

Chapter 7

I Get Raised to Life

“If anyone hears my words...”

Obviously I had to tell my folks.

I don't know why, but I asked God to help me. He did. They were totally supportive and didn't spend a lot of time on recriminations, probably sensing I was learning the hard way as it was.

The significance of this event had very little to do with the car which was gone forever. It was as though it had been allowed to happen in the way that it did to draw me out. Up to that point it had never even crossed my mind that God could be in any way *for* me. That wasn't what I thought he was like. My first experience of his presence had been so frightening that he appeared distant and very, very hard and condemning. But I was making the same mistake that human beings have made since time immemorial: I judged God's character by his attitude to the evil that was in my life.

As far as I can gauge, in spite of the ready availability of Bibles in this country and the mega-importance of the issue, very few people (even 'religious' people) take the time to look seriously into what God is actually like. We stop short of where he wants us to be, content to

believe whatever we believe regardless of where we derived our information, and waste our precious days with heads full of junk whilst God looks on in helpless amazement.

What! God *helpless*?

Yes, sadly he is. Its that free will thing again, because although he brings (or permits) many trying circumstances into our lives, we usually don't look farther than the point of our nose for a reason. In fact, many of us even lay the blame on God, especially in the case of the bigger picture, the high profile media-rich experiences of collective human suffering such as famines, earthquakes and tsunamis which we in our wisdom and compassion believe God (if he had half a heart) could easily prevent.

Hey! Has it never occurred to those who hole up behind the cosy barricade of feeling more righteous and caring than God that maybe He *does* prevent famines and earthquakes. Maybe he *does* waft tornadoes away from cities. Maybe he *did* prevent America and Russia from unleashing the bomb. Its just that, what with him not being insecure about his identity like us, he doesn't feel the same need to tell everyone. We don't get to hear about it. We only hear about the ones he doesn't.

So *why* doesn't he?

We are all hiding from God. We hide because we are extremely uncomfortable about being exposed and seen by all for what we truly are, because it basically doesn't amount to much - certainly a lot less than we feel the need to give the impression - and within ourselves we are so painfully aware of this. We fear the light. The Bible puts it this way in the Gospel of John: 'Light [Jesus] is come into the world, but men loved the darkness, for their deeds were evil'¹

Sadly it is not possible to get close enough to God to find out what he is truly like without being exposed to, and by that light. There's no getting around that - its just the way it is with lights. Really, it should be obvious, but in the sad self-centred gloom of our own personal little coal cellar we generally prefer to sit there in the dark, issuing forth ill-considered indictments against the Source of our discomfort, slipping them out like notes under the door for the Almighty to read and learn!

But what will we do when the hinges finally corrode?

At this stage, although I had been terribly exposed by his light (inwardly, not publicly²) it took the car incident to get me to ask for help. My experience of God shifted gear. A much more personal element appeared. I was a bit disconcerted by this as it moved the goalposts, but, aware as I was that it had not been initiated from my

¹ John 3:19

² That experience awaits those who resist till death.

end, I felt able to begin to take on board a whole new understanding of who God is.

In the coming weeks I began to feel more positive. The paralysing fear was receding and in its place there began to appear just a tinge of excitement. Excitement at the possibility that I may just have bumbled my way into something true and real, and although at this stage I still had absolutely not a clue about the bigger picture... I just knew that I knew that I knew...

But still I told no-one.

Then came the incident in the bathtub...

One night in March of 1979 I was in the bath at my folks' house. Now, anyone who knows me knows that I'm a right pain when it comes to baths because I monopolise the bathroom for at least three hours. It must have something to do with that little lock on the door, but for me bath times have always been sacred. They are a private sanctuary in which life can be assessed, interests contemplated and priorities forged. But back in those days houses only had one loo, and unfortunately for everyone else it meant I was in it.

But this bath time was very different. As I lay there reflecting on all that was going on, I began to feel very, very happy¹. All the

¹ I hasten to add there were no substances involved.

stress and strain of recent events seemed to just evaporate from off me. Even the room around me seemed to join in... all I could see - the wall tiles, the chrome, the porcelain - grew cleaner and brighter, with the colours and textures coming alive in a vivid crystal clarity that felt like a dance. I have to say there was no heavenly music, but if there had been I wouldn't have been surprised!

This was my moment. To this day I look back on that event as the moment I was truly born again.

But still I didn't understand.

About the beginning of April I got a job. It wasn't much of a job if the wages were anything to go by but it was a job. I started painting boats at Macduff slipway, which came as a bit of a physical wake-up call - I found out there is no such thing as being naturally fit! Also, being ordered around like a commodity by cold and distant working men was a bit of a culture shock having been trained in the softie world of working for my Dad, an unrealistic working environment in which every decision or command could potentially be the subject of debate. There was none of that at the boatyard - it was just "do this, do that, shut yer face and paint yer boat". Reality, basically.

Anyway, it was good for me. A bit of discipline. And there was another guy working there whom I knew from school - a tall guy called

Dougie. He was a couple of years older than me but in that dark and depressing place I could tell that he shared my lightness of spirit. His face seemed to shine with a simple, inner joy that I knew was the same as what I had found, but with one major difference: when he spoke about it, it was always in terms of the church. *Pah!*

The joy that had first enthralled me in the bathtub was still with me. Since that night I had a new-found enthusiasm for life, and the cold and distant men just seemed to me very, very sad... they were like kids arguing in the dirt outside an enormous sweet shop where everything was free, refusing to go inside for themselves, preferring instead the safe camaraderie of slagging off anyone who did.

I can't say for sure when was the first time that I told someone what was going on with me. I believe it was the following incident:

At that time a couple I knew well suddenly found themselves going through a rough patch in their relationship. Something had happened that should have finished them. They were at their wits' end so I invited the bloke out for a drive (in his car) and let him have both barrels. I didn't particularly mention Jesus as I didn't yet understand where he fitted in, but I told him about God - what he had done for me, and how low I had been.

Later that night, alone together the couple talked into the wee small hours but got nowhere. Feeling they had nothing to lose they decided as a last gasp, embarrassedly, to pray. As they did, a heavenly light began to shine around them and they both began to shake. She panicked and shouted, "What's happening!" What happened was their love was miraculously restored and their lives were changed. They fearlessly told the world what had happened and brought forward their wedding plans to October.

Well, I hadn't expected that.

I knew I was onto something big, but, well...

Unfortunately, the changes they introduced to their lifestyle in the following weeks mystified me completely and I failed to see what possible relevance they had to the transforming experience they had undergone. Having been brought up in Gamrie¹ he had been raised on the fringes of the kirk, with just enough contact with the whole set-up to fill his head full of legalism (no drinking, no smoking, no TV, wear a suit, you *must* go to the kirk, etc. etc...) Overnight, the two of them appeared to me to become something they were not, but something they (along with half the world) believed was part and parcel of the whole

¹ Gardenstown, for the uninitiated.

God/Bible experience. I think they kind of frowned on me for a while after that and nothing I said seemed to carry any weight. I was just a bit too 'out there' it would seem.

But according to the book of Daniel, iron mixed with clay doesn't make for a good foundation. Sadly for them the years would prove that to be true.

Then in June, a bloke from South America named Luis Palau came to Aberdeen. He was (and still is, though now in his mid seventies) an evangelist in the Billy Graham style. He created a bit of a stir, drawing large crowds to Pittodrie Football Stadium night after night for about three weeks. He also appeared for a week on the local religious nightcap 'God-slot' TV programme, *Reflections*. Now, it has to be said that this programme up till then was *the* most boring show on TV and should perhaps rather have been called *Deflections* for all the impact it had. Similar to the Rev. I. M. Jolly's *Last Call* it lasted five minutes and was approximately five minutes too long. The endless stream of I. M. lookalikes served to reinforce among my generation every conceivable negative religious stereotype: boring, old fashioned, out of touch and irrelevant to name but a few.

But Luis was different. Dressed normally for a start, he leaned forward with a beaming boyish smile and spoke fast and furious as if

his life depended on it (which of course it did¹). The five minutes whizzed by as Luis presented the message of Christ clearly and succinctly, and always with reference to current world events. But I have to say that although it excited me, and I knew I was in the same place Luis was, there was still much that I didn't understand. ²

One beautiful Friday night I headed off to Aberdeen with my sister and her boyfriend. It was awesome and we planned to go back the following night. On the way in I clearly remember leaning forward from the back seat of the car and saying to them, "But where does *Jesus* come into it? What does it *mean* that He 'died for our sins'?" I can't recall them giving me an answer.

But God must have heard me because the next day would change all that.

I've always been a night person, and we night people are partial to the odd long lie! Saturday was my day off and there was no-one else in the house. As I lay in bed with the sun streaming in the window I picked up a Gideons New Testament - the little red one my sister had received at school. The language was modern and it seemed easy to

¹ 'Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel.' The Apostle Paul, 1Cor 9:16

² My folks would later open their hearts to Christ while listening to one of Luis' evenings on tape.

read. I opened it at random and read the second half of Luke followed by the first half of Romans.

The effect was dynamite! Everything I read seemed crystal clear to me and it all fell perfectly into place. My questions were answered as there it was, laid out before me in the Bible, the Word of God clearly explained in black and white - exactly who Jesus Christ was and the reason why had to die.

I felt such a fool! If only I had just read this to start with I could have saved myself from having to go through all that darkness and depression. That was what I felt, but in retrospect I know that everything has a purpose, however hard, and the Bible shows that hard things are often there to bring us into humility and an awareness of our true state from which we have the opportunity to *choose* to turn¹.

So - going back to the question in the car - where *does* Jesus come into it? And what *does* it mean that he 'died for our sins'?

The short answer... Jesus was God.

The long answer... he got himself born into the world (check Christmas cards for further details) for a specific purpose, which was to rescue everyone from all the evils of the world, and our own nasty

¹ 2Cor 7:10

nature. This he achieved by allowing himself to be wrongly convicted, then mocked and horribly beaten up and crucified (as in *The Passion*). Although he was innocent he took our place - yours and mine - because from a moral standpoint we are all criminals before God. He is God of both love *and* justice, and this one act fulfilled the ultimate requirements of both.

Then, being God, he simply rose from the dead, proved he was alive by appearing to many hundreds of folk and commissioned his best friends whom he had been training for three years to sally forth and spread the 'good news' (which incidentally is what the word 'gospel' means - from the Old English word *godspel*) before returning to his throne on high, sending down the same power he had used (the Spirit of God, which is his presence with us) and waiting to see how we all got on.

So, as you can see its not really complicated.

But there's a catch (isn't there always a catch?) and the catch is this: Jesus requires a response.

The Bible says in the letter by Paul the Apostle¹ to the early Christians in Rome, 'The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is

¹ A word which means *sent*.

eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord'¹. Okay, so logically, since we all sin (think bad thoughts, do bad things...) the wages are no problem. We qualify for them. We earn them daily - with double time on the weekends!

But what about eternal life?

Well, it's a gift. And as with all gifts, if you don't open it you don't receive it. Is that a box I see still lying under *your* Christmas tree?

Yes, eternal life. When it finally comes to funerals, we all want it. We so desperately need the consolation of knowing that Jesus is rooting for us, that Jesus Christ Himself loves us and has done his bit to throw open wide the gates of heaven.

BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR BIT?

While on Earth Jesus said that 'the one who stands firm to the end will be saved'².

The sad truth is... we will die as we have lived.

Which is not to say that we are any of us in a position to pass judgment on anyone, including loved ones who have passed away. According to the Bible, there is only One Judge, and he will judge in

¹ Romans 6:23

² Matthew 24:13

righteousness; in other words, taking *all* mitigating circumstances into account (though not excuses¹) and always according to his own merciful nature. And let me tell you there's going to be a few surprises because he will judge our true hearts - he doesn't buy our act.

Jesus said, “Many who are now first will be last, and the last first.” *Mark 10:31*

That should be interesting.

He is the Son of God, the Jewish Messiah, The Lord Jesus Christ - the same Jesus who said... **“Heaven and Earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”**

Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33

The rest of that summer was one of the happiest times of my life.

Maybe I should write a song² about it...

*I got my first real breakthrough
God had finally called my time
Got it because Jesus bled
Was the summer of '79...*

¹ Matthew 25:41-46

² Thanks Bryan!

So, that's my story.

Now, a few decades later, nothing has changed in terms of the basics of my faith. God hasn't changed. He remains exactly the same, and what he expects from me hasn't changed either. He expects me to continue to follow Jesus, to model my behaviour and attitudes on him as revealed in his Word to us all, the Bible, and to put others first. I'm not saying I make a great job of it - of that he alone will be my final judge - but I at least make the effort.

The way that Jesus came into my life was very profound and turned my life completely upside down, and for me there is nothing to go back to. Of course I am tempted by all the same junk as everyone else, and don't always deal with it very well, but at the end of the day I know how much Jesus means to me and what he has done for me. As with everything in life it comes down to a simple question of priorities: we will always make time for the things we consider important.

Everyone has their own tale to tell - mine is of no more significance than anyone else's - and people come to faith in very different ways...

Some are raised with an awareness of the presence of God and grow into their relationship with Jesus. For others there comes an increasing realisation that he is there. Still others find themselves on completely the wrong path - ranging from pride-filled, successful and independent people through to mass murderers - but they always come by the same age-old process of climbing down off their high horse and getting real, humbly repenting before God. Thus they find peace, forgiveness and complete acceptance through the cross.

It doesn't matter how we come to Christ, the important thing is to come. Without that we are faced with the alternative as spelt out by Jesus Christ himself, which is:

“I told you that you would die in your sins. If you do not believe that I am who I say I am, you will indeed die in your sins.”

John 8:24

And we don't want that, do we?

A prayer for you to pray:

“Lord Jesus, I don’t want to die in my sins. Thank you for dying on the cross and rising again to overcome death for me.

Forgive me for all I have done to offend you, and others, as I totally open my heart and my life to you. Please fill me with your Spirit and begin to change me from the inside out. I want to know what real life is and live in a way that pleases you. I want to help and serve others, but first and foremost I want to serve you.

Help me to read the Bible and hear your still, small voice. I want to be honest, both in what I say and who I present to the world.

I ask all these things in your name, Jesus Christ, the name that is above every name. Amen.”

Jesus said...

“If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.

There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day. For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

John 12:47-50