

# How Does God Work with Humanity?

## Introduction

The following series of articles is a “dialogue” with Philip Yancey and his book *Disappointment with God*. It draws mainly on Chapters 17-19 and deals with the progression of God’s interacting with humans from the Old Testament into the New and extending into the present time. The emphasis is on Jesus’ earthly mission and the work of the Holy Spirit after his departure. (Book quotes are in italics.)

We’ll start with a slightly edited summary quote from Chapter 21:

God’s “goal,” if one can speak in such terms, is not to overpower all skeptics with a flashy miracle; he could do that in an instant if he wished. Rather, he seeks to reconcile: to love, and to be loved. And the Bible shows a clear progression in God’s efforts to break through to human beings without overwhelming them: from God the Father who hovered parentally over the Hebrews; to [God’s] Son who taught the will of God “from the bottom up,” rather than by fiat, from above; and finally, to the Holy Spirit [that] fills us with the literal presence of God. We who live now are not disadvantaged but wonderfully privileged, for God has chosen to rely primarily on us to carry out his will on earth.

## What Did Jesus Accomplish During His Life on Earth?

### Part 1

Drawing from and commenting on Chapter 17:

*“What difference did Jesus make? Both for God and for us, he made possible an intimacy that had never before existed. In the Old Testament, Israelites who touched the sacred Ark of the Covenant fell down dead; but people who touched Jesus, the Son of God in flesh, came away healed. To Jews who would not pronounce or even spell out the letters in God’s name, Jesus taught a new way of addressing God: Abba, or ‘Daddy.’ In Jesus, God came close.”*

Indeed, Jesus made possible an intimacy that had never before existed. How did he accomplish this? How was he the “Son of God in flesh”? And how did God come close in Jesus?

Jesus was the first human who had God’s essence, His Divine Love, in his soul. He was “son of man” by birth – having human parents and growing up like any other child. He was “son of God” because of his spiritual condition and having the new heart that the prophets of long ago spoke of. His soul became fully transformed by God’s Love from a divine image to divine substance. He was a true son of God, a divine angel, but not God or equal to God. In that way,

he had divine nature and was one with God, his Father. He exemplified a close relationship with God and opened the way for others, who desired to follow in his footsteps. He was the “firstborn of many brethren” – an elder brother helping those who would follow him on the way to at-onement with God, the Divine Love path that leads to immortality and glorious life in the Celestial Kingdom of God where Jesus is the Master.

As a result of God once again, in Jesus and through his gospel of the Kingdom, offering to humanity the gift of Divine Love, which the first couple rejected, it is indeed true what the book of Hebrews says: We can now “approach the throne of grace with confidence,” without fear.

Yancey continues: *“Charging boldly into the Most Holy Place—no image could hold more shock value for Jewish readers. Yet at the moment of Jesus’ death, a thick curtain inside the temple literally ripped in two from top to bottom, breaking open the Most Holy Place. Therefore, concludes Hebrews, “Let us draw near to God.” Jesus contributes at least this to the problem of disappointment with God: because of him, we can come to God directly. We need no human mediator, for God himself became one.”*

Indeed, each person is now free to come directly and pray to God as to their heavenly Father. With Jesus’ coming, a new covenant has been ratified. The book of Hebrews (9:15) tells us: “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.”

Paul further explained in his letter to Timothy – 1 Tim 1:15-17: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him [his teaching] and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1Tim 2:1-5: I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

Back to Yancey: *“No one in the Old Testament could claim to know the face of God. No one, in fact, could survive a direct gaze. The few who caught a glimpse of God’s glory came away glowing like extra-terrestrials, and all who saw them hid in fear. But Jesus offered a long, slow look at the face of God. “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,” he said. Whatever Jesus is, God is. As Michael Ramsey put it, “In God is no unChristlikeness at all.”*

*People grow up with all sorts of notions of what God is like. They may see God as an Enemy, or a Policeman, or even an Abusive Parent. Or perhaps they do not see God at all, and only*

*hear his silence. Because of Jesus, however, we no longer have to wonder how God feels or what he is like. When in doubt, we can look at Jesus to correct our blurry vision.*

*If I wonder how God views deformed or disabled people, I can watch Jesus among the crippled, the blind, and those with leprosy. If I wonder about the poor, and whether God has destined them to lives of misery, I can read Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. And if I ever wonder about the appropriate "spiritual" response to pain and suffering, I can note how Jesus responded to his own: with fear and trembling, with loud cries and tears."*

As mentioned, Jesus is not God as God is God, only the most spiritually developed son of God filled with His Divine Love and nature. In that sense, while on earth, he exemplified and portrayed God to those around him. He is now the most glorious divine angel and the Master and Ruler of God's Kingdom. In that sense, he is still showing what those who follow in his footsteps can become – what wonderful and incredible destiny and inheritance God has in mind for those who love Him. Even though "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared" for His loving children growing in the Divine Love, they can glimpse the deep things of God through increasing soul perceptions. These grow as the amount of Divine Love in the soul increases. So the more we become like Jesus in the amount of Divine Love in our souls, the more like and the closer we'll also be to the Father.

Let's end with Paul's heartfelt prayer – Eph 3:16-21: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

## **What Did Jesus Accomplish During His Life on Earth?**

### **Part 2**

Continuing the dialogue with Philip Yancey and his book, *Disappointment with God*, now from parts of Chapters 18 and 19:

*"Three scenes—the Sending of the Seventy, the Last Supper, and the Ascension—all reveal something about why Jesus came to earth, and why he left. True, he came to settle divine justice and to show us what God is like. But he also came to establish a Church, a new dwelling place for the Spirit of God. And that is why, when the seventy reported back to him [after preaching his message to people in the surrounding villages], Jesus nearly erupted with joy. "He who listens to you listens to me," he had told them, and indeed the plan was working. His*

*own mission—more, his own life— was being lived out through seventy commonplace human beings.”*

Jesus’ mission was to teach about and live the Kingdom of God, which was the wonderful news of salvation and immortality acquired through the new birth, new heart, and God’s Divine Love being made available to humans to transform their soul from the image of God to the substance of God. As the seventy, and more people through them, received the message and the Love, and in turn preached it to others, Jesus’ power was multiplied. His disciples were an extension of him. The church was being formed – a group of people possessing God’s Love – the body of Christ, where the Holy Spirit, imparting Divine Love would concentrate (though the Holy Spirit can work with people anywhere). These people were “in Christ” – anointed – and were becoming at one with one another and with God. As God’s real, not just created, children, whom the Divine Love and essence was transforming at soul level, they were in God and in Christ, and the Father and Jesus were in them. They were in a mutual relationship of growing love and intimacy.

Onto the next event that Yancey mentions: *“At the last supper with the disciples, Jesus conveyed a greater sense of urgency. They were his closest friends in all the world, and it was time to turn the entire mission over to them—these well-meaning friends so quick with their protestations of loyalty now, so quick with their denials later. ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,’ he said, knowing they did not comprehend. This little band would take his message to Jerusalem, and to all Judea and Samaria, and then to places he himself had never visited—all the way to the ends of the earth.”*

Jesus had a mighty and ambitious vision for those he was leaving on the earth after his death, and their descendants down through the ages – to eventually go far and wide away from their home area of Palestine and bring his message of grace and salvation through the Holy Spirit imparting the Divine Love and transforming hearts and souls, to the farthest corners of the earth. And it has indeed happened – not perfectly and not without obstacles or distortions of the original message, but the church, starting with a tiny nucleus, has reached most countries of the earth.

Yancey continues: *At the Ascension, Jesus’ body left the earth before his astonished disciples’ eyes. But soon, very soon, at Pentecost, the Spirit of God would take up residence in other bodies. Their bodies.*

Going on in Chapter 19: *“The mighty, awesome Lord of the Universe, full of passion and fire and holiness, dominates the first nine hundred pages [of the Bible]. Four Gospels follow, about one hundred pages long, recounting Jesus’ life on earth. But after Acts, the Bible shifts to a series of personal letters. Grecians, Romans, Jews, slaves, slave owners, women, men, children—the letters address all these diverse groups, and yet each letter assumes its readers belong to an overarching new identity. They are all ‘in Christ.’*

*“The Church is nothing but a section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form,” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The apostle Paul expressed much the same thought with his phrase ‘the body of Christ.’ The way he saw it, a new species of humanity was emerging on earth, in whom God himself—the Holy Spirit—was living. They extended the arms and legs and eyes of God on earth. What’s more, Paul acted as if that had been God’s goal all along. ‘Don’t you know that you yourself are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?’ Paul wrote to the unruly bunch at Corinth. To the Jews, of course, the temple was an actual building, the central place on earth where the Presence of God dwelt. Was Paul claiming, to put it plainly, that God had ‘moved?’”*

Indeed, in a sense, God was and is living in those that possess His Divine Love imparted by the Holy Spirit in their souls. Not that the Holy Spirit is God, but the Divine Love that the Holy Spirit brings into human hearts is God’s essence and nature imparting immortality. It makes its recipients new creatures, born from above, called divine angels. So yes indeed, “a new species of humanity was emerging on earth” – true children of God, Jesus’ younger brothers and sisters, who continued his mission on earth and would eventually join him in the Father’s Kingdom.

God had indeed moved from a central temple of stone, twice built and twice destroyed by humans with hearts of stone to a decentralized temple built of humans with new hearts – hearts of flesh, softened by the Divine Love imparted by the Holy Spirit. This was what the New Covenant, taught and mediated by Jesus was all about.

### **God’s Trust and Delegation under the New Covenant**

The New Covenant that God promised, the prophets spoke of, Jesus announced and personified, and all people who so desire can participate in, is amazing and profound when considering the implications.

Continuing in Chapter 19 of Philip Yancey’s book, *Disappointment with God*:

C.S. Lewis wrote: “[God] seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye. Creation seems to be delegation through and through. I suppose this is because He is a giver.”

How does God delegate? And before answering that question, how has God revealed Himself through the Scriptures? Yancey says:

*“The progression—Father, Son, Spirit—represents a profound advance in intimacy. At Sinai the people shrank from God, and begged Moses to approach him on their behalf. But in Jesus’ day people could hold a conversation with the Son of God; they could touch him, and even hurt him. And after Pentecost the same flawed disciples who had fled from Jesus’ trial became*

*carriers of the Living God. In an act of delegation beyond fathom, Jesus turned over the kingdom of God to the likes of his disciples— and to us.”*

The Old Testament God is pictured as both awesome and terrifying, as well as tender, loving and compassionate. To the hard-hearted Israelites, He appeared terrifying, but paradoxically, they weren't afraid to disobey and rebel against Him. God expressed a desire and a promise that the people would be given a new heart, enabling them to obey and enter into a new and closer relationship with Him (Ezek. 11:19-20). This was the promise of the New Covenant, to be mediated by Jesus, the son of God.

How was Jesus the son of God? He was both the son of man and son of God – human by birth and divine because of having God's Divine Love and essence in his soul and acquiring God's nature and immortality. Jesus was the image of God on earth, full of divine nature and grace, because for the first time in human history, God's Divine Love was made available to humans (it was offered to but rejected by the first couple). Jesus was the first one to accept the offer of the divine gift and to be born from above through soul transformation by the Divine Love into divine substance.

Jesus was to be the firstborn of many brethren. After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, the attribute of God imparting the Divine Love began to work powerfully among Jesus' followers. They were empowered to go out and spread Jesus' message. Weak, fearful, imperfect and sinful humans – yet being gradually transformed from within into divine angels, receiving a new heart, just like the prophets foretold, becoming new creatures and being in God and Christ – these were now delegated to carry on Jesus' mission to the world.

Yancey continues: *“Delegation always entails risk, as any employer soon learns. When you turn over a job, you let go. And when God “makes his appeal through us” (Paul’s phrase), he takes an awful risk: the risk that we will badly misrepresent him. Slavery, the Crusades, pogroms against the Jews, colonialism, wars, the Ku Klux Klan—all these movements have claimed the sanction of Christ for their cause. The world God wants to love, the world God is appealing to, may never see him; our own faces may get in the way. Yet God took that risk, and because he did so the world will know him primarily through Christians. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the doctrine of “the church”: God living in us. Such a plan is the “foolishness of God,” as Paul says in one place, and writer Frederick Buechner marvels at the folly: “to choose for his holy work in the world . . . lamebrains and misfits and nitpickers and holier-than-thousand stuffed shirts and odd ducks and egomaniacs and milquetoasts and closet sensualists.”*

Yancey elaborates further on the manner of God's delegation – it is actually a team effort:

*“Human beings do the work of God on earth. Or, to be strictly accurate, God does his work through us—the tension comes into play as soon as you try to phrase it. “Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not,” said Augustine. In a similar vein, Paul wrote, “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” in one clause, and “for it is God who works*

*in you” in the next. Whatever else they mean, such conundrums surely contradict a “Leave it up to God” attitude.*

*God miraculously provided food for the Israelites wandering through the Sinai desert, and even made sure their shoes would not wear out. Jesus, too, fed hungry people and ministered directly to their needs. Many Christians who read those thrilling stories look back with a sense of nostalgia, or even disappointment. “Why doesn’t God act like that now?” they wonder. “Why doesn’t he miraculously provide for my needs?”*

*But the New Testament letters seem to show a different pattern at work. Locked in a cold dungeon, Paul turned to his long-time friend Timothy to meet his physical needs. “Bring my cloak and my scrolls,” he wrote, “and also bring Mark, who has always been so helpful.” In other straits, Paul received “God’s comfort” in the form of a visit from Titus. And when a famine broke out in Jerusalem, Paul himself led a fund-raising effort among all the churches he had founded. God was meeting the needs of the young church as surely as he had met the needs of the Israelites, but he was doing so indirectly, through fellow members of his body. Paul made no such distinction as “the church did this, but God did that.” Such a division would miss the point he had made so often. The church is Christ’s body; therefore if the church did it, God did it.”*

This is a profound truth and responsibility. Each of us represent God on earth in the same way that Jesus represented God while he walked the earth. Having God’s Love in our hearts and souls means having God’s essence and nature within us. We have free will to follow the leading of this precious gift or not. We can choose to act lovingly toward every person we meet in whatever way we can. It can be a smile, blessing, prayer, kind word or something material. Or, we can overtly or covertly judge the other person, speak unkindly, put them down, insist we are right and they are wrong. Are we portraying a loving, kind and compassionate God, or one that is judgemental, angry and to be feared in the wrong way? That is something to think about.

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