

# Lenten Study:

## “Questioning Our Grip on the Cross”



## Study 7

### Resurrecting the Way of Jesus

**NOTE:**

In this final study, there are no reflection questions as such. Instead, I invite you to treat all the thoughts raised herein as open for discussion.

## Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*

### **PRELIMINARY NOTES**

This Lenten Study has been prepared for use in study groups at Blackwood Uniting Church and other interested groups. It is hoped that engaging with this study series will, in some small way, lead to a deepening of understanding and an enlivening of personal faith.

It has been my observation that there are some people for whom reflection on their beliefs and understanding of the Christian faith seems not to be so terribly important, so focussed are they on compassionately *living* their faith, through acts of service and love. If you are in that category, all I ask is that I continue to be permitted to sit at your feet and to learn from, and be inspired by, the ways of your heart.

It is my view that Christian practices, including engaging in studies such as this, are valuable insofar as they contribute to our change and growth as human beings, better enabling us to engage positively with the world, and lovingly and compassionately with those around us. Whether this study contributes in such a way remains to be seen, but...*one lives in hope!*

A word about the reflection questions that accompany each study. Please consider these as suggestive, rather than prescriptive. They are not questions which I'm expecting you to answer like it's some sort of exam! Some of the questions I have raised may be questions that also come to *your* mind. Some questions may not have occurred to you, and you may deem them worthy of exploration. Other questions may have no interest or relevance to you at all.

To the extent that the questions are helpful in facilitating discussion in your group, or sparking your own thoughts, use them. Otherwise consider them of no account.

### **TWO WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH THE STUDY SERIES:**

#### **Study documents and YouTube video clips**

Study participants have two ways in which they can engage with the study materials. Firstly, there are the printed studies, which are also available as downloadable PDF documents that can be viewed on your computer, tablet or smartphone. Secondly, there are YouTube videos for each of the seven studies. It is hoped that these two study media will complement each other, but either can be used separately too.

How each group approaches the study is, of course, up to them. I would anticipate, however, that it may be helpful for a study group to first watch together the YouTube video for the particular week's study, and then discuss the study, using the printed/PDF study notes as a reference. The links to the downloadable PDF files and to the YouTube videos can be found at:

<http://blackwooduc.org.au/downloads/studies/lentenstudy2022>

I hope that you appreciate this study series *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*.

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## Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*

### A recap of what we've covered in the Lenten study

As we commence this last study, we acknowledge that we've covered a lot of ground in the previous six weeks.

#### STUDY 1: Making sense of the world. Making sense of God.

- We considered the human need to make sense of the world through many avenues, including philosophy, science and religion.
- We considered how religions can be viewed as “models” to understand the world.
- Christianity can, likewise, be seen as a model to understand the world, ourselves and God.
- No individual Christian possesses God's Capital-T Truth. What each of us understands is limited and likely includes errors.
- We explored how monotheistic religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity) face a major challenge in making sense of an apparently less-than-perfect world being created by a perfect, all-powerful and all-loving God. The “Please explain!!!” that this evokes is what theologians call the *theodicy* problem.
- We examined the Bible, seeking to test the “all-loving” nature of the God which Christians assert is consistently revealed in the Bible.
- We reflected on Old Testament texts where not only is God *not* all-loving, but actually hateful, vindictive, violent and, at times, genocidally violent.
- We looked at these texts of horror-masquerading-as-the-will-of-God *in order to sensitize ourselves to violence from the outset*. During this Lenten Study series we will be following two threads – the threads of *violence* and *love* – that will lead us to the cross.



#### STUDY 2: What would you be prepared to do to keep the cross?

- This study invited us, by means of a fable, into an alternate reality where Jesus *wasn't* crucified, but instead lived to a ripe old age, preaching, teaching and healing and then, one night, simply dying in his sleep. We reflected on what we felt about such an alternate reality. Would that be okay? Would that be terrible? How tightly do we cling to the cross, and why, and what would we be prepared to do in order to keep it?



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### STUDY 3: What to do with a crucified Messiah?

- We considered the expectations surrounding the long-anticipated arrival of a special “Messiah” and how *none* of these expectations involved this Messiah getting himself crucified!
- We examined the fancy footwork of the New Testament writers in enthusiastically “mining” the Old Testament scriptures for evidence that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah and that he was actually meant to die on the cross. They did so by taking OT passages out of context and inappropriately applying them to Jesus.
- The mining of OT passages by the NT writers occurred in the context of the sacrificial culture of their Jewish faith, in which animal sacrifice was the unchallenged norm. In this context, Jesus’ death on the cross came to be seen, naturally enough, as a sacrifice to God.
- The phrases and images of the NT writers, in which Jesus was seen as sacrifice, ransom, sin-carrier, mercy seat, Lamb of God, Redeemer, were insufficient to form a systematic theology of the cross. Such a systematic theology would take hundreds of years after Jesus’ death to be developed.



### STUDY 4: The “Solution” to the Problem of the Cross: Fall-Salvation Theology

- This study examines, through a whimsical dialogue between an inquirer and the 4<sup>th</sup> Century theologian Augustine of Hippo whom I assigned, with blatant disregard for historical timelines, as the spokesperson for “Fall-Salvation Theology.”
- Fall-Salvation theology is simple in its essence:
  - We are “fallen”
  - Therefore we require “salvation”
  - Jesus’ death on the cross was the means of our salvation
- Fall-Salvation theology necessitates a certain reading of, and a certain set of assumptions surrounding, chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis.
- We began the study by reading the text of Genesis chapters 2 and 3, assessing the text in its own right and not “importing” any assumptions into the text.
- The whimsical dialogue then “unpacked” the “logic” of Fall-Salvation theology, which requires, as its underpinning, belief in a literal first couple, in a literal garden who, tempted by a literal serpent, took a literal forbidden fruit.



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### STUDY 5: What exactly did Jesus' death on the cross "do"?

- In this study, we began by reflecting on the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of Fall-Salvation theology examined in the previous study.
- Before completely dismissing Fall-Salvation theology, however, we first examined the claimed effects (according to the theology) of Jesus' death on the cross.
- We examined the "real-world" effects of Jesus' death on human behaviour, non-Christian and Christian alike, in the 2,000 years since his death on the cross, concluding that his death has been singularly ineffectual in positively influencing collective human behaviour.
- We considered the deep ambivalence in Christian behaviour in the 2,000 years since Jesus' death, puzzling over just how "redeemed" we may appear to the rest of humanity.
- We considered the broad variability in human behaviour, pondering the effect of Christianisation on the collective behaviour of people.
- We asked the question: "How is it that followers of Jesus and believers in the 'all-loving' God of the Bible can, with righteous justification, commit acts of hatred and violence? A hypothesis was put forward to explain this observation.
- We examined the possible "other-worldly effects of Jesus' death on the cross, including the doctrine of justification by faith and the possible impact of Jesus' death on the cross on what happens when we die.



### STUDY 6: Time to get personal: Jesus and you

- We left behind theology, doctrine, dogma, philosophies, concepts, including those shared in this study series, leaving behind only *Jesus and you*. Study participants were invited into a very personal reflection on the following questions.
- Who is Jesus to you?
- What does Jesus mean to you?
- How has the fact that Jesus lived and died and, according to the gospel record, rose again influenced, and continue to influence, your life?
- What significance has Jesus' life, ministry and teaching for you?
- What does salvation mean to you?
- What significance has Jesus' death on the cross for you?
- What significance has Jesus' resurrection for you?
- To assist the reflection of participants, six "Stations of the Christ" were offered:-
  - Station 1: Silence
  - Station 2: Jesus-Who is He?
  - Station 3: Salvation
  - Station 4: Transformation
  - Station 5: Mystical Union
  - Station 6: The Cross

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### STUDY 7: Resurrecting the Way of Jesus

In this seventh and final study, we approach Easter and resurrection.

*What to do with the resurrection?*

One option is to fall back on doctrinal statements about the resurrection:-

He descended into hell.  
The third day He arose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty  
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

We have an image from the Apostle's Creed above in which Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is now God's right-hand-man in heaven.

Do we really believe in the literal meaning of such statements?

Do we really believe in a place called hell?

Do we really believe that God "The Father" is seated in some place – where? – called heaven?

Do we really believe that Jesus, who lived a relatively brief life on Earth, has reverted to his eternal role as a divine being seated next to God The Father?

Do we really believe that Jesus as "Son of God," the "Holy Spirit" and "The Father" are each distinct from one another, are each fully God, but in no way constitute three gods, but rather a single God?

Do we really believe that Jesus will come again, from heaven, to judge the living and the dead?

As modern Christians, *do we really have to believe in such things?*

To be the butt of atheist jokes is the trivial cost of believing such things.

Of far greater cost to us is the disengagement from our wider world that such beliefs bring. How can the rest of the world take Christians seriously who believe such things?

To offer but a single example, why would a secular organisation committed to climate action ever think to partner with a church whose adherents believed Jesus would one day come on the clouds of heaven with a lengthy to-do list, and which included fixing climate change?!

In the Uniting Church's Basis of Union, we read: "*The Uniting Church commits its ministers and instructors to careful study of these creeds (such as the Apostle's Creed) and to the discipline of interpreting their teaching in a later age.*"

It is incumbent upon us to constantly reimagine theology, doctrines, and beliefs in light of reason and the discoveries of modern science. The beliefs that in a different time, place and culture "made sense" do not and should not be mandated beliefs now when they no longer makes sense. **Appendix 1** gives an example of a reimagined Apostle's Creed for today. To be clear, this is not to be prescriptive, and is not offered as a "sensible" replacement of a now ancient text.

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“Sensible” isn’t really a word that I’d use to describe what is an attempt to describe the indescribable reality of God. It is merely a halting, fallible attempt to reimagine ancient words – which once had great meaning – with modern words that may better resonate with modern ears and minds.

### **The problem with the Kataphatic approach: Apophatic silence to the rescue**

A helpful concept as, having journeying through six Lenten studies, we come to the mind-challenging study on Easter and resurrection, is the distinction between the *kataphatic* and *apophatic* approaches to belief. These two technical words which originate from the Greek language distinguish between two very different ways of expressing faith:

#### **Kataphatic:**

Concrete, word-based.

God is...Father, Son, Holy Spirit!

On the third day, Jesus rose bodily from the dead!

#### **Apophatic:**

Abstract, silence-based.

God is...mystery, beyond words.

On the third day, the apostles experienced something extraordinary that they struggled to understand.

So much theology, so much doctrine is *kataphatic* in nature.

There is always a line-up of people telling you the specifics of what exactly to believe!

The *apophatic* approach to faith can provide a helpful modulating and moderating effect on beliefs. For example, and in particular reference to this present study about resurrection, what happens when we die? The kataphatic approach is to insist on the specifics of belief. The apophatic approach is to sit more comfortably with uncertainty, with being comfortable to remain silent. There is an aspect of humility about the apophatic approach.

It is important, though, to have a balance between the kataphatic and apophatic. An apophatic-only approach is, in effect, to channel “Manuel” from the brilliant *Fawlty Towers*: “I know noooooooooothing!”

This present study will offer a mix of the kataphatic and the apophatic as it seeks to explore “resurrection” much more broadly than the imagery in the Apostle’s Creed. It will do so by examining, under the following headings, a number of key problems identified during this study series:-

- 1. Resurrecting a Non-Violent Christianity**
- 2. Resurrecting the Bible**
- 3. Resurrecting Christian Education**
- 4. Resurrecting our view of the World, Human Nature and Salvation**
- 5. Resurrecting our view of the Afterlife**
- 6. Resurrecting the Way of Jesus**

### 1. Resurrecting a Non-Violent Christianity

During this Lenten study series, we have followed the threads of *violence* and *love* on the way to the cross. We explored divine violence in the Old Testament writings and the ready acceptance on the part of the biblical writers of the concept of a vengeful, hateful, violent, genocidal, tribalistic God provided, of course, that this particular God was on *their* side. We followed the thread of divine violence through the Jewish sacrificial culture which, naturally enough, came to see Jesus-the-Crucified-Messiah as a sacrifice to God. We followed the thread of divine violence through the sacrificial imagery of the New Testament writers. We examined the divine violence inherent in the development of Fall-Salvation theology, which posited Jesus as the perfect human sacrifice to God. If one believes in a God who can enthusiastically engage in genocide, it is small beans indeed to conceive of such a God demanding his only son as a perfect human sacrifice.

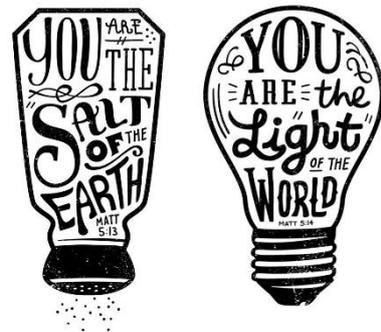
We examined the extremely ambivalent record of Christian behaviour in the 2,000 years since Jesus' death on the cross. We asked how exactly it could be that Christian followers of Jesus' and believers in the "all-loving" God of the Bible were able to engage in hateful and violent acts, whilst maintaining a self-perception of righteousness? A hypothesis was offered explaining this observation, in which absolving God of guilt for violent actions establishes a precedent for absolving us Christians of guilt for our own violent actions. As a violent God can be righteous, so can we.

*It is the assertion of this study* (very *kataphatically!*) that God is indeed *all-loving*.

*It is the assertion of this study* that the instances of divine violence in the Bible *have nothing whatsoever to do with God*, but are merely human projections of the biblical writers.

*It is the assertion of this study* that the idea, which forms the core of much Fall-Salvation theology, that God required the perfect human sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, is morally repugnant and in no way represents the desire of the all-loving God.

*It is the assertion of this study* that all violence in Christian theology and belief needs to be disavowed, and for an extremely practical reason: *history tends to repeat itself*. The worst excesses of Christian violence in the 2,000 years since Jesus' death occurred during that long period of *Christendom* in Europe when Christianity had immense power, both legally and militarily. These days, as a result of the separation of church and state, Christianity has lost its power to wage war, and to arrest and try people for heresy. *If*, at some point in the future, history was to repeat itself, and a legally and militarily powerful Christendom was to re-emerge, there is little doubt that the same self-justifying, self-righteous violence of its first incarnation would again rear its ugly head. For a fictional preview, just think: *The Handmaid's Tale*. If Christianity can eventually embrace a totally non-violent theology and belief system, then not only will we do the world a favour, we may even live out our call to be salt and light to it (Matthew 5: 13-14).



## **2. Resurrecting the Bible**

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)*

***“This is the word of the Lord.”***

***“In this is the word of the Lord.”***

These are two commonly heard endings after the Sunday Bible reading. The most memorable Bible reading I’ve heard didn’t employ either of these endings. The reading was that of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham (Genesis 22:1-19), where God had initially commanded Abraham to go and offer his son as a burnt offering. After reading the passage, the Bible reader looked up and said, “Well, I really do hope the preacher can bring something positive out of this appalling story.”

I like the honesty.

I like the implication that we should be prepared to critique, rather than unthinkingly accept everything the Bible says as “the word of the Lord.”

The thoughts offered in this section are not directed at the fundamentalists, who see the Bible as without error (“inerrant” being one of their favourite descriptors). Such people are impervious to all evidence, including evidence within the Bible itself, that the Bible is far from inerrant and far from perfect. They are wilfully blind to the endless internal contradictions within the Bible. To offer but a single example, in the two gospels which provide a birth narrative, there are two different genealogies offered for Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In each genealogy, Joseph is said to be a descendent of King David. In Luke (3:23-38), he is a descendent through King David’s son *Nathan*, but in Matthew he is descended through King David’s son *Solomon*. Logically, Joseph is descended from one or the other, or neither; he *cannot* be descended from *both*!

So, rather than being directed at the fundamentalists, this section is instead directed at those who are willing to look at the Bible critically and to subject to scrutiny its claims and advice. There are a number of problematic ways in which the Bible has been used, during its 2,000 year history, by various Christian groups:

- Justifying slavery
- Justifying the subordinate status of women
- Justifying discrimination against homosexuals
- Justifying violence
- Opposing the discoveries of science (e.g. the trial of Galileo and opposing the teaching of evolution).

We need to be prepared to “call out” the Bible in instances such as those above.

**A warning inside the cover of every Bible**

During this study's examination of Fall-Salvation theology, the fantasies of Adam and Eve, Original Righteousness, the Fall and Original Sin were critiqued. I must admit, however, that I have a fantasy of my own, namely that every Bible will one day have a little warning note inside the front cover that reads something like the following. Feel free to add to the list!

**!!!WARNING!!!  
!!!STATUS DOWNGRADE FOR BIBLE'S AUTHORITY!!!  
!!! PROCEED WITH CAUTION!!!**

1. This book is not a single book, but a compilation of 66 different books.
2. Some of these books have multiple authors, most of them unknown.
3. Where these books depict events in a historical sense, the events often occurred tens or even hundreds of years before the writings took written form.
4. Sometimes the advice of these authors agrees, and sometimes it conflicts widely.
5. These books comprise a range of genres.
6. When reading a book, it is helpful to understand its genre.
7. Reading a book (e.g. Genesis 1-3) thinking it is one genre (a historical and scientific account) when it is in fact another genre (mythology) can result in very silly conclusions being drawn
8. These books contain an abundance of textual errors, errors of fact, and many, many internal contradictions.
9. All of these books arose out of the historical and cultural context of the writers and therefore reflect the understanding of that time and culture.
10. Within these books you will find writing that is profoundly wise, sublimely beautiful, and which has been a source of inspiration to countless people over thousands of years.
11. Within these books you will find writings that reflect the time- and culture-bound prejudices and biases of the writers.
12. Within these books, especially the section referred to as the Old Testament, you will find depictions of God that reflect the narrow, tribalistic and, at times, violent attitudes of the writers. This is not the real God, but merely a projection of the human writers. The real God is, instead, all-loving and entirely non-violent.
13. Within the section referred to as the New Testament, you will read descriptions of the life and teachings of an extraordinarily beautiful person, Jesus of Nazareth. Many people have been inspired by these words to follow him, and to follow his teachings about how to live. Some of these words may record what he actually said and did, whereas other words may be the embellishment of later writers.
14. When Jesus' advice conflicts with other biblical advice, stick with Jesus' advice.
15. The writers of the New Testament saw Jesus as extremely special and tried to make sense out of why such a special person would be crucified. Out of their sacrificial culture, they came to conceive of Jesus as some kind of sacrifice offered to God. Our modern culture is different; ours is not a sacrificial culture, and therefore we don't have a cultural need to see Jesus' death as a sacrifice to God in order to appreciate him.
16. Some people will tell you this book is without error. No, it *isn't*.
17. Some people will tell you this book is the perfect word of God. No, it *isn't*.

### 3. Resurrecting Christian Education

Because this section deals with such things as ministerial education, rather than congregational education specifically, it has been placed in **Appendix 2** at the end of this study.

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### 4. Resurrecting our view of the World, Human Nature and Salvation

In this study series, we have critiqued the traditional Fall-Salvation theology which sees human nature and the natural world as “Fallen.” The term “Fall” in Fall-Salvation theology can best be understood as an acronym:-

<b>F</b>	<b>Farcical</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>Assumptions</b>
<b>L</b>	<b>Leavened with</b>
<b>L</b>	<b>Literalism</b>

*There was no historical Adam*  
*There was no historical fall.*  
*The natural world is not fallen.*  
*We are not fallen.*

**Human beings are, and have always been, capable of both good and evil. To use that mythological image of the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*, we have “taken of the fruit” (but not in any literal sense) and internalised, over our evolutionary history, the moral capacity to choose to do right or wrong.**

We human beings, therefore, need to take responsibility (*response-ability*) for the choices we make, both good and bad. We cannot fall back (no pun intended) on the excuse “I cannot choose the good in my own strength, for I am fallen!” For an exploration of the Christian denial of responsibility, see **Appendix 3**.

**Since there are no fallen, there is an obvious upshot:  
*Jesus is not Saviour of the fallen.***

In study 6, you were invited into a very personal exploration of *who Jesus is to you*. This included reflecting upon whether, and how, Jesus as “Saviour” resonated with you. I hope you found this a rich experience. If you wish to explore other possible images of Jesus as “Saviour,” please consult **Appendix 4**.

## Lenten Study: Questioning Our Grip on the Cross

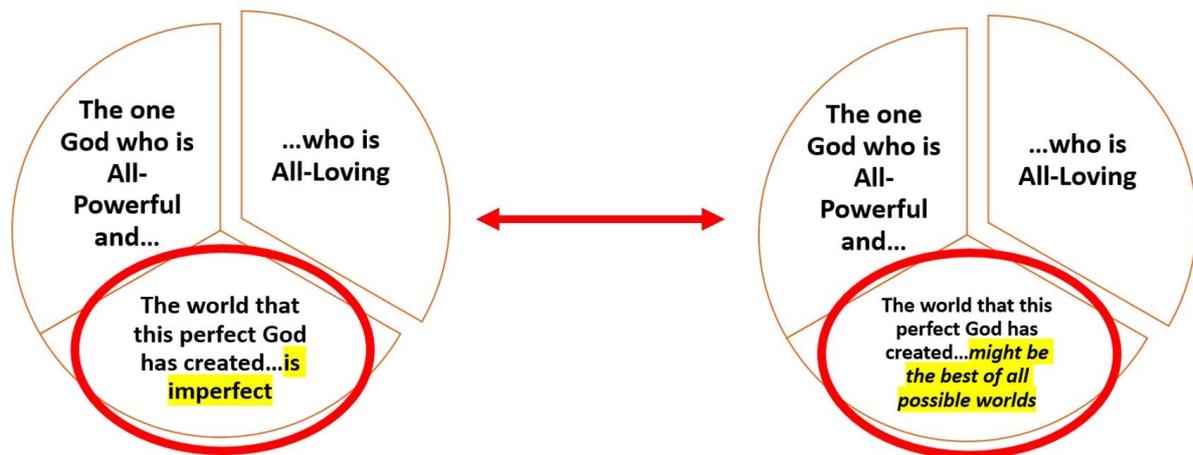
*But, but, but...if we humans aren't Fallen, and if the natural world isn't Fallen, how can we explain the theodicy problem?!*

**God is all-powerful**

**God is all-loving**

**The world that this perfect, all-powerful and all-loving God created is *imperfect*.**

Perhaps it is time to question our starting premise!



***“Might this be the best of all possible worlds?”***

Some of you might respond with ridicule to this question. The very idea evokes derision.

*Look at all the violence and killing in our world!  
Look at all the disease and natural disasters!*

Such a derisive response contains within it an implicit assumption:

The assumption is that we could *conceive* of a better world than this. Perhaps we could even *design* a better world than the one God has actually created?

Shall we flip over a beer coaster and, on the back, design a better world now?!



**Let's start by eliminating human violence.**

We do so by eliminating *human free will*.

Now, we are no longer beings who can *choose* between right and wrong, but instead simply *do what we are programmed to do*: we do only *nice* things; we become automatons, robots. Hmm...maybe that wouldn't be such a terribly meaningful world.

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Okay, having been stymied in eliminating human violence, **let's move on to eliminating natural disasters**. Natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and tsunamis caused by earthquakes.

But earthquakes and volcanic eruptions occur as a result of the dynamic nature of the Earth's molten core, a molten core that generates a *magnetosphere* that protects the Earth's atmosphere from being shredded by harmful cosmic rays.  
Hmmm...maybe best not to mess with how the Earth operates.

Okay, having again been stymied in eliminating human violence and natural disasters, we should at least be able to **eliminate something awful like cancer**.

Cancer occurs due to the accumulation of multiple mutations in our DNA. DNA has some proneness to mutation. *That's it, then!* We'll make DNA absolutely bullet-proof so that it is incapable of mutating, thus preventing cancer ever occurring! But the mutability of DNA is absolutely foundational to the process of evolution by random mutation and natural selection, which is responsible for the myriad of life forms we see on the Earth. Hmmm...maybe best if we don't mess with the stability of DNA either.

When it comes down to it, we know so little about the workings of "the world" – a universe not static, but dynamically unfolding and actualising its potential, over billions of years - that *it is quite simply impossible for us to say, with certainty, that this world is not the best and the most meaningful of all possible worlds*.

*"God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31)*

*Is it not time to resurrect our view of the natural world, and of human nature?*

When we consider God as Creator of all that is...  
A Creator God that operates within but exists outside of time and space...  
A Creator God that is continually creating in every temporal moment...  
A creation not static but a dynamic unfolding of potentialities...  
When we consider an unfolding cosmic evolution of 13.7 billion years...  
When we look at the infinite majesty and grandeur of the universe...  
When we look at the wonders of our own planet Earth...  
When we consider the myriad forms of life all around us...  
When we consider our own cosmic and evolutionary connection to all that is...  
When we consider that, in us, the universe has become self-aware...  
When we consider that, in us, the universe has acquired the power to choose...  
When we recognise within us the great response-ability to choose the good...

How can we see fallenness and corruption?  
Do we not see an unfolding creation  
of which we are part...  
*...and that simply takes our breath away?*

## **5. Resurrecting our view of the Afterlife**

*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied  
(1 Corinthians 15:19)*

### **In praise of Sheol**

*Do you show your wonders to the dead?  
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?  
Is your love declared in the grave,  
your faithfulness in Destruction?  
(Psalm 88)*

The Hebrew scriptures speak of a place called *sheol*, the place of the dead. When you die, you rest in *sheol*. Sometimes, sheol is understood as a dull place where not much of anything happens; as a place of entertainment, it's pretty *lifeless*.

The ancient Israelites did not have an understanding of a body with an immaterial "soul" that went to heaven when you die. The soul was a later invention of those influenced by the Greek Platonist philosophers. According to the ancient Israelites, when you died, your body didn't go to sheol and your soul to heaven. Rather, they understood the human being as a *nephesh*, an integrated whole. It was this integrated whole that died and got buried. They well understood that when you died, when you were buried in the ground, when there were worms crawling through your eye sockets, that things were not at all well with the *nephesh*! Therefore, when the psalmist asks the rhetorical question "Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction?" the answer is "No!" because *nothing* happens in sheol, *because you're dead, mate!*

Many modern Jews have no belief in an afterlife. According to them, when you're dead, you're dead. End of story.

This view apparently didn't fill the apostle Paul with joy (see above). He was immensely attracted to the idea of resurrection from the dead. He argued that as Christ was raised from the dead, so too will we be raised. He argued that if neither Christ nor we are raised from the dead, we have no hope.

I would ask the question: **Why?**

*Why* is it so bad *if*, at the end of this mortal life, we simply die, and that's it?

I think of some of the denominations that seem to have a huge focus on the rewards of a heavenly afterlife (the Jehovah's Witnesses especially come to mind). I wonder whether they would continue to do what they do if God was, in a blinding flash of revelation, to tell them that there was no afterlife? Would they, in that case, decide not to live the sort of life God called them to live, revealing their previous behaviour to have been, well, mercenary in nature?

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I must say that I am moved, *not* by those who live the way they do for the expectation of heavenly reward, but rather by those who live the way they do simply because they believe God calls them to live that way.

### **How certain are we that there *isn't* an afterlife?**

There is a significant proportion of people at the progressive end of the Christian faith who disbelieve in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. As they disbelieve in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and for the same reason, they disbelieve in the possibility of their own bodily resurrection. Such Christians also tend to disbelieve in a disembodied, heavenly afterlife.

As someone who lives in the modern world, and who is at least somewhat acquainted with the material and biological makeup of human bodies, it is hard to fault their scepticism. The apparent ridiculousness of bodily resurrection, as well as the notion of a disembodied, heavenly afterlife, is readily seen. Is God going to reassemble our bodies, atom by atom, cell by cell, organ by organ, reanimating us in ways akin to the capacities of some futuristic nanotechnologist? If instead we are to live a disembodied, heavenly afterlife, will we be able, in that life, to think and feel and, if so, how, without a brain and without a body?

And so, it's easy to adopt an attitude of certainty around the unreality of any sort of afterlife. When you're dead, you're dead, and that's it.

The people of the Jewish faith are correct in their beliefs.  
It's sheol for the lot of us.

But can we be so absolutely certain?

Do we know, well, *everything*, about existence?

To be honest, we know *almost nothing* about existence.

Yes, science has revealed much about the wonders of the natural world.

Yes, science has explained so many natural phenomena.

Yes, science has provided explanatory frameworks for interpreting and predicting events in the world.

But, the understanding offered by science is always *provisional*. The understanding offered us by science is always open to being updated, sometimes in ground-breaking ways. There are presently huge gaps in understanding about such things as dark matter and dark energy, about the true nature of the microscopic quantum realm, about possible hidden dimensions; and that is just to mention some of the things about which scientists *know* they are ignorant!

When this universe began, energy and subatomic particles began a 13.7-billion-year cosmic dance to actualise their myriad potentialities, resulting in atoms, stars, planets, living things and, in us, *conscious living beings* capable of contemplating our own existence and the meaning of our lives. Given how little we actually know about the workings of existence, who is to say that some form of "afterlife" is any more outlandish than how we got here in the first place?! Is it worth spending lots of energy speculating on? Probably not. Maybe best just to live this life as fully, richly and decently as we can, remaining agnostic about what might come next.

## **6. Resurrecting the Way of Jesus**

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life.  
No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6)*

This Lenten study series has spent considerable time exploring why and how the early Christian writers and subsequent theologians, in seeking to explain the death of Jesus on the cross, constructed an elaborate theological superstructure on the farcical foundation of something called The Fall. Once this superstructure and its foundation has tumbled, what remains is *The Way of Jesus*.

For many Christians, The Way of Jesus has always been, and continues to be, their focus. Such Christians are less interested in theological superstructures, doctrines, the minutia of belief, and much more interested in *living* their faith, as they seek to emulate Jesus in their lives. As I said to begin this study, *if* that describes you (and your humility is likely to be such that you wouldn't even recognise it as describing you!), then I simply want to sit at your feet, and continue to be inspired and moved by the ways of your heart.

In my limited understanding, and in my extremely limited emulation thereof, there seem to be a number of aspects to *The Way of Jesus* as described in the gospels.

### **An acceptance of others in their diversity**

Jesus made a habit of hanging out with, and eating and drinking with, those people that the righteous, upstanding religious of his day would have nothing to do with.

### **A focus on right living rather than right belief**

The Jesus that emerges from the "synoptic" gospels (i.e. Mark, Matthew, Luke) is someone who appears relatively indifferent to what people *believe*. He is focussed instead upon how people *live*, a focus that culminates so magnificently in the passage known as his "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7). It is only in the gospel of John, written considerably later and with a particular theological agenda, that Jesus is depicted as being focussed on what people believe, especially about him.

### **The courage to confront self-righteousness, judgementalism and the abuse of power**

The people that Jesus critiqued most harshly were not "the sinners," but *the religiously self-righteous* of his day. How is it that *we*, the religious people of *our* day, fail to see this as a salutary warning to *us*?! Jesus was willing to speak truth to power and, in particular, to speak truth to those who abused their power and ignored the needs of the marginalised. It was this willingness to speak truth to power, to not go quietly into the shadows to protect his own skin, that got him killed.

## Lenten Study: Questioning Our Grip on the Cross

### **A loving humility that is centred in relationship with God and others**

There is a humility in the Jesus we see depicted in the synoptic gospels. Humility is a much-misunderstood word. Humility doesn't mean thinking less of yourself, *but thinking of yourself less*. I actually prefer the term "self-forgetfulness," which describes a state of being in which one is so connected to God, to others, and to life, that one has, to a first approximation, *forgotten* about oneself. And yet, this state is not one of self-diminishment, but instead the pathway to being whom God made you to be. *If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it*. One is not focussed on oneself, on one's status, on one's acceptance by others, on one's ego, but instead is focussed on a rich and deep engagement with life, moment to moment. Jesus was adored by the crowds and hated by his enemies, yet he maintained a sense of self that was not dependent on their opinion of him. This self-forgetfulness appears to have been nourished in Jesus' life by a deep commitment to spending time alone and time in prayer. He lived out his teaching of "The Greatest Commandment" to love God with all of one's heart, soul and mind and to love one's neighbour as one loves oneself.

### **An abundant life that overflows and attracts others**

Jesus once said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10) Jesus lived and loved out of that abundant life, a life that overflowed, a life that drew people to him. Some beautiful souls I have met seem to live out of that same abundant life.

If our world is not drawn to the Christian faith, is it because they fail to discern that abundant life, collectively, within so many of the followers of Jesus? *If the worldwide Christian church did truly follow the Way of Jesus, if we did truly live out of that abundant life, would not the world flock to it?*



## Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*

### Following The Way of Jesus

In this Lenten Study series, *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*, we have examined our own preconceptions around the cross of Jesus. We have questioned how tightly we cling to the cross, that is, how essential do we believe it to be, but also how much do we grasp or understand about the cross.

*Why did Jesus die? Did Jesus have to die? What did Jesus' death achieve? What does Jesus as Saviour mean? Who is Jesus for each of us?*

We have followed the threads of *love* and *violence* from the writings of the Old Testament, through the writings about the life of Jesus in the New Testament, to the development of theologies about the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. We have followed these threads all the way to the cross, and beyond, to resurrection.



Whilst we have followed the threads of violence and love, we affirm that in the life and person of Jesus *there was only love*. He lived a life that embodied the very nature of *the all-loving God*. At the cross, the love of God, embodied in Jesus, collided with the hate and violence of the world, and Jesus died a victim of that violence.

But *violence* was not the last word.  
*Death* was not the last word.

The last words are...

**Faith**  
**Hope**  
and **Love**

And the greatest of these...

...is *love*.



## Lenten Study: Questioning Our Grip on the Cross

### **EPILOGUE to Questioning Our Grip on the Cross**

We have reached the end of our seven-week study, *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Thank you for your willingness to be challenged and exposed to new ideas.

I don't know how you have emerged from this study.

Whether things have changed for you.

Whether things have stayed the same.

Whether the study has answered questions you have had.

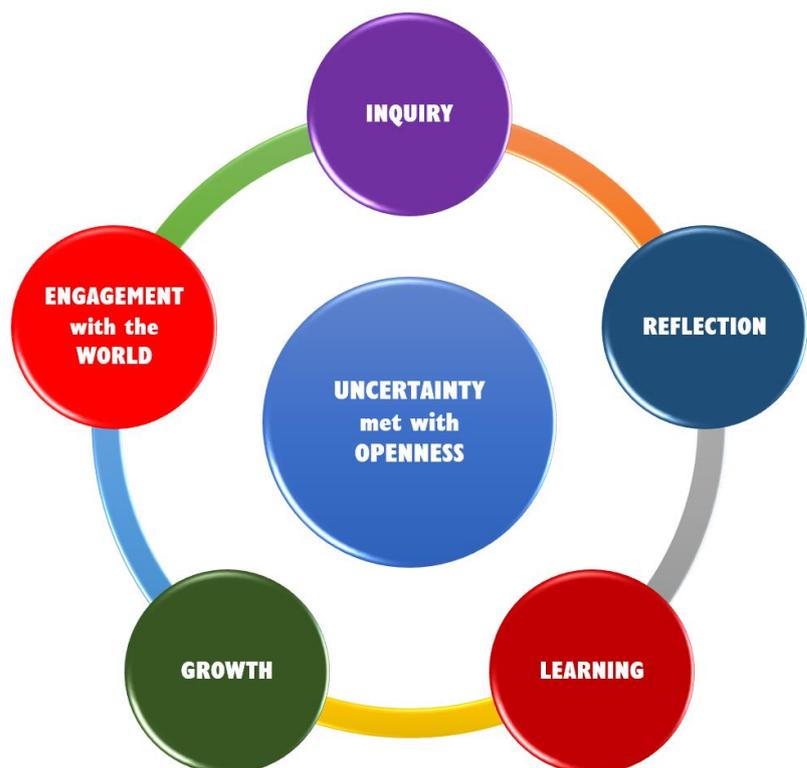
Whether the study has raised more questions for you.

Whether some things have become clearer for you.

Whether some things have become more uncertain for you.

We all need a balance between stability and change; between certainty and uncertainty.

Uncertainty and change can feel uncomfortable. However, if you are feeling uncertain, perhaps even more uncertain than before the study, then *maybe* that *isn't* such a bad thing. Uncertainty, if met with a spirit of openness and curiosity, can lead to inquiry and subsequent reflection, leading to the incorporation of new learning and growth, which better equips us for engaging with the world.



May you continue to approach

with openness the inevitable uncertainty that life brings.

May you continue to enjoy the journey of discovery and growth that is life.

May you continue to engage richly and openly with others.

May God bless and keep you.

Michael Dowling

March 2022

## Lenten Study: Questioning Our Grip on the Cross

### APPENDIX 1: THE APOSTLES' CREED RE-IMAGINED FOR OUR TIME

(Michael Dowling August 2020)

Since ancient times, the Church has, in its baptismal rites, employed the statement of faith known as the Apostle's Creed. In the Uniting Church's Basis of Union, we read: "*The Uniting Church commits its ministers and instructors to careful study of these creeds (such as the Apostle's Creed) and to the discipline of interpreting their teaching in a later age.*"

Because I take my responsibility as a minister in the Uniting Church seriously, I have endeavoured to do just that, in examining and interpreting this ancient creed with new words.

#### APOSTLES' CREED (circa 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
the Creator of heaven and earth,

and in Jesus Christ,  
His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.  
The third day He arose again from the  
dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father  
Almighty,

whence He shall come to judge the living  
and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

#### APOSTLES' CREED: (Reimagined for our time)

I believe in the God beyond time and space  
The God through whom all that is has its  
existence

I believe in Jesus Christ whom, in his life  
and witness, revealed this God so fully; a  
God he knew with such intimacy as "Abba"  
– "Daddy"

The One in whom the human and the divine  
are not opposed, but integrated as one

Who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was  
crucified, died, and was buried

Whose descent into death marked not an  
end  
but the beginning of ascent into newness of  
life and union with the Source of all life  
and meaning

As Christ's life mattered, so too does ours.  
How we live will be judged against Christ's  
life

I believe in the Holy Spirit, connecting  
every person, every living thing, every  
particle in our universe, in a network of  
love, meaning and purpose

## **Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross***

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### **APOSTLES' CREED (circa 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE)**

the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting.  
Amen.

### **APOSTLES' CREED: (Reimagined for our time)**

I acknowledge the importance of this  
flawed and fallible 'Body of Christ' that is  
the universal church, and its mission to be  
all that Christ calls it to be in our world

I acknowledge and honour those ancestors  
in the faith who have gone before me

I affirm that, in the infinite love and mercy  
of God, there is the possibility of  
forgiveness and reconciliation, both for us  
as individuals, and for our world

And I believe my final resting place to be  
not the grave but rather the eternal heart of  
God  
Amen

### **APPENDIX 2: Resurrecting Christian Education**

The following represent a few thoughts about deficiencies in Christian education and how to move toward addressing them.

#### **Level 1: Christian education of young children**

This is an area in which I am, myself, an “infant.”  
Hear these ideas, then, in that light.

I have seen young children given sanitised versions of various horror stories of the Bible, especially Old Testament stories, in which the children would likely come away having internalised a positive image of that story. Examples that come to mind include: the Flood/Noah’s ark story (where God engages in the near genocide of every species on the face of the Earth); the exodus of the Israelites through the Red Sea (where God drowns the Egyptians) and David’s victory over Goliath (where David beheads his enemy). Later in life, that now grownup child might be puzzled when someone such as Richard Dawkins offers a critique of the morality inherent in the stories they once heard as children. I have met many, many adults who seem genuinely puzzled when I raise instances in the Bible of God engaging in violence. This puzzlement likely comes from a number of contributing factors: the reduced reading of and familiarity with the Bible; a regular failure of ministers and preachers to engage with texts of horror in the Bible; and, very possibly, from an early childhood imprinting which renders horror texts as “positive” texts. We really shouldn’t infantilize another generation with sanitized versions of horror texts. Instead, such texts should be avoided entirely until such time as they are ready to hear the brutal truth.

#### **Level 2: Christian education of ministers**

What I’m about to share reflects my own extremely limited perspective in this area.

The theological and biblical education given ministers at liberal theological colleges is given by lecturers who are very erudite, very expert at imparting their knowledge, whether that be in the area of biblical studies or theology.

In biblical studies classes, students are given the confidence to engage in many layers of analysis: textual, literary, historical, sociological, rhetorical and others.

But it seems to me that students-as-ministers-to-be would also benefit from being given the confidence to more boldly challenge the authority of biblical texts. We were told to apply the tools of historical-literary “criticism” to the biblical text, but there seemed to be a deep reluctance on the part of lecturers to encourage “criticism” of the Bible in the more commonly understood sense of that word. The Bible, it would seem, is too “holy” to have criticism applied to it in this sense.

In **Old Testament** studies, with all its erudition, there is a failure to clearly address what is blindingly obvious even to a non-academic who chooses to take merely a cursory look at the biblical text. I speak here of the texts in which God is depicted as tribalistic, hateful, vindictive, violent, genocidal. Whilst I have heard a number of learned observations offered about such texts, I have *never* heard a lecturer state the obvious in the following form:

## Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*

“We have at least three choices when we read a text like this, depending on whether or not we believe the text depicts real events and also depicts accurately the expressed will of God. *If* we believe these texts accurately portray both actual events and the will of God, then we must acknowledge that the God we worship as Christians has commanded, on occasion, violence and even genocide. How do we process such an observation? We can, on the one hand, simply accept the fact that the God we worship has two sides, both a loving side and an extraordinarily violent side. On the other hand, we can argue that normal human standards of morality simply don’t apply to God: when God commands violence and genocide, they cease to be violence and genocide.

Our third option, in dealing with these texts, is to choose to utterly reject that this represents the *Real God* revealed in Jesus, but is instead merely a projection of the biblical writers.”

The lecturers may well have thought these words themselves, but I’ve heard no-one ever verbalise such thoughts. The Bible, it would seem, is just too “holy” to be criticised in this way.

In **New Testament** studies, once more, great erudition is employed, as the gospels and letters are analysed, and as the meaning and purpose of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection are explored. Linkages that New Testament writers draw between Old Testament “prophecies” and their “fulfilment” in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are examined in minute detail. But no lecturer has ever shared something such as the following:

“We emphasize to biblical studies students how important it is to interpret biblical texts with integrity, to seek to draw the true meaning out of the text (“exegesis”), rather than imposing one’s preferred meaning on it (“eisegesis”). A student or a preacher should not cherry-pick Old Testament verses out of context in order to support one’s argument. And yet, if we applied this modern standard to the writers of the New Testament, they would utterly fail to meet this standard, as their Old Testament references, when judged by modern standards, are almost invariably taken out of context, and inappropriately applied to the person of Jesus. You should keep this in mind when drawing theological inferences from their writings.”

When it comes to **theological studies**, theology classes at college explore many and varied interpretations and understandings of the death of Jesus on the cross. The complexity and the nuances involved are something to behold. However, I have never heard a theology lecturer state something like the following:

“It can be helpful, as we explore this theology of the cross, to simplify our language so that its essence can be readily understood by anyone. For example, the most common version of Fall-Salvation theology is described as *Penal Substitutionary Atonement*. It will help people better understand this theology if we say, straightforwardly, that God demanded the perfect human sacrifice of his only son because a literal first couple, tempted by a literal talking serpent, took and ate of a literal forbidden fruit.”

I’ve been curious for some time *why* I’ve never heard a theology lecturer say something like this. Is it because it sounds horrifying as well as ridiculous? Is it better to camouflage the horror and absurdity under layers of complexity, in order to cover one’s own embarrassment?

## Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*

### Level 3: The theological “education” of a congregation through songs and hymns

Much of our Christian theology is absorbed through the lyrics of the songs and hymns we sing. Over time, without even thinking about it, we begin to internalise the theology inherent in the words, words such as the following (P&W 592 Amazing Love):-

Amazing love, O what sacrifice  
The Son of God given for me  
My debt he pays, and my death he dies  
That I might live, that I might live

If we sing songs like this often enough, we start to “normalise” their theology. Are we willing to critically examine the songs and hymns we sing?

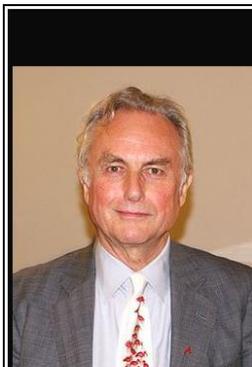
### Level 4: The theological “education” of a congregation by its minister

The Uniting Church lays upon its ministers a number of responsibilities, including a *teaching* responsibility. I’ve always thought this was a bit patronising toward the congregation. It would seem to me that sermons and studies are less about imparting information (“teaching”) and more about encouraging questioning. That being said, ministers do have the privilege of having gone to theology college and thereby being exposed to more information than the average member of a congregation. Maybe it can be helpful, at times, to share some of this information.

The question, though, is what information does the minister feel comfortable and confident in sharing with the congregation? If, during their theological education, the minister saw little willingness on the part of lecturers to “call it as it is” when it comes to the Bible and theology, then it may also be difficult for the new minister to speak plainly and directly when engaging with biblical horror texts and abhorrent theologies. They may think to themselves, “If the lecturers were afraid to speak straightforwardly and directly to me, then perhaps I’m right to be afraid to speak straightforwardly to my congregation, sharing my own concerns. Maybe the congregation isn’t ready to hear what I *really* believe?”

### A Multi-Level failure

The result of this multi-level failure to confront abhorrent Bible texts and abhorrent theologies is that so many members of congregations remain puzzled and offended when an atheist like Richard Dawkins calls Christianity to task for its abhorrent biblical texts and theology. “Why is he so mean, and so deluded?!” they think to themselves. Richard Dawkins is actually providing a valuable service to us Christians, but we really shouldn’t need an atheist to educate us.



The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

(Richard Dawkins)

izquotes.com

## Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*

### APPENDIX 3: Accepting personal responsibility for the *right* things

We need to move beyond some of the more pathological manifestations of Fall-Salvation belief. The psychiatrist M. Scott Peck describes two common disorders diagnosed in his profession. One is *neurosis*, these days called an anxiety disorder, where the person in question often assumes *too much responsibility*, or assumes responsibility for something that they shouldn't, anxiously worrying and fretting about it. The other disorder is a *character disorder*, in which the person assumes *too little responsibility*: nothing is ever their responsibility, it's always someone else's problem.

Some of the manifestations of Fall-Salvation theology bear the hallmarks of *both* character disorder *and* neurosis.

Psychological disorder	Christian manifestation
<b>Neurotic disorder:</b> where the person in question assumes responsibility for something that they shouldn't.	Feeling a guilty, fallen sinner, because of one's participation in the imaginary Fall of Adam and Eve.
<b>Character disorder:</b> where the person assumes too little responsibility.	Feeling an inability to do anything good in one's own strength, or to make the world a better place, because it all has to be left to Jesus, Saviour of the Fallen.

A dramatic example of the *character disorder* was emblazoned, one night, on a Christian billboard:-

**Good News for today! Jesus Christ will solve climate change!**

*Excellent news, I thought!*

We can immediately send off an email to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), telling them that they could safely disband the organisation. We could immediately cease worrying about engaging in climate action on the personal, business and government fronts.

There was no need for us humans to work toward creating a better environment.

We can't do anything good anyway, because we are fallen and corrupted.

Instead, we could just be *passive* and believe in Jesus.

Because Jesus will fix everything.

It is a complete denial of personal responsibility.

An example of the *neurosis* is Christians feeling guilty and worthless because we are the fallen, sinful descendants of Adam and Eve. By wrongfully assuming responsibility for an imaginary sin committed by an imaginary couple, we create a self-fulfilling prophecy: we don't believe we can do anything good in our own strength and so, we don't.

**A resurrection in personal responsibility will see Christians embrace their own personal responsibility to live out the teachings of Jesus, to care for others and for creation, rather than denying responsibility through seeing themselves as fallen, sinful beings who can do nothing good in their own strength.**

## **APPENDIX 4: A re-imagining of “Salvation” and Jesus as “Saviour”**

In this study series, we have examined Fall-Salvation theology at length. We have examined the foundation of “being Fallen” upon which the superstructure of the asserted need for salvation is erected, and discovered that it is a foundation without substance.

And what then of Jesus as “Saviour”?  
He is no longer Saviour of the Fallen.  
For there are no Fallen.

And what then of “Salvation”?  
Not salvation from a farcical event, in a fairy-tale garden, by an imaginary couple.  
There is no need for salvation from the *imaginary*.

There may, however, still be a need for a saviour and for salvation from aspects of our experience in the *real* world.

In Study 6 *Time to get Personal: Jesus and you*, I encouraged your reflection on who Jesus was for you. Forget the theology! Forget the doctrines! Forget the sermons! Forget this study series! I hope you took the opportunity to explore the meaning of Jesus for you.

There are a few images of Jesus as Saviour and of salvation that I will share with you, and which tie in to the response-ability we have as humans and as followers of Jesus.

### **Jesus as an Saviour of the potential of the human spirit.**

*“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father”* (John 14:12)

How often do we look at Jesus as some sort of superman figure?  
I couldn’t possibly do what *he* did, and live how *he* lived, and loved how *he* loved!  
And then we read this verse.  
And we are called by it to exercise our response-ability, day by day, to do likewise.

### **Jesus as Saviour from our fragile, self-interested ego**

*“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me”* (Galatians 2:19-20)

*“If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it”* (Matthew 10:39 NLT)

This dying to self can be understood, on one level, as a dying to our ego. The Greek word translated as “life” in the Matthew verse above is neither *bios* (biological life) nor *zoe* (divine life), but rather *psyche*, from which we derive the English words psychology and psyche. A Neo-Freudian translation would be “If you cling to your *ego*, you will lose it; but if you give up your *ego* for me, you will find it.”

## Lenten Study: Questioning Our Grip on the Cross

We put so much energy, at times, into defending our ego.

We defend our point of view, our beliefs, our need to control, our status in the eyes of others.

What would happen if, bit by bit, one day at a time, we let go of this need?

Might we discover that there was truly nothing to protect and defend?

Might we discover that, rather than losing our identity, we became whom God genuinely created us to be?

### **Jesus as Saviour of the Interconnected Kingdom of God**

*Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21)*

Jesus spoke enigmatically about this thing called the Kingdom of God. Never once did he say what it was, only what it was like, and that it was already here, hiding in plain sight.

One possibility is that the Kingdom of God describes a reality that is impossible to see whilst we live within a self-focussed, individualistic mindset. It is only when we *lose* our (individual) life that we *find* our (interconnected) life. It is only when *in him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28) that we experience the indescribable reality that is the Kingdom of God. It is only when we let go of ourselves enough to love our neighbour truly as ourselves that we experience the Kingdom of God. We experience "salvation" not in an isolated, individualistic sense, but rather in a collective sense, where we are deeply connected to God, others, life and our deepest self.