

# DESTINY BULLETIN

A commentary sent to the supporters of the ministry of Christian Destiny.

Dear “Special Friend” of Christian Destiny,

February 2008

## THE IMPERATIVE OF LOVE

Sometimes I think Christians could profit from a trip into the past. We would do well to detach ourselves for a moment and travel back through history, moving with wonder and anticipation through the years. As we went, we would need to shed our pretensions, our prejudices, our presumed accomplishments, and our self-appreciation. We would travel back through nearly two thousand years to a rocky hillside outside the city of Jerusalem. There we would stand and savor the day when time stopped and started again with a new purpose—the day when the living Son of God was executed by man, thereby dying for the sins of the world. What would it be like to observe Christ’s pain as the nails were driven into His hands? Can we imagine watching as His feet were pierced? Can we conceive of that sacred head bearing a crown of thorns? Isaiah speaks of these things, saying, *“His visage was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men” (Isaiah 52:14).*

If we knew something of the life, the ministry, the compassion of Christ in the days preceding this one, we would be at a loss to explain this event. We would say it was impossible that anyone, especially Jesus Christ, could commit crimes meriting such a cruel execution.

For the beginning of an explanation, we would need to look again to the words of Isaiah: *“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:3-4).* But still, we would ask, Why has this awful cataract of grief and sorrow come upon the holy, harmless Son of God? We should read on with astonishment and gratefulness. *“But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (vv. 5-6).*

In this most significant event of all history, the Lord Jesus Christ suffered in our place, purchasing the righteousness that becomes ours if we believe in Him. On this day the Old Covenant was superseded by a New Covenant written in the blood of Christ. There began the covenant of divine grace, whereby all who come as sinners to the Savior are washed clean and made acceptable by His atoning work. Volumes could not contain an adequate description of the scene that day. The Roman soldiers were there. Having nailed Him to the cross, they sat down and watched after casting lots for His garment. Not knowing who He was, they saw this as just another execution of an enemy of Rome. Then came the darkness! Then came the earthquake! They may have then asked, “Why?”

The rulers of the Jews were there. They were bringing to pass their own avowed statement, *“We will not have this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14).* Little did they dream of the desolation that would come upon them by reason of this occasion. They should have asked, “Why?”

The multitudes were there. They looked on with a mixture of bewilderment, sadistic interest, and compassion. They could not fathom the issue in question. Few realized that eternal life and death were at stake in what was taking place. Did someone ask, “Why?”

Mary, His mother, was there. Her heart was pierced with sorrow at the sight of her Son dying in

such agony. Surely, she knew by this time His true identity. Her son was her God! Her heart must have held a mixture of adoration, bewilderment, hope, and despair. She surely asked, “Why?”

Some of His disciples were there. Most of them were crushed, believing that all was lost, that His promises and presence would be gone forever. Only later did their hearts burn within as He identified Himself to them on the Emmaus road. Then their grieving hearts asked, “Why?”

Barabbas was, doubtless, there. He had been released as a prisoner of the Jews. Now his place of execution was taken by this divine Substitute. We hope that Barabbas came to faith in the One who redeemed his body and offered to redeem his soul.

Satan was there. Having filled his servant Judas with the spirit of betrayal, he was now looking, perhaps gleefully, at the results of his plans. If he knew, he would not admit that this day—far from being his moment of victory—was the day of his judgment. He never understood why.

The Father was there. This was the one to whom Christ spoke, first with the question, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” (*Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34*). Then, three agonizing hours later, with the words, “*Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit*” (*Luke 23:46*). Of Him Christ asked, “Why?”

You and I were there. Our life, our death, our eternity, was on the block at Calvary. We recognize our presence there when we believe. With the Apostle Paul we can say, “*I am crucified with Christ*” (*Galatians 2:20*).

Here we see the death of the Son of God at Calvary—costly beyond estimation. We must ask, “Why?”

Yes, in looking upon this event, we are left with the fundamental questions: Why? Why did He die? What made Him willing to give His life? Complex answers could be devised, but a simple answer can be given in one word—*love*. It was the love of God, the love of Christ for a lost humanity that impelled Him to this awful and wonderful act of redemption. “*In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins*” (*1 John 4:9-10*). That’s why!

This love is expressed in Scripture by the Greek word *agapao*. It has been described as “the characteristic word of Christianity, and since the spirit of revelation has used it to express ideas previously unknown, inquiry into its use, whether in Greek literature or in the Septuagint, throws but little light upon its distinctive meaning in the New Testament. God has taken this sublime word and endowed it with a meaning unknown in any other language. It can only be described in terms closely tied to the Creator of the universe. *Agapao* means the “love of God.” It is used in the New Testament to describe the nature of God. Volumes could not reveal the meaning of the phrase “*God is love*” (*1 John 4:8*). So exalted is this word in describing the intrinsic nature of the Lord that we may expect to find little other proper illustration of its essential meaning. And so it is. Love is explained in the New Testament, not in terms of its essence, but in terms of its activity. In the last analysis, its essence may well be beyond description, but its activity is well presented.

Its ultimate activity is that it is the motivation for the sacrifice of the life of Christ on Calvary. Because of that sacrifice, God is able to make history’s most moving announcement, “*God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life*” (*John 3:16*). The act and this announcement are presented in Scripture as the essence of love. “*But God commends His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*” (*Romans 5:8*). The love of God is beyond description. That infinite meaning, according to the Word, is illustrated in its best sense in the death of Christ on Calvary. How fathomless is the depth of that sacrifice and the depth of the love that allowed it.

Now it is your turn to express, to embody that love—yours and mine! That same quality of divine love is enjoined upon us. Peter uses the same word to name the crowning imperative of the Christian life. We are to add to our faith virtue, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and now, *agapao* itself—the love of God. Such love is to characterize our lives. It is the final imperative. What a sublime, unbelievable call!

Is it possible? Are we to become the bearers of, the custodians of, the love of God in our world? Yes, indeed! Each Christian is commanded and enabled to be a walking illustration of divine love in all that he says, thinks, and does. Christ is not here, but we are His representatives. As divine ambassadors we are human embodiments of the love of Christ. But remember, we must not be merely transported by the ambiguous glory of the loving commission placed upon us to reflect His love. We must be doers of His love!

Love, to be real, must take an object. What then must be the first object of the love grafted into our hearts, hearts that were once characterized by hatred, indifference, selfishness, and other opposites of the love of God? The first object of our love must be the Lord Himself. The Christian faith is more than just a code of rules, a system of doctrine, or a set of practices. At its core, Christianity is a Person. That Person is God Himself, in three Persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is the first object of our love.

This has been the mark of every mature Christian. In the early stages of the Christian life, we may have loved a thousand things. But, one by one, these things show themselves unworthy of affection. As we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, these things—the incidentals of life—are added unto us. Maturity, then, brings our vision into proper focus—on the Lord Himself. Paul, after many years of service, stated his fondest ambition. To the questions, What would you like to have most? What would it take to make you perfectly happy? Paul's answer was, "*That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death*" (Philippians 3:10). Christ became the singular object of his deepest love. That love became the constraining force for everything he did.

As we mature, so it will be with us. As Christ becomes the object of our love, all other things fall into place. Because of that love, we are able to set right priorities. Because of that love, we do not grow tired in battle. Because of that love, we are able to discern between the good and the best and choose that which will glorify Christ.

Having settled on love for God, we are led to a compelling love for the Body of Christ. The need for such love is presented to us in many ways, not the least of which is in the words, "*A new commandment I give unto you, That you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love one to another*" (John 13:34-35). Love that wells up from the heart of the believer like a fountain, is also admonished to him with the force of a commandment of our Lord.

In this matter of loving one another, we have the powerful help of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the "*fruit of the Spirit is love*" (Galatians 5:22). Just as the life within the tree causes the fruit to appear, so the life within the believer—with the help of the Holy Spirit—produces beautiful fruit. But in our efforts to produce the fruit of the Spirit, we must remember an interesting fact. We cannot cause fruit to grow; but we are earnestly asked to cultivate it. We are to weed it, and prune it, and protect it; only God can produce it. So it is with the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. The love of believers for one another becomes a great credential before the world. One of the primary reputations of the early Church was established because Christians were known by their genuine love one for another. It is impossible to divide the ranks or lead astray a segment of the flock of believers who have between them that greatest of all magnetism, the attraction of love.

The Church has been called to minister in a world without love. Today's society runs on greed, avarice, self-seeking, and ruthless advantage-taking. The life of the believer stands in contrast to this. Within the body of believers, the lonesome, the disenfranchised, and the lost can be accepted. The Christian life is distinguished by the promise that the love of God is shed upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit that is given unto us. The love of the brethren is the greatest concurrent advantage, next to sound doctrine, that the Church has.

The object of our love, therefore, is also the world. The world is hateful, vindictive, degenerate, and lost. The world lives its life in the kind of darkness that makes its victims less lovely with every day that passes. Nevertheless, these people are the objects of God's love and must be objects of our love. We were once members of that group. But while we were sinners, the love of God through other believers was extended to us. The ministry of extending the love of Christ to others now falls to us. Our ability to display that love is an increasing accurate marker of our Christian maturity.

God calls us to embody this love in an unlovely world.

When we think of this call, however, we are faced with a problem. It is expressed in the questions: What is love? and, How should we develop it? The answer is not simple. The love of God is a quality that defies definition, just as God Himself is so high and holy as to be beyond definition. We must not despair, however, because things that are difficult to understand, even if not definable in their *essence*, can often be defined by their *operation*. We may not be able to understand what they *are*, but we can understand what they *do*. That is true of such mysterious entities as light, electricity, thought, and many other things beyond our understanding. We know their effects, if not their essence. This can be applied to love as well.

The Lord has given us a description of love entirely in terms of what it does. We find it in 1 Corinthians 13.

This account tells us many things. First, we are told that if we speak with the tongues of men and angels, but without the love of God, we do no more than make noise (v.1). Apart from love, eloquence holds no significance. Next, we are told that spiritual gifts are worth nothing without love (v.2). These may include the gift of prophecy, the gift of miraculous understanding, the possession of all knowledge and all faith, even to the extent of removing mountains. But apart from the love of God, the person with such gifts has nothing. Generosity apart from divine love is worthless (v. 3). One may bestow all of his goods to feed the poor and still accomplish nothing. One may even give his body to be burned and do so totally without profit. By this many will be reminded of the Buddhist priests on the streets of Vietnam during that war, who covered themselves with gasoline and set themselves aflame. What did that accomplish? Nothing! Nothing whatsoever is significant unless it is accompanied by the love of God.

What, then, does love do? It suffers long and is kind. It does not envy or promote itself (v.4). It is correct in its behavior, is not selfish or easily provoked, and does not think evil (v.5). It does not rejoice in iniquity but in truth (v.6). It is eternally patient, bearing all things. It is full of faith, hope, and endurance (v.7). Though many other things can and will fail, love does not (v.8).

The love of God in our lives is the capstone of the imperatives. Love interacts completely with the other qualities and becomes the source of each of them. It is greater than faith, greater than hope; it is the greatest of all human endeavors.

Love must pervade the lives of all who believe the Gospel in these last days. Christ warns us of a time when love will be put at risk because of sinful society: "*Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall [grow] cold*" (Matthew 24:12). The believer who possesses divine love will stand out from the crowd. He will shine in a dark world. We must pray to be delivered from the cynicism overtaking us in these days of iniquity. As sin continues to rise, the love of God must continue to rise in our lives.

From the writings of Dave Breese



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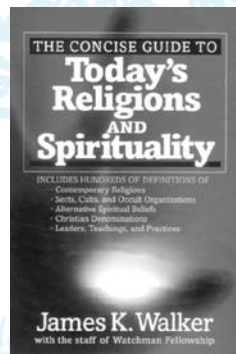
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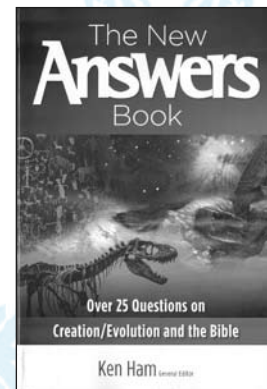


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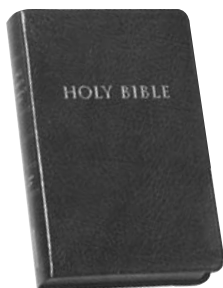
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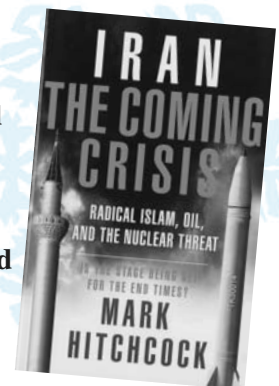
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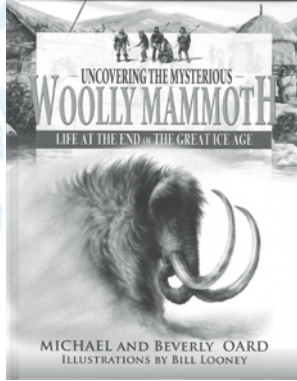


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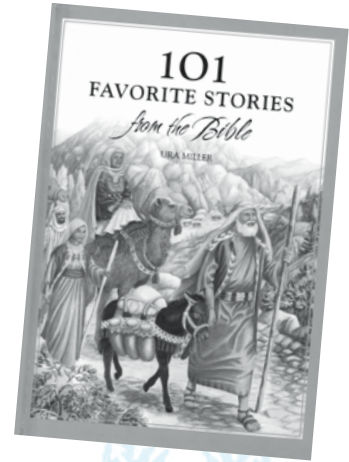


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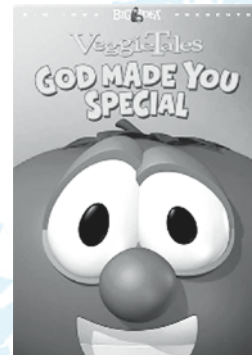


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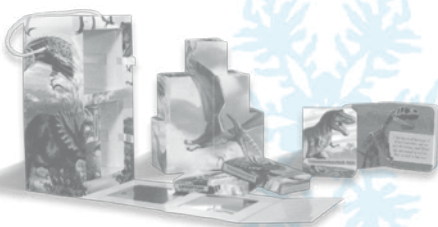
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- ★ **THE IMPERATIVE OF LOVE**
- ★ Commentary on Matthew--DVD, CD & BOOK--New
- ★ Antichrist--The Coming Global Storm--Booklet, CD & DVD
- ★ What To Do If You Miss The Rapture--CD & DVD
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