

# Social Awareness. Living Truth.

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## Sanctity of Life: Justice Issues

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### Psalm 8

- <sup>1</sup> LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory in the heavens.
- <sup>2</sup> Through the praise of children and infants  
you have established a stronghold against your  
enemies,  
to silence the foe and the avenger.
- <sup>3</sup> When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
- <sup>4</sup> What is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?
- <sup>5</sup> You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor.
- <sup>6</sup> You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:
- <sup>7</sup> all flocks and herds,  
and the animals of the wild,
- <sup>8</sup> the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.
- <sup>9</sup> LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

### Introduction

God values every human life at every stage. Our society is continually wrestling with the tensions surrounding this statement.

The “church” also has its own struggles in contending for the issues of life in public spheres. The evidence of God’s powerful presence can be perceived throughout the entirety of the created world, which includes human life.

*“Lord, Our Lord, How majestic is your name in all the earth!”* (Psalm 8:1a,9)

The theme of Psalm 8 is the greatness of God who assures the worth of mankind. God, the all-powerful Creator, cares for His most valuable earthly creation—people. This important reminder is to help those who acknowledge a belief in God, to understand that even those people, who don’t agree, still reflect the majesty of God’s creation. God values every human life. Life is sanctified by God. Every life is special and set apart by Him: Human life is created by God (Genesis 1:26- 27), bearing His image (Genesis 1:26-27), loved by Him (John 3:16), and uniquely designed for His purposes (Ephesians 2:10).

This paper introduces the topic of the next series of papers focusing on the sanctity of life and the implications for the erosion of justice in our society as the sacredness of life is lost. First, we will explore how sanctity of life has become an issue of justice facing our society and culture. Then we will review what scripture says regarding the sanctity of life. A recommendation for intentional response is provided in the conclusion to this paper. Additional

links and references are also listed to further promote inquiry and God-honouring action. It should also be noted that due to the personal experiences, implications and sensitivity of many of these topics, it is unlikely that all perspectives are completely represented in the brevity of this writing.

### How Our Culture Compromises on Sanctity of Life

To respond faithfully to issues that violate sanctity of life, it is important to provide context on how our modern world wrestles with these issues, and how views and practices in our culture contrast with the biblical response.

Future papers will delve into these five areas in which we most often see the sanctity of life being compromised. They include:

**Xenophobia (Racism):** Xenophobia is the fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign. Racial tensions seem to exist in growing forms across our country. At the writing of this paper, there is widespread consideration to the significance and extent of systemic racism in Canadian culture, including in Christian churches and denominations.

**First Nations issues:** Indigenous refers to people who, according to the United Nations, are descendants “of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived.” There continues to be a great divide in quality of life between First Nations and the general Canadian population across many societal measures. Whether measuring poverty levels, education levels, access to health care, unemployment and adequate housing, research is showing that the outcomes are more devastating for First Nations people than for the general Canadian population.

**Human Trafficking:** Globally, it is estimated that human trafficking is amongst the most lucrative of criminal activities generating billions of dollars annually. Regular people, including people in the church, can unknowingly contribute to the profits of human trafficking, through the products or media we consume and the issues on which we stay silent. At any given time, it is believed that worldwide nearly 2.5 million people are forced to perform degrading, dehumanizing and dangerous work in conditions akin to slavery. In Canada, human trafficking often takes place in large urban centres, largely for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Human trafficking offences were added to the Canadian Criminal Code only as recently as 2005 with additions pertaining to minors in 2010, protecting the vulnerable including the 90% of victims in Canada being Canadian.

**Abortion:** In 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada, found that the Criminal Code provision on abortion was unconstitutional and therefore unenforceable. As a result, the abortion law was struck down and no other law has replaced it. Abortion access, however, is regulated by the medical associations of Canada and regulations vary from province to province. Abortion has become a highly politicized and polarized issue that is impacting many in our communities. Encouraging a culture that positively affirms life is a significant challenge facing our faith communities.

**Medical Assistance In Death (MAiD):** In 2016, the Government of Canada introduced new legislation to grant permission to access MAiD for those facing a terminal illness or declining health condition defined to be a “grievous and irremediable medical condition.” The passing of this law not only affects the person seeking to end their life. It also affects family members and the medical staff who must carry out the procedure. While those professionals are released from legal implications, this law can infringe upon their individual moral rights.

In Canada, where a diminishing percentage of people are willing to describe themselves by long accepted biblical definitions, we must be reminded that it is not necessarily our religious rituals that reveal our worship of God—it is our everyday choices of integrity amid the sliding scales of tolerance; as well as our personal and corporate response, as followers of Jesus, to the real lives of the people around us. Our Charter of Rights and Freedoms declares the inherent worth of each life: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a follower of Jesus, in Canada, has this double assurance, divine and national, regarding the value of every life.

Living out the reality of these assurances has become more difficult in our current days. In the nearly forty years since the establishment of the Charter, the pursuit of group collective rights has led to where the freedoms of one group limit the freedoms of another. As a result, we face a growing resistance to God’s value of human life.

This paper will seek to expand our understanding regarding the sanctity of life from a biblical perspective. In so doing, it will also provide a framework through which to address current cultural threats to the upholding of God’s high value of life. Issues such as abortion, medical assistance in dying, human trafficking, xenophobia (racism) and Indigenous issues are some of the key social, political and ethical touchstones that are not commonly addressed in congregational settings, yet we live among those realities every day. Each topic in the upcoming series presents personal, congregational and political tensions requiring a fullness of grace and courageous truth in order to effectively engage in the shifting standards of a society losing its idea of the sacred. Each of these subjects present complex tensions that necessitate graceful engagement of God’s truth and will be the topic of subsequent papers in this series as they relate to the sanctity of life.

It is also important to note how acknowledgement of worldviews come to play when responding to diverse perspectives on the sanctity of life. For example, if a person’s worldview on the origin of life doesn’t acknowledge a divine creator, they may be less likely to defend or uphold social and moral standards that protect life in circumstances where violations against human life could be justified with human reason – such as in abortion or medically assisted suicide. Where practices that impact human life differ from God’s truth, these become matters of justice, such that followers of Jesus must take up these issues more intentionally than ever before.

### **What Scripture Reveals About the Sanctity of Life**

God’s laws from the beginning were put in place to honour

Him and guard the sanctity of human life. We see this in the Ten Commandments. The first half of these laws pertain to the greatness of God and the second half to the value of human life (Exodus 20:1-17). This is reiterated in the New Testament in Romans 13:9 where it says, “For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Let us consider the worth of human life from a biblical perspective. Scripture provides five fundamental truths that support the sanctity of life and which should anchor our views and practices in response to violations against life.

#### **1. Human life is created by God (Genesis 1:26-27) <sup>2</sup>**

The first two chapters of the book of Genesis provide both a wide-angle view and an up-close view of God’s creative work. That work is poetically summarized in Psalm 8, among other biblical writings. The sky, space and the universe are all created by God. His voice is the instrument most often used to describe the means by which the world was created: the animals, the fish and then the birds, to inhabit His created world. Humans are the work of God’s fingers (Psalm 8:3), the works of His hands (Genesis 2:7, Psalm 8:6), and the product of His breath (Genesis 2:7).

The recorded words of God, in Job 38-41, provide an extensive but not exhaustive picture of the intricacy and fragility of the created world. The beauty described can rarely be adequately captured by our pictures and videos despite our best efforts. The incredible power of God displayed in varying ways daily serves to still our souls and inspire our hearts.

#### **2. Human life is Created in the Image of God (Gen. 1:26-27)**

God’s creation of human life is uniquely specific and set apart from all other of His creative works. Human life is created, uniquely, in the image of God. As a potter works a piece of pottery with their hands while keeping the tablet spinning at the proper pace, the hands of God worked, shaped and molded human life to a reflection of His image. We were made from nothing to be the image of God. Therefore, part of the sacredness of human life is its divine design to reflect the image of God one to another. This perspective should then inspire a depth of humility and move us toward self-reflection, finding common ground with others and uniting in relationships based on this overlap and as created beings in the image of God.

Our shared humanity is also a shared capacity to reflect the image of God toward one another and should also inform the way we respond to the needs of others. “Truly, I tell you whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40) The words of Jesus point to the reflection of His divine image within the lives of others, even those who differ from us. Followers of Jesus demonstrate faithfulness and justice as those who serve God by serving others, in a personal, relational way, according to their needs, not necessarily according to our conveniences or preferences.

Take for example, the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling that Jesus was receiving sinners and eating with them. Jesus taught and modeled that all lives, even those who were scarred by sin, bear God’s image and must be valued. At our best, we not only honour the image of God we see in one another, but we contend for the upholding of that standard.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/check/art7.html>

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7, Job 10:8-12, Psalm 139:13-16, Isaiah 64:8, Jeremiah 1:5, Romans 9:20, Ephesians 2:10

Therefore, the sanctity of life, necessitates that we exercise mutual care as opposed to the destruction of life (Exodus 3:20; Proverbs 6:17). One of the out workings of our love for God should be a growing understanding of the divinely intrinsic value of every other human life. Proper attention should be given to how we contend for issues like the sanctity of life, as we remember that those who disagree or oppose these views are also likewise made in the image of God. "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness." (James 3:9) The warning about speech would likely extend to all kinds of digital speech which now occupies our communication.

### 3. All people are loved by God (John 3:16)

God's love has no hesitation or any limitation. His sacrificial love is complete for every person in the whole world providing opportunity for whoever would desire to be found in a relationship with Him. The inclusion of people at all ages and stages of life, as well as people of all nations, have been part of the inclusion of God's love all throughout biblical history:

- Showing favour to those "foreigners". (Leviticus 19:33-34)
- Toward the young. (Matthew 19:13-15)
- Against the untimely hastening of death. (2 Samuel 1:14, Exodus 20:13, Acts 16:27-28)
- Toward those with physical disability (2 Samuel 9, Luke 7:21-23)

In Jesus' earthly ministry, He was able to point to the immeasurable value of human life. To those who rejected some as worthless, He taught of every human's great worth. An example of this is found in Luke 15 in the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. God does not discard the one who is lost but pursues him. Not only does He pursue him but rejoices when he is found.

However, God's love has its greatest expression through the incarnation and redemptive work of Jesus Christ, as found in John 3:16.

**For God.** God is the initiator of love. We don't define love, He does, and therefore it's important for those of us who struggle to "love" or "be loved" to rethink love from God's point of view. It is also important for those of us who have been hurt by "love" to look first to God to restore and recapture the essence of love. It starts with God.

**So loved.** God's love is intense. "So loved" means with His whole being, His whole identity. God loves, not with His spare time, not when He has got nothing else to do – all the time, "God so Loves." That intensity is one that began in eternity past and continues through to today and beyond. God's love is faithful, dependable. God's love does not abandon. God's love walks with us, even toward us, particularly in times of difficulty.

**The world.** God's love is inclusive. You and I, we choose our loves, including some and excluding others. God's love is inclusive, He is willing to take us right where we are in life, despite our economic status, our race, gender, age, sexual orientation, our country of origin, our religious history, despite our distortion of what love looks like, despite our successes and pride or our failures and self-pity.

From what point does God care for us as humans? From the moment of birth? Or is it at some time prior, within the womb? And if it is prior, then when? For how long does God care for us?

And to what extent does He demonstrate His love for human life?

The biblical writers provide varying descriptions to the scientific process of 23 male chromosomes coming together with 23 female chromosomes and beginning a new life. The writers knew intellectually, spiritually, faithfully, what many know instinctively: that the unborn represent human life, precious and fragile. Perhaps the most compelling evidence comes from the Gospel of Luke, the medical doctor who writes about Jesus (Luke 1:41, 44; 2:12, 2:16). The descriptions of the activity of the unborn that Elizabeth and Mary carried repeatedly demonstrate emotion and responsiveness. They are never described in ambiguous terms, rather they are characterized by terms of human life from the time of conception. From a biblical perspective, the unborn are considered as human life created uniquely by God.

God loves those who will affirm the value and dignity of every human life. And God loves those who will differ or oppose those views.

**That He gave His one and only Son.** God's love is generous, it is selfless, it gives sacrificially, its purposeful, its hopeful, it's patient, kind, it seeks to forgive. We often base our willingness to love others on feelings or for our own benefit. God's love seeks to benefit others. Ultimately displayed through the virgin birth, earthly life, brutal death, and powerful resurrection of Jesus Christ. God gave His Son in order to redeem the intrinsic divine value of every person.

**That whoever believes.** God's love is invitational. The invitation to faith in God is open to all – no matter what your hang-ups have been in the past, it is a choice that God gives us now, while we have breath to choose to believe in Him. Belief is not arbitrary. We talk a lot about our beliefs or philosophies, particularly when it comes to discussing matters of human life. However, belief is demonstrated through our heart, words and actions. Belief is a cost that must be counted and is not stumbled into or given by default. In a later conversation with other people who were stuck on religious practice or outward action, Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was. His response was – "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." And the second was like it, "To love your neighbour as yourself."

**In Him shall not perish but have eternal life.** God's love is inspirational, it is life-giving. We live in a culture that is increasingly divided. Even as a Christian culture, we can be guilty of growing more cynical, hurtful, biased, judgmental, prejudiced and even bigoted. God knew this would happen. He understands it, and that's why He initiated His love, to redeem our lives through an invitation made possible via the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Then there is a very clear declaration being made throughout the book of Acts in launching the "church age," that this faith that started with the nation of Israel is to be extended to people of all ethnicities. We see this word "gentile" used throughout the New Testament. For some people, if they are familiar with the Bible, and/or have spent any number of years in a church setting, then they have grown accustomed to hearing this word "gentile." Gentile (in the original Greek, literally means "ethnos"): people of different ethnicity, or race, or nationality, or cultural customs.<sup>3</sup> Jesus' love and salvation are available to all people.

The promise given to Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3), that all the people of all the nations would be blessed through Him, is fulfilled through Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20) and propelled the work of the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ethnos.html>

Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:8), furthering the mission of God to all peoples in all the world. God's love for human life is not only in the act of creation, but through His ongoing efforts to demonstrate love for each person. In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah (1:4-5) there is a signature reminder where God speaks these expressions of intimate personal connection: "I formed you," "I knew you," "and before you came from the womb, I sanctified you." This knowing, forming, and setting apart or sanctifying of life is a revelation of the depth of God's love.

#### **4. Human life is uniquely designed for God's purposes (Ephesians 2:10)**

We have already traced through the creative work of God which resulted in humanity, as well as His on-going love toward the people made in His image. The vastness and variety of creation is made complete through human life. God Himself designates the completion of His creation as "very good" only after humans had been created (Genesis 1:31). The process of this creation is described as personal, intimate, specific and detail oriented. This points to there being a clear purpose that humanity serves in God's plan.

The means by which humanity discovers their function or purpose is initiated by and through the sacrificial love of God, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3-7).

Ephesians 2 reminds us that through a relationship with God, through the work of Jesus Christ, our human lives find fulfillment. It is the gift that each person can receive and that only Jesus can give. It is a gift through which we are redeemed, rescued, forgiven and equipped. Love, mercy and grace are found through the cross of Jesus, for every person. Through the cross, Jesus changes the way we view or think about ourselves and the people around us. No longer having to prove ourselves worthy of God's affection or reward; we instead live out of gratitude and in great confidence, knowing that right where we are, He is providing opportunity for us to serve Him, with our natural abilities and a God-given spiritual capacity. In addition, He says, that He has already prepared opportunities for us to do the good He desired us to do. Our purpose, our wholeness, our fulfillment as human beings comes by living in an affirming response to these truths.

Furthering our understanding of how our purpose is found, the Apostle Paul tells us that to "live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Our lives have value up until that time where our earthly days come to an end. This is an encouragement toward a determination to live life fully. For those who believe in the unique creative nature of each human life, it is also necessary to entrust the fullness of that life to the Creator, knowing that we cannot comprehend fully the suffering and difficult choices that exist in our earthly days.

From a biblical perspective, as we contend with issues which surround the sanctity of life, followers of Jesus will do well to remember the effects of sin and consequences of sin upon our world. In so doing, we should then remember that redemption or the restoration of intended value is possible because of God's love, as previously discussed. As a result of sin, we have a fractured view of self, others and creation which stem from a fractured relationship with God. However, through the redemptive love of God (Romans 6:11-14; Colossians 1:8-14), that which has been broken can experience, healing, fullness, and flourishing.

From the opening pages of the book of Genesis to the closing words of the book of Revelation, we discover that God has created all people uniquely. There is a distinctive sanctity of all human life (created to be special, only lower than the spiritual beings and to be stewards of the earth and all that is in it) to which we are redeemed, through which we must function and

for which we must contend, as Psalm 8:5-8 affirms:

You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:  
all flocks and herds,  
and the animals of the wild,  
the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.

This stewardship responsibility extends to our care and love for human life. In Acts 2:1-21, the ministry of the Holy Spirit of God is inaugurated. He is poured out, abundant in the lives of those who receive Him. He is living, vibrant and wants to move us to be agents of reconciliation in our community and our world, pointing people to value their lives according to the redemptive love of God. The church, the family of God, the body of Christ, needs to reflect this.

Remember that Jesus' prayer is that we would unify through the power of the Holy Spirit. Unity is not sameness, unity is like the grafting of a branch into a plant, like the harmony of a song, it's like the shading of colours in a painting - unity is the construction plan of God, using our individual uniqueness to build stronger communities. Every person of every ethnicity, every nation, every language...this is the mission of God...this is the movement that He calls us toward.

#### **Our Call to Action**

As described in the introduction, the Ten Commandments were provided to protect the sanctity of life. That is why we read in Jeremiah 22:3, "This is what the LORD says, 'Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.'"

The sanctity of life should motivate us to combat all forms of evil and injustice that are perpetuated against human life. Violence, abuse, oppression, human trafficking, and many other evils are violations of the sanctity of life.

Peter gave words of warning, to be wary of the corruption of the political, religious and social landscape. Peter called for a new movement, a movement that overcomes evil with good, and promotes love over fear. Peter gave words of pleading, receive the Holy Spirit he said and be part of a movement that listens intently, walks slowly, loves deeply, gives generously and is enriched through the beautiful diversity that each person, ethnicity and culture possesses because they are all created uniquely in the image of God. When God looked at Saul (the Apostle Paul), He didn't look at him according to his past but his potential. He looks at him as an instrument, for a specific purpose, to reach those of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds (Gentiles). As the work of the Gospel made its way across the continents, throughout the book of Acts, there is a focus on divine truth being expressed within cultural frameworks. These intentional efforts reflect and further the development of God's Kingdom ideal as revealed in Revelation 7:9.

The social/ethical issues outlined in the introduction to this paper invite thoughtful consideration and purposeful action.

In Psalm 8, the writer reminds us there is a constant, relentless battle against which we must continually engage: "Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger." (v.2) In this declaration we recognize that God has established a means for engaging the battle, and it begins with an invitation

to observe and contemplate the world He has created, including our place, as humans, within it: "What is humankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (v.4) This idea of observation and contemplation is significant for the ongoing work of transformation in our lives, congregations and communities.

"For the Church to engage society in twenty-first-century Canada, it must approach society as an outsider to the lost rather than an insider who has come to restore those who once were found."<sup>4</sup>

To effectively re-engage with Canadians, we must watch and learn about each new society entering Canada and think about how we can bring the Gospel to that society and a Canada that is completely different from the Christian-Canadian society it once imagined itself to be. We must re-imagine ourselves as missionaries sent out from our home country and among new people groups.

The upcoming topics (racism, First Nations issues, human trafficking, abortion and medical assistance in death – MAiD) in the Sanctity of Life series are discrepancies with and deviations from God's intended, created design for human life and have become matters of justice. Therefore, these issues need to be taken up by followers of Jesus more intentionally. There needs to be more freedom to discuss these issues more widely, pray through intentionally, and thoughtfully engage in public spaces, as part of the transformative work of discipleship.

"Fundamentally, the struggle for justice forms a different kind of Christian—a Christian who has the steadiness of heart to look at the problem of violence and to actually do something about it. Give me a Christian who has walked with Jesus in the struggle against aggressive, violent injustice, and I will show you a Christian who has been changed by the journey."<sup>5</sup>

Discipleship is shaped by the choices we make that reflect the life and truth of Jesus. His interaction with and sacrifice for all people exemplify His high regard for every human and is the example we are commissioned to follow. Let's consider the worth of a human life from a Christian's perspective.

The love of God calls out for a response. Upholding, preserving and advocating for the sanctity of life are crucial for the benefit of our society.<sup>6</sup> Where we see abuses, these are areas of injustice, some may be considered cultural, all are unbiblical and do not reflect God's desire for every human life. In so doing, these issues mentioned above become issues of justice. The remedies are not quick and they require our participation as followers of Jesus. We did not find ourselves with these ethical dilemmas in a short amount of time. Therefore, it is important to note that we will not amend or transform thinking on these matters in a short amount of time. Buoyed by the reminder of God's high value and great love for all people, it is significant for followers of Jesus to intentionally and thoughtfully pray for those in decision making positions, engage in purposeful interactions and be active in participating in the everyday spaces where these conversations are taking place.

What follows is a five-fold response (lament, listen, learn, love and live) to these and other issues. These are not separate steps

to follow, rather they intertwine and intersect with one another, strengthening our capacity to respond according to God's grace and truth.

## Lament

Lamenting is a spiritual battle that should bring us to a place of repentance, uniting us, with God's perspective on social ills.

"And once we begin to recognize the enchantment of our world, we will also become more open to the surprising, yet undeniable, ways God works mysteriously in our daily lives, as He answers prayers and makes His presence known to us. We might start to sense His nudges, recognize little ways He is active, and see His fingerprints in places we would easily miss if we were not paying attention."<sup>7</sup>

Lament is a means of talking to God whereby we express our disappointment, confusion and our sin. In our fast-track society, we are bypassing this necessary ingredient of prayer. Instead we rush into our need, our want, a protest, a judgment or a social media post.

"Intercession, at its most powerful, invariably begins with simple lament: a heavy sigh, silent tears, careful listening to a person's pain without immediately speaking to solve their problem or correct their theology. Lament features in more than half the Psalms and an entire book of the Bible. It is a vitally important, often forgotten, expression of prayer."<sup>8</sup>

The Old Testament book of Nehemiah provides an excellent example of the role of lament in advance of confronting an injustice. Nehemiah is grieved over the reports that he hears about Jerusalem. He longs for a restoration, or a return to the "normal" he once knew, not just for himself, but for the people of God. In his prayer, he identifies with those who are suffering and shares responsibility in societal wrongs, using the pronoun "we." And so, he pours out his feelings to God, not holding back the emotional roots that have grabbed his heart. And he does so, again and again over a period of at least a couple of months, until finally God, in His sovereign timing, provides the opportunity for him to be set free to rebuild Jerusalem. His lament was for the Kingdom of God, the reputation of God, and for the mission of God to continue to change the lives of people.

Lament is the doorway through which we discover grace. Lament is a holistic, cathartic, emotional release to God by which we are reminded of his unending supply of faithfulness to us. Many of us understand this intellectually, yet in practice we resist the messiness of lament, the silence of lament, and the release of control that it implies upon our lives.

Lament is an act of discipleship. It is part of what it means to follow the example of Jesus.

"To lament means to express sorrow or regret. Lamenting something horrific that has taken place allows a deep connection to form between the person lamenting and the harm that was done, and that emotional connection is the first step in creating a pathway for healing and hope. We have to sit in the sorrow, avoid trying to fix it right away, avoid our attempts to make it all okay. Only then is the pain useful. Only then can it lead us into healing and wisdom."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Don Hutchinson, *Under Siege: Religious Freedom and the Church in Canada at 150*, (Word Alive Press, Winnipeg, MB, 2017), Loc. 688.

<sup>5</sup> Gary A. Haugen, *Just Courage: God's Expedition for the Restless Christian*, (IVP Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2009), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (Penguin Books, London, England, 2009), 261.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Fikkert, *Becoming Whole*, (Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2019), 129.

<sup>8</sup> Pete Greig, *Dirty Glory: Go Where Your Best Prayers Take You*, (Colorado Springs, CO, NavPress, 2016), 235.

<sup>9</sup> Latasha Morrison *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation*, (Colorado Springs, CO, Waterbrook, 2019), 62

## Listen and Learn

James instructs us to be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19). Listening allows us to take a posture of humility before others and our preconceptions; it demonstrates honour and respect.

“Listening may be one of the most effective expressions of love for this reason: it honours the person speaking. It is also communicating that you are willing to be taught by the one speaking. In being good listeners, we allow the other person to have access to our mind and heart. In so doing, we become vulnerable to the other person. This isn't a negative thing if we exercise some discernment. In fact, it can be profoundly positive because listening often gives us access to the voice of God through one of his servants.”<sup>10</sup>

Learning reminds us that we don't know everything. Learning begins with a heart changed by the Holy Spirit, that recognizes the inherent God given value of every person and therefore the capacity to learn more about God through that person.

“For several reasons learning from others is considerably more powerful than learning about others. When we learn from someone, it is one of the great honors we bestow on them. When we ask questions, seek understanding and probe their thoughts, we are saying in effect: I need you to teach me. I can't do this alone. I may even fail unless you help me with your knowledge and insights.”<sup>11</sup>

The virtue of forbearance (or patience) is essential in the shaping of character necessary to listen and learn in matters of ethical tension and injustice, particularly from those with differing viewpoints. It may mean being open to dealing with personal issues and motivations that might get in the way of personal and community transformation. “If leaders cannot or will not make the time to prepare adequately for transformation, they should not continue any further with the process. . . .”<sup>12</sup> Our integrity is sustained and our credibility in leadership grows as we develop our capacity to listen.

“Spiritual leaders are not discouraged by their circumstances – they are informed by them... defensive leaders learn nothing. Listening leaders are constantly learning and growing... Effective leaders make a concerted effort to invite discussion and constructive feedback from associates.”<sup>13</sup>

David F. Ford contends that questions, the asking of them, and the welcoming of them and the thoughtful consideration of the responses they bring, are an integral part of developing theological views. “Can you really claim to know anything without there being experience, understanding, and judging, with questioning being present throughout?”<sup>14</sup> What I am learning, sometimes through difficult circumstances, is that Ford's question is rhetorical. I don't really need to answer it, because there is only one answer. Whether verbalized or not, questions are being asked all the time through the experiences faced in our personal lives, and by observing the lives of others. Questions

demonstrate interest in the other person. They communicate a willingness to be taught and can serve to empower another as it places the one asking into the position of a listener.

## Love

Love is not fearful but courageous in confronting social ills. Love is brotherhood. Love is about appreciating the value and richness of diversity in each life that is likewise created in the image of God, even if they disagree with us.

“Human beings are designed to know one another deeply and to love one another as much as we love ourselves. Our relationship to others should reflect the love of God, the same love that exists from all eternity between the Father, Son and Spirit; this love is what ultimately overflows and is manifested powerfully in the sacrifice of Christ on a cross for us. In our fallen world, this love now normally requires identification and sacrifice. God so loved... He gave (John 3:16).”<sup>15</sup>

Romans 8:28-39 reminds us that as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we have freedom for loving generously just like Christ loved us because we know that God is going to work out His sovereign plan, and we cannot be separated from the love God first shows to us. We must love because He abundantly loves.

There is room in our current autonomous, low touch, high need culture for people to exercise their freedom for loving generously, like Jesus. In that freedom for loving others as Christ has sacrificially loved us, the glory of God is spread across our neighbourhoods, cities and country. The love of God is not to be confined to our like-minded gatherings. The love of God must push out into the marginalized areas of our communities, coming alongside those who suffer, identifying with those who lack justice, helping those in need and understanding those who otherwise have no voice. As instruments in the hand of God, we courageously move outward in love as we are more than conquerors.

## Live

Know why we believe what we say we believe. And then live it out. Living the truth changes the people in your world. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be active participants in these and other arenas of our culture.

As those who have tasted redemption in Jesus, we have the freedom for speaking hope or prophesying from within the culture. Jesus told a parable about the Kingdom of God that helps us in thinking about the possibilities of transformation occurring from within. Matthew 13:31-33, “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed...The kingdom of God is like yeast...” As we consider the posture required to address difficult ethical issues like those mentioned, it will be instructive to give consideration to these analogies of the mustard seed and yeast.

**A. Humility:** Humility refers to the yielding of our will to a greater purpose. This isn't about seed collecting or being a fan of fungus. In both parables there is a common word that is used, “took”. The man took the seed, the woman took the yeast. The willingness to be taken up and used for God's greater purpose. It is a concept that is difficult to understand. Many of us want to direct or limit our usefulness. True participation in the Kingdom of God involves submitting ourselves to be used, worked into the world, knowing God is working through us.

<sup>10</sup> Duane Elmer, *Cross -Cultural Servanthood*, (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press, 2006), 122.

<sup>11</sup> Elmer, 98.

<sup>12</sup> Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Blackaby and Henry Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, (Nashville: B & H Pub. Group, 2011), 185.

<sup>14</sup> David F. Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 1999), 148.

<sup>15</sup> Fikkert, 152.

**B. Relentless:** When Jesus speaks of the mustard seed, being planted, breaking down, but sprouting through the earth to become a tree, it reminds of continual, relentless growth. When Jesus speaks of yeast, it communicates the kneading working in of the yeast into a large quantity of dough, the working of the yeast to pull out the sugars and the incalculable relentless release of carbon dioxide into the dough, which creates all those little bubbles, transforming dough into bread. Growth and transformation are the relentless work of God's power through our lives (1 Corinthians 1:18).

**C. Unseen:** Both the seed and the yeast are mostly unseen and often aren't given consideration when we look at the end result of the tree or the bread. Nobody, when looking at a tree, says, "that must have been a great seed!" Or, when enjoying a piece of freshly baked bread, has anyone exclaimed, "that was an incredible piece of yeast influenced product!" They are unseen but they are not unimportant; in fact, quite the opposite, both, though unseen, are vital, instrumental and necessary (John 12:24). While we tend to focus on the end result, Jesus is addressing the beginning. Are we willing to allow God to begin His work in us, even if it means, that we don't get the credit, we don't receive the glory?

**D. Uncommon:** Jesus is using two symbols: the mustard seed and yeast. The mustard seed is not necessarily the smallest seed out there, nor does it grow into the biggest tree. But it is the seed that becomes the most productive in terms of outcome based on its initial size. Yeast is most often used as a negative example throughout Scripture, both Old and New Testament. During the Passover, the Israelites are instructed to remove yeast from their homes. Jesus even warns the people to resist yeast of the Pharisees. So why would He use the example of yeast here. It serves as a reminder, that for those who feel

unworthy, unappreciated, even uncommon, they are valued by God and welcome to participate in the Kingdom of God. It is a reminder that though sometimes we can feel small, in a world that celebrates bigger, better, faster, stronger, that God can relentlessly work in and through us. It's a reminder that the yeast of Jesus, that is obedience to His teachings and following His example, allows us to be part of something bigger than ourselves. (1 Corinthians 1:27)

God's Spirit is enabling you as you engage the cultural mess of the world around us with the eternal hope that is ours, as followers of Jesus. It's a hope that compels us to not only stand against injustice, in protest, but to stand with those whom our God values: the broken, the lonely, the poor, the conflicted, the questioning, the widow, the fatherless, the Indigenous, the refugee, those who are suffering physically, those who are similar to us and those who are different from us.

Romans 8:22 reminds us that there is a groaning going on presently in the lives of the people around us. There is a groaning for a hope beyond what they see. Therefore, this truth should move us to personal reflection and loving interaction, rather than knee jerk reactions, uninformed social media posts, polarizing approaches to political activism, or even apathy. Our country needs to hear the reason for the hope we carry. We are the messengers. We must speak the hope of God's promises.

There is a need for the people of eternal perspective to speak freely and gracefully about the certain glorious hope of the Kingdom to come, knowing that God is revealing glimpses of it, even now here on earth as it is heaven. It is in the freedom of speaking hope that the glory of God is found.

*"Lord, Our Lord, How majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1a, 9)*

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## Recommended Resources

### Canadian Resources

*Church in Society* by Don Hutchinson

*Under Siege* by Don Hutchinson

Sanctity of Life <https://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/Themes/Sanctity-of-Life>

### Additional Resources

Phil Vischer video on racism: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=AGUwcs9qjXY&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=AGUwcs9qjXY&feature=emb_logo)

*Whole & Reconciled* by Al Tizon

*Good News About Injustice* by Gary Haugen

*The Bible, Justice and Public Theology* by David J. Neville

*Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggemann

### About the Author

Deve Persad has had the privilege of being involved in various types of work, ministry and mission for over 30 years. He and his wife, Amanda, have been married since 1994, and have two, soon to be university graduates, children, Jarrett and Aynsley. Since 2001, he has been serving on the pastoral staff of the Sarnia Evangelical Missionary Church in Sarnia, Ontario, a Kingdom minded group of intergenerational followers of Jesus. In 2016, he graduated with a Doctorate (Global and International Leadership) from George Fox University, and considers his life ambition to be focused on bringing the message, mercy and mission of Jesus to the world.

### Editorial Comment

*The SALT Committee (Social Awareness Living Truth) is grateful to the author for providing us with their academic and personal exploration of this topic. We encourage all readers to prayerfully consider how to integrate this culturally relevant information into their biblical worldview and ministry context.*