

JESUS THE FRIEND OF SINNERS

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Long ago a missionary on furlough from service had saved up \$300 to buy a kerosene refrigerator to take back. But he lent the money to a church friend so he could recover his pickup truck, which had been foreclosed for lack of payments. He was an old friend; it was certain he would repay.

Meanwhile the missionary pursued his itinerary. Week after week, month after month, he waited to receive a check from him by mail; but nothing came. Time got short; he worried. Was his friend unfaithful?

All this while he had been receiving bank statements from his inactive account in his little hometown bank. He tossed them all unopened in a drawer, for he wasn't using the account.

Finally, he looked at them. There, months before, was a mysterious deposit to his account of \$300. All this time he had been doubting his friend, while he had been faithful.

By virtue of His great sacrifice on His cross, your Savior deposited to your personal account the gift of justification, forgiveness of sin, eternal life. He details all the items of this Grand Deposit in Ephesians 1. Thus "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will." "In Him we were also

chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." Ephesians 1:3-5, 11, NIV. You knew nothing of it. You did nothing to merit it or to effect it. It was yours all this while, while your human heart was in alienation from Him. You needed to learn what is the true Good News of what He has already done for you.

Then when you learned the Good News of the gospel, and you believed, you EXPERIENCED justification by faith, you rejoiced in sins forgiven, you began to know the new quality of life that is "eternal life." But it was all purchased for you at the cross of Christ, and deposited to your account "by grace." Totally undeserved.

Now give some thought to those myriads who have never understood the true Good News. They have to understand HOW "God so loved" that "He GAVE" all for them. Then genuine faith can grip their hearts and work the works of obedience.

There is a prayer that we can pray that the Lord will always answer with His enthusiastic "Yes!" Let's not denigrate the wonderful promise that the Lord Jesus makes to us in His Luke 11 parable—(and thank you, our beloved Gentile brother who has saved these fascinating stories for us!).

It's when we ask Him for some bread of life to give to someone else:

"Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine in his journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?"

“And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.

“I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth” (Luke 11:5-8).

(a) There is enough “good news” in this parable for many sermons!

(b) You have been suddenly awakened at midnight by a dear friend who has come on a long journey.

(c) He is hungry.

(d) Your pantry is empty, not even a loaf of bread.

(e) So, you go bang on the door of your sleeping neighbor: “let me have three loaves of bread, not for myself, but for somebody else: a friend has come on his long journey and he is hungry. I am asking, so I can give to him.”

(f) Your selfish neighbor doesn’t want to help you; he and his children are deep in sleep; but you keep on banging on the door. You don’t stop.

(g) Finally, so he can get rid of you he gets up and gets you the bread you are asking—for someone else.

Jesus told the story to illustrate what the Lord is NOT like: He loves to give when we need something to give to someone else. Even at midnight.

(b) The Lord Jesus is presented as in contrast to the unwilling neighbor who must be begged and pleaded to give him a bit of bread to give to someone else!

(c) You don’t have to beg the dear Lord to answer this prayer; it’s the prayer that He promises ALWAYS to answer with a resounding “Yes!”

(d) “Asking to give” is what the Lord Jesus loves to hear us pray!

We become an essential part in His great plan of redemption for this lost world. We learn to participate by experience in His love for lost souls. Our naturally selfish heart has become awakened to the experience of His heart, which is love (*agape*).

Now we are one with Him; we have become reconciled to Him. We are at one with His heart of unselfish giving. There is no greater joy in life. A Roman Catholic professor visited our church this week for a funeral. He was very well-spoken as he eulogized the deceased. In the remarks of the message, it was mentioned that there was no greater love story than God’s giving His only begotten Son to the world. Later in conversation with him in the social hall he started off by saying, “There is no great love story of all time.” I replied, “It is the greatest love story.” In that moment Jesus’ *agape* joins hearts together.

Is the Holy Spirit our Friend? You say, Yes, of course; but think: Jesus says that His first work is to “reprove the world of sin” (John 16:8). Is that fun? The doctor does a scientific test and convinces you that you have a lethal disease. You “feel” okay and it hasn’t worried you, but he says you must do something drastic now. Fun? Is the doctor your “friend”?

Now suppose he has many, many patients all with a lethal disease they don't want to recognize; and suppose they all reject his counsel to do something, even though he is genuinely their friend. Wouldn't he be unhappy?

Is it impossible to conceive of a patient being concerned for the reputation or happiness of his physician? Patients are usually consumed by a me-first mind-set; few make appointments to inquire how the doctor is, and give HIM treatments. Few if any are concerned that he not be forced out of business. The Good News is that the Holy Spirit is "reproving" or "convicting" "the world of sin." The Bad News is that most who need help (His "patients") reject His reproofs and convictions of sin, so that Satan hopes that in the end the Holy Spirit will be proven a failure. Satan's last hope is that "the people of God" will reject His reproof and be involved in the general ruin coming on the earth.

There's a better reason to listen to the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin, than our own little personal salvation. He is Christ's Vicar; His job is to "convict of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment," the latter because "the prince of this world is condemned" (John 16:9-11). In listening, in receiving His reproof, in giving up the sin He convicts you of, you honor Christ in this last battle of the millennia-long great controversy. The Holy Spirit is your Friend; now be a friend to Him also. Say thanks to Him for His work.

People can make God very happy, or they can make Him sad. Abraham made Him so happy that He gave him the title "Friend of God" (James 2:23).

He was so delighted with Abraham that He declared that all who embraced the same faith that he had must inherit the whole earth for an everlasting possession with everlasting life to go along with the gift!

Further, God was so happy with him that He promised him and all his descendants to become a great nation, the "head and not the tail," the outstanding example to all the world of what God's salvation is all about. According to the Bible, what made God so happy was that Abraham "rejoiced to see," to perceive, to understand, to grasp, to appreciate Christ as the world's Savior. He "believed in the Lord" (John 8:56; Gen. 15:6). Remember, the gospel was preached to him as it has been to us, Gal. 3:8.

Abraham's descendants were to be a corporate body on earth, a "nation," God's church on earth that should evangelize the world. They would corporately honor His name before all the pagan nations.

It was a glorious idea! Israel was to be a nation of special people who would survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, whose richest gain they would count but loss, and pour contempt on all their pride. The Lord would fight for them and give them possession of the promised land; they wouldn't need to bear the sword (Ex. 14:14; Deut. 1:30; 3:22, etc.). He would use some agency that the wisest commentators still don't fully understand called "the hornet" (7:20) that would drive out their enemies.

But Israel largely failed. Even their best leaders blew it. God gave King Saul great military success with his sword; but it went to his head. Even David who praised the Lord in all his Psalms committed adultery with the wife of his bravest, most loyal soldier, Uriah the Hittite, and then murdered him. Solomon's vast wealth and wisdom went to his head. Kings such as Hezekiah and Jehoshaphat for whom the Lord wrought great miracles sullied their life record with tragic mistakes of pride. The prophets all longed for a national repentance that never came until Israel crucified their Messiah.

Now God has a world church through whom He longs to glorify His name before a bewildered, confused modern world in gross darkness. There is Good News: what Jesus died to accomplish will yet be achieved in His church—when they can pour contempt on all their pride.

We have been studying about the “Atonement,” especially as it is taught in the New Testament.

The word is not of Latin origin; it's a plain old Saxon word that means to “be at-one-with” someone from whom you have been alienated. It's always a sweet experience to become “at-one-with” a friend or relative from whom you have been alienated, but no words can describe the sheer joy that becomes ours when we are at last “at-one-with” the Lord—so there is no alienation between us. Our natural state as fallen humans is to be alienated from Him: “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7).

“At-one-ment” means to be restored to the intimate closeness with the Lord that was ours as humans before our first parents yielded to the deceptive claims of the fallen Lucifer in the Garden of Eden. Ever since, as humans we have been at odds with the Lord; it's our nature; it's something passed on down to us through our fallen father, Adam. “The carnal [natural] mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Romans 8:7). And no one can claim that he is better than all the other fallen sons or daughters of Adam and claim that he doesn't have that problem. We are all in the same boat.

No one can claim that he/she does not need the divine human Saviour who gave Himself for us.

The very story of Jesus moves us toward salvation if we will but listen and believe it; there is redemption in the story itself.

(a) Our fallen father Adam passed on to us in our nature the lostness that became his.

(b) Christ has fired him from his job of being our “father,” and Himself has become our “second” or “last Adam,” reversing the judicial condemnation that sin has brought on all of us.

(c) Therefore as our “last Adam,” the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the human race another probation: Christ has erased the judicial condemnation that was against us “in Adam” and has given us, not merely offered us, a judicial verdict of acquittal. Let's read it in Romans 5:

(d) “It was through one man that sin entered the world, and through sin death, and thus death pervaded the whole human race. . . . But God's act

of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many, its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. And again, the gift of God is not to be compared in its effect with that one man's sin; for the judicial action, following on the one offense, resulted in a verdict of condemnation; but the act of grace, following on so many misdeeds, resulted in a verdict of acquittal . . . It follows, then, that as the result of one misdeed was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all" (Rom. 5:12-18, REB). What does this say?

(e) The Father has not merely offered to give Jesus to us; He has given Him to us!

(f) Since the world began, only one "righteous act" has ever been performed—the sacrifice of Jesus.

(g) The Father gave Him and He gave Himself for us, each one individually, going to hell and giving Himself forever, to save us each individually.

(h) Kneel and think about it, your eyes closed, your radio and TV off, until you can begin to appreciate it.

My friend had just given me the little book that he hoped would find a treasured spot in my library. It had the price sticker still on it—97 cents. It was entitled "Seeking the Savior."

The author was faithful to his title: the book went on to tell the many things I must do in order to find Jesus. The basic idea of the book is that the Savior

of the world is hiding somewhere, and one must diligently search Him out.

My friend meant well; he wanted to help me. Thanks to him. And thanks to the author of the book who sincerely wanted to help his reader. I appreciated all the good intentions.

But the idea of Jesus hiding and waiting for us to find Him through diligent search is an Old Covenant idea, and Old Covenant thinking "genders to bondage" (Gal. 4:24).

The faith of Jesus is not another shop set up alongside Buddhism, Islam, Shintoism, etc. where you come to buy salvation. Jesus has given Himself to us; the Father "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," that whoever believes in Him should not go on perishing within himself (the original has this idea). But may have (now, present tense) eternal life.

The Bible idea is just what hungry, lonely hearts yearn to understand:

The Father is infinite, which means that He gives His full attention to every person on earth. He faithfully, meticulously watched over you when you were an embryo in your mother's womb. "You have formed my inward parts; You have covered me in my mother's womb. . . . My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth [that is, the secret realities beyond our knowledge]. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me [that includes today!], when as yet there were none of them" (Psalm 139:13-16, NKJV).

Kneel before Him, and let each word penetrate; you've come to where you need to "enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matt. 6:6, KJV). Just wait, wait; let Him say to you what He yearns for you to receive in your heart. The Lord Jesus is your Savior, He has given Himself to you. It's not your job to go and dig Him out somehow, somewhere.

It's your job to let the Holy Spirit melt your hard, worldly heart with the truth of His nearness.

The Father has so loved us, unworthy sinners, that He gave us His only Son, a gift for eternity. He is the "brother born for adversity" (Prov. 17:17), and our "Friend closer than a brother" (18:24). Jesus will forever remain what He was given to be—one of us, the Son of God but now forever, the Son of man. As He sits at the Father's right hand in heaven, He feels lonely there, for His heart is with us.

He can never forget His divinity nor can He forget His humanity; He is one. He has promised to come again the second time, visibly, personally, literally; but not only does He want to keep His promise, He wants to come on His own—that His people may be with Him, one with Him (cf. John 14:1-3). The reason? He loves them!

That means He is lonely in heaven; He has loved every individual believer since the world began, vast multitudes now sleeping in the grave; He loved each one individually but the Lord Jesus knows them personally and He longs to bring us together in the resurrection morning. Think of the joy that

awaits Him! Only someone infinite could experience a joy that will be infinite in itself!

We have often thought of the joy that will be ours in that glad morning; but let us enlarge our hearts a bit and think of the joy that will be His! And think how He longs for that day to come, yet He has been disappointed time and again as His own people have in various ways postponed the joyous day.

We are living in the time when God's people are to grow up "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). The church is many individuals, but it is to become the Bride of Christ at the "marriage of the Lamb." All who "grow up" in the Lord are "guests at the wedding" (don't turn that invitation down!). But as a corporate body, the church becomes the Bride of the Lamb (cf. Rev. 19:7, 8).

The Chinese have said that a picture is worth a thousand words; here's the picture (Song of Solomon 5:2-7). The girl whom the Bridegroom loves has gone to bed; He has been on a journey; He has come "home" to her; it's night; it's raining; He's hungry; but most of all He longs for her; she is snug in bed, warm and cozy; He is knocking at her door (the Hebrew text says He is banging on the door); she doesn't want to give up her comfort and let Him in—she snuggles closer; He keeps on banging; finally, she "grows up" enough to forget her selfish comfort and thinks of Him out there in the rain and cold and decides to let Him in.

But when she opens the door, He is gone.

That's another portrait of the church that Revelation says is Laodicea (cf. 3:14-21).

Can you think a moment and envision God in the way that Psalm 145 does? The Book of Psalms is where our intimate closeness to the King of the Universe is emphasized; you and I may be the most lowly inhabitants of this globe, yet we remember that “the Lord thinketh on me” (Psalm 40:17, KJV).

You are delighted when a friend tells you he/she has been thinking about you—with good will. Somehow they connected on the internet. Hidayet in Turkey and Carey in America. The story is that Hidayet’s business tanked and his creditors came knocking. In that Moslem country you can be thrown into debtor’s prison—something we are protected from here by our Constitution. Carey made it his business to send regular payments to Hidayet in order to keep him out of prison. He shared the good news about Jesus. It was such a foreign concept to this Moslem. But he is learning about what a true friend he has in this follower of Christ.

Well, it is solid truth that the Lord, infinite though He is, busy as He is keeping the Milky Way running smoothly, takes time to devote His thought processes to you and me individually, with good will (cf. Luke 2:14). “In Christ” the infinite Father is as close to you and me, unworthy as we are, as if we were the only inhabitants of this “desert island” of earth.

Yes, we must as the most rudimentary lesson of heaven’s kindergarten, believe two magnificent things: “he that comes to God must believe (a) that He is, and (2) that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). He has reconciled

us who are in heart at “enmity with God” (Rom. 8:7), but at the same time we must let go this enmity we have: now “be ye reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Here is how Psalm 145 pictures God: (it’s like He puts pictures in His Bible like we put pictures in our books): here is the mighty God kneeling down like you kneel down with some nuts in your hand to entice a fawn or chipmunk to come and eat them out of your hand. “The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and you give them their food in due season. The LORD . . . opens [His] hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing” (vs. 16). This includes the squirrels and the birds, and the bears, and all.

But that’s not all that is in this “picture.” Read more: “The LORD upholds all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down” (vs. 14). “All,” yes; if we will let Him do it.

Don’t be ashamed to kneel before Him so the entire universe sees you; let everybody on earth and in heaven see that you are “bowed down.” When He does that, He puts “a new song” in your soul, “even praise to our God: many shall see it, and . . . trust in the Lord” (Psalm 40:3).

That’s His substitute for an anti-depressant drug, or the psychiatrist’s chair.

There is a precious little book called *Steps to Christ* which presents the gospel of Christ very clearly. Some publishers printed a special edition in which they printed on the back cover these words: “Jesus Wants to Be Your Best Friend.” They sincerely thought they were doing the right thing, but they were vitiating the message of the book and transforming its Good News into Bad News.

The implication was clear: Jesus is not your Best Friend and He will not be your Best Friend until you do something right first which will change Him into becoming your Best Friend. And thus the book becomes a subtle statement of our old-fashioned legalism.

Question: Did the repentant, believing thief crucified with Jesus make Him become his Best Friend? Or was He so already? Had God already loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son to save us? Or did we do something first to induce Him to love us?

Was Jesus already the Best Friend of the cruel men who nailed Him to the cross? He prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). One of them did repent and we trust he will be saved eternally—the centurion (vs. 47). He came to know Him as his already-Best-Friend Savior!

Caiphas never in his life had such a Best Friend as the Jesus of Nazareth whom he condemned to be crucified. All these deliberately unbelieving people will realize in the final day of judgment how evil and stupid they were not to realize that the Jesus whom they rejected was the only true Friend they had ever had. May the Holy Spirit enable us to present Him thus to every person whom we shall meet! Including children and youth!