

THE IMMENSE RESOURCES

Hopefully we have realized, with the help of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, that the excitement and expanse of the Christian Message in the first century A.D. was even greater than we had imagined. The "mystery of God's plan," as Paul called it, was a greater departure from First Covenant expectations than is easily grasped. But it also leaves us in the wonder and challenge of a two-dimensional reality that we want to both love and ignore at the same time.

We love the evidence and reassurance that we are spiritual beings. Most of us would not deny that the evidence for spiritual realities all around us is beyond rational dispute. But that also puts us in the middle of a huge dilemma. If we live in a place where physical and spiritual realities are admitted and acknowledged, what does that mean about how we live our lives here? To be sure, at least some of us no longer pretend that we are in charge or that we can control very much of what is going on all around us. But we do make choices every day. We do have goals and purposes and values we try to live by. And yes, to some degree, we have free will. At least we have enough free will to feel responsibility for some of our behavior. We are still capable of guilt, shame, and remorse for some of our actions, and we are capable of joy, satisfaction, and gratitude when our choices seem to bring benefit and feel faithful.

It is, for instance, common knowledge that Paul's view of salvation is three-layered. Christ's victory in the Cross and Resurrection is a PAST FACT. Jesus conquered "Sin, Death, and the Devil," to use our shorthand formula. He took the fight straight into the jaws of Hell, and God backed Him up completely and unmistakably. That was true for Jesus, and is true for all of us who believe in Him. But salvation is also PRESENT EXPERIENCE. That is, the struggle is not over yet for any of us. We still encounter and deal with "Sin, Death, and the Devil." So for us the Present Experience is a continual "calling on" the presence of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord as we continue to choose and decide – to live and behave – according to our confidence in Jesus and in His leadership in our own lives in the present moment. This does not seem nearly as clear or certain to us as the Past Fact of Jesus' victory and authority; He did it better than anybody could have expected or imagined. We are not nearly as certain about our *own* participation in this drama. We trust Him for our salvation, but not for our perfect performance. If we are being saved, it will doubtless involve a good deal of grace,

mercy, and forgiveness along the WAY. Yet we do trust Him for that as well. In any case, salvation is now a Present Experience. And we do discover the continual support and caring of His presence with us – backed by frequent reminders of His power and authority working on our behalf – whenever we are willing to receive and allow it.

But our salvation is also a FUTURE HOPE. It is not over – it is never finished in this realm. Nor *can it* ever be finished in this realm of physical limitations and partial possibilities. Jesus is saving us and will go on saving us – that is, He is teaching, forgiving, and inspiring us, and also bailing us out and giving us new chances: dusting us off and setting us on the Path afresh. However much we may experience love and beauty and truth in this realm, it is always mixed with flaws and limitations. Our true HOPE is never full or fulfilled here. Nor are the promises of Jesus or His Father full or fulfilled here. Being physical creatures with finite minds, we often waffle on this point, but Jesus doesn't and never did. There is a future and a hope far greater than this world has ever known or seen. And that is our true hope and destination.

But that still leaves us with the very current dilemma and opportunity of walking the Path – following the WAY (that is, following Jesus) – in the here and now. And that puts us smack in the middle of what we have called “The Balancing Act.” We live in a place where physical reality and spiritual reality mix and intertwine. This is our glory, and often our downfall. How do we remember ... how do we behave ... how do we choose and respond to all that comes our way – each and every day – here where we find ourselves “in, but not of, this world”?

Paul sees “the mystery” – sees that God is now bringing unity and harmony to all things and all peoples. Is that what *we* see? Is that what *you* see? Are you able to frame and shape your life according to that plan, that hope?

I don't mean for that to sound like a rhetorical question, or like some simple theoretical concept. I think this is the real question for Christians – the most urgent practical question we have. It isn't a very high question, in one sense, though of course it has more complexities and facets to it than we imagine at first. But it is a very pragmatic, down-to-earth question. Do we have some glimmer of what God is doing, and are we trying to live our lives in such a way that we are cooperating with what God is doing? That is Paul's enthusiasm and delight when he begins to realize “the mystery of God's plan.”

Paul does also ask the much more profound question: Does God have the power, the authority, the resources to accomplish his plan? Can God pull it off? Naturally, the answer to this question, at least from the faith perspective, has to be YES. Of course! God can do whatever God decides to do. Even this question will sometimes come back to haunt us, since we *know* the right answer but, from time to time, we also doubt the reality of the right answer. Does God have the resources to bring unity and harmony to all Creation? Oh sure! I mean – gulp – I certainly hope so. Well, some days it doesn't seem like there is much evidence for a favorable reply; but if not, *then* what?

Paul actually gives a reply to this question in verse seven: “... *so that God might display in the ages to come how immense are the resources of his grace, and how great his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*” (REB) How immense are the resources? They are immense enough to pull off the mystery of God's plan. They are immense enough to bring unity and harmony to all Creation. They are immense enough to break past all the racial barriers, all the animosity, and all the sin and separation that divides each and every one of us from God. Otherwise, you see, it is hopeless. Otherwise, all religion is a pipe dream, an illusion, a dishonest form of wishful thinking.

Normally we think more in terms of physical resources. Is there enough oil? Do we have enough money? Is there adequate food and water, or time? Are there enough weapons, enough manpower? But spiritual resources? Are they ever in short supply? From our actual perspective, they are always in short supply. What *are* spiritual resources? Hope, trust, love, approval, appreciation, caring, forgiveness, grace, inspiration. Are there enough of these things to pick up anyone and everyone, in this realm and the next? What are the real barriers to the mystery of God's plan? The reverse of these very resources: “I don't believe it.” “I am not included.” “I am angry (or rebellious, or self-sufficient).” And so on.

Paul is serious, and really means it. The immense resources of God's grace are sufficient to accomplish his purposes. “*For by grace you have been saved through faith.*” We often pull such a statement out of context, don't we? It's not *about* anything; it's just sort of a nice-sounding motto, or a cheer Christians should give at the homecoming game. But Paul is finishing his claim: Can God accomplish God's plan? Yes; God's resources are immense – enough to save even you. “*For by grace you have been saved through faith.*”

How do we stay real and honest? I think it is imperative that we do so, because we are about at the point where this will become the central core of our reality, or we will abandon it and go back to normal life in this world. We can see, by the life going on all around us, that huge numbers of people have decided that this is all just theoretical verbiage which has no relevance at all to our reality. Am I actually going to live for this incredible plan to bring unity and harmony to all Creation? Or am I going back to the tiny hopes and pleasures of my little life here, for at least as long as I can hang on to any of them? Maybe a pleasant dinner from time to time, and a movie; a little vacation; possibly a raise. And maybe, if I'm lucky, from time to time some people will say they think I'm a nice person, or even that I do some good things.

What is my truth? To be candid, I do not see any overwhelming signs of unity or harmony coming to our world. It may be that Paul was expecting it in *his* world. He may actually have been thinking and expecting that nearly all Jews would soon be realizing that Jesus was the true Messiah. He may have been hopeful that the divisions between the various Christian groups were just the fallout from how fast things were developing. And even amidst the vast pagan empires of his time, Paul may have seen signs that the Gospel was making swift inroads everywhere it was being proclaimed. Maybe in relatively short order, a new unity and harmony really was spreading across the world.

If this is what Paul was thinking, he was mistaken. Meaning, if this was the level of his hope and faith, it was an aberration. Christians would fight and argue and disagree with each other more and more, not less and less. Paul was in constant controversy even in his own time, and his own ministry was constantly under threat of divisions and arguments that were tearing things apart. And Paul didn't even live to see the great heresies being born. Some of them, in one form or another, are still tearing things apart. A careless historian might claim that Christianity was spreading so rapidly and effectively that the Emperor (Constantine) would convert and unite the entire Roman Empire under Christ. Yes – just in time to split it all asunder in Church Council after Church Council that would keep Christians at each other's throats until the Empire itself fell. And then we get Islam, and then Reformation, and counter-Reformation.

How many separate churches try to survive in the tiny town of Port Townsend – all bearing witness to the unity of Christ's church in 2011? Population is 9,113. Number of churches: 30. This is “unity and

harmony”? And is this picture not duplicated in every town and city in the United States? What unity? What harmony?

Even so, this is far from the hottest or most damaging issue of our time. At least most of us don't think such divisions and disagreements among Christians even matter very much anymore. It's all too familiar to seem important. But when have we experienced a more polarized society than the one we now find ourselves in? When have we ever had to steer clear of so many topics to avoid an angry, futile, senseless, unresolvable argument?

Do I think – actually believe – that we are moving toward an age of unity and harmony? Muslims and Christians will see themselves as brothers again? Jews and Arabs will work for the common good again? Rich and poor and middle-class people will all wish each other well? And all of us will honor all the creatures of the earth, and work together to ensure their well-being and restore their habitat? Right! We are so close to “peace on earth” – to harmony everywhere – that I cannot even imagine it.

And yet ... that is not the only perspective, is it? Are we asking the question from a physical viewpoint or from a spiritual viewpoint? Life does not look the same from these two very different perspectives. It never has.

But the truth is, I have hope for many things – from a spiritual perspective. They appear to be somewhere between unlikely and impossible – from a physical perspective. I even have discussions with people, when we are both in a spiritual perspective, that we could not possibly have if either of us were in a physical perspective. If you are a Democrat, do you ever have any good conversations with a Republican? Or vice versa? Not unless you both get beyond the normal plane of awareness in this world.

Sometimes one or another of us will be in some kind of crisis: an accident or a disease; or harm has come to some family member; or there has been the loss of a job or a mate. And “out of the woodwork,” as we used to say – from numerous and amazing places – come pouring the compassion and caring of all sorts of people who are suddenly operating from a spiritual plane instead of from the usual physical plane. Indeed, the person in trouble will often say something about “a miracle,” and claim they had no idea that so many people were so loving or that anybody actually cared about them very much.

So do I believe in “unity and harmony” from a spiritual perspective? If not, I have no spiritual perspective. The question then is: By which perspective will I live? Some people continually bounce back and forth between the two perspectives, but in fact that is the hardest life of all.

Did Jesus struggle with any of these realities and choices? Did Jesus live in any kind of awareness of these two dimensions? You know He did. You know that is why His life is so remarkable, and so troubling. Eventually the world of the physical dimension would kill Jesus. And it would kill Him precisely because of His amazing and unnerving determination to live by the spiritual dimension. Both were going on all around Him all the time. One was not more real than the other. *Both* were going on all around Him all the time. According to which dimension a person happened to be looking at, different people had different authority, different status, different power. Do you remember the strange scene between Jesus and Pilate just before the crucifixion? Both men were aware that nothing was really what it appeared to be. They both had a certain status, but Jesus’ true identity and status were far beyond Pilate’s. Jesus even claimed that He could call on His power if it were appropriate. But let us not lose the point.

At this moment, the point is that Jesus was living “in, but not of, this world.” That is, Jesus knew both realities, but chose to live, decide, and behave according to the truth, the hope, and the realities of the spiritual realm – where He is indeed the true King. Therefore – and we must never forget it – the physical realm of this world killed Him. In many times and places, the physical and spiritual realms dwell side by side and seem to have no particular animosity toward each other. But that is always a lull in the real issues. The two realms have very different values and methods. Whenever that comes to light, there is severe conflict. The physical realm is always deeply threatened by the spiritual realm. And from time to time, it will prove it.

Jesus knew that He – and therefore all the rest of us as well – could live *in* this world but *for* the spiritual realities, hopes, and purposes: for the will of His Father. He did so, and the world killed Him. Yet it was still a real and true possibility, and He chose it. And He invited all the rest of us to follow Him into this same WAY. It is a WAY wherein we live for the spiritual realities though we are still also alive in this physical world. But never stop there! That is not the end of the story. Then we come to the mystery: Despite His focus on the spiritual realm, did Jesus have any influence or impact on the physical dimensions of this world?

All our equations and expectations now go haywire. Name another person to match Him on the level of sheer influence in this physical world.

The only leader who was a serious contender, for a while, was Augustus Caesar. He was clearly the most influential man in the world – for a while – and Jesus couldn't hold a candle to his achievements or reputation *for generations*. But that is no longer the case. Not even for the greatest ruler of the known world.

Paul, as we have mentioned, did not at first know about this New WAY. But increasingly, from the time of his encounter on the Damascus Road, Paul did know of it. Rather quickly, from our perspective, Paul chose this New WAY more and more. He lived for Jesus, though he was still in this physical world. With the help of Jesus, Paul's choices and behavior and purposes were more and more according to the spiritual realities. Like Jesus, he was then "in, but not of, this world."

And the world killed Paul also. No surprise to him, by the way. He had learned from Jesus faster and better than most. And for this reason, I suspect that Paul's hope and devotion to the mystery of God's plan for unity and harmony was seen mostly from a spiritual perspective and not from a physical perspective. Be that as it may, he did choose The New WAY with utter devotion and abandon. And the world killed him for it.

Nevertheless, Paul and growing hundreds, and then thousands, of others were discovering a New WAY – and a new worth, and a new hope beyond this world. For them, all life and reality was changing, and so they were being changed too. Jesus was freeing them from "the way of the world" and taking them into THE WAY OF THE KINGDOM. To the casual observer, it didn't really look like they had gone anywhere: same little village, city, or town; all the same physical needs and problems. But they were traveling faster and farther than the boundaries of this world could contain.

Never tell yourself – never pretend – that there is no New WAY, or that it is not possible to follow Jesus into it. There is a huge host of real and true church members who belong to the true church. It is never fully seen from the physical perspective. But its hopes and purposes are nonetheless real.

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So I do ask myself, from time to time: “Am I discouraged? Have I pulled back from my real purpose and true goals?” Or maybe easier and faster: “Have I stopped following my Lord?” The New WAY is still open before me, just as it is still open before you. And in fact we both have an incredibly wise, powerful, and loving LEADER, who keeps inviting, encouraging, and training us in living this New WAY. And His resources are immense indeed.