

## COMING HOME, PART 2: FINDING THE WAY

John 14:4-11 (NASB)

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How do we find our way home to God? In meditating on this subject I found it impossible to avoid thinking of a fictional home called Rivendell invented by J.R.R. Tolkien for his books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien invented a valley protected by elves in which was "The Last Homely House," as he called it, on the very edge of the wild in Middle Earth. "Homely" was not a reference to being unlovely, but most expressive of what we yearn for in a home. In *The Hobbit* Bilbo Baggins sets out on a dangerous journey with the wizard, Gandalf, and some dwarves. They travel for a while, and before they launch out into the most dangerous part of Middle Earth they rest for a while at Rivendell.

Tolkien described the house of Elrond, an elf-lord, which was found there: "His house was perfect, whether you liked food, or sleep, or work, or story-telling, or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all. Evil things did not come into that valley. ...All of [the travelers], the ponies as well, grew refreshed and strong in a few days there. Their clothes were mended as well as their bruises, their tempers and their hopes. Their bags were filled with food and provisions light to carry but strong to bring them over the mountain passes. Their plans were improved with the best advice" (*The Hobbit*, New York: Ballantine Books, rev. ed. 1966, p. 61).

Rivendell has a crucial role in *The Lord of the Rings* as well. When Bilbo Baggins' nephew, Frodo, sets out on a similar dangerous adventure, he ends up being chased by evil creatures who are out to kill him. Frodo gets stabbed with one of the creatures' swords upon which an evil spell has been placed. The battle wound infects not only Frodo's body, but his soul. He begins to descend into despair and darkness. Frodo and his traveling companions are hungry, cold, and beset by evil creatures fixed on hunting them down. Frodo is dying of his wound. The travelers must go with all speed to Rivendell, where they hope the power of the elves will save them from their attackers. They arrive ahead of their enemies in the nick of time. The elvish healing arts do indeed bring Frodo back from certain death, and the travelers all find rest and replenishment for their bodies and souls.

Safety, nourishment, warmth, rest, healing, and reviving of the soul are among the sweetest blessings of home. In our last study we saw that our intense desire for these things points to the plan of God for us to find our home in him. Jesus spoke to his worried disciples about this Most Homely House after revealing that he had to be crucified and leave them: "**Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also**" (John 14:1-3).

## JESUS' PERSON IS THE WAY TO THE FATHER'S HOUSE

Christ's view of us is that we are all wounded in our souls like Frodo. We are all spiritually starving, morally dehydrated, and on the verge of collapse unless we can find our way home to the place of healing, nourishment, and replenishment for our souls. To our troubled hearts Christ speaks the

promise of a heavenly home, where we will dwell with him and our Father in blessing forever. Even if cannot fully appreciate the wonder of it, the offer of a home in the Father's house is tantalizing. But how do we find it?

One of the little gleams of the gospel in *The Hobbit* is that even Gandalf, the wisest character of all, cannot easily find his way to The Last Homely House in Rivendell. Although he has a general idea of where it is his pony almost falls into the crevice which leads into the valley when he finally stumbles upon it. The spiritual reality which you and I face is far worse. The entire creation is calling to us of God's reality and we are not even looking for him, as Paul wrote to the Romans: **"THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD"** (Romans 3:11 -- caps in orig.). It's hopeless for us.

So it was an act of supreme grace for the Lord to come find us and show us the way. After saying to his disciples that he had to be crucified, that he was leaving and that they could not follow him, he explained: **"And you know the way where I am going.' Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me'"** (John 14:4-6). Let's give Thomas credit for asking honestly when he did not understand! Which one of us would have understood that Jesus Christ is, in his very person, both the destination itself and the way to that destination? Along with being profound beyond our capacities, Christ's statement here is completely uncompromising about the failure of every other path to God. **"No one"** means no one--not a soul saved, anywhere, anytime, apart from his personal redemptive work.

And what was the participation of the Father in the redemptive work of Christ to make a way for us to get to the Father's house? Peter spoke these words in his first sermon after the Holy Spirit came upon the church: **"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know-- this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God [the Father], you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God [the Father] raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power"** (Acts 2:22-24). The Jewish crowd to which Peter spoke on that day would have understood that the term "God" meant God the Father. Our heavenly Father knew that after creating us we would fall into sin, that he would have to make a way for us to get home again, and that way would have to be the redeeming sacrifice of God the Son.

When my wife and I were on vacation a few years ago we borrowed our son's GPS to navigate our way around several unfamiliar states. We had never used one before. My plan was to use paper maps and my wife's plan was to use the GPS. Because of our unfamiliarity with the unit, there were some very trying moments on the road where I was calling out the correct directions and the GPS was calling out different ones. Barb—in the driver's seat--was somewhat perplexed to get two different sets of verbal instructions at the same instant. I was perplexed that she was not sure that she should choose mine over that of a robot with a tiny brain. Properly programmed, the GPS would have worked fine, but we did not figure that out until the end of our week. For a while I felt the way God must feel about the way to the home he has prepared for believers in Christ. He has been clear beyond any confusion that there is no way to his house apart from the work of Christ, and yet even many who call themselves evangelicals seem to think that there are other ways home.

Some members of mainline denominations and the emergent church movement, for example, are offended by the verses we just read which plainly state that the Father sent his Son to the cross, calling it "cosmic child abuse." This is wrong on so many levels that it makes my blood boil, but what does that mean about people finding their way to the Father's house? Anything which deters us from total dependence on the person of Christ as both the way and the destination must be seen as spiritually fatal. Frodo would have fallen into the hellish darkness of the undead if he had not successfully arrived at Rivendell, and we invite spiritual death if we listen to the wrong voices. Jesus is uniquely the way home because he is also the truth and the life.

## THE FATHER'S HOUSE IS JESUS' HOUSE

In the next few verses in John 14 it became Philip's turn to honestly express ignorance about the way to the Father's house: **"If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.' Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father '?"** (John 14:7-9).

This was a stinging rebuke both to Thomas and Philip. The revelation of the Father had already been done. No new epiphany was needed like the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus is the revelation of God the Father, so the Father's house is Jesus' house. They are one and the same. But Jesus clearly expected both Thomas and Philip to have known more than they did.

I have discovered that communicating the significance of the truth is the main challenge of preaching. What good is "covering the material" of the Bible for people if they do not grasp the meaning of it? On the one hand this passage relieves me because even Jesus Christ had trouble getting his significance across to people. On the other hand the passage frightens me because God has called me to do that very thing! So I am always watching faces for understanding and appreciation of the word of God.

Jesus said that believers should look forward to arriving at the Father's house. Because he is himself the way, and the truth, and the life we should expect that it will be very familiar when we get there. This is almost too profound for words. But, at the very least, we should be able to process the notion that the destination of our lives of faith is all about Christ. Whatever he said and did during his earthly ministry as recorded in the four Gospels is what we are supposed to know about the Father.

So when Jesus spoke tenderly to people in desperate need of healing, that is what the Father is like. When he thundered against the Pharisees for leading the people away from God, that is what the Father is like. When Christ patiently taught the parables of the kingdom and the events of the end times, that is what the Father is like. When Christ loved us so much that he died for us, that is the same sacrificial attitude the Father has. Everything we read about Christ in the gospels tells us something of the destination of Christ's followers in the Father's house. It is good for us to read books about heaven to help us with the short treatment it receives in the New Testament, but that is not all God had to say to us about it. Heaven is the Father's house is Jesus' house, so all that we know about Christ applies.

We are familiar with the idea that a house becomes a home when someone works to make it so. The Last Homely House is Elrond's home. He is the immensely wise elf who makes it safe and restorative. My wife works to make our house a home, and I loom over the whole thing as the father figure. What Christ is trying to tell us about the Father's house is the same, except that we can look directly at him to see what the Father's house will be like. Our ignorance will be taught, our sorrows will be comforted, our wounds will be healed, and our souls shall be restored. Bank on it.

## PERSONAL FAITH IN CHRIST GRANTS ENTRANCE

To comfort his disciples and challenge their faith Jesus continued his explanation of the Father's house: **"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 initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves"** (John 14:10-11). Jesus is claiming total identity with God the Father. These are not words a normal person should be allowed to say! But Hebrews 1:3 affirms the same thing: **"And He [Jesus Christ] is the radiance of His [God the Father's] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high..."** (Hebrews 1:3).

Again Christ tells us that the way home is through faith in him. But lots of people throughout church history, and millions today, say they believe in Christ and yet their lives do not change from when they did not believe. If George Barna's statistics are a true indicator, there is an epidemic today of professing Christians who do not seem to live very differently from those who do not profess faith. In light of this problem we need to grasp two aspects of the belief which changes our lives and leads to blessing in the Father's house.

First, we must have an unreserved trust in Christ to forgive our sins and cleanse us from unrighteousness. If the faith is not personal, it is not real. This reminds me of when I went sky diving with some college buddies. We had to take an instructional course before the jumpmaster would let us anywhere near an airplane. Part of the course work was to convince us that the equipment could be trusted. We jumped using Army T-10 parachutes with L-shaped steering cutouts. They were very large and assured a soft landing. We donned jumpsuits and helmets. We practiced the landing by jumping off a four foot high platform.

But then it came time to actually get on the aircraft with the big open door. It took a measure of faith just to scrunch into the back of the passenger compartment with the other jumpers. But that still did not qualify as personally trusting our parachutes. Then the jumpmaster checked our clips on the static line and instructed us to get out the door onto the tire of the aircraft while holding the diagonal wing strut. There was quite a blast of wind out there, and the ground looked very far away at three thousand feet of altitude. Standing out in the breeze was pretty radical, but it still does not qualify as personal trust in the chute.

Not until you step off the tire and let go of the wing strut are you genuinely trusting the parachute. There is a crisis of faith at that moment. Your brain is screaming a warning, your gut is heaving, and your emotions are somersaulting. Up until that point you had knowledge, as many do of Christ, but no action of trust. You might even feel that you trust the parachute, but that is still not the

personal commitment of trust. Once you are in the air you are committed. In the same way it is not until you release every fleshly hope and support for your own righteousness are you really trusting Christ for salvation. There is no other way to the Father's house.

But the lack of personal trust does not explain all of the people who say they trust him yet do not change. We must understand that belief does not consist only in personal trust. Christ insists that we believe certain facts about him: "**Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me...**" Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, liberal Christians, New Agers, many cults and even many who think they are evangelicals believe in a Christ but not the Christ who is all holy, all powerful, and identical with the Father.

That is why the early church had to hold repeated councils, not to invent the doctrine of the deity of Christ but to state it carefully enough that people could believe it with confidence and be saved. The lines had to be drawn carefully because salvation is at stake--the way to the Father's house is on the line. Jesus told us the way home to God and we must not allow it to be confused or misrepresented in any way.

Though not the product of any one early church council, the so-called Athanasian Creed provides a good summary of the idea that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself." [It is included as an appendix to the printed version of this message.] It is quite a bit longer than the Apostles' Creed because, in the middle of spiritual warfare in the early church, there turned out to be many ways for the identity of Christ and his relationship to the Father to be gotten wrong. On the comforting side, we need not understand all of the theological controversies to find our way to the blessing of the Father's house. We just need to have a true, personal faith in the Christ who is the true representation on earth of God the Father. The study of God should be the life-long personal endeavor of every believer. Is it yours?

"The Last Homely House" of Tolkien is just a fictional picture and cannot hold a candle to the Father's house where we can find total healing and ultimate rest for our souls. Have you let go of the wing strut yet or is your faith still theoretical? Your flesh will tell you not to do it, but you must choose to commit. The blessings of your heavenly home are hanging in the balance. The alternative is unthinkable--to be lost forever. Don't take that chance! And if you have already let go of the wing strut by placing your personal trust in Christ, may the knowledge of your destiny in the Father's house bring you blessing every day, no matter what difficulties, sorrow, or pain you may face. All that your heart really yearns for is found there.

#### **Appendix: The Athanasian Creed** [NOTE: The word "catholic" means "universal."]

1. Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith;
2. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
3. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
4. Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.
5. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.
6. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.

7. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.
8. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated.
9. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.
10. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal.
11. And yet they are not three eternal but one eternal.
12. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.
13. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty.
14. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty.
15. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God;
16. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
17. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord;
18. And yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.
19. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord;
20. So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say; There are three Gods or three Lords.
21. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten.
22. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten.
23. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.
24. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.
25. And in this Trinity none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another.
26. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal.
27. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped.
28. He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.
29. Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
30. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.
31. God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world.
32. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.
33. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood.
34. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ.
35. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God.
36. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.
37. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ;
38. Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead;
39. He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God, Almighty;
40. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
41. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies;
42. and shall give account of their own works.
43. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.
44. This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.