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If I Saw You in Heaven

I've been reading Eric Clapton's new autobiography, *Clapton*, and it's gotten me to thinking again about humanity's inclusion in the Divine Life of the Father, Son and Spirit.

Clapton is a man who's really lived the legendary life of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." Yet he's also a man who has, like all of us, shared in the Divine nature (Acts 14:17.) His autobiography is raw and honest about both of these realities.

You might want to read it some day, so I won't give it all away, but I was quite struck by his own awareness of his art as a participation in God and the way in which he finds connection with God in the midst of addiction, profound personal loss, and the long road home.

There was a time when I viewed everything in compartments. I saw that God was in heaven and the world was not. Every human being could be neatly classified as in or out.

Perhaps greatest of all was the massive, yawning gulf between secular and sacred. In the world as I imagined it Eric Clapton would be classified as secular, pure and simple, and the sacredness of heaven would have no place for him (unless of course he shunned his whole existence and became what I said he should be.)

Now, in Christ, I have found a breathtaking vision of wholeness, connection and inclusion. The idea of the "secular" has been blasted out of existence, because the sacred – the Divine Son – has invaded our world, crucified our fallenness, and raised up creation to heaven in himself (Col. 3:1-4.)

In Christ all things have been made heavenly and holy.

That doesn't mean we don't sin. We all do, every day. What it means is that we are all in this together; that the Father, Son and Spirit have decided to never be God without us.

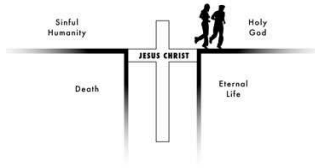
The cross we celebrate this Easter season tells me that the Trinity is in Eric Clapton's sin – and in mine and in yours; bearing the sorrow with us and ensuring that our failure cannot destroy us.

The resurrection we celebrate this Easter season tells me something even more important, though: that the Trinity is in Eric Clapton's music – and in mine and in yours; sharing with us the joy and dance and life of their heaven. It is a joy given freely to their beloved humanity in the divine man Jesus Christ.



~ Jonathan Stepp

The Witness of “Witness”



We preachers sometimes talk out of both sides of our mouths

First we speak of a God who cannot abide the presence of sin (kind of like my great-aunt who would faint if you used the word ‘darn’). We speak of a God who is separated from us by a bottomless chasm. A God who made a bridge for us so we could cross over to his side. A God who then left our side to go back to his side, and who is now far away. A God who is waiting for us to show up.

But then the other side of our mouths starts flapping.

We speak of how a Christian ought to be ‘a friend of sinners.’ How a Christian should enter into the lives of unchurched people, even though those lives can be messy with sin. Take the initiative and go to them, rather than waiting for them to show up at church.

Here’s the question that is coming to my mind lately... Is it possible that evangelism is so hard because it contradicts our theology? After all, if God is far away from my ‘lost’ neighbors, why should I be expected to draw near to them? If my church’s evangelism consists mostly of opening the church door and waiting for sinners to come flowing in, is it possible that my church is simply acting like its god?

Maybe it’s time to upgrade to a vision of God in which evangelism makes sense. To find this vision, we need look no further than the vision of Jesus, the apostles, and the early church.



We start with the being of God. The Son is with the Father in the fellowship of the Spirit. In the Triune being we find nothing of separation, alienation, or passivity. The Church Fathers rightly imagined the Triune life as “The Great Dance.” And this Dancing, this “With”-ness was so beautiful and true and good, that one day Father and Son and Spirit said together: “Let us make man in our image.”

So that Their new creation could share in the Son’s life with the Father, creation was given its being “in Christ.” All created things are “from him and through him and to him” (Rom 11.36). In Him all things “live and move and have [their] being” (Acts 17). “In Him all things hold together” (Col 1.17). And when the Son became incarnate, God’s creation become a permanent part of God’s life. The created universe (the whole human race included) was drawn into the eternal Great Dance. And as we live and move and have our being within the Father-Son dance, the Spirit works at cleansing the eyes of our hearts, helping us to see the truth about ourselves—that “we are God’s children” (Rom 8.16).

God is not far away, waiting for us to show up. Our shepherd has found his lost

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The Witness of “Withness” . . . (cont.)

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sheep, and He has taken us home. Repent and believe. Jesus is the Immanuel, “God with us.” Not “God far away.” Not “God with us if we get our religion right.” No way. He is God with us. Period. Jesus’ message was not “The kingdom of God is far away, but you can go there after you die if you work up enough faith.” No. His message was “The kingdom of God has arrived. Believe it” (Mark 1.15).

Imagine a new kind of evangelism, based on the gospel truth of “God with us.” What do its evangelists look like?

1. **They know where God is.** When they feel close to God, they rejoice that their brain chemistry is in line with reality. When they don’t feel close to God, they rest in the truth that their ebbing belief does not change God’s location. Jesus himself struggled with ‘not feeling God’s presence,’ and coincidentally, he was quite open about it in the presence of unbelievers (Mark 15.34; Psalm 22). This new kind of evangelist knows the truth, is set free by the truth, and is able to obey Jesus’ most oft-repeated command: “Fear not.”
2. **They know that God is not the problem.** Too often, our ‘gospel’ is about a God who needed to kill somebody because He was mad about sin, but then luckily Jesus took the bullet for us. Jesus came to protect us from God. And as we try to join in Jesus’ saving work, our evangelistic logic goes something like this:
 - a. God loves my non-Christian friends.
 - b. If they don’t believe this, He will torture them forever.
 - c. I must help Jesus protect my friends from God.

The evangelist of the future is one who has traded up for a better, non-schizophrenic God. A God who has embraced His Creation and is now in the process of rescuing it, not from Himself, but from the evil that results when its people live in darkness and despair.

3. **They look for (and find) God in the most unlikely places.** A disciple is someone who believes that “God is with me.” An evangelist is simply a disciple who also believes that “God is with *you* too.”

One of my coworkers is a single mother who just doesn’t have time for religion. But when I see the love she showers on her daughter, I know I am watching her share in the Triune life of love, whether she knows it or not. Love has only one Source.

Whatever issues God might have with my atheist gay friend’s sex life, God is with

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The Witness of “Withness” . . . (cont.)

(Continued from page 3)

him and his partner of many years. In their every act of kindness to each other, they are participating in the kindness of the God they don’t believe in, the God who is rumored to hate them.



Likewise the Triune life finds expression even in non-Christian religions. The beauty of the Taj Mahal comes from Somewhere. When we find truth in the teachings of Buddha, those truths comes from Somewhere. When a good deed is done by a Wiccan, that goodness comes from Somewhere. Christians do not have a monopoly on truth, goodness and beauty. Christians just know a little more about the One from Whom those blessings come.

As a disciple of Jesus, I’m learning to believe the good news that I’ve been drawn into the with-ness of the Triune Life. In precise theological terms, I am “participating in God’s being.” The Holy Spirit is helping me experience the truth of this good news, and also to give that experience away. Every time I am truly *with* another person, I am performing the steps of the Great Dance in the hope that the other person will begin to hear the Music a little better.

When I am with my friends—Christian or otherwise—they experience with-ness. They may not immediately understand that experience as “God is with me.” But they *do* understand “John is with me.” And if our goal is to share in Christ’s incarnating of God’s life in the world, that’s a pretty good start.

~ John Stonecypher

The Healing of the Prodigal Son

Brace yourself. You are about to read a comment on the ‘Parable of the Prodigal Son’ (Luke 15: 11-31) you most likely have never heard before. Yet human history bears out that this is the way the story relates to all of us.



Most of us are familiar with Jesus’ story of a father who had two sons and divided his estate between them. The older son remains with the father and the younger son takes his part of the estate—money—and leaves home and spends his life in riotous living on wine, women, and song. So much so that he probably became an alcoholic, sex addict, drug addict, diseased, most likely maimed and partially blinded by his excesses. Not a pretty picture. But human suffering and failure never are pretty.

Because of his now ‘ruined’ condition, the only employment he could find was slopping the hogs in an unfamiliar environment. Apparently he was neither educated enough nor physically able to command greater and more respectful employment. He was hanging on to life by a thread.

After most of a lifetime he realizes that there is security, protection, sustenance, and

The Healing of the Prodigal Son . . . (cont.)

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acceptance at his father's house. Most people require a lifetime to learn life's lessons, and this man was no exception. He is probably in middle age—maybe 40 to 60—when he 'comes to himself and his senses' and heads home.

I want you to note that when his father saw him far off, he had compassion on his son. Let me describe this scene as it encompasses all of us. His father SAW him and had compassion on him. No spoken word yet, just years of being away from his son, and now what he SEES evokes COMPASSION on his son. What did he see?

He saw a son in the distance, barely able to walk. Tired. Dirty. Sore-infested. Unkempt. Disheveled. Lame in one leg. Dragging a foot. An arm in a sling hanging limply at the man's side. One eye bandaged. A body emaciated from the lack of dietary necessities. And later to find out that his son's mind was confused and wandering from all the abuses to which he had subjected his body. But he was HOME.

No matter what the father saw he saw it through the eyes of LOVE and COMPASSION. This was his son who was lost, gone, alienated, away, and now he is home. The father weeps in drenching tears of joy.

Why did the father run to the son? I submit to you that the son was not able to run to the father in his condition. A myriad of emotions, questions, doubts, weaknesses, and physical circumstances prevented his running to his father. He did not wait until he was WHOLE to come home, he came home TO GET WHOLE. TO BECOME WHOLE. TO BE HEALED.

The father realized all these things and couldn't wait for the slowly moving son to painfully make his way to the father's house. The father was overjoyed at the sight of his son returning, regardless of his condition. His son was JUST AS HE WAS. HE CAME. (Just like Charlotte Elliot's hymn, JUST AS I AM). And his dad was unconditionally accepting of his lost son. So he RAN to embrace his dear son who was back. The father's love and forgiveness already covered EVERYTHING.

Nothing mattered in this son's past. No addictions mattered. No indiscretions mattered. No shortcomings or failures mattered. No weaknesses mattered. No sins mattered. No physical impairments mattered. The son was home and there was healing and health to be received at his father's house. His dad ran to embrace his son, and the healing began.

The father threw a celebration, not for what the son had done in his life, but for what was now going to take place in the NEW LIFE he would have by starting over in his father's house. Unconditionally loved. Unconditionally accepted. Embraced as the son the father had always dreamed of having back.. And now he was!

Do you see yourself in this story? We All are the child who went our way in life. And our Father waits for us to come home. When He sees us coming He will RUN TO US. UNCONDITIONALLY LOVING US. FOREVER.



~ Paul Kurts

What Happens in Vegas

Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! 10 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:9-11 NIV)

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." (John 12:32 NIV)

Rural Upstate New York can be a lot of fun in the winter. Before snowmobiles came into the neighborhood, our outdoor fun involved skating, sledding, igloo-building, and of course snowball fights with siblings and neighbors.

When my little sister was all of seven and her brothers were 9 and 12, we decided to put an early version of the current nationwide ad to the test. Was it true that "What happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas"? Young inquiring minds had to know!

One evening after supper under the cover of darkness all three of us strayed from clearly laid out family values. I'm not sure who threw the first snowball, (and as the oldest I don't really want to remember *all* those details), but 'we' decided to hurl snowballs at passing cars from the neighbors elevated yard across the road from our home

Hearing a well packed projectile go thump on a passing windshield, roof, or quarter panel was something we just couldn't get enough of! With each resounding 'thud' we all giggled and did whatever the equivalent of a high five was in the late '60's. Gravity and trajectory made up for muscle, and practice made perfect.

One unfortunate soul was bombarded on his trek both to and from the nearby country store and decided to do something about it. Our hearts sank as he turned into our driveway instead of the one closest to the crime scene. Evidence of our marksmanship was still plastered on his windshield.

He stepped out of his car quickly, knocked on the door, and had a short but meaningful conversation with my father. We observed both gesture and body language from across the road, and as the victim drove away our summons came.

At the risk of sounding politically incorrect as well as having my parents misunderstood or misjudged, we received individual, timely, well placed, corporal punishment. In two other words- *It stung!*

My sister started to cry while her brothers were still in therapy, so when her turn came both of us spoke in her defense. "She can't really even pack a snow ball Dad", we submitted to the high court of appeals. "Most of hers' fell a few feet down the



What Happens in Vegas . . . (cont.)

hill in the snow.” But alas, her intent was the same, and like all children she could get better at being bad if left to practice. Her sentence was diminished, but a total pardon was not in her best interest.

The notion that we can do as we please and not experience separation and pain from those we love has been around for a long time. An old lie is still a lie – and believing it still yields the same results. Distance from home only adds inertial weight to the mistake which finds its’ destructive mark. As children of our heavenly father we have believed lies about him that keep us running back across the road into the far country. Missing His mark in life means attempting to make our own in all the wrong places.

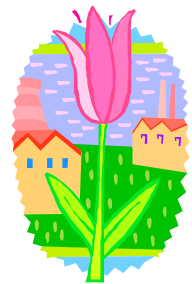
But He has reached farther than we can run. While we hope that the stupid things we’ve done won’t come back to haunt us, we have each experienced enough of life to know that we reap what we sow. What goes up must come back down.

But we are put here to grow up into children of God weren’t we? Surely we all won’t become a permanent version of every stupid thing we’ve done! We’re meant to see where we’re headed and aim for plan and action which does our neighbor good instead of harm.

The one who entered our life on this planet once for every season and every man did so out of love for His creation and we are lifted to a higher calling and higher reward in Him. The one who came down for us was lifted back up with us in his arms. His discipline is always filled with hope and not hatred, diligence and not damnation. He knows the limits of our frame and counts the very hairs on our head.

Thanks Dad and Mom for helping us realize that what happens in Vegas doesn’t really stay there. Thank you also for teaching us that what happened in our savior’s life, death, and resurrection eclipses anything we could mess up across the road, or at home. Real Dads love forever.

~ Steve Schantz



Check this Out: An Image of the Trinity

This image appeared on Pastor Jonathan’s blog and many people have asked about it. It shows the Father, Spirit, and Son as one, with the Son in t-shirt and jeans because he is incarnate with us. The creation exists in Jesus. For more info you can check out the artist’s website at www.stephenleaver.com.



Who Are You?



Have you ever wondered, “Who am I?” “Why do I exist?” “Why am I here?” “What am I supposed to be doing?” or, “What will happen to me after I die?” Of course you have!!!

This is why books such as Rick Warren’s bestseller “The Purpose Driven Life” fly off the bookshelves and into millions of homes. Who could honestly look in the mirror and not ask “Who in the World Am I?!”

Our calling is to respond to the question with a fundamental, biblical answer based on the cardinal Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son.

Let’s look at 2 Corinthians 5:13-21. What is interesting to note about this particular passage is how Paul addresses who the Corinthians really are, and by extension, who we are also as human beings. Paul does something very differently than we do when addressing the question “Who are we?”

We tend to think of ourselves in isolation or separation from God, with a need to get connected to Him. Whereas there is a real distinction between humans and God, Paul is clear that there is no distinction we have as humans that is not already in union with God in Christ!!!

It sounds kind of crazy because of how we typically think, but Paul even addresses the craziness of how it sounds. Let’s break it down into its foundational points. You can follow along in your bible as you read these comments on the scripture:

2 Cor. 5:13 Paul is basically saying, “If it sounds like we are out of our minds with this Good News we are preaching, it is for God (We are willing to sound crazy for God!) If we are in our right minds as we express this message, this is for your encouragement. The Gospel, though radical sounding to the human mind, is encouraging through and through.”

2 Cor. 5:14 Paul is saying “The love of Christ urges us to preach this Good News to you and we’re convinced that this is what it is: You are so connected to Jesus Christ that whatever happened to him, happened to you! When Jesus died, all of humanity died! When Jesus rose, we all rose! We no longer recognize anyone according to the flesh (or how they act, their idiosyncrasies, their race, ethnicity, sex, etc.), we see everyone more accurately in Jesus Christ. God did this so that we would no longer live to ourselves, like isolated human beings, wondering who we are, instead we could praise Him and live knowing Who we REALLY are in Jesus.”

That is NOT how most of us typically think about our lives or answer the question, “Who are we?” is it? In the West, we tend to see ourselves as so distinct from God that unless we do something to get connected to God (admit we’re sinners,

God did this so that we would no longer live to ourselves . . . instead we could praise Him and live knowing who we really are in Jesus.

Who Are You . . . (cont.)

believe, repent, pray, study the bible, etc.) then we think we will be forever separated from God. Paul is convinced of the truth – we are all connected to God in Jesus, the Son of God. He is convinced of this because He is an Apostle that understood that it is in Jesus, the Son of God, that all things “live, move and have their being” (Acts 17:28).

There is no such thing as being separated from God. This is where the importance of holding to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation come in to play. The doctrine of the Trinity says that God is one God in three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, who are so intimate with each other and so in unity that it would betray their union to think of them as anything less than One.

However, The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. The Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son, and the Father and the Son are not the Holy Spirit. They each have distinct personalities but the same motives, intentions and love – the same Essence and Being.

Since we live, move and have our being in God the Son, it is impossible to think of humanity as being separated from the Godhead. This Son of God became human, without losing His divinity (John 1:1-18), and actually made the connection he already had with us even stronger!!

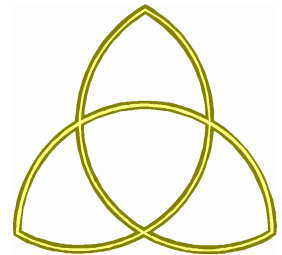
Here is a good human analogy of what we should understand about God. If God the Son was a “cup”, and He created creation to be “water inside the cup”, then whatever happens to the “cup” necessarily happens to the “water in the cup!” That is a good picture of how our connection with God actually works.

Jesus created us in Himself and sustains us in Himself. When the cup (Jesus) became human and lived, that is when the water in the cup (creation) actually became what it really was destined to be and when it REALLY had life.

When the cup went into the grave, the water inside the cup went into the grave with it. When the cup came out of the grave, the water inside the cup came out of the grave, too! When the cup (Jesus) went back and ascended to the Father and the Spirit, the water inside the cup (creation) ascended to the Father and the Spirit in Him! Whatever happens to the Cup MUST necessarily happen to the water inside the cup!! That makes sense, doesn't it?

That is what the Apostle Paul understood so well and is explaining in these scriptures. One thing should be pointed out about this analogy. We are NOT so swallowed up in God and everyone else that we have no distinction. That would be New Age philosophy!

We are our own distinct selves connected to the rest of creation in Jesus! We will



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always be distinctly individuals, AND yet, we will always be in union with God. That is how God is, and that is how we will be!

If God the Son already had union with us when He was only the Son, then what happened when He literally came into His Creation as human (which He will be forever)? It means that now humanity's connection with God, in the Son, is Eternal, Permanent and even more strong!! How is that for Good News?

2 Cor. 5:17-19 Paul goes on to clarify in these verses that EVERYTHING has been made new due to it's connection with Jesus, God's Son made flesh!! This is a gracious gift from God that was not earned nor ever could be! Neither is it a gift that can be turned down or changed, even though it can certainly be opposed and rejected in our distinction.

What we should really love about verse 19 is that right when certain people want to make this sound like something that has only happened to Christians, Paul sticks like glue to the Gospel and states explicitly that what Christ did was something done to the entire world, NOT just Christians! Everyone in the world has his or her being in Jesus!

God, the Trinity, is not counting anyone's trespasses against them, and we, the Church, or those who believe this Good News, are supposed to be telling everyone about this marvelous reconciliation that has happened between God and Man in Jesus!! We needed reconciliation because we had come to believe the lie that God was somehow against us, when God never has been against us!

Do you see why the bible is filled with so many commands to repent and believe the Good News? This is exactly how you should understand "faith" and "repentance" in the bible. God already saved everyone in the Whole World in our connection with Jesus, God's Son, but we can only experience this Salvation as truth when we believe it as truth!! If we don't believe we are New, even though we really are New, then we can't live and act like we are New.

We are like a dog that is bound without a leash! We can only live in the pain, lies and misperceptions that bring on a condition called, well, hell! Our beliefs are VERY important for experiencing the Truth!

In a very real sense, there is no such thing as an "unbeliever." Everybody believes something, usually very strongly! We either believe the Truth that we are connected to Triune God in Jesus, OR, we believe the lie that our sins are keeping us disconnected from God. If we believe the Truth, we actually experience a foretaste of all of our blessings in Jesus. If we believe the lies, then we are probably on a reli-



Who Are You . . . (cont.)

gious treadmill of trying to earn or work our way back into God's favor so that we can "get blessed" or "stay blessed", or we have given up the facade all together and are trying to have all of the fun we can before we "go to hell!"

2 Cor. 5:20-21 Admittedly, there are other verses in the bible, written by Paul, that seem to state the very opposite of the truth of all of humanity's union with God in Christ, such as in this very passage where Paul says that we are to encourage people to "be reconciled."

There is really a very simple key to reconciling passages of this type. Please notice that Paul says "be reconciled" NOT "get reconciled."

You will notice this with other verses about salvation, too, such as 2 Tim 2:3-6. Triune God's desire, and His desire through Paul, is that we believe who we really are in Jesus, so that we can "be that."

Have you ever seen someone involved in a sports game that wasn't playing up to their potential, and maybe you or someone else encouraged them to get "in the game," or to, "get their head in the game?" The person was REALLY in the game but something was so obviously wrong in their thinking and game play that we actually made the accusation that they weren't in the game (even though they really were!!)

That is exactly what is going on in the scriptures! It is one thing for something to be true; it is a whole other thing for something to be EXPERIENCED as truth!! This is why the bible urges us to repent. Repent comes from the Greek word "metanoia" and literally means to "re-think" or "think again."

We have believed lies, or simply been in ignorance about who we really are. The gospel encourages us to rethink and believe the Truth, or Good News, so that we can experience that joyous Truth in our distinction!

~ Tim Brassell

Check this Out: Tim and Jonathan's Blogs

Just can't get enough of the good news of our adoption into the Triune Life? Check out Pastor Tim and Pastor Jonathan's blogs. They are posting articles and short reflections several times a week.

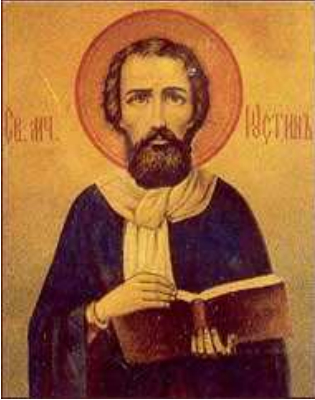
Pastor Tim is at www.godlikesyou.wordpress.com. His blog is a mix of gospel theology and practical Christian living from a Christ-centered perspective.

Pastor Jonathan is at www.neoreformation.wordpress.com. His writing is focusing on theological issues facing the church as the Spirit brings about a new reformation in this new century.

Please notice that Paul says "be reconciled" NOT "get reconciled."



Justin Martyr on the Resurrection



The good news is that the Son of God remains forever incarnate. Some struggle with this idea, thinking that Jesus shed human nature and left flesh behind at his resurrection. Our resurrection and ascension in Christ, and our adoption into the Triune Life, depend on the Son's permanent connection to our humanity.

From the earliest days of the apostles the permanent incarnation of the Son has been the church's teaching. Here's what Justin Martyr said in ca. 150 A.D.:

Why did He rise in the flesh in which He suffered, unless to show the resurrection of the flesh? And wishing to confirm this, when His disciples did not know whether to believe He had truly risen in the body, and were looking upon Him and doubting, He said to them, "Ye have not yet faith, see that it is I;" and He let them handle Him, and showed them the prints of the nails in His hands. And when they were by every kind of proof persuaded that it was Himself, and in the body, they asked Him to eat with them, that they might thus still more accurately ascertain that He had in verity risen bodily; and He did eat honey-comb and fish. And when He had thus shown them that there is truly a resurrection of the flesh, wishing to show them this also, that it is not impossible for flesh to ascend into heaven (as He had said that our dwelling-place is in heaven), "He was taken up into heaven while they beheld," as He was in the flesh.

Taken from Justin's book, On the Resurrection, Chapter 9.



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