

# EVANGEL

*The Good News of Jesus Christ*



# Truth is Stranger than Fiction

**I admit it.**

**I don't always like being a Christian.**

**That may surprise you – especially since I'm a pastor of a wonderful little church. I believe I have personally tasted the love and power of God in Jesus Christ. I've been in tight spots – and time and time again God has rescued me – mainly from *myself*.**

**But yet there are times when I have to scratch my head at the things I read in the Bible. There are even times when Christianity bothers me. It's not, frankly, what I expect or what I want.**

## Black Holes

Now why do I admit this? Partly because I'd like to be honest – and I appreciate you letting me be honest with you. We don't gain anything by pretending that Christians always have everything figured out. But it's more than that.

Consider this: could our struggles with the Christian faith actually be an indirect sign of its truth? I know that sounds a bit paradoxical. It's like making "doubt" the evidence.

But here's an analogy:

Scientists find it difficult to prove the existence of a black hole. It's impossible to directly observe one. Black holes suck in everything, including light. They're "black" for a

reason. But there can be secondary effects, like escaping gamma radiation, that reveal the existence of a black hole. So you can "see" a black hole – indirectly.

In the same way, our struggles to believe may show that we are grappling with something that really exists. They may show the Christian faith is not just a figment of our imagination, molded to our own desires. Perhaps there truly is a God, and there is salvation in Jesus, different and greater than even our grandest thoughts and ideas.

## Bad Math?

First of all, Christianity is different than what we might expect.

Take the Trinity, for instance. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – three persons, but only one God. Thomas Jefferson said the Trinity was simply bad math. Wouldn't it make a lot more sense if there was just one God and nothing more? Some, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, make this very argument.

Or take the existence of the soul. No one has ever seen a soul or put it in a Petri dish. You may wonder how a soul, something non-material, could be connected to a physical body. It just doesn't seem to make any sense.

## Truth is stranger. . .

This sort of thing is actually relatively easy to deal with. C.S. Lewis noted that in this regard spiritual things are much the same as physical things. They both are more complex and bizarre than we first expect.

Ever seen the geyser pools at Yellowstone? Or watched *The Blue Planet* and seen mysterious

creatures from the ocean's deep? The more we know about our world the stranger it seems to be.

Scientists can hardly explain reality at an atomic level. Even something like everyday matter is not so "everyday." Would God be any simpler? Scientists now postulate the existence of extra dimensions and other strange stuff. Why can't there also be strange stuff within ourselves, body/mind/soul? We have a saying – "truth is stranger than fiction."

Just like the world around us, Christianity also involves mysteries we can't easily solve or explain. That's not a sign the Bible is made-up – but the exact opposite. We should be cautious in hastily dismissing these things, as if they are merely relics of primitive superstition.

## A tell-tale heart

Christianity is not merely different than what I might first expect. It's also different than what I *want*.

I think that this, too, is a tell-tale sign of the truth of Christianity. We're prone to paint our own picture of reality. We like to see things "our way."

It usually happens in two places, I've noticed. First, when we've got a vice we don't want to let go. Or when there's friction in a close relationship. In these situations, we become masters of spin. "If only *you* hadn't . . ." "I can handle a drink now and then." Lickety-split, we've justified our choices, our behaviour. Someone witty once said, "De-nial is not only a river in Egypt!"

## Calling a spade a spade

So when the Bible confronts us with our moral failures and tells us that even the most decent of us have a broken relationship with God, I expect myself to bristle.

Who really wants to talk about their sin? I mean hard-hitting talk. Not just something trite like “to err is human,” but that at the core I’m selfish and self-absorbed, warped from day one, intent on leading my life on my own, without God? Who wants to hear that we’re prouder than a peacock, unable to face the music, that our problems are not first of all due to others or circumstances or systems around us, but due to our own brainless choices and actions? Who wants to be told that we aren’t god, that he doesn’t have to answer to us, and we don’t have a leg to stand on before him?

Who wants to hear that the sin I enjoy (I admit this, too) is the ultimate addiction, worse than any drug? And that it makes us repulsive in God’s sight, like a spiritual leper, horribly diseased in soul?

There are other hard hitting words in the Bible, too. Jesus tells us, for instance, that if you seek to find your life, you will lose it, but if you lose it – think nothing of it, and give it to him and to others – you will find it. Who wants that kind of command? That’s a tall order. I’d like to keep something, even just a bit, for myself. Who wants to hear that we have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God? I would prefer to think things aren’t that bad. I admit I might need a little tune-up. But not a complete overhaul.

## Too convenient

All of these “issues” I might have with the teaching of the Bible betray me. They are just the sort of issues I would have if I was a sinner alienated from God, in need of some serious salvation. They ring of the

truth – the truth I don’t want at first to hear – but the truth I must hear.

The kinds of things we hear in the Bible are just the things we “spin masters” would never dare say. They are the words of someone standing outside of us – God.

So my struggles with the Bible may not be about problems in it – but the exact opposite. About problems in me.

## Wonder of wonders

But we’re not done yet. Because the gospel, the good news of God, is also radically different than you might expect. Or want.

Here, too, truth is stranger, more wonderful, than fiction. The Bible also shows us that the very God whom we’ve offended comes and dies for us, in our place. He takes on himself the ugly truth that we are unable to even admit.

That’s shocking, really. Imagine a trial where terrible abuse has taken place. When the judge sentences the guilty person, the victim suddenly jumps forward and says they’ll do the time. They’ll take on the life sentence. That sort of thing just doesn’t happen. But it has happened for us in Jesus Christ.

How could anyone love us – when we’ve done things worse than we like to admit? How could they love us enough to die for us? How could *God* love us – when our sin assaults him and his world in so many ways?

We read in the Bible that angels longed to look into the way God would save mankind. They knew this was his plan, but they couldn’t figure it out. The Creator becoming a creature? The King of Glory becoming a humble slave, hanging naked on a cross? The Author of life experiencing death in all its horror and finality? This is a mystery even beyond that of anything in creation.

## An embarrassment of riches

And look at the promises we have in the Bible, too. They, too, are also beyond our imagination.

In one place in the Bible, Jesus gives a parable, an illustration with a challenge. He talks about how servants need to be faithful also when their master is away. When the master comes back he will reward them – or punish them. The reward is unbelievable, though. “The master himself have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.” (Luke 12:37) A master serving his servants? Where do you ever see this? And this is even more astonishing when you realize this is speaking about *the* master, Jesus, and his servants, those who follow him.

God promises that one day he himself will serve us! The point, of course, is not that we are so great. This is about how great God is – in love, in generosity and goodness. God will give nothing less than himself to us, tiny creatures, who deserve nothing – nothing but his wrath. We were made to serve him – but he will also serve us!

A good friend of mine likes to remind me that in Christ we receive an “embarrassment of riches.” Clearly, God is at work here, again, beyond all my expectations.

## It’s better

Christianity can certainly be challenging. But truth is so often stranger than fiction.

Do you need to face hard truths about yourself, as a sinner, a rebel? That’s the way to find more wonderful truths than you can imagine, too.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not what we might expect – or want. It’s better, far better!

Thanks for reading,

Marc

# He's got the Whole

**He is a full-blooded Cherokee Indian with the name Obie Philpot. During World War II he composed the song "He's got the Whole World in his Hands." He left the lyrics of the song in his locker when he went off to war. When it was cleaned out, the song was found and it soon began to air on the radio. Ever since that time, you and I have been familiar with the song. It's a song about God having the whole world in his hands. And then, not just the whole world in general, but the wind and the rain, the tiny little baby, you and me brother, and everybody here in particular.**

## God's providence

What Obie Philpot wrote and sang about, you also find in the Bible. We refer to it as God's providence. Literally, the word means "to see in advance" and that is what God does. Everything that happened in the past, is happening in the present and will happen in the future God saw and sees in advance (Isaiah 42:9; Jeremiah 1:5). Yet, 'providence' not only refers to God seeing everything in advance. It also refers to God sustaining and governing all things that happened in the past, are happening now and will happen in the future. As someone once said, "it pertains no less to his hands than to his eyes" (Genesis 22:8). Thus, God not only created the world, He also sustains and directs what happens in it. You could say

God's providence is his administration of his creation.

Now I am married and have five children. Four are no longer living at home. Yet, I can remember when all the children were living at home, I would sometimes give them permission to do something I really did not want them to do. I really wanted them to do something else, but because they kept nagging me, I sometimes would give in and give the permission they wanted. You could call this an unwilling permission. This is what my administration of my home would sometimes look like. But God's administration of his creation does not look like this. When He allows things to happen, He never allows them to happen unwillingly, but always willingly. I mention this because sometimes people want to absolve God from responsibility of what happens by saying that He allowed it to happen, but that He did not will it to happen. You often hear people saying this when loved ones die in accidents. But while I understand why this is said, I cannot agree with it because when God allows things to happen, He also directs that they happen as He himself says: "I form the light and create the darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7; cf. Amos 3:6).

I was born in 1949 and thus can still remember alarm clocks and watches that I would have to wind up. Once I had wound up my watch or alarm clock, I would no longer pay attention to the watch or clock because it would run by itself. Some people say that God's providence or his administration of his creation is considered to be like this. For instance, they say that God puts universal laws of nature into motion

(like gravity) and then no longer pays attention to what is happening. He lets the world run by itself and is not personally involved in the day-to-day administration of the world both generally and specifically. Yet, the Bible tells us that God is personally involved in the day-to-day administration of the world. Moreover, it tells us that He is also involved in the administration of the so-called small things of life. For instance, it tells us that not a sparrow falls to the ground without the will of God (Matthew 10:29). And what is true for a sparrow is also true for human beings. As God sustains and governs everything in the life of a sparrow, so He sustains and governs everything in our lives too – our plans, intentions and actions (Proverbs 21:1). Obie Philpot is right. He's not only got the whole world in his hands! He also has you and me in his hands! In fact, He's got the tiny little baby in his hands, too!

## How does God's providence work?

But how does God's providence actually work? To be sure, there is much that we do not understand and will always remain a mystery to us. But the Bible does indicate that God administers his creation in three different ways. Most of the time, He administers it with an intermediate or secondary cause. I just got up this morning and it is light. Why is there light? Because of the sun, of course. But the sun is not the main cause there is light. God simply uses the sun as an instrument, a means or a cause to give light. Thus, God is the ultimate cause of light. Yet, He administers his creation through the means of the sun so that there is light. The same is true when you get sick. Your gall bladder acts up and you go the hospital for surgery. God

# World in his Hands

heals you, but He uses a surgeon and medical staff as intermediate or secondary causes.

Sometimes, however, God's providence or administration of his creation works **without** an intermediate or second cause. Take, for instance, the sun again. When you read the creation account in Genesis 1, you notice that God created light on the first day and sun on the fourth (Genesis 1:3, 14-19). This means that during the first three days of creation, God gave light to his creation without the intermediate cause of the sun. Why, precisely the fact that God created the sun on the fourth day and not on the first is his way of teaching us not to look to the sun as the ultimate cause of light, but only the intermediate cause. What God did during the first three days of creation by giving light directly Himself and not indirectly through the secondary cause of the sun, He sometimes does today as well. Sometimes, people do not have access to a doctor or the right medicine when they get sick and they still get healed. Why? God just does it directly without the use of intermediate causes like a doctor or medicine. Mind you, this does not happen too often, but it still does. And it just goes to show that God is not tied to intermediate or secondary causes in his administration of creation.

Rarely, God administers his creation **contrary** to every intermediate or secondary cause. Imagine having died because of terminal cancer. The cancer is the intermediate or second cause God used to end your life. If God wanted to bring you back to life again, He could do this if He wanted to. But He would have to do this contrary to or against the cancer that was working in your life and caused your death. When Jesus Christ returns, God

administer his creation in this manner by raising all those who have died and bringing them back to life. While Jesus was on earth, He gave a little foretaste of God administering his creation contrary to intermediate or secondary causes by raising a few people from the dead (Matthew 9:18 25; Luke 7:14-15; John 11:43-44).

## The effect of God's providence

If you believe that God has the whole world in his hands and that He governs everything in this universe, including everything you and I plan, think and do, then that can have a tremendous positive effect in your life. When you believe in God's providence or his administration of his creation, then you can be very thankful for the favorable outcome of things. You will not attribute this favorable outcome to the forces of chance or fate, but to God's wise and loving administration of his creation. This, in turn, is a tremendous incentive to learn to stand in awe of God, worship Him and obey Him.

When you believe in God's providence, then you can also become patient in adversity. Perhaps, you are familiar with the story of Joseph who was sold by his brothers as a slave and sent off to Egypt quite a distance from where his family lived. While he was in Egypt, he was falsely accused by someone and ended up in jail. After that, however, his life took a turn for the better and he rose to a position of prominence. If after some twenty years, you met your brothers who had sold you as a slave again, how would you treat them? We read in the Bible that Joseph treated them with kindness and gentleness. Why, he even comforted his brothers, saying to them, "And now, do not be distressed, and do not be angry with

yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Genesis 45:5). And again, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). Why was Joseph able to say this? Because he knew that what had happened in his life was not the result of chance or fate, but the result of God's wise and loving administration of his life. In this connection, someone once aptly wrote:

If there is no more effective remedy for anger and impatience, he has surely benefited greatly who has so learned to meditate upon God's providence that he can always recall his mind to this point: the Lord has willed it; therefore it must be borne, not only because one may not contend against it, but also because he wills nothing but what is just and expedient. To sum this up: when we are unjustly wounded by men, let us overlook their wickedness (which would but worsen our pain and sharpen our minds to revenge), remember to mount up to God, and learn to believe for certain that whatever our enemy has wickedly committed against us was permitted and sent by God's just dispensation [= administration].

Last but not least, believing in God's providence also can lead to an incredible freedom from worry about the future. You see, worry is imagining the future without God. And the future is not without God. In fact, God has the whole future in his hands – also your future. Trusting this can lead to an incredible rest and peace. Not trusting this can lead to an incredible unrest and fear. Thanks for reading.

Dick Moes

# JACOB'S BLESSING

## Bible Story based on Genesis 48-50

Jacob had become an old man. Before his arrival in Egypt he had thought that the end of his years was near. His heartbreaking troubles had sapped his will to live. First his beloved wife died. Then his special son Joseph disappeared, most likely killed by a wild animal. And now a severe famine struck the land. There was not nearly enough food for his large family. Desperate he sent his sons to the mighty lord of Egypt, who had great supplies of grain.

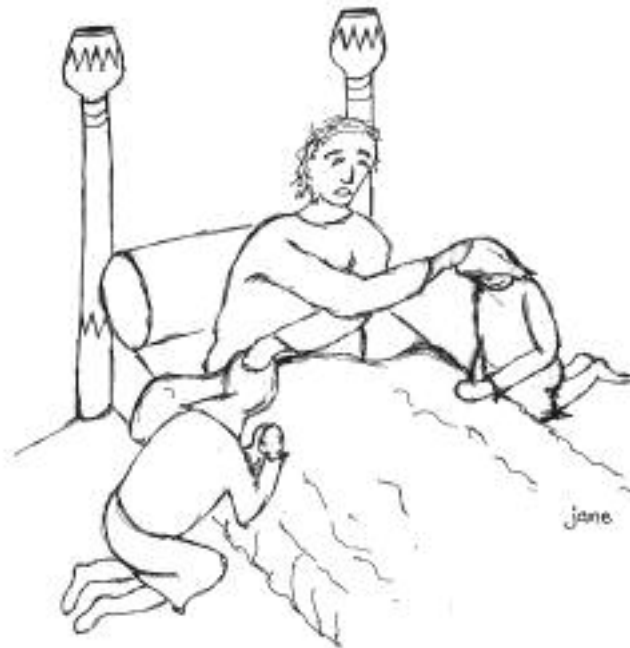
But from then on things started to change. Great blessings came from the hand of the Lord. His sons came back from their second trip to Egypt with very good news. Joseph was alive! The mighty lord of Egypt was his own, long lost Joseph!

With his entire family Jacob moved to Egypt, where Joseph provided for their needs. Jacob did not worry anymore. Every day he thanked the Lord for saving his family from starvation through his own son Joseph. The dreams of long ago had come true. Joseph had become the ruler in his family.

But if the Lord had made Joseph the leader in his family, then Jacob must give him a special place as well. Even though Joseph was not his oldest son, he must give him the rights of an oldest son. Joseph must receive a double share of the inheritance.

Jacob was too old to leave his bedroom. Still he had one very important task left. He must bless his sons, giving Joseph the double portion.

He called Joseph to his room. "Joseph, as you know, the Lord has told me that He will make our family into a large nation. He has also made known to me that Canaan, not Egypt, is our Promised Land. But He has sent you to Egypt to save us from the famine in Canaan. That is why you



are our prince. You will receive the double blessing of the oldest son. Both your sons will receive a full portion. Bring them to me."

Right away Joseph took his sons to his father's room.

"Here are the sons the Lord gave me, Father."

"Bring them close to me, that I may bless them."

Jacob's eyes could not fully see the young men anymore. Yet he took them in his arms and kissed them.

"God is good to me, Joseph," he said. "I never thought I would see you again, and now I even see your children."

Then Joseph took his oldest son, and made him kneel at the right side of his father. He placed the youngest son on the left. Jacob sat up in bed. He stretched out his hands to bless. But reaching out he put his right hand on the younger boy, who sat on his left, while he crossed his left arm to put it on the older boy at his right.

"Father, you are confused," Joseph said kindly. "You are placing your right hand on the younger son."

But Jacob was sure.

"No, Joseph, both your sons will become the father of a large nation, but the younger will become the greater."

By putting the younger son first, Jacob broke the rule. Usually the oldest son received the largest

portion. But Jacob did not make a mistake. In fact, he followed a new pattern that the Lord had started with him. Jacob, too, had received the blessing of the first-born, even though he was younger than his twin brother. Joseph also was not the oldest, but the Lord had made him the leader in the family. One more time the new order is repeated, now with the sons of Joseph.

Three times in a row God Himself changed the order. Jacob was the younger, but he was the one who walked in God's ways. Joseph was number eleven, but he became the saviour of his family. Ephraim, Joseph's second son from an Egyptian woman, grew into a large nation.

The Lord is showing his people that He will bring about a change in the order of the house of Jacob. One day a Son will be born who will be of a new order. He will be a first-born, but He will not have an earthly father. God Himself will be his father. Like Jacob, He will walk in his Father's ways. Like Joseph, He will save his people from death and give them life. And last but not least, He will have a large group of children among all the nations of the world.

This special Son of Jacob is our Lord Jesus, the Saviour of the World.

Jane

# Activity Page

## BLESSINGS

A blessing is a special promise.

When the Lord blesses us, He promises that He will keep us in his care. He will give us all we need to serve Him.

People are not always able to keep their promises, even if they want to. Sometimes they forget. Or they may become sick.

But the Lord keeps all his promises. He is faithful. The Lord is also powerful. As the ruler of heaven and earth He is able do what he promised.

## BLESSINGS IN THE BIBLE

The Lord uses people to speak his blessings. In the Bible we can read that Jacob blessed the children of Joseph. Later Jacob blessed his own children as well. The Lord showed Jacob which blessing each of his children would receive.

## BLESSINGS FOR GOD'S PEOPLE TODAY

The blessings of the Bible still hold for God's people today.

The Lord will make sure that there will be a multitude of people who believe in God. The believers will have believing children, and many others will join God's people.

Moreover, the Lord will give these people a place to live where they can serve Him in peace. After their death they will receive a place on the new earth, where they will live forever in the presence of their Lord.

These blessings are theirs because Jesus, the promised Saviour, saved them from death.

## BLESSINGS FOR GOOD DAYS AND BAD

Every day God gives his people blessings. He gives us a family and a home. He makes sure that we have enough to eat. He gives us teachers so we can learn and doctors to look after our health.

But even when we are poor and hungry the Lord blesses us. He does not leave us alone, but He gives us the strength to keep going.

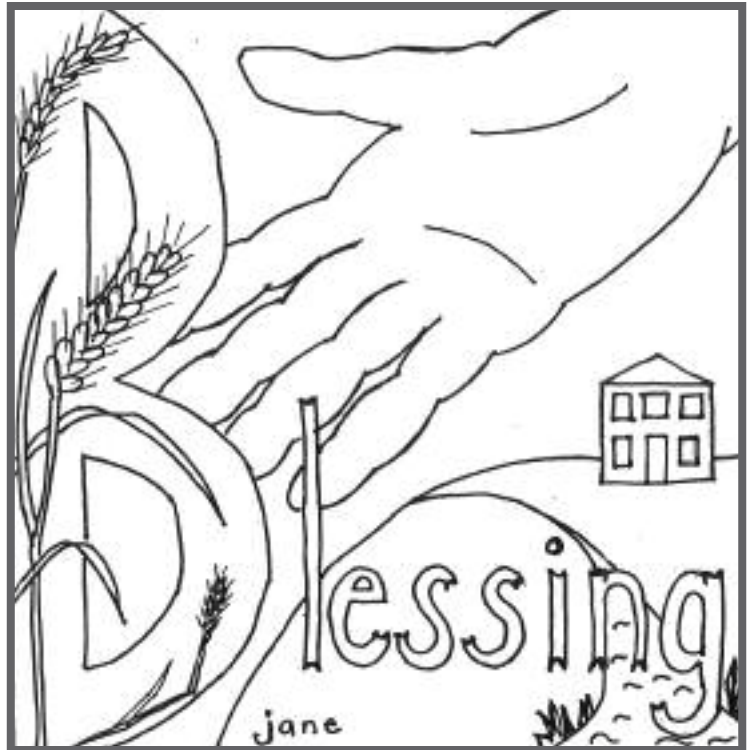
All these blessings come to us in the name of the Father, who looks after us, and in the name of Jesus, who saved us, and in the name of the Spirit, who teaches us to walk in God's ways.

## MAY THE GRACE OF CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR

May the grace of Christ our Savior and the Father's boundless love with the Holy Spirit's favor, rest upon us from above.

Thus may we abide in union with each other and the Lord, and possess, in sweet communion, joys which earth cannot afford.

(John Newton, 1779, based on 2 Corinthians 13:14)



## WORD PICTURE

The hand of the Lord blesses us every day. He looks after our families. His goodness and love flow like a river that never dries up.

# God is Real!

*“ . . .the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.”*

2 Chronicles 36:16

**What kind of person are you? I'm sure that you have some good qualities. You can be (and sometimes are) kind to your brother and sister; you are usually respectful toward your parents and considerate toward strangers, generous to the poor. There are probably other good things about you too.**

But there is another side to you too, I suspect. Maybe you become angry when you hear about someone being cruel to animals. You may feel hatred toward industries that pollute the environment. Perhaps there are times when you'd really like to see someone who has done a terrible crime, punished severely.

If you feel like that, then you are a normal person. You have real feelings. You're someone who cares.

What do you think about God? Is he real? Is he, like you, a living, feeling and caring person? Of course God loves. The Apostle John says that God is love. But does he also get angry sometimes, feel hatred and want to see criminals punished the way their crimes deserve?

Some people think that God is only love. They don't want to think about God as having hatred or being angry. But such a god is a wooden image – apparently living, but really just a puppet: he seems real but feelings are only an act imposed on him by those who control him.

But what we think about God is not as important as what God says about himself. In the Bible, he tells us that he can become angry, and that he punishes people. He is a covenant God. The covenant is the

agreement which he made with us. In that covenant, he tells us that he loves and he hates. He says to you: Do what I love and I will be happy with you and bless you. Do what I hate and I will be angry with you and punish you.

God is real. He is a living, feeling and caring person

Second Chronicles 36 shows God when he was angry with Israel. Really angry. Israel was the OT church. For several hundred years, God had been warning them that they were ignoring his law, doing what he forbade and failing to do what he required. Gentle warnings had no effect, so God began to warn them that he would punish them if they did not listen. He made Israel weak and the countries around them strong. Still Israel didn't listen to God. Instead, we read in this chapter that they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets.

God became very angry at Israel for this. So he did what he had threatened to do. All their cities were captured by enemies and burned to the ground. Thousands of Israelites were killed. The survivors were

rounded up like animals and marched off to countries they knew nothing about.

God's anger is a terrible thing. It is important for you to know not only God's love, but also his anger. God can become angry at you too if you don't listen to him, if you don't pay attention to his word.

And what does he tell you? He wants you to know that he loves you. If you listen to the Bible, you will discover that he has sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world to be your saviour. Jesus suffered all of God's anger because he took our sins upon himself. If you put your hope in the Lord Jesus, you have nothing to fear. God will be unhappy with you because of sins in your life, but he will never punish you for them. He will discipline you, but never hurl his wrath against you. Jesus has taken it all already.

But if you don't put your trust in Jesus, then know that God is not just love. He is a real person. He also has wrath for those who reject him. So don't! Believe in him. Listen to him. And he will bless you.

*Paul Aasman*

## EVANGEL

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