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THE INDWELLING GOD –1: WE WILL COME TO YOU

Martin Bleby

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.'

Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.' (John 14:15 –24)

If you were asked, 'Which passage in the whole of the Bible best describes for you the experience of the Christian life', where would you turn?

For me: it is this passage from John 14:15 –24. Spirit, Son and Father –the whole of the holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons in one God –coming and making their home in us. It doesn't get better than that!

The passage begins and ends with loving Jesus Christ –having a love for him that comes from hearing his words –and loving Jesus means we will want to do what he says:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

So there is a word that has come to us, from the Father through the Son –a word that we want to keep –that brings us to love the Son, and so to do what he says. We are in the company of those who know and love the Son, who hear his word from the Father and do what it says.

What happens then? The Spirit comes, from the Father, at the Son's request, to be with us forever. The One who is called the Spirit of our Father (Mat. 10:20) and the Spirit of the Father's Son (Gal. 4:6). So we find ourselves in a group of people in whom, or among whom, the Spirit dwells. So the Spirit has come.

Then Jesus says that he will not leave us alone –he will come to us. The way he says this tells us when this is going to happen. It will not be when he comes at the end of the world. When he spoke these words to his disciples, he said it would be in 'a little while':

I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also.

So it will be when they see him, when he lives again –after he has risen from the dead. So are we now in the days when Jesus has come to us? Yes –these are the days when Jesus is alive from the grave, and we live because of him. He has come to us. So the Spirit has come, and is in us and among us, and Jesus himself has come to us.

Jesus with us is not an unseen mystical or imaginary presence. It is the real presence of the risen ascended Lord Jesus, present through the Spirit sent from the Father –this is what Jesus is saying.

Jesus then tells us something we will know in that day:

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

This is something we know now, in this day. This is most important –we will come back to it.

Jesus then summarised what we have seen so far:

He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

We said this passage begins and ends with loving Jesus, and here it is in the middle also. This is never apart from the love of the Father –being loved by the Father. Note also what Jesus will do when he loves someone: ‘I will love him and manifest [reveal] myself to him’. That is what happens when we love someone: we open ourselves out to them, we show them who we really are, holding nothing back.

In answer to a question about this from the disciple besides Judas Iscariot who was also called Judas, Jesus repeated what he said, and also made a surprising and wonderful addition:

If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

The Father and the Son together come to us, just as the Spirit has come! So, in our present experience of the risen Lord Jesus, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have all come as one and moved in on us!

If it was not so amazingly wonderful, it could be a bit unnerving. Fancy the whole of God coming and living in us! How could there be room? How would that work with us? Is that what we really want?

You know how Billy Graham talks about Jesus coming into your heart, and to ask him to come in and take over. There are texts which speak in that way (e.g. Eph. 3:17: ‘ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith’)–it looks to me that this passage in John goes even further than that, though it is talking about the same reality. Anyway, once in a country parish I was talking about Christ coming and living in us, and I wrote about it in the parish magazine, and one older lady took exception to this, and said to me, ‘God has nothing to do with my insides’! As if to say, ‘My insides are my business, and God and everyone else had better keep out!’

We may laugh, but I wonder if we are not all a bit like that? Yet Jesus is telling us that, as human beings, God has made us for Him to come and live and dwell and have His home in us. Together, and even individually. And if we are going to be real human beings, and not just half –baked ones, we had better get used to the idea.

Where does this come from? Aren’t we all individuals, complete in ourselves? Apparently not. Why is this so? It could have something to do with being made by God in His own image and likeness. What was that important thing that Jesus said we would know in this day when he is alive and risen from the dead?

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Jesus has already said, earlier in the chapter, in answer to a question from Philip, the most important thing about himself, that should be obvious to all:

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me (John 14:10 -11).

It seems most natural for Jesus to regard himself as being in the Father and the Father being in him. That is the way it has always been. The apostles came to speak of Jesus as 'the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18) -from all eternity! -the one in whom 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col. 2:9). No less is the Holy Spirit, as we have seen, the Spirit entirely of the Father and of the Son, who 'searches everything, even the depths of God' (1 Cor. 2:10).

So it seems to be natural to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to know what it means for one person to be fully 'in' another person, and for the persons to be fully 'in' each other, as each opens out to the other, holding nothing back, and each gives room for the other in willing and generous hospitality. There is a word the early Greek Christian theologians used to describe this, and it was the word perichoresis. You may have heard it. Some modern writers have mistranslated this to describe it as an intricate dance between the persons. But that does not do it justice. In a dance we skirt around each other, sometimes even in a teasing way. But that is not the way it is in God. The real meaning of perichoresis is giving room to each other within oneself, in open and generous hospitality.

If that is how it is in the holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three Persons in one God, how is it with us who are made in God's image and likeness? As sinners, we scarcely know, until God Himself starts to break us down and bring us into it. Left to ourselves, we try to set ourselves up as impregnable fortresses.

Let me use myself as an example. When as a boy at school, one of my teachers wrote in my report: 'This boy is just beginning to come out of his tortoise shell'. You know how a tortoise can pull his head and legs right in and just lie there as a shell? I didn't even know that I had a tortoise shell. But it was true. I was a bit shy and quiet. But I had also built up this hard shell around me to protect myself from the outside world, and from everyone in it. And this teacher had seen me in there, and had wanted to help me crack out of it. He had put me in the school play, and had helped me to discover something I could do to start to bring me out of myself.

As I grew up, I became more aware of this protective shell, and the struggle it was to keep it there, as God relentlessly, more and more, kept on breaking it down, and getting in to me. The time I became most aware of it was when I began to relate with Vivien, who later became my wife. At that time my protection was like a great thick high wall, with cracks starting to appear in it, that I kept patching up. I think we all do that, in one way or another. We call it our 'independence', or even, in a perverse way, our 'integrity', when in reality it is our fearful pride. In the end, Vivien could not crack it open herself, and we broke off the relationship. Not that Vivien realised that this is what she was doing, or that I even had a 'wall' that her very presence was undermining. She knew that we were not getting through to each other, and that our relationship, such as it was, was not satisfactory. She asked God to do something about it, and God did what she could not do, and broke down my defences, and brought me to fall in love with her and marry her. I tremble to think what might have happened to me if God had not done that. I don't think I could ever have had a pastoral ministry with other people if that had not happened to me. In letting Vivien in to my life, the way was then open for me to make room for others as well, and I continue to discover more of what that means as I grow older.

You can imagine then what it meant to me when, some years later, I came across this passage in Ezekiel 13 about some false prophets:

Because, yea, because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace,' when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets daub it with whitewash; say to those who daub it with whitewash that it shall fall! There will be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will I fall, and a stormy wind break out; and when the wall falls, will it not be said to you, 'Where is the daubing with which you daubed it?' Therefore thus says the LORD GOD: I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath; and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger, and great hailstones in wrath to destroy it. And I will break down the wall that you have daubed with whitewash, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare; when it falls, you shall perish in the midst of it; and you shall know that I am the LORD (Ezek. 13:10 -14).

Fearful as that may be, I also found another text that went with it, in Zechariah 2, that gives the final outcome:

I looked up and saw a man with a measuring line in his hand. Then I asked, 'Where are you going?' He answered me, 'To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length.' Then the angel who talked with me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him, and said to him, 'Run, say to that young man: Jerusalem shall be inhabited like villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and animals in it. For I will be a wall of fire all around it, says the LORD, and I will be the glory within it.' (Zech. 2:1 -5).

On the strength of that, I wrote a little short story, called 'The Wall -Builder':

The thing about building the wall himself, especially out of mud bricks, was that he could put it exactly the way he wanted it. The wall-builder stood back and surveyed the beginnings of his wall with pleasure. All his own work. It gave him immense satisfaction.

He started off in a new direction, and then around the back, until he was surrounded on all sides by a low wall of sun-dried mud bricks. He steadily built higher.

Passers-by paused to look at the wall. The wall-builder took some secret pride at their interest, but carried on as if he hadn't noticed. After a while it didn't matter anyway, because the wall was now high enough to obscure them from his view. He kept on building until it had gone as high as he could reach.

By then he reckoned it was near enough complete. He settled down to enjoy it. It certainly kept the wind out, and made him feel quite secure. The blue sky above filled his walled space with a sunny warmth.

Cracks? Yes, there were a few, that opened up from time to time, but nothing that a bit of Polyfilla wouldn't fix. And when the whole thing was whitewashed over you could hardly notice that they'd ever been there at all.

He wondered what the people outside were thinking now. But after a while he ceased to bother about them, and they faded from his mind. He was content inside his walled space, even though the horizon was somewhat limited. At least it was all his own work, the way he wanted it. And he felt secure.

He could not remember exactly when the earthquake began. For some time there had been an unusual stillness. He became faintly aware of a deep underlying uneasiness. With some concern he did vaguely wonder what might be going on outside - and underneath - his walled enclosure. Then came the rumbling, deep at first and scarcely audible, after that a trembling, and cracks too large and too many for Polyfilla, until, with a violent shuddering that went on and on and a deafening roar that felt it would never cease, the wall came crashing down on top of him, and he barely escaped being crushed in its fall.

A long time after the earthquake had ceased, and the rumbling had faded away, he ventured a look out over the ruins of his wall. The sight that met his eyes appalled and frightened him. Under the gloom, stretching right away to where a pale washed-out glimmer showed faintly on the far horizon, there was dark, unrelieved devastation, every thing leveled, utterly flat.

His first inclination was to build. Out of the rubble, walls, and more walls. Further out, and lower, but still walls. Areas of demarcation. Security zones. Buttresses against the empty nothingness.

But that was when the refugees began to arrive. And they had no regard for his walls. They trampled all over them and filled up the spaces between until he wasn't sure where he had put walls and where he hadn't. It didn't matter anyhow, because now they were camped all over them. More and more refugees arrived, until they covered the plain.

Morose, and with nowhere to go that he could now call his own, he sat down just where he was. When it rained, he sheltered in one of their tents, and they didn't seem to mind.

It was some mornings later, when he looked out, that he saw a change in the sky. The pale dim light on the far horizon began to show signs of colour – pale yellow at first, then blue, and orange, purple, and fiery red. Streaks of colour beamed out across the sky, shimmering, glowing, weaving and growing, until the whole sky was filled with dazzling rainbow brightness above them, and all around them.

He stood amazed, and in awe. It was a wall, such as he had never seen, nor ever attempted. A wall of fire, shimmering close, yet towering, vast and expansive, surrounding and covering them all.

There was a stirring in the camp, right across the vast plain. A warmth, and a joy in being together. A whole new ball-game was beginning.

What is it that makes us build those walls that keep God and other people out, and what do we build them of? We can use our culture, or our family situation, or our occupation or social status, or our religion, or whatever, to build the walls that try to keep us in and others out, but underneath it all is our fearful pride. We don't want to let that go, and we don't want it to be hurt. But God in His mercy will not leave us with it. He will come and break it down, and move in Himself, and bring His friends with Him. Because He knows that it is for this, and not the other, that He has made us.

... the Spirit of truth ... dwells with you, and will be in you.

I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you ... he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him ... If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

So—I don't know what you think of what I have shared with you this morning. I don't know what you think of me. I have opened to you something of my own heart, and let you in to it. What you think of me perhaps isn't all that important. But Paul the apostle was writing to friends at Corinth, whom he loved very much in the LORD, and he opened his heart to them. At first, he didn't get as lot of thanks for it from them. But he kept writing to them, and this is what he said:

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also ... Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction (2 Cor. 6:11–13; 7:2–4).

We've got four weeks to speak together concerning the indwelling God. Perhaps in that time God may grant us to have something of the mutually indwelling relationship, with God and with each other, that Paul longed to have with his fellow believers in Corinth.

THE INDWELLING GOD –2: WILL GOD INDEED DWELL ON THE EARTH?

Martin Bleby

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.' So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do.' Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.

Then the LORD said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.' When Moses had told the words of the people to the LORD, the LORD said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, "Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live." When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.' So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, 'Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.'

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the LORD descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the LORD summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people not to break through to the LORD to look; otherwise many of them will perish. Even the priests who approach the LORD must consecrate themselves or the LORD will break out against them.' Moses said to the LORD, 'The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, "Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy."' The LORD said to him, 'Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the LORD; otherwise he will break out against them.' So Moses went down to the people and told them.

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me (Exod. 19:1 –20:3).

Last week we began this four –part series on 'The Indwelling God'. We saw from Jesus' words in John 14 that, for those who love Jesus and have received the word that he has brought us from the Father, and are happy to do what it says, for us in these days after Jesus has risen alive from the dead, the Spirit and the Son and the Father together come and make their home in us. Among us as a community of believers, and in each of us individually. Amazing, and incomprehensible! We are made by God to be indwelt by God. And this is already what characterises our experience as Christian believers.

We heard Jesus talking about himself being in the Father, and the Father being in him, as the most natural thing of all, and we heard him say that we would be in him, and he would be in us. We saw that this is because each person of the Trinity makes room for the others, in welcoming

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and generous hospitality, holding nothing back –each is fully in the other –and that for us, being made in the image of God, it should be the most natural thing to be the

same way with God and with each other. But we found that this is not so. Instead of welcoming each other fully into our lives –being in each other –we build walls around ourselves to keep God and each other out. I heard someone say after I had spoken last week that we have to break down those walls to let God in. But I did not say that, because that is not how it happens. We built those walls ourselves –we are not the ones who are going to break them down. Once they are built, we find that we cannot break them down ourselves, even if we wanted to –we are trapped in them. But we found that God Himself comes, and breaks down our walls, and Himself moves in on us – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus said: ‘We will come and make our home with you’. And so we are able then to open our hearts to each other, and let each other in –and we do.

Today I want to talk about the impossibility of God living in us. That may sound strange after what I have just said, that we have been made to have God dwell in us –and that is true–but how could that possibly be?

There are two reasons that make it impossible for God as He is to come and live in us as we are. The first reason is that God is eternal, and we are not. When king Solomon had built the temple in Jerusalem, about 950 years before Christ, where God said He would come and dwell, Solomon prayed:

But will God dwell indeed with [humankind] on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house which I have built! (2 Chron. 6:18).

It’s a fair enough question. We said last week: ‘How could the whole of God come and live in us? How could there be room?’ Our hearts would need to be as large as God is –and as full of love –if that was to happen. Maybe that is what Jesus meant when he said: ‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful’ –let your love be as deep and as wide –ranging as His (Luke 6:36; compare Mat. 5:43-48). But look what we are made of: ‘dust from the ground’ (Gen. 2:7)! We all know that: if ever we lose the breath that God has breathed into us, we return again to our dust. How can dust ever be capable of sustaining the presence of the everlasting God? Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 15:

I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable (1 Cor. 15:50).

Something amazing will have to happen to us for us to have God living in us, and us in Him, forever. Paul does say that we will have bodies that are capable of sustaining this ‘eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison’ (2 Cor. 5:17), but if God in all his glory came to us as we are now, in our perishable dust, we would be blown apart by Him –we would be flattened. Remember when Moses asked to see God’s glory? What did God say to him?

And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The LORD”; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.’ And the LORD continued, ‘See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.’ (Exod. 33:19-23).

‘No one shall see me and live’ –how then can we ever have God living within us?

I said there are two reasons that make it impossible for God as He is to come and live in us as we are. That is the first one: God is eternal and imperishable, and we are perishable dust. But there is a second reason that makes it even more impossible: God is holy, and we are sinners. That may have had something to do with why Moses could not look God full in the face: Moses, for all that he was a friend of God, was a sinner, as we are. John the apostle

testifies: ' God is light and in him there is no darkness at al ' (1 John 1:5), and the apostle Paul asks: ' what fellowship is there between light and darkness? ' (2 Cor. 6:14). So for us as sinners to be anywhere near God means that we would be burned up like stubble, as God says in Malachi 4:

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when al the arrogant and al evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall I burn them up, says the L ORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch (Mal. 4:1).

That is the day that God comes in judgment. Not a lot of hope for us there, is there?

Yet, throughout the Bible, this same God makes clear that He is determined to come and live among us, and in us, and that He w ill do whatever is necessary for that to be so.

That is why I am particularly interested in what God is doing in Exodus 19. God has brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and they have come to the wilderness at the foot of Mount Sinai. God says to them:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exod. 19:4).

God has brought them to Himself as He really is, and He is about to come and show them Himself as He really is, by giving them the ten commandments. Exodus 19 is followed by Exodus 20, in which God spells out to them the ten commandments. And the ten commandments are God revealing Himself as He really is in Himself, and in His relationship with us, and in our relationships with Him and with each other. Verse 17 tells us what is about to happen:

Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.

The people are about to meet God directly in the revelation of Himself in His commandments. And if they are going to be with God as He is, they will need to be with Him in a way that is consistent with the way He is –they will have to be in the keeping of His commandments. So God says to them:

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession (Exod. 19:5).

The people al say: ' Everything that the LORD has spoken we will l do', and no doubt they meant it at the time, but we know that is not what was in their heart, and that is certainly not what came out later. No doubt God knew that, and k new that if He came to them in their present condition as sinners, they would not fare too well. Nevertheless, God was determined in His love to meet with them, and went to great lengths to ensure He could do so without destroying them in the process. That is what much of Exodus 19 was concerned with:

When Moses had told the words of the people to the L ORD, the L ORD said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because o n the third day the L ORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of al the people. You shall set limits for the people al around, saying, "Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot whether animal or human being, they shall not live." When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.' So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated t he people, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, 'Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman' (Exod. 19:9 –15).

What is God doing here? He is setting the necessary precautions and buffer zones in place for Him to be able to come to them without them being harmed. [What about refraining from sexual relations for three days –what is that about? It's not God saying that sexual relations between husband and wife are bad –He made us that way. It's just saying that meeting with God is something even more intimate and wonderful than that, which puts it in the shade.] God is quite intent on making sure that they are not harmed by their meeting with them –for the potential is there:

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the LORD descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the LORD summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people not to break through to the LORD to look; otherwise many of them will perish. Even the priests who approach the LORD must consecrate themselves or the LORD will break out against them' Moses said to the LORD, 'The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, "Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy."' The LORD said to him, 'Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the LORD; otherwise he will break out against them.'

So God spoke to them His 'ten words', or ten vital communications, and the people heard Him directly.

But is God going to have to go through all of that every time He wants to get near us? Is He going to have to put us through that every time we need to hear from him? What about once the Israelites have openly gone against God and His words, as they did shortly afterwards with the worship of the golden calf? How could we ever come to face God and live with Him –forever?

Yet in the New Testament, amazingly, we find that this is what has now happened: God has come to dwell with us and in us, and we have direct access to God, without any precautions or buffer zones!

Let me tell you what happened after God met with them and gave them His ten words. Moses takes up the story in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy:

When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you approached me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders; and you said, 'Look, the LORD our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. So now why should we die? For this great fire will I consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? Go near, you yourself, and hear all that the LORD our God will say. Then tell us everything that the LORD our God tells you, and we will listen and do it.' (Deut. 5:23-27).

Now, I used to think that the people were backing off from God –they couldn't handle it, and they wanted to get away from Him. But now I see that it wasn't like that. In Exodus 20:20, Moses had said to the people: 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin' (Exod. 20:20). And that is exactly what had happened. For once in their life, the people of Israel had a right and true fear of God, and a real desire to do what He says. For God goes on to say to Moses:

I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they are right in all that they have spoken. If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever! (Deut. 5:28-29).

God is saying to Moses: For once the people have a true fear of Me. That is, a true and right understanding of who God is and what He requires, and a willingness to be in obedience to him. At that moment the people knew that, although God had spared them, if they stayed in His presence in that way for much longer, they would not survive –for the very reasons we have said: God is eternal and we are dust; God is holy and we are sinners. God is endorsing that realisation. I wonder if that realisation has ever come to us. I think it needs to come to each one of us. As it came to Isaiah: ‘ Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts! ‘ (Isa. 6:5). As it came to Peter: ‘ Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man! ‘ (Luke 5:8). That is what came to the whole people of Israel at Sinai. And God said, ‘ they are right in all that they have spoken’.

God is also saying that they were right in asking for someone who could be close to God for that one to hear what God says and bring it to them, so they can do it. Moses was that one, for the time being. But Moses, like the rest of the people, was mortal, and a sinner. His occupation of that position, even by God’s appointment, could only ever be a temporary one. And before Moses died, God gave this promise through Moses, when Moses said to the people:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: ‘If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.’ Then the LORD replied to me: ‘They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable (Deut. 18:15 –19).’

There will come one who will I speak God’s word directly from God’s presence, and we will need to listen to him and do what he says. Somehow this one will be the answer to the difficulty the people had, and we have, of not being able to remain safely in the immediate presence of God. And he is the one we will be considering more closely –next week.

Meanwhile, the point I want us to take away this week is this. Whether we are thinking about the Old Testament or the New Testament: we can never just saunter into God’s presence. We can never have a casual relationship with God. There is a right and proper fear of the Lord, that has to do with the way God really is, in Himself and in His relationship with us, as He reveals and communicates Himself to us in His covenant and in His law and commandments. No dwelling with God or God dwelling with and in us can ever be apart from that righteousness and holiness of God.

I want to illustrate this by reference to one New Testament passage that I referred to partly last week, from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, chapters 6 and 7. Remember how Paul said that he had opened his heart to the Corinthian believers, and he wanted them to open their hearts to him. He says that in 6:11 –12, ‘open wide your hearts’, and again in 7:2, ‘Make room in your hearts for us’. In between those two appeals is the section 6:14 –7:1. At the heart of that section is Paul talking about God indwelling us in an intimate family relationship:

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.’ (2 Cor. 6:14, 18).

And what else does Paul say in this section? Therefore ‘ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God ‘ (2 Cor. 7:1). That includes giving no endorsement to unbelievers or lawless or idolatrous people, and touching nothing unclean. We can see why: God’s dwelling in us, and our dwelling in Him and in each other, can only ever rightly be on the terms of God’s own holiness and righteousness.

Some scholars think they see an inconsistency here. On the one hand Paul wants to relate closely with the Corinthian believers, in asking them to open their hearts to him, and is talking about God relating intimately with us, which appears to be all nice and loving; and yet on the other hand, they say, he is insisting that we dissociate from certain persons, which doesn’t seem very loving at all, and looks like closing our hearts to them. So inconsistent does this seem to these scholars, that they mark these verses off as some kind of intrusion –in my translation 6:14 –7:1 is a separate paragraph marked off from the rest by big spaces, as if it has nothing to do with what surrounds it about opening our hearts to each other. But if what we have been saying today is true, then this section has everything to do with what surrounds it—it is all of the one piece. God’s love is not all nicely lovey –dovey in the way we might want it to be to suit our own sinful dispositions. God’s love, by which He insists on coming to dwell in us no matter what, and by which we can be truly open in love to each other, can only ever be in keeping with God’s holiness and righteousness as He comes to us in His covenant and law and commandments. He will never bypass that, and neither can we. But exactly how that can be –we will need to come back next week and find out!

THE INDWELLING GOD –3: GOD WITH US IN THE SON

Martin Bleby

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

(John bore witness to him, and cried, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.’”) And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1:1 –18).

This is the third in a four –part series on ‘The Indwelling God’. So far we have seen that the distinctive Christian experience is of God, the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, coming to dwell among us and to live in us. But last time we saw the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of God coming and dwelling with us and in us. How could God do that with us? When He is eternal and we are perishable dust? When we are sinners and He comes in all His righteousness and holiness and steadfast love?

We saw last week the boundaries and the buffer zones and protections that God had to set in place just to be with His people Israel in a way that would not wipe them out. God told the Israelites that the whole reason he rescued them out of slavery in Egypt was so that He could dwell among them:

And I will dwell among the people of Israel, and will I be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God (Exod. 29:45 –46).

One way He gave them to ensure that this would be so was the giving to them of the tabernacle in the wilderness, and later the temple in Jerusalem:

And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it (Exod. 25:8 –9).

I will meet with the Israelites there, and it shall be sanctified by my glory (Exod 29:43).

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34).

You shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there, bringing there your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you (Deut. 12:5 –7).

David gave his son Solomon the plan of the vestibule of the temple, and of its houses, its treasuries, its upper rooms, and its inner chambers, and of the room for the mercy seat; and the plan of all that he had in mind: for the courts of the house of the LORD, all the surrounding chambers, the treasuries of the house of God . . . 'All this, in writing at the Lord's direction, he made clear to me –the plan of all the works.' (1 Chron. 28:11 –12, 19).

And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD (1 Kings 8:10 –11).

Note that these were no ordinary 'shrines made by human hands'. God Himself specified every detail –they were part of His gift to them, so they could have His presence with them. Yet, right from the beginning it was acknowledged:

Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! (1 Kings 8:27).

Once again, also, we sense the awesome power of God's presence: covered in thick darkness so they cannot see Him and so be exposed to death and, even so, the incompatibility of even Moses or the priests being able to endure God's presence in the sanctuary.

Right through Israel's history special precautions needed to be in place to enable God to dwell amongst the people safely without bringing irreparable harm to them. At the centre of the temple was 'the most holy place' –the Holy of Holies –marked off by a big thick curtain. In there only one person was ever allowed to go: the high priest, dressed in robes of particular significance, once a year only, on the day of atonement, carrying the blood of a special sacrifice. The bells on his robes were to sound as he went in and came out, and a cloud of incense was to cover the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant, so that he would not die (See Exod. 28, 29). The ceremonies on the day of atonement appear to be mainly to 'make atonement for the sanctuary ... and cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel' (Lev. 16:16, 19) –to establish and keep it as a cleansed and undefiled zone where God may dwell –as much as to cleanse the people from their sins so that they also are 'clean before the Lord' (Lev. 16:30).

Yet, in the New Testament we are told that, when Jesus died on a cross just outside Jerusalem:

the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (Mark 15:38).

As a result of the great once –for–all cleansing that Jesus effected there, both for Israel and for all the nations:

through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18).

And we are urged:

since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19 –22).

We are going to see today how this has happened, and how it can be true for us.

First, we will go back to the time when the temple was first built and dedicated at Jerusalem. God appeared to Solomon:

The LORD said to him, 'I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you made before me; I have consecrated this house that you have built, and put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time. As for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised your father David, saying, "There shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel."' "

God's presence in the temple here is linked with the promise of a successor to David, and the keeping of God's commandments. God then goes on to talk about the negative consequences:

If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight; and Israel will become a proverb and a taunt among all peoples. This house will become a heap of ruins; everyone passing by it will be astonished, and will hiss; and they will say, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?' Then they will say, 'Because they have forsaken the LORD their God, who brought their ancestors out of the land of Egypt, and embraced other gods, worshiping them and serving them; therefore the LORD has brought this disaster upon them.' (1 Kings 9:3-9).

Note that, when the judgment comes, the temple itself, where God's name and eyes and heart are forever, is not exempt. God Himself suffers: God's house itself becomes a heap of ruins –and that is exactly what happened to it, more than once. And Ezekiel was shown that, before the temple was destroyed, God moved away.

What were the two things we said made it difficult, if not impossible, for God as He is to dwell with us as we are? (1) God is everlasting, and we are perishable dust. (2) God is holy and righteous, and we are sinners. Both those things will need to be addressed, if God is going to dwell with us, and us with Him, eternally. When Jesus came into the world, two things were said about him, in two names that were given to him. This is what the angel of the Lord said to Joseph:

'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' At this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.' (Mat. 1:20 -23).

The two names? 'Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins', and 'Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'

We'll take the second one first: in Jesus, 'God is with us'. Jesus is our flesh and blood. But he is not from the earth in the same way as we are. Paul made the contrast:

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven (1 Cor. 15:47 -49).

This is when Paul went on to say: 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable' (1 Cor. 15:50). As long as we are perishable dust, no way can we bear the eternal weight of God's glory. But here is one –one of us –who

can, because he comes from God. That is what we heard in the reading from John: 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (John 1:18). 'No one has ever seen God' –we heard God saying to Moses: 'no one shall see me and live' (Exod. 33:20) –that is, no one of perishable flesh. But Jesus has always been 'in the bosom of the Father', and face –to–face with him (the meaning of 'the Word was with God' in John 1:1). Paul spoke of God to Timothy in this way:

It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see (1 Tim 6:16).

God has immortality; we do not, unless somehow He gives it to us. Jesus is 'the man from heaven', who lives and works 'through the power of an indestructible life' (Heb. 7:16). We can 'bear the image of the man from heaven', by faith –union with him. We have never been able to look on God, but Jesus does, and in him we can too.

So that is the first thing. We can know Jesus, as Paul says, 'according to the flesh', or 'from a human point of view' (2 Cor. 5:16), or we can receive the Spirit from the Father and know him as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God'! (See Mat. 16:16 –17; compare 1 Cor. 12:3). If we insist on knowing Jesus only according to the flesh, then we will be stuck with our mortal perishable flesh. Or we can believe on him as the Son of God, and we are in him a 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17).

But something else is needed before that can happen. What was the other thing that made it difficult or impossible for God as He is to dwell with us as we are? God is holy and righteous and we are sinners. And what was the other name given to the Son of God when he was born, and the meaning of that name? 'You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'. Jesus was talking with a woman at a well in Samaria. She asked him a question about the right place to worship:

Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain [that is, Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worshipped], but you [that is, you Jews] say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem (John 4:20).

Jerusalem was the place where God had told the Jews to set up the temple as their one place of worship. So Jesus affirmed that the Jews, rather than the Samaritans, were on the right track: You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews (John 4:22).

He also added something quite startling:

Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him' (John 4:21, 23).

Jesus is saying: The place of worship will no longer be a building or a particular location, and the Father is right now seeking the true worshippers, that He will be with.

The woman picks up on it. Perhaps she knew that God had linked the temple and his presence and righteousness with the successor to David, the Messiah:

The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' (John 4:25).

And she got her answer:

Jesus said to her, I am he, the one who is speaking to you. (John 4:26).

In other words, the place where God is truly worshipped is not a place, but a person! Jesus himself is the one in whom God dwells, in whom the Father is worshipped in spirit and in truth! The Father is seeking us to be 'in him'.

This was borne out earlier when Jesus referred to himself –his own body –as the 'temple' –the dwelling –place of God, where the Father is truly worshipped. He had just driven the marketeers and the moneychangers out of the temple in Jerusalem. They asked him what sign he could show them for doing this.

Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' . . . he was speaking of the temple of his body (John 2:19, 21).

'Destroy this temple'! What had God said He would do to His own beloved temple if the people turned aside from following Him and keeping His commandments –as the people had done, and as we have done? He would cast it out of His sight, and make it a heap of ruins. Jesus is saying: I am the true temple –the one in whom the Father has put His name and His eyes and His heart – His al –and this is what will happen to me. 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'.

If Jesus is the one place, the one person, in whom God is truly worshipped, and in whom God is pleased to dwell, why does God choose to 'destroy this temple'? It is, as He has determined al along, so we are not destroyed. Jesus is there for us, as our own flesh and blood. If we refuse to be with him, he will nonetheless be with us, and in us –in al the vile mess and sorrow and pain and damnableness of our refusal. As the place of worship, he becomes the sacrifice whose blood is poured out, whose life is taken. Our death and our judgment is his. And, as Ezekiel saw so graphically, before the final destruction comes, God moves away: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

So, for God to be present with us and in us –Father, Son and Holy Spirit –it is not enough for us simply to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. We need to believe in him as the one the Father has given as the Saviour of the world (see 1 John 4:14), 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29), 'the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). We need to see that his death was our death; that he got no less than we deserve. We need to see ourselves there with him on that cross, and deservedly so. 'I have been crucified with Christ' (Gal. 2:19). My life as a sinner is forfeit. It has been taken, and rightly so. I have no life now but His.

I have no life now but His! His risen life! His sinless life! The life he lives that is alive to God! (See Rom. 6:10.) As the one who is 'in the Father', with the Father in him (see John 14:11). That is the way –the only way He had, the only way we have, for Father, Son and Holy Spirit to come and live in us, and for us to be in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That, and that alone, must be our faith: 'consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11).

THE INDWELLING GOD –4: LIVING IN GOD

Martin Bleby

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.' And he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' And he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment. He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death' ... And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day and there shall be no night there; they shall bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:1 –8, 22 –27).

This is the last in a four –part series on 'The Indwelling God'. We have seen that for Christians – those to whom the word of Christ has come, so that we love him and want to do what he says – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have moved in and made their home in us (see John 14:15 –24). This is what we have been made for. But we have seen that this cannot happen, just like that. God has to do something with us to make it possible. We need to be made clean from our sin –have it taken away –and we need to be 'eternalised' to be made capable of sustaining 'an eternal weight of glory'. These things God has done for us and to us in the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the grave.

In this reading from Revelation 21 we see the ultimate outcome:

the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them.

The temple is where people normally met God in the Old Testament, but here we find the temple is God Himself:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

Here we are, actually dwelling in God, with God in us.

And we see that we have been made to fit with how God is in His righteousness and holiness:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.

Any who are those things still are not there in the holy city. We have been any or all of those things, but if we are in this holy city we are those things no longer. We and all things have been made new. We heard how that happened:

But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Who is the Lamb, and how do we get to be in the Lamb's book of life? The Lamb is the one who was sacrificed –who was slaughtered, his blood was poured out. The Lamb of God is Jesus, who has taken away the sin of the world. He has identified himself with us –entered into our flesh – and has carried our sin and its terrible consequences in his own body on the cross, and has died our death, and has taken us with him down into the grave, and has risen from death to take us with him into eternal life with God –which has begun for us here and now, as we believe on him, and that we will know forever in that age to come. We were unclean, and in abomination and falsehood, and he has brought us into the forgiveness of all our sin –we are those who ‘ have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb ‘ (Rev. 7:14).

Today we are going to ask: How do we live in the presence of God? How do we live with God dwelling in us, and us in God? How do we live in this exalted position?

The first thing is: we never forget how we got here. Peter wrote in his second letter about living in a way that fits with being with God:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.

That is where He has brought us, and he tells us what follows from that:

For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self –control, and self –control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ .

Makes sense, doesn't it, that with God dwelling in us we should be that way? In faith, virtue, knowledge, self –control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. So what is it that makes us like that? Peter tells us what stops us from being like that: ‘Any one who lacks these things’ is what –not trying hard enough, and needs to try harder? No:

For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins (2 Pet. 1:3 –9).

That is the one thing we should never forget. That is the one thing that keeps us in all these things. Note that Peter does not say we must keep on remembering our old sins. No –we must always remember the cleansing that has happened to us.

So that's the first thing. Is it always foremost in our thinking that we have been cleansed from our old sins? Perhaps we think: Surely we can get beyond that? Do we always have to be stuck back there? The answer is: Yes. But it's not a case of being stuck back there. That is the only place we can ever move forward. The moment we forget that we have been cleansed from our old sins –or are too blind or shortsighted to see that –then immediately, according to Peter, we are short –changing ourselves on faith, virtue, knowledge, self –control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love –we will be lacking in all those things.

The second thing is: we must never forget how that happened, and what it did to us. The cleansing of our old sins happened to us at the cross, and it did it by killing us. Yes, you heard me right: the way God justified us and forgave us and cleansed us from all our sins was by justly killing us, rightly putting us to death, legally executing us, in the crucifixion of His Son Jesus.

You may say: But wait a minute –didn't Jesus die on the cross for us, and instead of us, so we would not have to die? Yes –the fact that he died for us does mean that we now live. But we are the ones who sinned. We are the ones who needed to die. Just having someone die for us does not change that –and deep down in our consciences I think we know that. There's something still not right, something still unfinished, about Jesus having died for us while we are still walking around alive and free –when we are the ones who should have died. All sorts of nice little stories are told of people who have substituted themselves or given their lives for another in a dangerous situation, or those who have taken someone else's punishment, to illustrate what Jesus did and convince us that it was for us, and to show us how grateful we should feel. These stories contain truth, and have been powerfully used of God to bring people to faith in Christ. But still deep down I think we know it should have been us who died, and the business is still unfinished.

What we need to know is that the reason Jesus identified with us in our sinful flesh, and died on the cross, and was buried, and rose again and ascended into heaven, was not just so he could do that instead of us, so we could get off free. It was so he could take us with him into his terrible death, down into his grave, out into his resurrection from the dead, and up into the heavenly places with him at the Father's right hand –all of that, and nothing less than all of that, is what is taught us in the New Testament.

I would go so far as to say that if Jesus died on that cross and we did not, then we are still walking about as unregenerate sinners, alienated from the life of God.

What did Paul the apostle say happened to him on the cross of Christ? Paul says that he himself died there. The sentence of death that the law of God rightly requires –despite, and even because of, all Paul's attempts to keep and uphold the law of God in his own self – righteousness –that sentence of death that Paul deserved was passed against Paul there, and Paul was justly executed:

I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God (Gal. 2:19).

Living to God was the one thing he had not been doing –he had been living to himself. That is why he himself needed to die.

Paul himself would never have admitted that this is what needed to happen to him –he thought he was doing all the right things, and more. If Paul had been just executed under the law of God, then that would have been that –Paul would be dead and buried. But Paul came to see that he needed to die, and saw that this is what had already happened to him, when he saw Jesus as the Messiah who was crucified –not on his own account, but in his love that identified him fully with Paul in Paul's sinful flesh. Paul came to believe in Jesus as:

the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

That is when Paul could truly say:

I have been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20).

Not only Paul, but the whole of sinful humanity:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised (2 Cor. 5:14 –15).

So Paul applies this also to us in Romans 6:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life . . . We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin . . . The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:3 -4, 6, 10 -11).

We might object: isn't that all a bit fanciful, saying we have already died? I mean, here we are, still alive. Wasn't Paul speaking allegorically –that we are as if 'dead', so to speak, to certain things? No, I think he is speaking more strongly than that. The Bible is telling us things that we would never come to of ourselves, by trying to work it out in our own minds, or determine it from our own experience. If the apostle tells us, in no uncertain terms, that we died with Christ on that cross, then we had better take it by faith that this is what happened to us. If we did not die with Christ there, then we are faced with death –the terrible death of a sinner –all on our own, in the devil's clutches.

One thing that means is that we have no illusions about ourselves and our own virtue. We have been shown that we have no such thing as an independent sinful existence apart from God. The ground has been cut out from under our feet. We do not have a leg to stand on. Our life is not our own any longer –we now belong to another.

So that is the second thing we need to know, to be living in God as God is dwelling in us. First, we need to have at the forefront of all our thinking that we have been cleansed from our old sins. And second, we need to know how this happened: it happened to us in the cross of Christ, where we died and were buried with him.

The third thing follows from that. Paul goes on to say of himself:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

We are still in the flesh, as Paul was in the flesh when he wrote that. We are not yet in the resurrection life to come, of which we read in Revelation 21. We know that is coming, more surely than we know anything else, because we know and believe that Jesus is already risen from the dead, and we are in him –we are his. But we do not yet see that resurrection life. We are still 'in the flesh, in our mortal bodies. 'We walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor. 5:7). We live by faith in the Messiah, the Son of God, who, for no sin of his own, loved us and gave himself for us. We believe in him as the one who has already taken us through the death we deserved and out again into his eternal life that he has with the Father. Jesus himself said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

So Paul wrote to us:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his . . . For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:5, 7-11).

So we live now no longer to ourselves and from ourselves, but to God and from God, by faith in Christ. God is the source of our life in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:30). We now have no life but his. Jesus said: 'Apart from me, you can do nothing' (John 15:5). Abiding in him, we do plenty –we bear much fruit.

It is only then that we know what truth and righteousness actually are, so that we can be in them in a practical way. While we were living to ourselves, we thought we knew what righteousness is –trouble was, we defined it as what is right or us. Now we have been put to death as far as that goes, we have the mind of Christ by the Spirit (see 1 Cor. 2), and we know God, by His coming to dwell in us. That is where we are now:

For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:2).

We are to live now the life of Christ, and of God, for that is what we now know and are now in, by the Spirit of God:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (Col. 3:1 –2).

Paul then goes on to point out all the things we are dead to: ‘fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry . . . anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth’ (Col. 3:5, 8). He also says the things we now know, and are alive to, that we can put on: ‘compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another . . . forgiving each other . . . And above all these put on love’ (Col.3:12, 13, 14).

The moment we hear that, our old flesh rises up and says: Yes! That is what I can do! That is how I can prove myself! And so we are back to working on it by trying harder. No –that is not how it happens. It happens by something that has already been done:

you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Col. 3:9 –10).

A man was going past an ‘adult’ cinema where they were screening pornographic R –rated movies, and his friends said to him, ‘Let’s go in’. ‘I can’t go in there’, he said. ‘I’m baptised!’ He knew what his baptism meant; he knew what had already happened to him:

you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12).

So he didn’t say: ‘I can’t go in there because it’s sinful and wrong. I can’t go in there because I am afraid of the harmful things it might do to me. I can’t go in there because if I did God would be really disappointed in me’. All of that may well be true. But where he was basing his faith was: I am already dead to that, and alive to God. No question about it, no great moral struggle, no ‘shall I, shan’t I’ –just take it by faith: that’s the way it is. So I’ve got better things to do with my time.

So living in God, as God dwells in us, is a very practical thing here and now. I might have talked this morning about how amazing and wonderful it is to have God actually dwelling in us—which it is –and so I might have appealed to you emotionally to rise up to that, and you might have been willing, for a time, to respond –until the next emotional appeal comes to kick you along. I have not done that here this morning. Rather, I have told us three things, that are real, that we need to know and believe and live by;

- You have been cleansed from your old sins
- You have died through the body of Christ
- Your life is hid with Christ in God

Don’t try and work out how that might be so. Don’t try to explain it or illustrate it. Don’t philosophise about it. Just take it by faith that this is how it is, and see what follows. The Lord be with you!