

## **Looking Forward From Lent**

If you're not already looking forward to Easter and the end of Lent then you probably live in some warm, sunny part of the world like Puerto Rico or the Southern Hemisphere. The rest of us are ready for winter to end and light to return to our dark lives.

Lent lasts 40 days because that's how long Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by the Devil. Easter lasts 50 days because that's the time until Pentecost and, besides, you should spend more time celebrating Jesus' resurrection than preparing to celebrate it.

Lent and Easter reflect the constant tension of the Christian life. In a sense it is always Lent while we live in this world of sorrows. Until the day of the Lord's appearing, we are preparing for his coming, changing our minds about our false beliefs (repenting), and allowing the Spirit to instruct us in his ways. We live our lives in Lenten lands.

In another sense it is always Easter. As we await the Lord's appearing, we live in the power and glory of his resurrection, knowing that we have already been raised up in Christ and seated in heavenly realms, in him, at the Father's right hand. It would not be possible for us to travel safely through this Lenten world if we did not know ourselves to already be the children of the Easter world to come.

This tension of the "already" and the "not yet" explains why we experience both despair and joy, sometimes in the very same moment. We are already adopted and raised up in Christ, but we have not yet experienced the fullness of this reality in time and space.

It's not just the end of this year's season of Lent that we are looking forward to. We are looking forward to the end of the whole creation's Lent and the dawning of the Easter that will last for all eternity. The promise of the New Jerusalem, and the New Heaven and the New Earth, is that someday there will be no more Lent. Someday it will be Easter forever.

May we live in hope and faith as we look forward to the glory of the home our Father has prepared for us.

*~ Jonathan Stepp*

## Our Awesome New Bodies

One summer day when my son Nick was about six years old, we went for a bicycle ride at the TVA bike trail near the Tennessee River in Muscle Shoals. Nick had just recently learned to ride and was doing quite well, until about the end of the two-mile track. I was riding just ahead of him, sort of keeping an eye on him out of the corner of my eye, when I saw him begin to wobble and I heard a horrendous crash!

Amazingly, the little fellow got up, inspected his hands and knees and found no signs of blood or scratches anywhere. Then he looked up at me and said with an excited grin “Awesome Dad! It’s just like Jesus has come back already and I’ve got my new body!”

One of the glorious truths that we hold dear as Christians is, that even though the physical bodies that we now inhabit will eventually die and decay, we will be granted new glorified bodies in resurrection at his coming. Just as our spirits are made new in Christ now through faith, our bodies will one day be raised incorruptible as well.

Speaking of the resurrection of the human body, the Apostle Paul wrote:

*It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:43-44).*

One encouraging thing to know about the resurrection body for me is that, even though it is spoken of as an incorruptible “spiritual” body, it apparently will still have some of the same capabilities and characteristics of our human bodies as well.

For instance, when Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection he walked, fished, cooked, ate, and even told them to touch him and feel his wounds so that they might believe. In other words, if Christ is the prototype and “first-fruits” of them that sleep, then it is reasonable to suppose that our bodies will be raised in similar fashion and with the same capabilities as his.

That is to say: not susceptible to death, disease, or decay nor even subject to the laws of physics or gravity, but at least in many respects, similar to what we are now accustomed to. If Jesus ate fish with his disciples on the beach and told them that “A spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have” (Luke 24:39), then I do not think it too far-fetched to believe that our resurrection bodies will similarly be able to experience and do things in a way that “disembodied spirits” cannot.

I agree with Nick... That’s pretty awesome!

~ Brad Campbell

## Being Adopted Means War!

I'm tired! How about you? I'm sure you are! How do I know that? Because we are compelled, presently, to embrace this Good News of our Adoption into the Life of the Trinity, in Jesus, in this "present evil age" (Gal 1:4). I am not being pessimistic and forgetting to remember that the Light shines in the darkness and that Jesus has set us free from the present age! Rather, I am simply admitting that the Light is shining, right now, IN THE DARKNESS of the present age.

Through the experience of living, it becomes clearer to me each day that the only hope for the kind of world we're actually wired to live in is Jesus Christ Himself. There may come a day when a bulk of fallen humanity begins to embrace the Gospel and things greatly improve in every arena of life, but such a time will only fail again and again until it is broken in on by the literal return of the Son of Man and we share in incorruptible bodies. After all, the nature of sin is the nature of sin and therefore, in the end, can still only be the nature of sin.

I am writing this way because I need to be reminded from time to time that to embrace humanity's sonship in Jesus, in our present darkness, is to suffer! To embrace our adoption in Christ is to ache and agonize (and even be terrorized!). Talk about the Person and Message that hits at the "root" of the core issues in our life and the lives of all others—it's Jesus!

The reality of the Jesus Who is in relationship with all people and things means that at some point, he is coming to address each of us personally in our darkness (as any truly loving Person would!), and this will necessitate a profound crisis. This crisis will come because the Triune God, in Jesus, has undone every part of our brokenness. In the passion of the Father and Spirit, he will not be satisfied with our being and believing anything less than the Truth of who we are in Him!

By every part of our brokenness being addressed and undone, I mean EVERYTHING! Every idol we have—including money, sex and power—must go! Every stable thing we center on—including jobs, homes, computers, governments, and even families—must sometimes be exposed as the fragile things they really are apart from Him. Our dependence upon self, smarts, race, doctrines and even the scriptures must be exposed (the scriptures are a window designed to lead us to see and depend on Jesus, as my friend Jonathan Stepp might say!)

In part, this is a major part of the problem with lack of Church growth as typically defined in terms of attendance! In calling people to truly "pick up their cross and follow Jesus"—by embracing the union of all in Jesus, solely on the basis of grace rather than works, law, or individualism—brings a radical change of mind and naturally transformed lifestyle! Good gravy! Pulling off a change like that is like trying to get most of us to start eating right and exercising! It's simply not going to happen until we suffer the proverbial or literal crisis of having a "heart attack"—a heart attack we hope to survive so that we can eat right, get some exercise and live really healthy! Ha-Ha! For God to be with us and in us as we are—it means war! It means war because in the end God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself. There simply is no such thing! There is nothing else! And the Father will fight for what is His! He will fight for you! The Holy Spirit will fight in you!

Thought provokingly, and in conclusion, if the Triune God goes to war for something, what do you suspect will be the likely outcome of that war?!

~ *Tim Brassell*

## **In Jesus, All Are Accepted**

During the 1800's there was a young boy who lived on the streets of London, England. One day he heard that the great American evangelist Dwight L. Moody was coming to preach in a church in London. The young boy wanted to go and hear Mr. Moody preach. On the day Mr. Moody was to preach, the young boy walked across town to the church where the American evangelist would preach. It took several hours for the boy to arrive at the church. As he looked up at the church it must have been a heavenly sight to him. He enthusiastically made his way up the steps.

Just before he was about to enter the front door, a man stopped him and asked him just where he thought he was going. The young boy told the man that he had come to hear Dwight Moody preach. The man informed the boy that he was not about to let him in that church because he was filthy. Since the poor boy lived on the streets he probably had not had a bath in quite a long time and possessed a bad odor. At any rate, the boy was turned away.

The boy believed that he could find a way into that church, so he proceeded to walk around the church looking for an open door or an open window. There was just no way in. The young boy finally gave up. He sat down on the front steps of the church and began to weep.

Then suddenly a carriage pulled up just in front of the church. A man stepped out of the carriage and noticed the young boy weeping on the church steps. This man asked the boy what was wrong. The boy replied that he had come to see the American evangelist Dwight Moody preach but no one would let him inside the church because he was too dirty.

The man took the young boy by the hand and told him to come with him. The man took the young boy up the steps right through the front doorway and down to the front of the church where the boy was seated on the front row. During the service, this man got up and preached—he was none other than the famous American evangelist Dwight L. Moody. No one questioned Mr. Moody's authority to bring that boy into the church.

The Holy Trinity dwells in a heavenly perfection. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in perfect harmony. Among the Trinity there is absolute purity, holiness, love, and goodness. We have quite a lot in common with that young boy in the story. If we listen to false teachers we might be led to believe that we are not fit for fellowship with God.

But listen to the words of Paul: "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:4, NASB). Mr. Moody made a dramatic appearance in that church with the "filthy" young boy. One day Jesus will make a dramatic appearance in glory as He presents you and me to the Father. Strangely, in a way this happened some 2000 years ago. As Jesus was raised from death, we were raised with Him. As Jesus was seated at the right hand of the Father, our human family was seated right there with Him.

It is fascinating that 2000 years ago the perfection of heaven was born as a child in Bethlehem and His name is Jesus. Something wonderful happened when Jesus came into our world. God became flesh. Jesus is fully God and fully man. Jesus remains fully God and fully man even until this very day.

The second person of the Trinity wrapped Himself with the dirt of the earth. Jesus came walking down the dusty trails of our world. He came with a mission. He came to take you and me by the

hand and lead us into eternal fellowship with the Triune God. It can be said that the Father reached through the Son in order to reconcile sinful dirty mankind.

Today Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. You and I also are seated right there with the Son. Today we enjoy fellowship with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who love us with unconditional love. In Jesus we are all forever accepted as adopted children of the Father.

~ *Mark Nelson*

## **A Lenten Challenge**

You were created to call the Father “Father” and to call the Son “Jesus” and to call the Holy Spirit “Holy Spirit.”

Maybe that doesn’t sound too profound to you until you stop and ask yourself “how many times do I simply say ‘God’ or ‘Lord’ and never speak about, or to, the persons of God by personal name?”

There’s a lot in a personal name. I am a human and an American and a Pastor. I have no problem with people calling me those things. But when my 6 year-old son crawls up in my lap, the last thing I want him to call me is “Pastor” or “Citizen Stepp.” I want him to call me “Daddy” because, as far as he’s concerned, that is my name and I have no other.

Our Father in heaven created us to call him “Father” because—as far as we’re concerned—that’s who he is. He is the Father because of his relationship with the Son. He was the eternal Father of the eternal Son forever before we came into existence, and he will be the Father of the Son forevermore. When we call him “Father” we are calling him by his true, personal name. Even the names revealed to Israel—like Yahweh and El-Shaddai—are not nearly as fundamentally descriptive of his true nature as the simple name “Father.”

Likewise, the Son has a name. He is God, yes. And he is certainly Lord, of that there is no doubt. But his Mama calls him Jesus, as do his friends, and he calls us his friends. So we should call him Jesus. We were born to be his brothers and sisters. He includes us all in his life and his relationship with the Father. We call him Jesus because that’s his name, and it will be his name forever.

The Holy Spirit is also the Lord and the giver of Life, so there’s certainly nothing wrong with calling him “God” or “Lord.” But Jesus calls him “The Spirit”—the Spirit of truth, the Counselor, the one who is Holy. He comes to us from the Father through the Son, and he gives us the fruit of the Holy relationship the Father and Son share. He gives us their love, their joy, their peace, and their kindness.

Because we know the names of the persons of God, the Church has always prayed and worshiped in one of two ways: either “to the Father, in Jesus’ name, by the power of the Holy Spirit” or “to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.” Sometimes we pray to God and sometimes we worship the Lord (those words for the Triune Life are both very Biblical), but those are not the primary ways we have talked to, and about, the Trinity. The primary and most common way we speak of God is to call upon our Father in heaven, in the name of Jesus, by the power of the

Holy Spirit.

I say this is how we pray and worship because I am thinking of the Church Universal, as she exists in every language, tribe, and nation for 2,000 years. Unfortunately, we have to admit that we 21st century Christians in North America do not most commonly pray to the Father in Jesus' name. Most often we pray to God. We do not usually worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; we usually worship the Lord. The doctrinal statements of our Churches are Trinitarian but our thoughts, words, prayers, and songs are far too often Unitarian.

Sometimes people say to me "Yes, but aren't these *just* words?" Of course they are words, but no word is "just" a word. "Love" is a word, but it is not *just* a word. "Daddy" and "Mama" and "home" are words, but they are never *just* words.

The words we use—to think, to feel, to speak, to pray, and to sing—are all symbols that convey deep truth about the way we view reality: ourselves, others, and the world. These words also shape and form our view of reality. When 90% of our spiritual language is generic and neutral—like the words "God" and "Lord"—we have to admit that we are expressing the generic and neutral inner reality of our thoughts about our Father in heaven. And when we predominantly use that generic language, then our generic view of the Divine Life is reinforced.

Likewise, when we allow the Holy Spirit to discipline our thoughts and language so that we are always talking about our Father in heaven and our brother Jesus, that also reveals the inner reality of our thoughts. And that language also shapes our thinking and our view of the world. When we use the words "Father," "Jesus," and "Holy Spirit," we can no longer think of God as some generic, impersonal force. The use of the words themselves forces our minds, hearts, and souls to understand that we are in union with our Dad in heaven, through his Son Jesus, and baptized in his Spirit.

Here's my Lenten challenge to you: for the season of Lent stop saying "God" and "Lord." Not because those words are wrong but because you have said them a million times in your life while you've only said "Father," "Jesus," and "Holy Spirit" a few thousand times. Try this experiment: for the rest of Lent, every time you want to say something about God, pick a person of the Trinity to speak about instead, or speak of all three together. Here are some examples:

Instead of saying "God loves us all" say "Our Father in heaven loves us all."

Instead of saying "God has forgiven us" say "We have forgiveness in Jesus."

Instead of saying "Let's worship the Lord" say "Let's worship the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit."

Instead of praying "Lord, help me" pray "Father, help me, in the name of Jesus, through the power of your Holy Spirit." Amen.

~ Jonathan Stepp

## St. John of Damascus on Humanity's Salvation

We're sometimes asked "Are you sure the adoption of humanity is the gospel? I've never heard it before." That's why we like to bring in the thoughts of various theologians from history to add to our understanding of the gospel.

In the following passage St. John of Damascus (ca. 676 - 749) explains how Jesus included all mankind in his victory over death:

Throughout all the earth the Gospel of the knowledge of God has been preached; no wars or weapons or armies being used to rout the enemy, but only a few, naked, poor, illiterate, persecuted and tormented men, who with their lives in their hands, preached Him Who was crucified in the flesh and died, and who became victors over the wise and powerful. For the omnipotent power of the Cross accompanied them. Death itself, which once was man's chiefest terror, has been overthrown, and now that which was once the object of hate and loathing is preferred to life. These are the achievements of Christ's presence: these are the tokens of His power. For it was not one people that He saved, as when through Moses He divided the sea and delivered Israel out of Egypt and the bondage of Pharaoh; nay, rather **He rescued all mankind from the corruption of death** and the bitter tyranny of sin: not leading them by force to virtue, not overwhelming them with earth or burning them with fire, or ordering the sinners to be stoned, but persuading man by gentleness and long-suffering to choose virtue . . . (*The Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book 4, Chapter 4, emphasis ours.)

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Publishers: *Tim Brassell and Jonathan Stepp*

Editor: *John Stonecypher*

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*Contact us at:*

*[www.theadoptedlife.org](http://www.theadoptedlife.org)*

*[theadoptedlife@gmail.com](mailto:theadoptedlife@gmail.com)*

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