

A Quest for Purpose

Discovering Christ-Infused Meaning in
All of Life's Trivialities

By Jeff Fogle

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Introduction

The Meaninglessness of a Christ-less View of the Mundane

What if our struggle for meaningfulness in the ordinary events of every day life doesn't have to do with their being worthless or boring, but they have to do with our view of Christ?

We live in a culture where we thrive on excitement and the extraordinary, but our reality inevitably leaves us wanting. The reality is that most of us are called to relatively few extraordinary events in our lifetime, and we are left wondering why we have to endure the humdrum trivialities of everyday life.

I work in a vocation as an army chaplain where paratroopers come to me almost daily with the same problem. "I joined the army to jump out of perfectly good airplanes and defend our country, not to scrub toilets and do push-ups." "This is sooooo boring." "I want to make something of myself, yet I am stuck with the mundane events of every day life." And the consequence is that "I've lost all ability to feel. I don't know what it is to be happy, sad, or excited about anything anymore."

Or maybe your journey more closely resembles my own. Maybe you have given your life to do wonderful and extreme things for Christ, and in the process you have so belittled your earthly life that you have sucked the meaning out of everything that doesn't seem (to you) extraordinarily spiritual.

And you are left longing for answers: "What is the point of spending my whole day trying to figure out how to write a report for my boss?" "Am I pleasing to God in the *mundane* things I do every day? In eating, drinking, spending time exercising, taking time to be with my spouse and children, or even spending all day waiting in line to receive something I don't particularly care about?"

If you've found yourself asking these or similar questions, then you may hold a heretical view (dare I say?) of Christ's purpose for your life ... even as I once did.

By far the most pendulum-changing moment in my life was when He gripped my heart to show me that I could joyously entrust my life to Him. Yet then about ten years later, he shook my world and altered the pendulum's trajectory by infusing every aspect of my life with meaning, learning the joys in every diaper change, every sniff of autumn air, every jump from an airplane, every grasp at the beauty of a work of art, every struggle in power lifting.

If you are asking right now whether or not these things are spiritual and/or meaningful, then (dare I say?) your purpose in life may amount to nothingness, which is only what rocks should think about (according to Aristotle).

What follows in the pages to come is a labor of love based on my theological and experiential journey. The opening of my eyes to these central truths have infiltrated every aspect of my life and senses with joy, akin to the difference between repeatedly kicking a struggling black

and white TV and purchasing an HD big screen (with multiple colors!).

To paratroopers, colleagues, and those I long to experience the joyous new world He has called me into, I give myself to compile a summary of my research over the past few years, that you, by God's grace, would be encouraged despite me. To those paratroopers and FaceBook "friends" (if they shall be so called) who wonder if I am abandoning God as I transition from being a chaplain in the 82nd Airborne Division to entering the M.D. program at the University of Illinois, I give the sweat of my brow to show you that everything in life (yes, even science and power lifting) is joyous when we realize the meaning with which Christ has infused it.

The musings in the following pages consist of *everything* I know (yes, and no more) about the subjects of the so-called theology of vocation and the relationship between the physical life and the spiritual.

A Little Somethin' Somethin' about My Journey to Find Purpose

How can my life be worthwhile and pleasing to God?

This was a question that had not even flickered in my mind until my junior year, yet the hauntings remained for eleven years after I gave up everything for Christ.

The background in which I sprouted was very Christian, for which I am thankful, yet I was, like many others, only a Christian by name for all my blossoming years. My father grew up as a missionary kid in Africa, while my mother met Jesus out of a home in which her mother was married eight times and had many other struggles. Yet my parents raised me as a Christian.

I had *zero* inklings of desire to be a Christian as my scrawny trunk slowly flourished. Like many others, I recognized what I excelled at – math, science, and sports in my case – and I well intended to make my fortune and rise in society in this way.

Yet suddenly at a camp meeting, for the first time in my shy little life, I could not resist going forward to ask somebody about this Jesus of whom I had heard. Though I had heard of Him all my life, I had never desired Him before. In a moment, He changed my desires somehow in ways I cannot explain. Suddenly, the overwhelming joy of following Him flooded my heart in such a way that every other desire was drowned without a cough.

There I was (no comment from the army folk reading this!), a people-pleaser not giving a hoot for what anybody else thought, tears melting down my face as my heart softened, not knowing what any of this meant.

Though not particularly at any certain person's prodding, I assumed that giving my life to Jesus meant being a pastor or missionary, so I quit Calculus after the fall semester of my senior year, seeing this as worthless in the light of eternity.

For college, the Lord opened the door for me to leave good old Des Moines (indeed you do not pronounce either "s," for all you jokesters out there!) and everything I knew, which I expected was a necessary step in giving my life to Him. During my stint in Chicago (Chi-town!), I attended Moody Bible Institute, where I struggled with the purpose of playing soccer.

Though the Lord gave me a measure of success at this level of play,¹ I waivered in God's purpose in this game, almost quitting entirely on several occasions, seeing this pithy game as "unspiritual" and "of no use" for eternal purposes. Yet somehow I continued to play (in hindsight, it seems for the sheer enjoyment of the sport and for no other reason).

During a time of my struggle in the off-season, figuring it unspiritual to exercise, I ceased straining my body for anything but the necessary journeys to the bathroom, the dining hall, the classrooms and the other essentials. One day when I was *forced* (oh the cruelties of Bible college!) to play

¹ I am *well aware* that I was not a professional, yet for the sake of credibility, if it means anything to you, I will share that we won our Christian college national championship, I was captain my senior year, and I was named the Male Athlete of the Year my senior year. Please don't mistake my spirit in sharing this. My only point in sharing anything about myself here is to facilitate a story about Christ's greatness.

half court basketball with my friends, I figured out that my philosophy of exercise was less than honed when I heard my heart screaming “You’re an idiot!” at every exertion. Thus, I learned that cessation from all exercise was less than desirable, while I still had no purpose in place for the *vanities* of the weight room (or so was my perception at that phase).

While at Moody, there was also a wonderful emphasis on worldwide missions work and evangelism. It was really a wonderful place to grow and blossom, not only physically in this case, but even more so spiritually. Yet the lens through which I was viewing the Christian life at that time only allowed me to digest certain spiritual truths that fostered an even more dichotomized view of my life.

Truly I saw the Christian life as consisting of only the so-called “spiritual disciplines,” while *the remainder of my life could only be endured, at best.*

I honestly found this a better way to live than before I met Christ, but it was still desperately lacking! It is far better to attempt to lean on the Gospel in every respect and to be oblivious of its implications for the rest of your life than to have never tasted the joys of following Him at all!

While at Moody and at Wheaton Graduate School, I used to go to the D.L. Moody Museum and the Billy Graham Museum and cry that I was not like them. Both of these men were evangelists who preached the Gospel to countless masses. Why was I not doing the same? “If I were fully committed to Jesus, surely I would be doing the same thing!” D.L. Moody even said, “The world has yet to see what God could do with one man who is fully committed to Him.”²

“Could I become this man? ... I *must* become this man!”

² We *should and must* encourage people toward evangelism and missions work, yet we should *also* encourage people to lay down their lives for Christ in whatever God has called them to.

Though far outside of my comfort zone, I volunteered to preach once a week to three hundred homeless men at the Pacific Garden Mission. I was a willing, *yet horrible*, preacher at that time. Though God used my patheticisms somehow in a few lives, my extreme volunteerism was more about myself, I fear in hindsight, than it was about Him.

Throughout my years of Bible college and graduate school, I focused on studying the biblical languages, Greek for five years, and Hebrew for four, feeling that the Lord was leading me to translate the Bible into a language that did not have a copy yet. Though to this day I realize the need and remain passionate, the Lord led me to work in a church as an assistant pastor for three years at Christ Church of Dubuque (IA).

There I remained until a bizarre dream about becoming an army chaplain. Realizing the ridiculous nature of the dream and the utter impossibility of my wife's acceptance, I jokingly shared it with her. To my utter astonishment, she encouraged the dream.

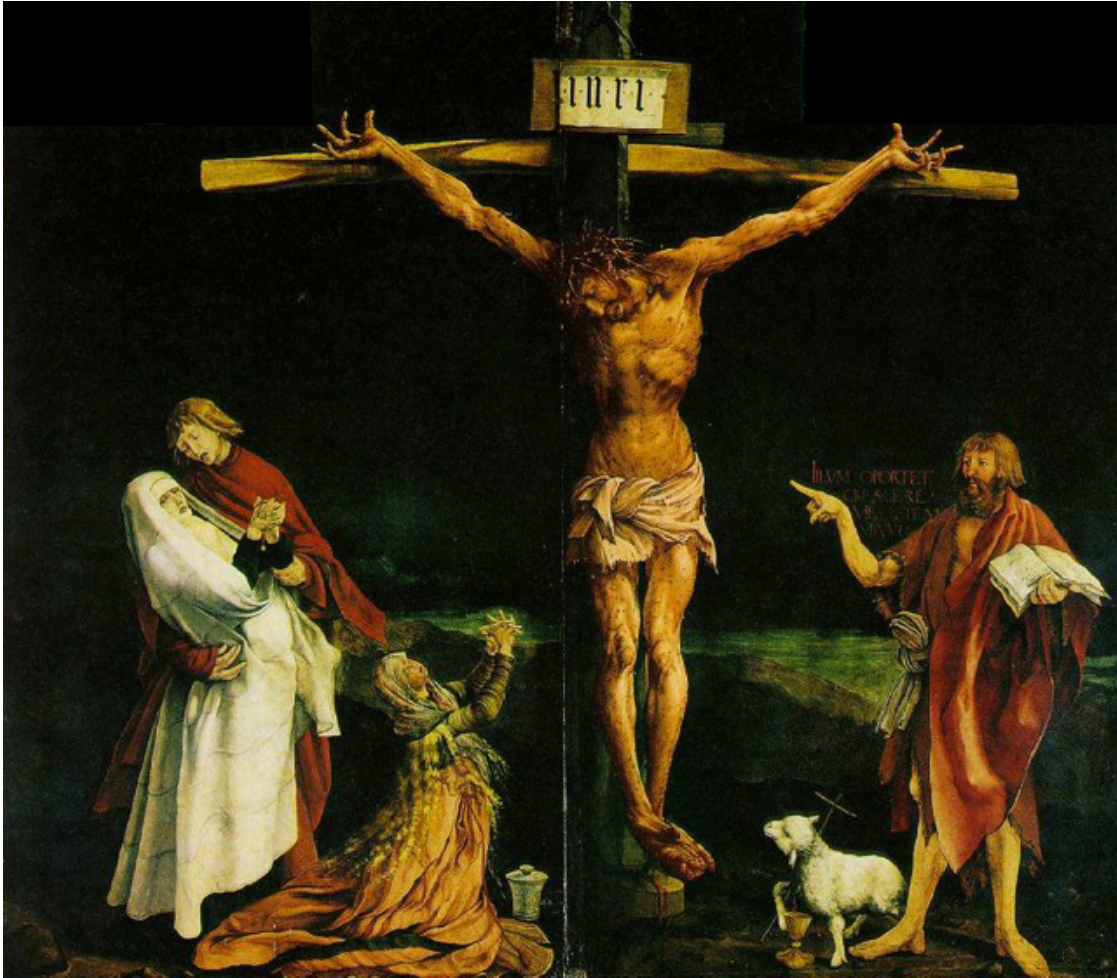
Here I stand today on the other side of my chaplaincy in the 82nd Airborne Division, two baby girls later, on the brink of matriculating (a fancy word for "entering") at the College of Medicine at the University of Illinois.

How did I get from there to here? Have I abandoned God? Has science finally shown me that God does not exist? If I am still pursuing God, how is it that I don't struggle with the thought of "wasting my life" on unspiritual topics?

In the following pages, it is my aim to answer these questions. In the first part of my musings, I seek to show, at great risk to myself, that my view of the Christian life until the time I learned these lessons, was (I write while cringing) heretical. In the second part, I amuse myself with various topics, seeking to show how the theology of the first part

transforms our “practical” life. I’m seeking to do as the apostle Paul does in several of his letters, laying out the theological foundations, and then showing how the theology necessarily transforms daily living. Lastly, in all of this, it is my aim and prayer that you and I would make it our highest delight in all of life to be as the finger of the Baptist, pointing to Jesus, while proclaiming, “He must increase, and I must decrease.”³

³ Karl Barth had a copy of the Isenheim Altarpiece above his fireplace (see next page), reminding him that all theology should be “as the finger of the Baptist,” pointing to Jesus. This painting is a good reminder that all of life should not be pointing to ourselves because it is not about ourselves; it should point to Jesus. Behind John the Baptist, it says in Latin, “He must increase, and I must decrease.”



The Isenheim Altarpiece

Part I: Theological Foundations & Unveiling My Heresies

Christ's reign over every aspect of our lives infuses us with a sense of purpose to worship in areas that the world may call mundane, boring, or unsuccessful. If we are deceived into thinking like the world, we deny that we are accepted before the Father on the basis of Christ's perfect work on our behalf, we deny the incarnation, and we deny His good design for our lives and the life to come. As believers, we have the joyous delight of worshiping Him as we change magazines, diapers, and every aspect of culture.

Vocation and Christ as the Unifying Principle of All of Life (Col 2:3)

Over the last few years in the 82nd Airborne Division, it has become apparent to me that many paratroopers who also call themselves “Christian” have molded Jesus into who they want Him to be, rather than who He proclaims Himself to be. He is a “Buddy Jesus” who can be made fun of when times are good. He is a rabbit’s foot whose cross they bear upon their chests, whose sayings they tape to their trucks, when we would go on a convoy where we could be “blown up.” They see the cross upon my chest as a charm that will protect them when we jump out of a perfectly good airplane, yet they don’t see that *every* aspect of their life has to do with their view of Jesus.

Soldiers and “civilians” alike tend to put Jesus into a box “in their hearts” in a corner that comforts them. Just as a man who takes one of the greatest gifts a woman has to offer (innuendo implied) and then leaves her by the wayside, so also Christ’s good gift is readily seized, so long as it remains at no cost, so long as it can be nicely packaged in the corner without disturbing our hearty decorations.

Somewhere to the “left” (should we say?) on the spectrum are well-intentioned Christians who really want Christ to come redecorate the whole hearty shebang, yet we didn’t realize that from there, He wanted to pump His life into every area of our being.

Unknowingly, I fell into this second group for ten years until one day He brought me to tears on my couch. There He taught me that life-transforming lesson second only to the Gospel itself. I only worshiped Him, which equals “only found joy in Him,” in the *spiritual* compartments, incognizant that I had been debasing the *non-spiritual* areas, and thus friends and family who devoted the majority of their days to the *non-spiritual*.

If you indeed fall into either of these groups previously described, the heresies of our heart need some serious redecorating, maybe even reconstruction. I challenge you to remain close as we bring in new theological furniture throughout Part I, because these truths are the most crucial part of my writing to you.

Part II is the wonderful application of Christ’s work from Part I. Part II is the “therefore” of Paul’s writings (cf. Romans 12:1), of which many have said, “When you see a ‘therefore’ in the Word, look and see what it is “there for.” In other words, what follows the “therefore” is based on something. Paul’s writing about family life, government, and every practical area of living the Christian life is nothing but a best-selling self-help book, if there is no Christ under the surface. To be brutally biblical about the subject, this Christ-less Christianity is nothing other than “moralistic, therapeutic deism,” which leads to Helsinki.

Truth is, the fullness of understanding life, the end goal of which is the knowledge of the mystery of God is *Christ Himself*. In Him are hidden *all the treasures* of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:2-3).⁴ According to this, understanding our life is not primarily about becoming a good person, not primarily about success, not primarily about achieving our dreams. The goal is to find out the

⁴ Translation mine.

mystery of God. Surely He is the best mystery writer!⁵ His mysteries, most of the world does not understand, for His mystery is Jesus Christ Himself, who we must be coming to know more throughout all of eternity to understand the depths of God's mysteries.

Notice that *all treasures* of wisdom and knowledge can only be experienced in their deepest created measures when they are understood through Christ.

You may be subconsciously agreeing with me, yet you may not believe, as I once did not, that truly the depths of science's mysteries can only be plunged, that the feelings which art, sunsets, and romance arouse, that every bit of wisdom and knowledge that can be eked out by man can only be experienced in the fullest sense when Christ is central to the pursuit.

Can this possibly be true? Surely some of your most loved authors, some of your most respected scientists and best mechanics won't have anything to do with Jesus, and do they not plunge greater depths of their professions than we who pursue them for understanding?

It would be arrogant and ignorant to overlook the giftedness and excellence with which many other-than-Christians execute their work. Might we even say that the *majority* who has produced the most appreciated paintings, the most eloquent literature, and the most profound scientific theories have been non-Christians?

How then can Christ be central to plunging the depths of treasure in these various fields? The answer is that, even though a scientist can explain what causes a beautiful sunset, he cannot declare why it overwhelms the heart. Even though an artist can paint a breathtaking depiction of the sunset, she cannot unfold why the sunset exists. Though

⁵ We'll talk more about Christ over writing later in "Christ over the Arts."

professionals in every field can plunge great joys, the depths stop short of all that Christ designed for their joy by experiencing Him in the midst of their journey.⁶

C. S. Lewis, that great author, philosopher, and literature teacher in times past, gives us an analogy from his tool shed to help us understand this mystery:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.⁷

In the midst of the seeming excellencies of their various professions, scientists, artists, engineers, janitors, can only recognize that there *is* a beam in the dark, while they are unable to look *along* the beam apart from understanding the mystery.

Remember that we saw from Colossians 2:2 that the end goal of all things is the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ Himself! So to remain in the dark toolshed is

⁶ We will unfold more thoroughly how Christ is central to our joys in art and science in later chapters.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," God in the Dock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 212.

to leave all things mysterious, while aligning yourself under the beam will open your eyes to mysteries in these areas you have never known. Seeing Christ's finger on everything in the universe opens you to behold His greatness in the arts, in the sciences, in all things.

Truly the knowledge of Christ is the foundation and the end goal for the joyous productive life. Although there may be non-Christian professionals with excellent intellects and gifts, Christ provides the means, motivations, and joys to be excellent in those areas He has given us the desire to pursue.⁸

Yet this issue of desire and motivation (or lack thereof) continues to haunt soldiers and civilians alike. When soldiers volunteer to jump out of perfectly good airplanes, they do so out of their own desire. However, countless soldiers grow weary and discouraged at the hardships involved when the initial excitement is gone. I've also witnessed many spouses who grow weary of their marriages after the honeymoon period wanes.

These sort of waning individuals are missing the great mystery – that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:2-3 shows us in our troubles that truly Christ is also what we need to overcome our sins and troubles. Truly *every temptation brings us back to the foot of the cross*. If this passage is correct, then if we know Christ, we

⁸ I am not proclaiming that, if you follow Jesus, you will be successful and wealthy in this world. That is called the Prosperity Gospel. I am saying that, proverbially speaking, God's ways work in the world that He has designed, and we should pursue excellence for His sake, not our own. This is not to say that God doesn't call people to abandon things on the earth and to lay down their lives for Him for the greater joy of following Him. We all need to be ready and willing to do this, but I am making the point here that we also need to be ready and willing to proclaim Christ's reign over the things He's made us good at. We will unfold this more in our chapter entitled "Christ over Missions."

will know how to live, we will know wisdom, and we will know how to face temptation.

A dear mentor of ours, Jay Thomas⁹ taught my wife and me that behind every sin is a lie about Christ that we have bought into. This truth is central to our understanding that in Christ is every nugget of treasure by which to live. In other words, when you are tempted to sin, you can ask, “What lie about Christ am I about to buy into?” “Is He more satisfying than this sin that will give me a rush and then drop me on my face?” “Am I accepted before Him?”

In terms of my own struggle with debasing the “mundane and unspiritual” areas of life, I can ask, “Am I truly acceptable to Him on the basis of what He has done, or do I feel that I have to earn His acceptance?” I fear that there are many today who feel as I did – that the *only* way to live fully for Him is to be in church ministry as a missionary or a pastor, likewise leaving those by the wayside feeling that they are the lower class in regards to their spirituality.

Yet let us ask the question again, “Are we acceptable to Him because of what He has done? If we buy into this, are we buying into a false Christ, a Christ of our imaginations, not the Christ of the Bible who opens up to us every good treasure?”

These questions crux of the matter in the Reformation, questions that, in “Christian America,” we only see as applying to our salvation. Yet we have been blind to history’s lesson that the Reformation teaching did not only impact our understanding of salvation paid by Christ alone, but the same truth about Christ shows us that every calling (ministry or not) is acceptable to God, unless it is obviously unholy (like prostitution).

⁹ Jay Thomas was my wife’s college pastor at Wheaton College Church (IL) and is now the head preaching pastor at Chapel Hill Bible Church (NC).

In the early 16th century, errors had crept like a thief to steal the church's joy and take her focus from the truth of Christ. Had she been asking how Christ and the Gospel impacted every arena of life, she would not have allowed these falsehoods. Nuns, monks, and priests were seen as those truly dedicated to God. Why? Because they were doing good works to earn God's favor. If you were not among these spiritual elite, then you could buy their extra good deeds to be credited to your account.

Martin Luther, although a fiery personality and extreme in some of his views, displayed how these beliefs were clearly contrary to the Christ of the Scriptures. Christians were acceptable in whatever state God had called them, not because of *anything they could do*, but on the basis of what Christ had done on their behalf.

Thus, the truth of Christ confirmed that anybody who trusted in Christ was acceptable before the Father, whether farmer or milkmaid, child or elder, married or unmarried. And Luther himself recognized that the truth of the Gospel applied to every area of his life and sought to proclaim it when he married an ex-nun. Indeed, both of them had committed themselves to celibacy "for God" when God was actually pleased with them in Christ no matter their married state.¹⁰

Unfortunately, in our modern American culture, we are falling into the same errors as we imply and/or state that those who are most committed to Christ will be in church/missions work. This has resulted in parts of the church that are disengaged from culture, rather than showing Christ's reign within their culture, individuals who pursue a pulpit who should never think about it,¹¹

¹⁰ See more on marriage's relationship to Christ in "Christ over Marriage and Sex."

¹¹ Here is Charles Spurgeon's up-front advice: "That hundreds have missed their way and stumbled against a pulpit is sorrowfully evident from the fruitless

musicians/artists who don't refine themselves with cultural expertise because they are more concerned with what will "touch the spirit," Christian athletes who shy away from greatness or don't know how to integrate Christ, and a number of other issues we will explore.

The Reformation awakened purpose for *all* Christians in *all* callings, whether extraordinary or quite the ordinary. This so-called Reformation theology of vocation provided the basis for pursuing the Gospel in every area of life under Calvin in Geneva. It provided the basis for scientific exploration and great architecture in the West. It opened the door for a nation "under God."

Should we neglect that Christ opens to us all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in *all* topics, then we will also steal the basis for our joy, condemn ourselves to triviality, make ourselves irrelevant to our culture, and reduce the goal of missions to how many we can get to say the "sinner's prayer."

Since Christ is central to our understanding of *all* of life, we will be thoroughly Christocentric in our next three sections, unveiling our heresies in relation to Christ's pre-incarnate work, His incarnation, and His resurrection. (If any of these terms are new to you, fear not, for we will unveil them.) It is my prayer that as you catch a glimpse of the Christ of the Scriptures, you will also catch a glimpse of His salvation and His treasures that reach into all the nooks and

ministries and decaying churches which surround us... It would be a curious and painful subject for reflection – the frequency with which men in the possession of reason mistake the end of their existence, and aim at objects which they were never intended to pursue... 'Do not enter the ministry *if you can help it*,' was the deeply sage advice of a divine to one who sought his judgment. If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth let him go his way..." C. H. Spurgeon, Lectures to My Students (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 25-27.

all the crannies of your life, that very same glimpse that brought me to tears on my couch when I realized that my faith was misconstrued.

Vocation and the Pre-Incarnate Christ (Gen 1:26-28)

I've often heard quite serious Christians (even preachers!) who talk about work as though it is, at best, a necessary evil, as though there was no work in the Garden of Eden and there will be no work in heaven. With good hearts, the best they can do is encourage believers to endure their work and focus on the spiritual worth of sharing the Jesus with others at work. Yet this is nothing but a popular misconception of God's design.

As we turn the pages back to the genesis of God's Word, we find that *God Himself is working!* And this working God creates man His image, or rather in *their* image. Notice the confusing language about God's plurality and oneness in relation to man's image below:

Then God said, "Let us make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in *his own image*, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (NIV, Genesis 1:26-28, emphasis mine).

If you were sly, you may have noticed that God refers to Himself as a plurality, and that he makes man in His image as a plurality, male and female. Though countless books have been written on the Trinity, the point here is that God created us in His image, reflecting His very nature.

This plurality, according to a Christian understanding, is that God, in the beginning existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yes, Jesus was there, as the pre-incarnate Christ,¹² underlying the creation account, without the name “Jesus,” when the Hebrew Scriptures were penned. John 1 says clearly that Jesus is God, who made all things.

If, as the last chapter suggests from Colossians 2, in Jesus are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, wouldn't it be pretty important for us to understand His design for us in creation? We saw that the knowledge of Him is the goal of all things. Colossians 1 shows us also that all things were made “through Him and for Him.”¹³ He did not need to make us, but made us *for* Himself, to reflect to each other bits of His greatness.

Imprinted on my mind is that His image in us mimics His “ruler-ship and relationship.”

As the God who has existed as one God from eternity past (yeah, that will give you a headache to try to fathom!), He created us as a unity in the marriage relationship and the family. The intimate mysteries experienced in marriage give us a glimpse of the eternal (non-sexual) love that existed in the Trinity from eternity past.

¹² “Pre-incarnate” refers to His life before His incarnation. For those of you familiar with Spanish or Mexican restaurants, you may be able to remember that “carne” is meat/flesh, so “incarnation” is Christ's coming “in flesh.” The Christian view is that Christ existed from eternity past as one God with the Father and Holy Spirit in a way that is a mystery to us.

¹³ 1:16.

As the working God, He created man and woman not to be idle and bored out of their minds in their lawn chairs all day in the “perfect” Garden of Eden. Rather, He commanded them to “fill the earth,” “subdue it” and to “rule over” (Genesis 1:28).

The clinching fact here is that *work was God’s design before the fall*, not a product of the curse. The curse made man’s work harder, which means that it takes more work to accomplish anything, but the essence of joy in work is the glimmers we find there of the image of the God who works!

“Fill the earth and subdue it!” The Garden wasn’t all of God’s intention for mankind.¹⁴ His design was that they would reflect His image as they proclaimed His rule over the whole world. They weren’t to be their own rulers, but to rule under Him “over the fish ... the birds ... over every living thing.” Indeed, mankind possesses more value than animals, because they have God’s image stamped upon them, to reflect His greatness.

When we think of subdue, we may think of military strength or Ultimate Fighting Championships? But what does it mean to subdue as part of God’s design? Surely it does not mean to leave all of His creation undisturbed, but rather it means to cultivate the earth, to build bridges over rivers,¹⁵ to design beautiful buildings, to bless other people through our vocations!

Martin Luther helped me realize that our work is a part of God’s work. As we subdue (i.e. by building bridges), God

¹⁴ See more on this later on p. 48 in “Vocation and the Resurrected Christ” under “Bookends of the Bible.”

¹⁵ When I write “build bridges,” I think of my former pastor-scholar-mentor-expositor, Chip Gatto, of Christ Church of Dubuque (IA), who proclaimed the theology of vocation from this passage long before God opened my eyes to this wonderful truth. Countless times, he mentioned “building bridges” as part of subduing the earth and blessing other people with our gifts.

blessees others through us. The scales again fell from my eyes at this wonderful truth, so that I could see God's hand in places where I had previously thought he didn't trespass, so that I could delight by thankfulness in Him suddenly for the brains that designed my car, for the technology that brings me electricity, for every way that He has provided for me by means of those who subdue/rule under Him ... even if they don't realize it. Gene Edward Veith summarizes Luther wonderfully:

“The doctrine of vocation, a term that is just the Latin word for “calling,” deals with how God works through human beings to bestow His gifts. God gives us this day our daily bread by means of the farmer, the baker, the cooks, and the lady at the check-out counter. He creates new life — the most amazing miracle of all — by means of mothers and fathers. He protects us by means of police officers, firemen, and our military. He creates beauty through artists. He heals by working through doctors, nurses, and others whom He has gifted, equipped, and called to the medical professions. He proclaims His Word, administers His sacraments, and cares for His sheep through the calling of pastors. Luther called vocation a “*mask of God*.” He said that God milks the cows by means of the milkmaid. We see a menial worker and may even be so presumptuous to look down upon her, but behind that humble façade looms God Himself, providing milk for His children” (italics mine).¹⁶

¹⁶ Gene Edward Veith, “Our Calling and God’s Glory,” *Modern Reformation*, 16.6 (2007): 22-28. Also see Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).

This “mask of God” is astounding when you step back and imagine momentarily the labor that would be required to live on your own, with no interaction, and thus no blessings, from any other human. Surely He has blessed us by means of the milkmaid! Surely He has double-blessed me by means of dairies, since I love milk! His hand is at work providing for us through vocations, whether the milkmaid recognizes it or not.

God’s mask in our vocations in itself is a cause for renewed vigor in the mundane, for He is working through us. And whilst we subdue and even change diapers, we, in turn, are serving Him. You might say, “I didn’t think I was serving Him. The baby was just nasty.” Yet would you disagree with Jesus? He said that you are actually doing for Him whatever “you did for the least of these” (Matthew 25:40).

He made mankind in His image to work in and through Him, yet that is not the whole story, is it? For the reduction of man’s purpose to working would not yet remain very hopeful. But what more?

We learn more about this purpose in Genesis 2:15, where we see that “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend it and to keep it.” At first blush, there is nothing more here, but oh the wonders in the wordplay going on here!

If Moses were writing in our day, he might have followed that verse with “Pun intended” in parentheses, to which we would reply “Pun taken!” Yet we often don’t pick this up in our English translations! To start with, the original hearers/readers would have heard a double meaning in the words we translate as “to tend it and to keep it.” Our very purpose of being placed on the earth is wrapped up in the double meaning here. These Hebrew words occur in pairs

throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as priestly language, often translated as “to worship and obey”!¹⁷

In other words, the purpose of “tending and keeping the Garden” is that these actions are one and the same as their “worshiping and obeying.” In more words, *work is worship and obedience*! Pun taken!

Furthermore, another important wordplay remains. When God “put” or “placed” man in the Garden, He did not do His placing in a willy-nilly manner. He rather “caused the man to rest in the Garden.”^{18 19}

If you’re a little confused at this point, fear not, because you should be. The confusion in the wordplay will help us ultimately grasp and not forget the meaning here. The confusion comes in the following question: What does “causing to rest” have anything to do with “working”? The two seem self-contradictory, right?

¹⁷ E.g. Deuteronomy 10:12-13.

¹⁸ I do not mean in any way to convey that our best English translations are in any way less than accurate or that I possess more translational fortitude than the scholars involved in translating our English Bibles. Rather, the issue here is that translators must choose the best English word for the context, which doesn’t have a one-to-one correspondence with the Hebrew word, whereas the Hebrew hearers/readers would have heard a bit different of a nuance.

For those who have studied other languages or speak other languages, you quickly realize that you have to make choices about the best word that most closely resembles the word you’re trying to translate. You may have noticed how interesting it can be when somebody is translating a conversation, that they may sometimes speak five sentences when the original speaker only spoke one.

The reason is that sometimes a sentence in one language requires five sentences in another language to convey all of the nuances (and to avoid saying offensive things in another language). Most English Bible translations use the philosophy of choosing just one word or one phrase that will most closely resemble the original meaning.

¹⁹ John Sailhamer is one example of a commentator who supports these interpretations of Genesis 2:15. John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” The Expositor’s Bible Commentary with New International Version: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

Excavating this answer takes us back to chapter one (really 1:1-2:3) and casts a deeper vision for God's purpose for mankind. That wonderful first chapter conveys that after God's work (chapter 1), He rested on the seventh day (2:1-3). The description of that day lacks something striking in comparison to the other six – the day never ends!²⁰

Part of God's purpose in His creation was that man would enter into His rest! This is the trajectory of the creation week, that man would be the climax of His creation over whom He would declare "that's some 'very good' stuff," and then He would give them the opportunity to enter into His rest.

"Rest" here is not an eternal sleepiness! That would surely be mundane drudgery! God's rest is rather resting by faith in Him in all the joys He has designed for you and for His glory. This rest Adam and Eve had the opportunity to enter into, yet they chose their own way, thinking it would be more joyous, thus not entering into His rest.

Mankind has experienced this restlessness and searching for significance, purpose, and joy ever since we entered into sin. Just like Adam and Eve, we think our souls will be satisfied in what we declare to be "good," rather than what God declares to be good for us. We run after things that promise big and then drop us on our faces, rather than trusting that the one who designed all things for our joy knows what will make us happy *and* bring him the most glory.

We are just like Israel, who would not enter into His rest, but chose her own way (Psalm 95 and Hebrews 4). Throughout the Bible, God's people long for this rest and are looking for His rest. Noah's parents were longing for this rest,

²⁰ Every other day in Genesis 1 ends with the parallel phrase "and there was evening and there was morning, day ____" Yet day seven is open-ended.

even going so far as to name their son “Rest,” significantly the same word used in Genesis 2:15, when God “caused the man to rest in the Garden.”

So why does “longing for rest” have beans to do with worshiping in our work (Genesis 2:15)? We only come to experience *His rest* in our work when we come to see our work as worship and obedience. In other words, resting in Him (equals “finding our greatest soul’s satisfaction in Him”) is most fully experienced when we realize that every aspect of our life and work is worship and obedience.

Resting in our work is free from anxiety, free from working only for money, and free from drudgery in the mundane. Resting in our work is precisely worshiping in the mundane, obeying in the details.

If your attitude about your work or your daily tasks in life has become progressively more negative, then you do not know what worship is. If you think that worship is what you do on Sunday morning, then you don’t know what God’s rest is. If your soul is not satisfied in Him as you change magazines (on your weapon) or change diapers, then you will remain at a loss for purpose, and you should expect nothing less than a soggy attitude toward your boss or your children.

How can we get God’s rest and a worshipful attitude back though if we are among those who have lost it or never found it in the first place? According to Hebrews 4, Jesus is the One who ushers in what was lost by sin. He is the One that Noah’s parents and all of mankind has been longing for. He is the One who satisfies our souls, as we learn the joys of living for Him in every area of life.

When we embrace Him and His design for us in creation, “mundane,” “boring,” and “useless” can no longer remain in our vocabulary to describe anything that is meant

to be worshipful. He infuses every aspect of our lives with purpose, according to His created design.

Since God designed work and subduing the earth, pursuing all of the joys of excellence in art, soldiering, and child rearing, would we be the sorts of people who would embrace Him as our soul's satisfaction? Would we give up our heretical views of debasing what God has proclaimed as "very good," satisfying, and worshipful?

This, the first set of questions regarding our heresies in relation to Christ pre-incarnate work, and now we turn to His incarnation...

Vocation and the Incarnate Christ (John 1)

Why did she marry me after she witnessed this heresy in my apartment? To this day, I know not why, other than the miracle He was doing in her heart.

Before I learned these truths, you see, there existed a “dualism” of sorts in my life, dichotomizing my existence into the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the physical, the eternal and the temporal. How did this manifest itself in my apartment? At great risk to myself, I shall tell, for this is about proclaiming Christ, which is far more wonderful.

At the time, I saw no need, to say the least, of wasting my time on cleanliness, food preparation, and definitely not decorations. I would rather spend my time investing in disciplines with eternal significance – mainly reading the Bible or theology.

When she came, she saw. While we were still dating, she came to find that the only event that necessitated the scraping of old food from a dish was the desire to have enough room for new food to dwell momentarily. The sheets remained unwashed for my two years’ inhabitation. The bathroom requires no comment for our purposes.

To say the least, my experience in my apartment and other struggles I shared in the introduction, was theologically misinformed, not directly by any one person,

but by my assumptions and the expectations of our wider Christian culture, taken to their extreme.

Such heresies, if left un-confronted in America, will pummel our joy, infest us with an elitist mentality, conceal us from our wider culture, and wedge us away from Christ.

The words of Dorothy Sayers cut me open, and I keep bleeding, keep bleeding because she was declaring this message in the 1940's, and I never heard these words in Bible college or seminary (likely because the ears of my heart weren't open)! She makes ever so plain that the core belief of our faith demands a different view of life, that my former view of life was, I dare say, heretical.

“Bound up with all this, there is a fundamental error about the Church’s attitude to the Active Life – a persistent assumption that Catholic Christianity, like any Oriental Gnosticism, despises the flesh and enjoins a complete detachment from all secular activities. Such a view is altogether heretical. *No religion that centres about a Divine Incarnation can take up such an attitude as that.* What the Church enjoins is quite different: namely, that all the good things of this world are to be loved because God loves them, as God loves them, for the love of God, and for no other reason” (italics mine).²¹

Do you see as plainly as I did at that moment my eyes first fell upon her words? The very core of my hope rests in the truth that God became a man. The fact that He Himself took on human flesh has much to say concerning our life in the flesh.

²¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, Introductory Papers on Dante (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), 114.

I had been living in quite an un-Christian world by my behaviors. One might expect it if my belief were that it is blasphemy to associate God with humanity. I learned while in Iraq that Islam calls this *shirk*, yet Christians believe that God *self-shirked*,²² or associated Himself with Humanity by becoming a part of His creation.

The first chapter of the Gospel of John shows us clearly how Jesus created all things and then took on human flesh (1:12). Dorothy Sayers says that we cannot separate the unison between spirit and matter in our personal lives, because we inherently deny the Incarnation²³ in the process.

If Gnosticism debased the fleshly life and exalted the spiritual, then American Christianity has developed what others have dubbed “neo-Gnosticism,” or a new breed of Gnosticism, which rejoices in all things spiritual and only endures the fleshly and temporal.

I was no neo-Gnostic master, but I bore the brands of that religion in my personal life, finding no time for cleaning, ceasing all exercising for a time, feeling that playing soccer had nothing to do with following Christ, and only finding worthwhile obviously worthwhile activities of reading my Bible, praying, ministering, and the like.

Yet we believe in the incarnation! Jesus, the Creator of all things, labeled them “very good” following the stamping of

²² Frederick Dale Bruner, The Christbook, Matthew 1-12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 45. “For God to touch earth is, in Islam, called *shirk* (literally, ‘association’), and anyone who claims that God has a Son or became a human being or anything like a human being commits *shirk*, that is, ‘associates’ God with what is gross, and so blasphemes God’s glory. But in the Gospel we have learned to think of God another way. The Gospel’s God is so great that he *can* come down... and *wants* to come down. And, to the satisfaction of believers, God has proven his love by the record that he *did* come down and touch our ground... And that condescension, ... that great stoop that Christians call Christmas and that theologians call incarnation, is the fulfillment of every OT promise of God’s coming. Christians may courteously say to their Muslim friends that Christmas is God’s *self-shirking*.”

²³ Recall that “incarnation” refers to Christ’s taking on human flesh.

His image upon man. Crucial to this image-bearing creation was that He could one day become a part of them within the scheme of His grand story written “before the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8), which we see playing itself out before our very eyes.

If we did not bear the image of God, reflecting bits and pieces of who He is, then He could have never legitimately become part of His creation, or we would have never understood it, being merely animals that lacked intelligibility. But His plan displays that He is the most marvelous author ever, who brought His story to life, and became the heroin of His story.²⁴

In the divine incarnation, we find that the body is not evil, in and of itself,²⁵ otherwise Christ would have been evil and would have been unable to save us in our sins.²⁶

Though we don’t know too much about Christ’s life before the commencement of His public ministry at age thirty, the little we do know about these years should transform our view of the earthly life.

To downplay His earthly life would be to fall into the heresy of the Docetists, who taught that Jesus wasn’t really a man, but rather only “seemed”²⁷ to be a man. In an effort to shelter deity from man, unwilling to accept this great mystery, they explained away the reality of His earthly flesh.

The incarnation is a deep and complex subject to muse about. I recall Dr. Henri Blocher teaching on the wealth of this subject for an entire course at Wheaton Graduate School, only to climax his final lecture with tears, “God became a

²⁴ See “Christ over the Arts” for a better understanding of His relationship to writing and authors.

²⁵ Paul often refers to the “flesh” as an analogy to his sinful nature, not in relation to his physical body.

²⁶ See more on how we should view our physical bodies and how they can be avenues to know Christ in “Christ over the Physical Body and Nature.”

²⁷ From the Greek *dokeo*.

man.” The deep and intimate subjects are often ones that also babes can accept, and even scholars alike. When he broached the climax of his concluding lecture with four words, he captured the hope of the Christian faith.

We believe that the Word became flesh (John 1), that God Himself became a man, even a son, a brother, a carpenter. His public ministry did not begin until He was thirty years young.

What are we to make of this? We must ask, “Were the first thirty years of His life useless?” Because if His first thirty were useless, then so may be anything “ordinary” which remains in our lives. If His first thirty were nothing, why didn’t He force His way into the public scene much sooner? Could He not have studied under the best Rabbis? Seemingly He made an impression at the Temple in His younger years!²⁸

Yet what we know of Jesus’s life is that He lived within a family, growing as a carpenter, not what an aspiring religious leader would typically pursue. He was sinless and perfect as He swung His hammer, He worshiped as He played with His brothers, He submitted to His parents, etc.

All of the “ordinary” and “mundane” was rather communion with His Father, rather than an opportunity to waste His time and to find preoccupations for His idle mind.

In our American struggle with these two aforementioned words, time measures the importance of grasping Christ’s incarnation for our daily trivialities. As I write, my heart despairs over the story of a young man who filled his idle times with video games, role playing, and pornography, only to lose touch with the joys of reality and to find himself dressed as the Joker and savagely killing and wounding the innocent in a movie theater.

On a lesser level, countless paratroopers have come into my office with *no paradigm* to grasp the significance of

²⁸ Luke 2:46-47.

the “ordinary.” How should we expect anybody to deal with their problems with all they try to do is “fill up” their free time with entertainments that steal them away from reality?

Further, how can we expect Christians to find joy in life, if they haven’t grasped the significance of Christ’s incarnation, when 99% of their lives consist of what is “ordinary” and “mundane”?

But God became a man to bring about a “new way to be human,”²⁹ a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), that you would be done with calling “boring” those things that He has called holy, that you would no longer perceive an endless task (such as changing diapers or standing in formations) as purposeless or joyless.

Precisely in this God-in-flesh we find that we can worship Him no matter whether our circumstances have us in a palace or a prison, studying science, playing ball, or shooting guns, subjects we shall crack as the book unfolds.

²⁹ I can’t help but think that’s what Switchfoot meant in their old song! Switchfoot. “New Way to be Human.” New Way to be Human. re:think Records, 1999.

Vocation and the Resurrected Christ (Col 1:19-20; Rom 8:18-22)

In a moment of heroic and pious fancy, I expected I would rescue my father from the worries of this temporary existence by announcing to him, “Dad, don’t worry. It’s all going to burn up anyway!” Yet, to my chagrin, the faucet was still leaky, and my faithful father fulfilled his duties to the pipe ... and to my mother.

Thusly did my piety flourish. We need not concern ourselves with leaky pipes instead of consuming our minds with Christ.

We ourselves can sometimes feel fool-heartedly when someone else reminds that we don’t even need to think about daily occurrences, but only our heavenly home. But how would we feel if this breed of Christianity were a gross misrepresentation that could breed isolationism, escapism, and irrelevance to the world? What if a proper view of Christ’s resurrection life should refract our sight of leaky faucets and other items “that will burn up anyway, dad”?

The problem with the “turn and burn” mindset is that it reduces Christ’s influence to merely the “spiritual” realm, rather than recognizing that His bloodshed on a tree a couple millennia past subjugated everything to Him, the *physical and the spiritual*. Many well-intentioned preachers have truncated the purpose of our lives to evangelism, to the

“spiritual.” They have debased the work and the culture in which it breathes to merely a means for spreading the good word. *This mentality minimizes Christ and minimizes our lives.*

Hear the apostle Paul, not me:

Colossians 1:19-20 For God was pleased to have *all* his fullness dwell in him,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (*italics mine*).

To my chagrin, and not my father’s, Christ had something to say about the “dern leaky faucet,” something He said in three words on that tree – “It is finished.” For He in whom was *all* of God’s fullness, when He shed it *all*, He reconciled *all*, meaning that Christ’s reign extends out over everything, whether we see it fully now or not.

A physician named Luke wrote *Luke* and *Acts* in the Bible. Throughout *Luke*, the kingdom of God begins breaking into the world through Jesus earthly ministry, but when Jesus is enthroned as King, He begins doing His work through His people, recorded in the book of *Acts*. Interestingly, Luke uses the same wording throughout *Acts* that he also used to describe Jesus’s works in *Luke*. Jesus’s works in His earthly life, which are mirrored and expanded through Peter and Paul specifically in *Acts*, displays that His Gospel does far more than change hearts, for He cares about our physical realities as well.

This is not in any way to say that those who submit to the Gospel will never get sick and will always have their tummies filled. Throughout the book of *Acts*, we see that precisely through the suffering of His people, He spreads His kingdom mysteriously.

However, we have underemphasized the wrong syllable when we overemphasize the “spiritual” and throw out the “physical” ramifications of the Gospel. In fact, maybe we should consider throwing these two terms in the garbage, so that we can begin to understand how Jesus cared for people as holistic human beings.

When Christians have caught these visions in the past, God has used them to transform their cultures, rather than to remove their influences from society. Abraham Kuyper was indeed a godly theologian, but not so confused as I to leave all of the faucets leaking and the people hungry in my pious pursuits. Rather, in his efforts to display how the Gospel and Christ’s reign infiltrates every aspect of culture, he became Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901-1905, not to shove Christianity down everybody’s throats, but rather to lead as he sought to worship Christ in every area of life while being prime minister at the same time.

As with Dorothy Sayers, it saddens me to think that he wrote of our errors over a century ago, yet his words have remained unheeded:

“Christendom, it must be confessed, did not escape this error. A dualistic conception of regeneration was the cause of the rupture between the life of nature and the life of grace. It has, on account of its *exclusive love of things eternal, been backward in the fulfillment of its temporal duties*. It has neglected the care of the body, because it cared too exclusively for the soul ... This dualism, however, is by no means countenanced by the Holy Scriptures. ... the work of redemption is not limited to the salvation of individual sinners, but extends itself to the redemption *of the world*, and to the organic reunion of all things in heaven and on earth under

Christ as their original head. ...Calvinism puts an end once and for all to contempt for the world, neglect of temporal and under-valuation of cosmical things” (italics mine).³⁰

“What was that all about?” you ask. “A dualistic conception of regeneration” means that we have split up Christ’s work unknowingly. What has He done? Has He only provided us a free ticket to heaven, while the best thing that can be done here is to simply hold on? Rather, His regeneration has not only impacted the “life of grace” but also the “life of nature.”

Though we Christians want to agree with Kuyper that there is purpose in the “life of nature,” often there is no logic or basis underlying this claim, and, quite frankly, it may make us uncomfortable when we read Kuyper’s commentary regarding the scope of Christ’s redemption. How can His redemption have anything to do with *the entire world*? Is this not contrariwise to our understanding that Christ will save our soul and we will go to live with Him in heaven forever?

Let us reconnoiter a few verses from Paul to understand what redemption has anything to do with the physical world:

Romans 8:19-22: The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. ²² We know that the

³⁰ Kuyper, 65.

whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

When I read these verses with the background of “Dad, it’s all going to burn up anyway,” the quill and paper beckon me to write and rebuke Paul, for he mentions “liberation” for the physical world. I know, however, that it will all burn one day, and we will go live in heaven. At a popular level, the majority of American Christians believe that they will just be spiritual beings living in a spiritual place for all eternity. (This misconception has gone so far that when N. T. Wright published his book, *Surprised by Hope*,³¹ a few years back, ABC News referred to the biblical understanding of the resurrection as “a radical departure from traditional belief.”³²)

The conundrum here is that Paul is clearly not interested in jiving with that view. With what view, then, might his willingness to jive appear?

Without getting into each nook and cranny of the debates about the end times, we can simply observe, for our purposes, that creation will somehow experience liberation, a sort of liberation which is directly connected with the freedom of the children of God! The creation longs for the revelation of the sons (and daughters)³³ of God as a mother longs to give birth. But why does it even care about the sons’

³¹ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

³² Martin Bashir, “Bishop’s Heaven: Is There Life After the Afterlife?”, ABC News, Feb. 26, 2008, available online at <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=4330823>.

³³ When I write “sons” here, I use it as the Bible uses it here, referring really to “children,” including “daughters,” in the same way that “mankind” once referred to both genders. This is why some Bible translations appropriately translate this wording as “children” to keep up with the modern lingo.

revelation? Because it will be changed! Thus, the physical world is not irrelevant, because Christ's redeeming work will transform it as well as us.

When will this happen? He makes us His children now (1 John 3:1), if we have accepted Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, if the Father looks at us through the lens of the perfect son, who bore our punishment. Yet the ultimate revelation of God's children will be at the end of this world as we know it, when He has defeated all our enemies, when we will live with Him in perfect peace forever.

For creation, then, this means that the physical world *begins to experience its liberation now*, as people become God's children and begin to be transformed into the image of the perfect Son. As He begins to re-create us into who He wants us to be, creation begins to experience once again its own liberation. If creation was subjected to futility and abuse under sinful man, then the re-created man begins once again to worshipfully subdue the earth. This does not in any way mean that the Garden of Eden can be achieved again (that was never the goal), but rather it means that we begin to display God's design for us in relation to the earth as we become more like *the* Son.

Although I may never be able to ascribe to the "cleanliness is next to godliness" philosophy, never have I grasped how clearly the world around us should be transformed by Christianity as when I've been in third world countries. Contemplations pinged around my cranium as I travelled around Haiti and Iraq recently, wondering what a land would really look like if the "sons of God" grasped that "subduing the earth" is worship.

As Christ transforms our hearts, shouldn't the world around us experience His freedom? Shouldn't our spouses be overwhelmed with grace if Christ was nailed to a cross for

us? Shouldn't we serve our families with joy as we fix our leaky faucets?

Certainly this passage unveils meaning for our lives today, but we would be amiss to miss the liberation creation will undergo when these children are finally and fully revealed at the end. When we read the end of the book we call *Revelation*, we find a description of a new heaven and new earth, or rather, a new physical creation that will experience the fullness of liberation under the children of God.

So it appears that we will not be invisible in heaven playing harps (invisible too?) for eternity, but there will be some form of physical world as well. What then is the relationship between our current physical world and the world to come?

Christ's own physical body seems to be a good paradigm by which we may base the unknown off what is known. His resurrected body bears the marks of continuity and discontinuity with what we know of our physical world today. He ate, He drank, He bore scars (continuity), yet He appeared through walls and vanished frequently (discontinuity).

We might not know everything about the physical world to come and our future physical bodies, but we can expect some reasonable continuity and discontinuity. Will the laws of physics remain the same? Will the skills of a master gardener be useful? We can at least expect that those who are interested in such things will neither be ballet dancers or professional athletes in eternity. In other words, we shouldn't expect that we will arrive and hate what we have become, nor should we expect that the physical world's liberation will mean that it ceases to exist.

Whether He will start over or totally renew our current creation, I won't argue, but what we can agree on is that our relationship to the physical life today involves our worship and obedience that will spill over into eternity. With all the groaning from sin that this world experiences, we get a (tiny) foretaste of the world to come as we begin to plunge the depths of God's plan for us now.

The reason for over-reiterating this point over again and again multiple times centers around my former attitude toward the future, which, at a popular level, many today possess. Some, even by falling prey to future preoccupations, have reduced their status within the culture to "obsolete."

I humbly point to what has happened with Harold Camping, who grew so entrenched in figuring out his mathematical calculations about the end times, that he invalidated himself to the culture once again.³⁴ Hitting a little closer to home, dare we bring up that our fascination with the end times often more closely resembles the aura of Star Wars' fanatics rather than the aroma of Jesus fanatics? Some of us have probably run across those "sci-fi" Christians who are all about connecting contemporary events with some apocalyptic event in the Bible, while neglecting Christ in the process.

The study of the end times is by no means irrelevant! Please don't hear me saying that. But I'm quite sure that, "for those that have ears to hear,"³⁵ it is all meant to point us to greater love for Jesus *in the present*.

³⁴ With a basic understanding of textual criticism, the study of the transmission of the biblical text, I never give one inkling of validity to any system that bases their biblical interpretation off counting letters, rather than understanding the meaning of literature in some sort of normal way.

³⁵ This phrase is used over and over throughout the book of *Revelation* to challenge how people live in the present, not encouraging them to disengage from worshipping God in the present.

When we hear Jesus saying, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5), whatever exactly that will look like is not the most pressing matter. We should rather be overwhelmed that He will dwell there forever with us. The new heavens and new earth are not primarily or even secondarily about being immortal; it is about God’s presence being our joy. If you haven’t tasted the joy of knowing God, then you should not want to go to live in the new creation,³⁶ since He will dwell perfectly there with His people forever (Revelation 21:3-4).

We see in Revelation 21 again that the liberation experienced by the newly created natural order is intricately connected with the son-ship of believers. There will be a new creation, both new heavens and earth, where all will be set back in order in a comparable, but eclipsing manner, where mankind will live properly as children of God or be cast out of His presence forever (Revelation 20:11-14).³⁷

By “eclipsing,” we refer to how far more wonderful the new creation will be than the former, which we described in detail before. Some among our thousands of Christian sub-cultures and soap boxes have implied that getting back to the

³⁶ Intriguingly, I even find my gnostic tendencies here as I write, wanting to write about going to live in “heaven” forever, rather than the “new heavens and new earth.” I’m assuming that if I, the writer, subconsciously struggle with perceiving our eternal dwelling as “heaven,” then how much more, at a popular level, do people talk of going to live in “heaven forever”!

³⁷ I once heard our former pastor, Chip Gatto, describe hell in an intriguing way. He said that the people who do not want God, but want to declare for themselves what will make them happy, would not want to live in a place where God dwells, so they will get what they want for eternity – life apart from God. D.A. Carson is quoted as getting across this same point: “Hell is not filled with people who have already repented, only God isn’t gentle enough or good enough to let them out. It’s filled with people who, for all eternity, still want to be at the center of the universe and who persist in their God- defying rebellion.” Quoted in Lee Strobel, The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 147.

Garden of Eden is the goal of humanity, but God has set us on a trajectory to something far better, not only from giving us the purpose of worshiping Him while we “subdue the earth,” but also on a path He is taking all of us who are a part of the new creation! Indeed, according to Paul, Christ has already re-created who have trusted in Him, so that we are currently beginning to taste the greatness of all that is to come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The entire eclipsing trajectory is all about Christ from beginning to end. He does not call Himself the “Alpha and Omega” (Revelation 21:6) because He was in a fraternity, but rather because He created and will re-create all things, and His work alone at the cross could bring defeat to everything that went wrong in this world of sin.

So what, we beg, is so much better about the new creation than the first? Interestingly, many Christians feel that it is an affront to God if anyone would say that the initial creation account didn’t portray a world “as good as it could be.” Yet when we compare the “bookends” of the Bible (Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22), we find that the intention is to read them in light of each other and in light of what Christ has accomplished between them (see the table called “The Bookends of the Bible” below).

The Bookends of the Bible

Comparison of Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22

<i>Genesis</i>	<i>Revelation</i>
Creation of heaven and earth	Creation of new heaven and new earth (21:1)
Formless, empty, and dark sea	No longer any sea (21:1)
Partial dwelling of God with man	Full dwelling of God with man (21:3, 22)
Curse on mankind	No more curse (21:3)
Creation of light when it was dark	No need of light, because of the presence of God and the Lamb (21:23). No more darkness (21:25; 22:5).
Only the pure can dwell in Eden	Only the pure can dwell in new heaven and earth (21:7-8, 27; 22:14-15, 19)
2 Trees	Only access to the tree of life (22:2, 14)
Image of God (ruler-ship, relationship (1:26-27))	Image restored, an eternal reign (22:5)
Satan and serpent created good	Satan/serpent thrown into abyss (Rev 20)

He is ...The Alpha ...The Beginning He makes all things new (Rev 21:5)!	...and the Omega ...and the End
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Upon thorough investigation, we find that the way God created the initial creation was in such a way that it would point us to the far better new creation. The Genesis account portrays an open-endedness and opportunity. Though God walked about in the Garden and talked with humanity, we

don't get the sense of the full dwelling of God we long for as described in Revelation (21:3). Though we often assume that Adam and Eve were created as immortals, it appears that they were not. Their immortality would have necessitated their eating of the Tree of Life, from which, interestingly, God neither tells them to eat or to refrain. Presumably and hypothetically, had they eaten from the proper tree, they would have entered into immortality and a deeper relationship to God, as described in Revelation.

Though we wish that spiritual hindsight were 20/20, we all look back on their disobedience and make the same mistakes as them daily. Thankfully, in God's providential manner, He planned before the foundation of the world for the Lamb to be slain (Revelation 13:8) to bring about an eclipsingly more wonderful dwelling for those He redeemed! In that place, we will dwell with Him and reign forever underneath Him³⁸ when the image of God is fully restored in us (Revelation 22:5; cf. Genesis 1:26-27). What will we reign over other than the new creation in comparable, yet better, ways than we are currently implementing in this creation?

If the newly created order will be so much better than our current existence, why then should we care about our lives in the present? (Will you suffer me to answer that question with a question?) Why would any authentic Christian who is *already a part of the new creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17) not want to begin experiencing *now* the

³⁸ The pamphlet called "Two Ways to Live" lays out the story of the Bible particularly in relation to the reign of God. Sin is basically saying that we don't want God to rule over us. But Christ's work on the cross opened the way for man to live under His reign again forever. For some, this is a repulsive thought, so God will send them away forever, but those who have tasted how wonderful it is to submit to the most amazing King ever (literally) will have the joy of reigning under Him for a long, long, eternally-long time. "Two Ways to Live: The Choice We All Face" (Australia: Matthias Media, 2003).

depths of joy, which Christ has designed for us in the new creation?

To devalue this present life is to devalue Christ's work on the cross and only proves an individual to be inauthentic. If a person believes in the Christ of the Bible, He believes that Christ is more joyous than all the pleasures of sin, and he desires to live with God forever. Thus, he desires to begin living with Him now, proclaiming Christ's reign over every area of his life, worshiping Him as he subdues the earth joyfully, ever foretasting all eternity before him.

This Christ, the Christ of the Bible and not our own fancies, calls us to significance and purpose and worship in the ordinary, casting His light on all the nooks and all the crannies hidden away in our "meaningless" compartments. Having now tasted the core for a meaningful life, let us turn to some practicalities. How does Christ transform our understanding of science, art, missions, sports, etcetera?

Part II: Christ and the Transformation of Everything (Yes, He has to do with all these things!)

Christ's reign over every aspect of our lives infuses us with a sense of purpose to worship in areas that the world may call mundane, boring, or unsuccessful. If we are deceived into thinking like the world, we deny that we are accepted before the Father on the basis of Christ's perfect work on our behalf, we deny the incarnation, and we deny His good design for our lives and the life to come. As believers, we have the joyous delight of worshiping Him as we change magazines, diapers, and every aspect of culture.

Christ over Soldiering³⁹



³⁹ This chapter is dedicated to Captain Tommy Dull, advanced airborne school commander, who encouraged me to write about this, who worships Christ as an infantry officer, who honed my thinking, and cared enough about me as a friend to constantly point me to Christ.

To say the least, army cadences are not theologically accurate, even though done in fun. To say the most, most, believing Christ to be a ninny, turn to alternate means of motivation to become a killing machine, seeing it irreconcilable with the faith many of them once had.

Observe a few verses from “My Grandma”:

When my grandma was 97
She up, she died, she went to heaven

When my grandma was 98
She met St. Peter at the Pearly Gate
She said “St. Peter, sorry I'm late”
She went side-straddle hoppin' through the pearly gate

When my grandma was 99
She did PT mighty-fine
She had Ol' J.C. Dublin' Time⁴⁰

⁴⁰ <http://www.apft-standards.com/army-cadence.html>

Observe also a few verses from “When I get to Heaven”:

When I get to Heaven
Saint Peter's gonna say
“How'd you earn your livin' boy?
How'd you earn your pay?”
I'll reply with a whole lot of anger,
“I made my living as an Airborne Ranger!”
Blood, guts, and a whole lot of danger
That's the life of an Airborne Ranger!”

When I get to hell
Satan's gonna say
“How'd you earn your livin' boy?”
How'd you earn your pay?”
I'll reply with a boot to his chest

Here human strength, even Granny's strength, is propounded as the highest power which can overcome the "pearly gates" and "smoke" Jesus Christ Himself. Though of course most don't ascribe to the theological accuracies penned by the motivator, Christ remains here a ninny who has nothing to offer to the military.

What then is Christ's role for the vocation of the soldier? Is fighting for a living a legitimate vocation, since it wasn't part of God's original created order? Is Jesus only useful as a rabbit's foot to keep us safe from the enemy, to cause our chutes to deploy, or to give us "inner strength"? By answering these and similar questions, my prayer is that Christian soldiers can find that they can worship Christ as a warrior, that they can cope and digest what they've done, and that they can find renewed zeal and earnestness, instead of bitterness.

First off, what should motivate a soldier? I've found in sports and the army alike that some leaders feel they need to motivate their subordinates with bitterness, like a person that kicks a dog over and over again to make him dangerous. Yet humans are driven by both emotions and reason; producing a warrior motivated by only hatred will neither end in his becoming a loyal subject or a mighty leader. The thought pattern is, "the more wickedness we feed him, the more wickedness he'll be willing to pour out on the enemy without reserve." This, of course, assumes that fighting and killing is wickedness.

Some paratroopers want to kill to be cool, to be respected, to fulfill their fantasies in relation to movies

"I made my living laying souls to rest!"

<http://www.unh.edu/army/docs/cadenceRunning.pdf>

they've watched or video games they've played. To become a complete "bad %&\$" is the goal, though I never understood what donkeys had to do with it.

One can begin to understand how a Christian can go into the army and see a complete conflict between his job and his faith, only to abandon Jesus because following Jesus is seen as weak. It is soft, after all, to follow a ninny, if He is one.

And therein lies the problem – that many (maybe most) Americans who call themselves "Christian" haven't a clue what following Christ means for their lives. They haven't a clue that they may only be heretics in the making, as I was, who say that they follow Jesus, only their lives display the exact opposite (see Part I as the foundation for the whole Christian life).

How can a Christian reconcile being a warrior with worshiping Christ in every area of life? We can begin to unpeel the layers of motivation for a Christian soldier by realizing God's love for justice and hatred for wickedness is grounded in His holiness. If you're maybe not familiar with "Christian" language, your ears and brain may be unable to digest this wording as the first time you choked on your drill sergeant's endless acronyms. As in Isaiah 6, we find that God's holiness means that He is so perfect that He can't stand sin in His presence, which is why He provided a way to purify Isaiah before Him, and why we can only stand before Him if Jesus has paid the price for our sins.

He hates (yes, God does hate!) sin, wickedness, and the devil. Yet his capacity for hatred is wholly foreign to our understanding. When we hate, our emotions easily unbridle themselves, as a stallion bucking out of control. Yet God's hatred is holy, is perfect. He hates Satan and has and will execute His justice on him as the King of the universe.

Because our hatred is imperfect, He calls us, on a personal level, to forgive, to love our enemies, to do good to those that hate us, if indeed we claim to have accepted Christ's forgiveness, poured out on us, even while we were still running from Him after sinful pleasures (Romans 5:8).

Because our hatred will devour us from the inside out with bitterness and despair, He calls us to leave the vengeance to Him (Romans 12:18-19). We may not see it now, or in our lifetime, but He will set all things right one day (we'll talk about it below).

The misconception at this point may be that we have absolutely taken every motivation away, and nothing remains to produce "hard-core" soldiers, but this disconcerting feeling is merely based on false presuppositions, and soldiers who worship as fight and execute justice should have the potential to be among the best the U.S. military has to offer.

How then? God has established human governments to execute justice, to deal out judgments that are wicked when carried out on the personal level. If a soldier cannot grasp the difference between fighting for the government and fighting in his personal life, then he will likely end up beating his wife or worse.

If you are among those that believe you must produce a bitter bull dog to make the best subordinate, then you'll likely end up with a bull dog in his social life and interactions with you as well. When the proper motivations aren't in place, people cannot balance their various roles and end up jacking themselves up.

Romans chapter 13 tells us that God established governments to carry out justice. Interestingly, Romans 13 comes after Romans 12, which follows Romans 1-11 – interesting not because of the mathematical difficulty, but because Romans 1-11 lays the Christocentric foundations

and motivations for chapters 12 and following. As I've said before, the second part of my writing makes no sense without the theological motivations flowing from Part I and Christ's work. Paul means to say precisely the same when he gets to chapter 12 and says "Therefore." Chapter 13 is part of the "therefore," showing what the Christian's life must be like because of the Gospel expounded in chapters 1-11!

Because we are all sinners (3:23), *because* Christ died for us while we were still sinning (5:8), *because* He can rescue us (10:9-10), therefore let's lay down our lives for Him (12:1), and let's submit to our human government (13:1).

Although governments aren't perfect (I don't mean to shock you!), they *should* execute justice fairly. If you then work for the government in executing justice in the world, then you are part of what God has ordained and can, in the spirit of chapter 13, follow God in your holy calling as a soldier.

But how can we say that being a warrior is a legitimate job if it wasn't part of God's original creation? We might assume that warrior-ing is, at best, just a temporary result of mankind's fall into sin, but to assume may make donkeys out of you and me.

In the creation account itself, was not "guarding" a part of God's initial orders to man? In Genesis 2:15 (see Part I.B), we saw that God "put man in the Garden of Eden to tend it and to keep it," which we saw could also mean "to worship and obey," while working, worshiping, and obeying were all one and the same thing in this word play.

When the temptation came from Satan (Genesis 3), even though man had not entered into sin yet (and had not killed yet), Adam should have risen up as the guardian, the warrior, to defend the truth and to crush Satan in that moment. Yet He was a coward, as we all are when we don't

have the testosterone to do what's right. The chart below shows the truths for which Adam should have stood as a man.

<u>Genesis 3, Verse</u>	<u>Character</u>	<u>Distortion</u>	<u>The Truth</u>
1	Serpent	Indeed, has <u>God said</u> , 'You shall <u>not</u> eat from any tree of the garden '?	The <i>LORD God commanded</i> the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat <i>freely</i> (2:16) "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I <i>commanded</i> you not to eat?" (3:11)
2	Woman	From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat	From <i>any</i> tree of the garden you may eat <i>freely</i> (2:16)
3	Woman	but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden	the tree of life <i>also in the [middle] of the garden</i> , and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9)
3	Woman	God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or <u>touch</u> it, or you will die.'	but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil <i>you shall not eat</i> , for in the day that you eat from it you will <i>surely</i> die (2:17)
4	Serpent	You surely will <u>not</u> die!	you will surely die (2:17)
5	Serpent	For God knows that in the day you eat from it	<i>in the day that you eat from it</i> you will surely die (2:17)...
5	Serpent	your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.	Then the <i>eyes of both of them were opened</i> , and they knew that they were naked (3:7) Behold, the man <i>has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil</i> ; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever (3:22)
6	Woman	When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was <u>desirable to make [one] wise</u>	Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is <i>pleasing to the sight and good for food</i> ; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9)

We begin to deceive ourselves into thinking that the dude is toughest who does the most wicked things, yet that is the coward's way, the easy way to do what everybody else will think is "cool." Adam's cowardice and all ours is what landed us in our precarious situation in the first place.

If Adam were a warrior, he would have guarded the Garden; he would have guarded Eve and loved his wife while doing so. The warrior spirit should have been part of early man's actions, since it was part of God's design. If Adam had worshiped God as he kicked the serpent's tail, he would have experienced utter satisfaction and the joy of continued communion with God.

But he didn't, and warriors ever since have had sinful motives intermingled with their reasons for fighting, that is, with the exception of Jesus Himself.

Our culture often portrays Jesus as a ninny or a big teddy bear who loves everybody no matter how they live, but this is based in faulty theology. Some people who have never given their lives over to Jesus just assume that He will forgive them anything, so that they can keep on doing whatever they want to. These people only want a free ticket to heaven, rather than Jesus Himself, to whom He will say, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"⁴¹

The Jesus of the Bible, not our own creations, is ninny-less however. He is a mighty warrior who laid down His life to defeat Satan, sin, and death. When we were dead in our sins, He became our hero, disarming our enemies, and, ironically, making a "public spectacle" over them as he lay them waste.⁴²

⁴¹ Matthew 7:23.

⁴² Philippians 2:13-15 – When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, **14** having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. **15** And

Yes, He did go to the cross to pay for *any* sin, but faulty theology says that you can define whatever is right and wrong for you and keep on living your own way, while Jesus will forgive you no matter what. Because He is a big teddy bear and a softy, He doesn't really care how you live.

Yet Jesus's victory at the cross and over the grave is only worth anything to those who want to submit to Him and His ways. Even though it is easy to bear the label "Christian," the authentic Jesus-follower will *want* to submit to Him, will want to know Him and pursue Him more than anything in life (Philippians 3:7-14).⁴³ James chapter 2 says that even the demons possess more faith than the person who says he believes, and his life isn't changed at all. The demons, at least, shutter in their "belief," because they know He is real and hates evil.

He is neither a teddy bear nor a ninny. When He comes to execute justice upon His enemies, His garments will be fit for battle. His robes will be dipped in blood. He will be ready to kick some butt and then to "tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty" (Revelation 19:13-15).

having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

⁴³ Philippians 3:7-14 – But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. **8** What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. **10** I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. **12** Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

If ever there were a jaw-dropping reason to be impressed by how strong a person was or how good of a fighter another was, then now would be the climactic time, because He's going to kick everybody's butt. Nobody stands a chance before Him.

Does the best warrior have to also then be the most sadistic, the most unmerciful, the most cruel? We might argue that the best soldiers would be those that reflect the best Warrior ever. He swiftly executes justice, when it is time to serve up a dose of justice.

Yet the ironic part of God's story that He planned before the world is that He went into the enemies' camp, rescued people (Colossians 1:21-22), and kicked the butt of their leader and those who continued to follow their evil master.

The best soldiers who worship Christ in their professions would then be those that realize that God rescued them while they were still sinful enemies, running in the other direction from God, doing whatever they pleased. They realize that He rescued them not because of any good thing they had done (Ephesians 2:8-9), but rescued them to give them a new life.

To worship Christ in your vocation as a soldier then, you should be ready to execute justice when called upon by your government (established by God), but you should also have a balance of compassion. This does not mean that you must be a softy who can't harm a fly. Christ wasn't a pansy, and He wouldn't want you to be one either.

The balance with compassion means that you are ready and willing to help when you can. The war of the recent decade brings the relevance of this balance to the fore, when we might have helped some of our enemies by freeing them from a cruel dictator or from terrorists.

If you merely thrive on bitterness and rage, rather than knowing when to execute justice or give compassion, you

will become needlessly cruel, and these habits will likely spill over into your people skills, in the way you treat your loved ones and subordinates.

To be a man's man, you neither have to have bulging muscles, nor have to be cruel to be cool, nor have to drive the biggest truck, but you must know how to balance compassion and justice by casting yourself constantly at the feet of Jesus. He courageously went to the cross to save the condemned, in the same way that Aslan went to the stone table to die for Edmond in *Chronicles of Narnia*, and rose from the dead to give us new life.⁴⁴ He kicked, is kicking, and will kick the butts of all His enemies, the last one being death itself (1 Corinthians 15:24-26).

At the end of the day, we must also realize that we are the ninnyes in comparison to Jesus, and we only possess our strengths because Jesus gave them to us. And on those days when we realize we have nothing left and we're weak to accomplish what we've been called to do, then we can boast that it was all Him, because His "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

If your "vocation" is to be a warrior, then don't seek alternate motivations that only lead to dead ends, bitterness, purposelessness, and broken relationships, but cast yourself at the feet of the Ultimate Warrior,⁴⁵ so that you can reflect something about His greatness as you fulfill your calling.

...And one more thing – next time you hear the cadence about kicking Satan in the chest, let it point you to Jesus, who has already kicked Satan in the chest for you. He defeated Satan once and for all. He has nothing on you, if Christ is your hero.

⁴⁴ Romans 5:10 – For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

⁴⁵ This Ultimate Warrior requires no steroids, nor paint, nor Speedos!