solace that comes from obeying the first and great commandment, "No other gods before me." This is the first and great commandment because it is the first and great commandment. Having God first in your life is the ultimate way to live. It is the best life we can have on planet earth.

Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment. In reply he rephrased the commandment around love: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, souls, mind and strength." David did that. His soul found rest in God alone.

When God is first and foremost, there is a contentment that you cannot find any other way...and it's a lasting contentment: *He is my fortress, I will never be shaken*. When each of my daughters graduated from high school, I took the time to write them a letter. I sat at my computer and sobbed as I reminisced about them as little girls, and remembered the times we had shared. You can never really "rest" relationships in this life. They'll change, or disappear on you. Some will even "flip" on you, and become hostile to you. Such was the context of David's rest. It came in the context of opposition.

Psalm 62:3-4

How long will you assault a man? Would all of you throw him down—this leaning wall, this tottering fence? They fully intend to topple him from his lofty place; they take delight in lies. With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse.

As David writes this, he is in a precarious spot, a vulnerable spot. He likens himself to a *leaning wall* or a *tottering fence* about to be pushed over. In action movies sometimes a bus careens over the embankment and it just teeters there precariously. Imagine that you are on that bus, and then you see a person

running toward you. You're thinking, "Oh good. Someone's going to help me up!" But as they approach, they pick up speed and give the bus a shove, over the embankment. Now you know how David feels. He writes in third person, *They fully intend to topple him from his lofty place.*

Sometimes the world is really out to get you. It's not paranoia when people really are out to get you. This is not paranoia in David's case. He's the king, but there are those who don't want to see him on the throne. William Shakespeare wrote, "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown."

We face this all through life. There are kids who don't want to see you make the team, or get the solo part in the choir. There are business associates that you see at Rotary or Kiwanis and they are not really pulling for you. The opposition can even be underhanded and hypocritical. Such was the case in David's life. *They take delight in lies. With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse.* They see the king coming, and they say "Hail to the chief." But when the king's gone they say "Who made him king?!" This is the worst of human behavior. This is the context in which we have to have serenity. In which we have to have simple faith. So David calls us to it. Well, first he calls himself to it.

Psalm 62:5-6

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge.

There is a very interesting comparison between verse 1, and verse 5. In verse 1, David writes *My soul finds rest in God alone.* In verse 5 he writes, *Find rest, O my soul, in God alone.* This is a very realistic expression of a life of faith. On one hand we want to seek God, but on the other hand we don't. On one hand we want to be like Christ, but on the other hand we're not. If you were to ask me, "Are you a Christian?" the most honest answer I could give is yes...and no. There is still a significant gap between the "ideal" me and the "real" me. Knowing this, David invites us to a greater faith.

Psalm 62:8

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

What does it mean to *trust in him*? It means to *pour out your heart to him*. This is expanding Hebrew poetry, where the second phrase builds on the first. The one you trust is the one you will pour out your heart to. If you have had a difficult day, who do you call? It will be a person that you trust. Here, David is inviting us to bring God into this favored status, and not just on special occasions: *Trust in him at all times.* And the invitation is to everyone, whether high, low, rich or poor:

Psalm 62:9-10

Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath. Do not trust in extortion or take pride in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

It is so difficult, as your riches increase, to not have your trust in riches increase. When I made nothing, or next to it, it was relatively easy to put my faith in God. There was nothing else for me to trust. This reminds me of a time that I had the opportunity to have breakfast with Charles Swindoll. At the end of that time he said: "I have a prayer for you. I pray that you will do well. Not that you will be successful. But that you will do well. There's a difference." Some of us are confused about the difference. But David knows the difference. He knows that his sense of well-being is tied to something internal and eternal. So he concludes with this statement of clarity:

Psalm 62:11-12

One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.

This is the spiritual journey, to know these two things: That God is strong, and that God is loving. By speaking this way (*one thing...two things*) David is using an ancient form of rhetoric (akin to the old English "Hear ye, Hear ye). He's saying, "I've got something here for you." He is giving us "the ol' one, two."

The "ol' one, two" is that God is both strong and loving. This is what we teach our children in the meal time prayer, "God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food." Getting to number one – that God is great and strong – that's obvious to anyone who is looking:

Romans 1:19,20

What may be known about God is plain...because God has made it plain....For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

A line from the hymn *How Great Thou Art* says "I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed." Understanding how Great He Is comes naturally, or at least from nature. Getting to personal knowledge of the second part – that God is loving - is the journey.

The combination of strong and loving is what makes God special. It was said of Abraham Lincoln that he was a man of steel and velvet. This balance of strength

and sensitivity is often associated with great people, like Jesus. It was said of him that he was full of grace and truth. God represents this balance in extreme. No being is stronger. No being is more loving.

When you put together strength and love, you get grace. The strength says, I could squish you like a bug if I choose to. The love says, I don't choose to. I choose to use my strength to bless you.

If God did not have both of these characteristics, he would not be worthy of our worship. If he were strong, but not loving, he would be a bully. If he were loving, but not strong, he would be a wimp. But God is a God of grace, strong yet loving.

G.K. Chesterton was a literary giant whose favorite form of literature was fairy tales. "Fairy tales," he said, "speak to us about how to live as adults." Chesterton's favorite fairy tale was Beauty and the Beast. The point of the story was that unlovely things must be loved in order to become lovely.

People who don't know God, sometimes imagine that God is the beast. But David knows God. And he knows that God cares about him. God is not the beast. He's the beauty. We are the unlovely thing that must be loved in order to become lovely.

Welcome Home!

Homecoming Prayer

God, thank you for being both strong and loving. Thank you for being worth of my worship. I receive your love, acceptance and forgiveness.