

Grace Communion International presents *You're Included* —
the good news of Jesus Christ. Our host is Dr. J. Michael Feazell.

JMF: You've done work on the need to see Jesus not only in the past as fully God and fully human, but even *now* as fully God and fully human.

CFN: Yes, and the important thing to remember as we have this conversation is that we speak about mysteries that we haven't seen, and yet we need to speak about them as loudly, happily and wonderfully as we can, because blessed are those who haven't seen, but there are plenty who did. The 40 days of Jesus' resurrection life shows up as a sort of a preview that says, "This is really me. I'm not here as a ghost, I'm not here as a spirit being who can walk through a wall just to say some last things before I kick off and leave. This is what it looks like for you to get your life back."

That is what the gospel is about. That is what salvation is: that *you*, who have been beloved before the foundations of the earth, you, who the Father and Son and Spirit never needed (because they are eternally happy in themselves (as Jonathan Edwards says, "Their love for each other is perfect.") For us to *be* at all is an incredible overflow of the love of the triune Persons for one another, saying, "Let's let others share in and participate in that. We aren't finished in our joy and our extension of that joy until we have Mike, until we have Cherith, precisely because it delights us that they bear the image of God in and for the world and that they are in relationship to us and to one another."

For Jesus' life to be so particular to say, this is the life that you have. We have God (one and three) because before the foundations of the earth, he predestined that you would become children of God, and once you have been predestined to become that, and you become that, you never stop being that. The only way to be children of God is to be human children of God.

For Jesus, it was 40 days of life, new-creation life, to say, this is what's coming. This is what you can anticipate. This is what it is like for you to see a body fit for the age of come which can eat a meal with you and walk through a wall, a body that is not dimensionally challenged for how time and eternity meet one another as heaven and earth join, and creation is restored into the fullness of all that it gets to be. It doesn't mean that you stop being who you are and have to turn into something else called a soul or an angel or something else (as if your humanity wasn't good, it was just sort of good, or it was a good first attempt), but when it comes to eternal life, your eternal life will be *you* as something else.

That has nothing to do with the gospel, but it's the way that as a child, I heard that. I don't think I ever heard it preached to me except that it's the language of "when our souls go to heaven." It's falling into the language of our hymns, where we sing "then sings my soul" as if there is a different way of praising God in this deeper spiritual way of being, that if I can just ignore my body and not even have to deal with the shame that comes with being this embodied person, and just get into that spiritual place, then this is what I have to look forward to, is to shed this skin and be in a disembodied new way of being. I didn't realize this then, but this is called Gnosticism.

When I was 21, I was about to get married, and my husband said something to me that was very loving and adoring about me, loving me and my body. I reacted strongly, feeling betrayed by him that somehow he had seen me as this embodied woman without seeing the real me, who I thought he really loved. I was confused trying to explain to him why that was hurting me or upsetting me, because he was confused about what was disturbing me.

I called my dad. I said, "Dad, I'm caught. I can't get Robert to understand why this feels awful, that he focused on my femaleness and not the real me." My dad listened to me very kindly and finally quietly said, "Cherith, when did you become a Gnostic?" I had to stop and think about what a Gnostic is. Oh, that's somebody who believes that the material world or anything that's created, or has physicality to it, or a being to it, is bad, and that only the soul is good and only the spiritual realm is good.

So I stopped and said, "Am I a Gnostic?" He says, "Well, honey, based on what you just said to me, I think you need to get saved! You seem to think that Jesus saved your soul or something. He's the incarnate one who celebrates your whole person, and you can't be you without being you, Cherith, in your female body. Who do you think it is that he loves? Just your soul?" I was taken aback. I knew that mentally I should be able to say what he said to me, but deep in my heart, I did not know that.

So I started, in these last years, looking at what I was not seeing over and over in the New Testament text, that let me keep splitting out Jesus' divinity from his humanity, kept splitting out my soul from my embodied life. One day I came across the conversation that Jesus gets pulled into between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They're all good Jews and they're all well-trained, but the Sadducees are trained more in Greek thought and they have no time for or belief in the resurrection of the body, because who would ever resurrect a body? It's no good!

The Pharisees are still holding to the Old Testament promises through Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Isaiah and all of these deep new covenant promises that when the new creation is restored, when life comes back, it will be the flourishing of all creation and you will get your life back. So, here these two groups are arguing and pulling Jesus in, and so they set it up with the woman marries the husband who dies, and then marries the many brothers that he has, and so who is she going to be married to in the resurrection? I had been reading this because I had had a few friends of mine, men (in theological studies, they are mostly men), and we were talking about Jesus' human life and his ongoing embodiment and how that matters. They said, "I don't understand... as you're doing this work and challenging this feminist theology, etcetera, why these women feel like they need God to look like them when in heaven there will be no male or female, so it doesn't matter?"

I looked at them thinking, where do you get that? They said, "You know that debate that Jesus is in with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. We will be like the angels and there will be no marriage and giving in marriage in heaven." I went back to that and thought, really? Is he going to turn me into something else? I'm not going to be human, and I'm not going to be a soul, I'm going to be like an angel? This conversation and that text came up in the course of two weeks, completely different conversations, unrelated to one another, and I thought, there is something serious going on here.

In that story, I noticed Jesus' way of coming into that conversation: oh children of the resurrection, you will be, in a sense, like the angels. It doesn't matter who she marries, because your question is all about who she will procreate with. Who will she carry the family line along with? Who gets to have her to bear the name? The fact is, you're not going to die, so this need to procreate and to create this ongoing lineage, this is a conversation which doesn't fit resurrection life, which is eternal life. You children of the resurrection have started to shift the plot into a different debate than what is authentic, which is that you will get your human life back.

I watched Jesus' life and the promise of his resurrection, which he kept instilling as their only hope (that he too had to trust that the Father would raise him from the dead), because he wasn't going to raise himself and he wasn't saying, "I'll be back in three days, I'm just going to die and I'll be back." He agonizes in this place of trusting, that he is doing something that the Father will make an atoning

eternity-changing reality and that he would, by the Spirit, bring him back to live in this whole new way that he has never died and hasn't experienced and doesn't know.

So I began then to listen and watch his 40 days of life and his insistence that his followers do not move until they too receive the Spirit, because there is no way that they are going to be able to begin to participate in the life that he has now guaranteed in his new humanity by the Spirit, in the same way that he was already beginning to enact prior to his death and resurrection, without the same Spirit that raised him from the dead. Paul uses that term over and over. Peter uses that term. John uses that term, "the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead," and "this Jesus whom you killed, God raised him from the dead and has seated him at the right hand of the Father, and with the Father has now poured out the Holy Spirit whom you see in here."

I then started reading Acts. Every time these apostles are held before the Sanhedrin, before Roman leadership, before Hebrew (Jewish) leadership, they are professing that the one who you killed who you thought was just this carpenter from Nazareth and an imposter, was truly God incarnate, and how we know that this was God present to us and what our future looks like is that he is resurrected. He is the firstborn from among the dead. He is the firstborn of a new humanity. He is, in Paul's words, the new Adam, the progenitor of a new race of human beings that aren't broken anymore, that are restored to their beauty that God has held before the foundation of the earth and guaranteed by entering into his creation and becoming one with us and bearing that image perfectly. Not with a divine credit card. Not with access to secret God powers that make it easy for him so that his humanity isn't really something I should take seriously, but to say, "I will enter into your condition completely, Cherith. I will take on the DNA of a mom. I'll have the nose of my uncle. I'll do the family business. People will have my furniture in their house. I will have to grow up as a teenage boy and obey in terms of my budding sexuality, my awareness of other people, my obedience to my parents, my trying to hear why it is that I am not getting betrothed when everybody else is," and trying to understand his story and obey his story both as a true human, but as one who has submitted to and is listening to the Father all the time.

Something in his baptism is unique up to that mold. He is functioning and living as a young man who knows how to pray for me because he really gets my life because he had entered into any kind of experience. A lot of people push back and say, maybe he didn't do that, or maybe he wasn't this. He doesn't have to experience every single human experience in particular.

JMF: No human does.

CFN: Exactly. I haven't experienced many of those things.

JMF: He would be abnormal if he did.

CFN: Exactly. It's doing a crazy thing to his humanity, which we also do to his divinity. What we're talking about is, does he understand what it means to be tempted, to choose for himself instead of someone else? Does he understand what it means to be tempted to let someone become an object for his gratification instead to let them be a true person, a person he is for, and loves. Does he understand all the kinds of ways that my life every day is begged to question, Cherith are you going to do this out of your brokenness or are you going to do this in conformity to what God really looks like, which is what you are, an image bearer of God.

I think he gets it. He says, "So you don't get off the hook and look at my life and say, 'yeah, but you were God; it was easy for you to do all that cool stuff.' I want you to see that my baptism is when the Father names me and claims me and says, 'This is my son, whom I love and in whom I am well pleased.'" But this isn't necessarily divine language that comes down and says, oh, that's the pre-existent Son who came to you. That language comes way back from the Exodus. It comes from Deuteronomy. That's the language God uses whenever he names his image-bearers, whenever he calls a people for himself. He says, "You are my Israel, my true son, the one who bears my image for the world. So look like me, and love the widow and the orphan and extend yourself to the alien and be for the other who does not have anyone to be for them, because that is how I am God for you. So look like me. Listen to what I would do, and speak for me the way that I would speak, enact in power what is rightfully my power to give you because I am the Creator who can do what I would love to do for the flourishing of creation."

It is simple to isolate Moses or Jeremiah or Jesus and say, well, there is something special about them. The only special thing about Moses and Jeremiah is that, very begrudgingly, they obeyed and let the Spirit's anointing upon them free, let the Holy Spirit do what he wanted to do, to call the world to attention to Yahweh.

JMF: For most, in fact for everybody, we look back over our personal history, at the things we've been through and the things we do, and we wonder, how can this possibly apply to me? I agree with it in principle and I can see how this is God's will and God's purpose, and I can imagine it being theoretically possible, but it's really not talking about me. I can't identify with it because I know what I'm really like.

CFN: And what I'm really like is messed up and with a past that feels like it's never going to leave me, and generally feeling disempowered to change any of that.

JMF: Exactly. That's where most of us live.

CFN: I think so. The radicality of the gospel is that there is so much more – it would require that we don't change our thinking of what the gospel means, but that we just let it *take* at every conceivable level. Our salvation in Christ is not simply assent to this amazing thing that God has come and done for us that we couldn't possibly do anything about or for on our own, to make the possibility of being in a relationship with the triune God happen.

Everything that we are comes out of response to the fact that this is who God is to us. He doesn't just show up as an idea of the three Persons in one to invite us into this idea of communal love, but to say, "look, right here, in the way that God has chosen to be God, there is now a human being permanently present." So you are never without the ability to say, so what *is* my life about and where is it going? And what have you done with my past? Because the one who stands in for me is not only this perfect human who I can't relate to because he's perfect, but this human who bears the marks of a deeply broken and imperfect humanity who had entered into every kind of condition that humanity has, yet without falling and breaking in the process, without sinning into that process. His life bears the effects of being betrayed by his best friends. His life bears the effects of being isolated and alone. His life bears the effects of being unjustly and horribly, horribly executed. His life bears the effects of systemic sin, of personal sin, hitting him and influencing him all the time.

So how do I look at his life and say, "Then what is our response within the midst of sin and brokenness that shows me what a real human being looks like who doesn't live above all of that,

who lives bombarded by and in it all the time?” He says, “Cherith, the place where you see me, who sits on the throne looking like a slain lamb, who bears the effects of the fact that I know your humanity inside and out as my own, means that there is nothing about your human life that I have not always known, and you are the one I’ve always loved.” There isn’t the, “oh, if she shapes up and follows me or just believes all that stuff and starts assenting to this right theology or something, then we love her so much better.” Rather, it’s “while you were a mess I came into the mess and said, she is broken and she will never get out of this by herself. But we plan to love her forever, and we plan to have her with us forever and in communion with us forever, which means that we, I, God, will have to enter into the human condition and take what belongs to her and restore it for her, and in the process restore her.”

The thing that is so life-changing is to realize there is no human being that the Father, Son, and Spirit see and love apart from me, who is always the healed broken person, who is always the saved guilty person, who is always the restored alienated person, who always has the whole story held together, and the fact that the Father doesn’t see me just as a before and after. He *always* sees me in the company of the Son. He always sees me with Jesus of Nazareth, Galilean Jewish male, forever as God’s way of taking on humanity and keeping it, so that it doesn’t dip down and go, “well now I can like you or now I can love you, or now we can relate to you.”

“How could I possibly be more for you, Cherith, than to become like you, as a choice of freedom and love? And to become like you and take that into my way of being God permanently, so that you are never without somebody who is also your permanent advocate. So, you can’t make me love you more, you can’t make me love you less. Nothing you do, height, depth, powers, principalities, your brokenness, your horrible past, your attempts to try to be good in your own strength. Nothing can separate you from the love that has now been guaranteed to you in Christ Jesus, who holds you in that communion with the Father by the Spirit and stands as God for you, having received and accepted and loved you, and stands as the new human.” He says, “Father, when you see her, see her as she will be finished. Because this is what she will look like.”

JMF: And already do.

CFN: Yes. So my Christian life is, I need to get on board because the kingdom has already come.

JMF: The starting place is the belonging. You already belong. You always will belong, therefore....

CM: And out of that relationship, what does it look like to be part of bringing the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? If the life that Jesus is living has already determined where my life is headed, it also determines who I am, because this is my identity now. So the invitation is, “Cherith, do you want to start looking like who you’re going to permanently be? Do you want to start doing the stuff that looks like a restored human being?”

You can’t do that by yourself. You can only do that by the power of the Third Person of the Trinity happily taking up residence in you and saying, “This has been how the story was from the beginning, is that the Ruach of the Spirit of the living God would rest upon and dwell within his image-bearer. *That* has been what we’ve been about. It’s what Jesus’ life looks like, as this anointing as the new and true image bearer, and now you, Cherith and Mike, beloved image-bearing children of the Father, who are conformed to the image of the Son, your brother and your Lord, who happens to also be the King over all kings and the one who is reigning.”

How do you stand with him and participate with him today by the power of the Spirit to be part of what he's doing? How do you ask him and not feel frustrated by what he invites you into, but to say, "If I let you, you could empower me to be more of who I actually am." Then salvation becomes not a getting in or an entry point or just a conversion moment – it becomes this deep, permanent conversion into the person that I will forever be. My life becomes the *living into* my savedness, the *living into* my restoration.

JMF: The living out the reality of what already is.

CFN: The living out the promise that I don't only have in the future, but the fact that the future has dramatically impeded the present and has altered the course of everything from this forward. I think that is a very different thing than just to say, "I believe those things, but now I'm just going to try to gut it out to the best of my ability."

JMF: Muddle on through it.

CFN: Well, we can do that, but that's not the richest plot that we're in, and it doesn't have the greatest joy and the most amazing possibility. The place in the New Testament that talks about grieving the heart of God is when we inhibit the Holy Spirit. Because, he says, "how else could you bear my image in the world? How else can you participate in what I'm doing, when you block me there and say no and stick the stopper into the bottle and say, 'I'm only going to do what I can do instead of finding out what it would look like to do what God would do with me.'"

He says, "It grieves me, because you love me, but you are un-empowered to love me well or to love those who I love. You are disempowered to do the things you want to do." It changes the story. We become people who believe things about God, and then we become religious people. Everybody who believes anything about God is a religious person, but that's very different than being a child of the triune God who has been asked to manifest the presence and power of God in the world.

JMF: The good thing is he doesn't give up.

CFN: Amen. And it's a good thing because if I muddle or stop this bottle or whatever else, he is still the Lord of the church and the King of all things and he'll invite you back again tomorrow when you wake up. Because he's already sealed the deal. He's already doing what he is doing, and nothing that I can do can also stop that grace from flowing.

JMF: Thanks for being here.

CFN: A joy to be here. Thank you.

JMF: Thanks. We've been talking with writer, preacher, and lecturer, Dr. Cherith Fee Nordling. I'm Mike Feazell for *You're Included*.