

## LIVING LIFE ON TWO LEVELS

By “living life on two levels” I mean the ability to live simultaneously on both an earthly and a spiritual level, merging the two so that no matter what is happening in this world or in your life, you know that somehow a larger, invisible world is also involved. Bible stories are great case studies for learning about this concept, because God, the Author of the Book, often lets us see the interaction between both levels. I will explore several stories beginning with one from Jesus’ youth.

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At the age of twelve Jesus was already living on both earthly and spiritual levels. Luke 2:41-52 tells the story. Jesus and his family were in Jerusalem for Passover. When his parents left to return home, Jesus stayed behind. Three days later they located him in the temple. Mary said, *“Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”* *“Why were you searching for me?”* he asked. *“Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”* But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. Jesus knew the difference between his Father (God) and his father (Joseph, his legal father), between his heavenly Father’s house (the temple in Jerusalem) and his home in Nazareth. On the earthly level, he did what was required of him: he obeyed his parents and learned carpentry; on the spiritual level, he was preparing to do the will of God his Father and to be about his Father’s business. Such commitment would involve the isolation and depth that comes from being different, being misunderstood. This would not be the only time when his family would be thinking of the earthly realm while Jesus had his mind on spiritual things. And *Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and people*: he developed physically and spiritually at the same time.

On the brink of his teenage years, it is not surprising to read that Jesus grew taller. Growing in wisdom, however, involves effort: learning and thinking about things; observing and meditating. Growing in favor with people involves mingling; listening and talking; being courteous and respectful, honest and good. Growing in favor with God – what does that mean? Didn’t Jesus automatically have God’s favor from birth? I’m sure he did, but this was a quality Jesus needed to develop, and he did it. I can well imagine Jesus working with his hands, doing chores or carpentry, while his heart was yearning for his heavenly Father and his mind was going over the Scriptures, perhaps singing the Psalms. And all the while he was observing, looking to see what God was doing in this world. (All this is a good way for us to practice living on both levels, too.)

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Finally the time came for Jesus to be about his heavenly Father’s business in a fuller way. Right from the start we can see the two levels working in his life. His introduction to public ministry is described in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and referred to in John. Listen to Mark’s brief account of this time period: *At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him (Mark 1:9-13).*

To a casual observer the earthly elements are interesting, but not unusual: Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River and then spent forty days in the desert surrounded by wild animals. Spiritually, though, a lot more was going on simultaneously:

- John was being obedient to God by baptizing people. This was part of his mission. Obedience plays a big role in the spiritual realm.

- The triune nature of God was being pictured with God the Father speaking, God the Son in the person of Jesus being baptized, and God the Holy Spirit coming down like a dove and resting on Jesus.
- John was noticing the Spirit come and rest on Jesus. This was the sign by which he was to know for sure who the Son of God was. John's confidence and joy were increasing.
- Jesus was also being obedient, both by submitting to John's baptism and by following the Spirit's leading into the desert.
- Jesus was involved in a serious battle against Satan. Jesus won, and was comforted by angels. This story certainly shows us the reality of invisible beings.

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The raising of Lazarus from the dead also illustrates very well the two levels of living coinciding in one story (John 11). *A man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." He went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."*

From an earthly standpoint, time played an essential role. Jesus needed to hurry! Lazarus was critically ill, and it was unthinkable to his sisters that he should die at this time. If Jesus really loved us, Mary and Martha may have reasoned, he would drop everything and run to Bethany to prevent his friend's death. Jesus had often enjoyed the hospitality of these three in Bethany. Now the sisters were making what to them was a reasonable request. Surely Jesus would come for the sake of their friendship, wouldn't he? But Jesus took so much time before leaving for Bethany that now it was too late; Lazarus was dead. Would he arrive in time to officiate at the funeral service and burial? No! He didn't arrive until four days after the body of Lazarus was placed in the tomb, much too late to do anything except mingle with the mourners. The brokenhearted sisters both felt that Jesus owed them an explanation for his odd behavior!

*Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."*

*After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they*

*replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

From a spiritual standpoint, this was an incident that was going to bring glory to God and to Jesus, and glorifying God is the joy of the Kingdom of God, a name often used for the spiritual level. It would serve as part of the Eternal Plan to advance the Kingdom in so many ways, some of which I will list after we hear the happy conclusion to the story.

*Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."*

*Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."*

With our spiritual eyes we can see some of the value of the death and resurrection of Lazarus:

- It would strengthen the faith of Mary, Martha and the disciples.
- It would cause many Jews to put their faith in Jesus.
- It would anger the chief priests and Pharisees, causing them to want Jesus arrested (a necessary step leading to his predicted death).
- It would serve as a backdrop for teaching wonderful truths about the resurrection, life after death, and the nature of death itself for a believer.
- It would be written down so all generations could benefit from its truth and marvel at the power of God.

Our Lord Jesus wants everyone to believe in him. Word certainly got around about Lazarus being called out of the tomb after four days!

*Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume ... Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.*

This dinner gives us an idea of how the family felt about Jesus after the incident at the tomb. All three siblings were there, honoring Jesus. The sisters held no hard feelings; they knew now why Jesus did not do things their way. Many people were believing in Jesus because of Lazarus and that was fine with them. More than ever their minds and hearts would be on advancing God's kingdom, rather than on their

earthly desires. It is doubtful that people would have come in such numbers just to see a man who had been healed from an illness. God's ways are higher than ours, even today!

Time does play a role in the kingdom, but it is God's time, not ours, and there is no rush. Events occur when the time has fully come – not sooner, not later. Everything God does is right; there is never a case where God owes us an explanation or an apology.

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There are many ways to look at and understand Scripture; many points of view. That is why the Bible stories never grow dull. In contrast to all other books, the Bible itself belongs to the spiritual realm. It is God-breathed in origin, with God prompting certain people to write and others to gather the books and preserve them. 2 Timothy 3:16,17 says Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that God's servant may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. From this valuable, living, speaking book, I want to look at two familiar incidents relating to our current topic: living life on two levels. The stories concern the giving of the ten commandments and the sermon on the mount.

Both incidents took place on mountains, helping us to picture them as belonging to a high, spiritual level and containing high standards. Both were given by God, the sermon by God incarnate in Jesus. Both were meant to be received by God's people and were to be lived out in their lives on the earthly level. Both were taken down mountains, the ten commandments on stone tablets and the sermon in the hearts and minds of the listeners.

Moses was the one up the mountain with God when the ten commandments were given. He and God were together for forty days during which Moses was given all kinds of instruction for God's chosen people. When he came down the mountain, Moses carried with him a disturbing piece of information. God, who sees and knows everything on all levels, reported to Moses news that seemed unthinkable: at the foot of the mountain the people had forgotten all about God, had made a golden calf that they called their god, and at that moment were happily worshiping it! In addition to the news, Moses also carried two stone tablets on which God had written:

1. You shall have no other gods besides me.
2. You shall not make an image in the form of anything for the purpose of worshiping it.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

*When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it (Exodus 32:19,20).* If that sounds severe, consider that on the mountain God was so angry that he wanted to destroy all the people and start a new nation from Moses! It was the intercession of Moses that caused God to relent and let the people live.

Later God wrote the commandments on other stone tablets which, in time, were placed in the Ark of the Covenant, the golden chest that represented the presence of God with his people. Thus, in picture, God linked the ten commandments with himself. Hundreds of years later, when someone asked him what was the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus summarized all of them this way: *"Love the Lord your*

*God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind [and with all your strength].” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Sounds reasonable, doesn’t it? This is the way God wants his people to live on the earth. If we did, what an influence we would have! What glory would ascend to God!*

But there’s more! While the ten commandments sound like good common sense, there is something otherworldly about the sermon on the mount as recorded in Matthew 5-7. This is radical thinking, much different from ordinary thought. As I see it, this sermon supposes that you are already following the commandments and now asks, “Are you ready for more? Do you want to come up higher? Do you want to live on a spiritual level while on earth? If so, here’s how to do it.”

Matthew records that as Jesus went about Galilee teaching and healing, *large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them.* He was teaching those who had enough interest in what he had to say to follow him up a mountain, that is, this was no casual crowd; they were called disciples. Jesus began his address with a series of statements that we call the “beatitudes,” a word my dictionary defines as “a state of utmost bliss”:

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
3. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
9. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The value system in the spiritual level is quite different from the values of the earthly realm, isn’t it? People who live with this kind of thinking are doing far more than “hanging in there,” a current phrase used by some who are having problems; instead, they are really happy! Notice that the rewards for living in a state of utmost bliss are all spiritual as well. Nowhere is there a promise of earthly “blessing” (wealth or good health, for example) for fulfilling the requirements for blessedness.

There is a series of statements in the sermon on the mount that clearly shows the difference between the commandments and the deeper, inward type of righteousness that Jesus was now presenting to his followers. Each statement compares the old (“You have heard that it was said”) with the new (“But I tell you”). Listen to the differences:

– *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.*

– *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

– *“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell*

*you* that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

– “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ But I tell you, do not swear on oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply ‘Yes,’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

– “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

– “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

I wonder what the original listeners were thinking as they heard these fresh ideas come from their new teacher. At the end of the sermon, Matthew records that the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. They weren’t used to hearing teaching like this! And Jesus wasn’t finished yet.

Next Jesus told them that their charitable deeds were to be done privately, not so that others could see them. Their devotional life was to be carried out in secret also. Only God was to know if they were praying or fasting. And they were to forgive those who sinned against them. No holding grudges or seeking revenge allowed, that is, if they wanted God to forgive them when they sinned against him.

The disciples were to let go of the grip money may have had on their lives. “*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.*”

And they were not to worry about ordinary earthly things such as food and clothing or even their very lives. “*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*”

As for judging others, they were to be sure to remove the planks that may be in their own eyes before

trying to remove specks from the eyes of others. Then Jesus issued a wonderful invitation: *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”* and issued a warning: *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus by their fruit you will recognize them.”*

Jesus realized that not all those on the mountain would put his teachings into practice, so he told a story about that. *“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”*

All of the sermon on the mount is meant for us, God’s disciples today. We are meant to live on the high spiritual level while also of necessity living on the earthly level. Have you heard the expression “They are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good”? Don’t believe it! Those who are living on a high spiritual plane are in the best position to influence the earth. Jesus, in the sermon on the mount, told us what our relationship to the earth is to be:

*“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

The standard offered in the sermon on the mount is high and is contrary to the thinking of popular society, but it is also possible, because God’s Holy Spirit lives within us to strengthen our resolve. So let’s climb up the mountain with Jesus, hear what he has to say with our spiritual ears wide open and then come down the mountain with him to be salt and light in this world. And to God be the glory. Amen.

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As we practice living life on a spiritual level, we become aware that things that seem so bad on earth may be serving a dual purpose, and thus are well worth enduring. Unfair treatment is a case in point. Wouldn’t life be wonderful if people were always fair to others, if no one took advantage of someone else, if you could trust everyone? We all know such is not the case. The sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:38-42 mentions several unfair situations that may occur in our lives, gives one interesting solution and forbids another. The passage bears repeating in this essay:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”*

You cannot be taken advantage of if you willingly offer more than what is being demanded or taken, can you? How contrary this is to our human natures! What is clearly forbidden is any thought of revenge. In writing his letter to the Romans, Paul gives similar instruction:

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary:*

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).*

During the time that I was serving as pastor of the Community Church of Yorktown, I received a phone call from a man who had a story of desperation to tell. His family had fallen on hard times and could not even afford diapers for their baby, whom I heard crying in the background. As a pastor, he hoped I could find it in my heart to give him \$125. What a dilemma that was for me! At the time I was meditating on the sermon on the mount, and running through my head at that moment was "Give to the one who asks you; give to the one who asks you ..."

I was well aware that this might be a scam. Certainly I knew human nature enough to know such things happen. Since I was hesitating, he offered to put his uncle on the phone to verify his story. Hearing the same tale twice still did not convince me that it was true. But then a second idea began forming in my mind: suppose this were a test for me? What if God wanted to see if I would obey the command to give to those who are asking? Maybe the test was to see what grip my money had on me. (Looking at earthly events as possibly a test from God, whether the pop quiz or the final exam kind, is a great way to practice living on two levels.) For this reason, I decided to give the men the money they had asked for, leaving them in God's hands as far as their truthfulness was concerned. Into a bag I put the money, some diapers I had left over from tending grandchildren, and some Christian literature. I welcomed the opportunity to give a gospel witness to the strangers in this way. I met the men in a well-lighted public place with people all around, handed over the bag and drove off with a happy heart.

Not long after that, a prior incident found its way back into my consciousness. About five years earlier I had been with my friend who owned a Christian bookstore just as the store was closing for the day. After all the customers were gone, a man came in and told us a sad story of need, wondering if we could possibly help him out financially. I wrote a personal check and my friend gave him cash. Several weeks later the store owner called saying the police had been there looking for information about the man to whom we had given money. We had been scammed! I looked through my check stubs from that time period and found that the name on that check was very similar to the one the man had given on the phone. I had been scammed by the same people twice!

When Jesus was sending out the disciples to preach and heal, he gave them instructions about the various situations they were likely to encounter. In Matthew 10:16,17 Jesus said, *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against other people."* We need to have all the teachings of the Scriptures in our minds in order to be balanced while living on two levels. So when a man called me again perhaps six months later and gave me a similar name and story I said, "I have given you money twice. Please don't call me again." And he didn't.

My experience of being treated unfairly pales in comparison to what Jesus received at the hands of human beings. Think about the natural and spiritual levels coinciding at the end of his earthly life, for example:

There was nothing fair about the trial or the treatment Jesus had before his crucifixion. How was he able to endure – mostly in silence – the blatant lies, the spitting, mocking, stripping, blindfolding, being struck with fists, being crowned with thorns, the floggings that were his portion just prior to the humiliation of being nailed to the cross? Jesus was not seeing the situation from an earthly, human point of view. His vision extended into the heavenly, spiritual realm that he knew so well. He saw as far back as Eden; it hadn't been fair for innocent animals to die for the sins of Adam and Eve, either, but it had been a necessary step in providing for their salvation. His mind's eye could see all the people that had lived since then and all that would be born and live afterwards: all of them sinners in need of a Savior; all of them loved by God. He remembered how, before the universe was created, he had offered to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. He recalled the prophecies in the Scriptures that



predicted many of the things that were happening that day. None of the atrocities surprised him, for he knew the depths of depravity to which the human heart could go. Jesus had double checked with his Father the night before and received the confirmation he needed: everything was in place; all was proceeding as planned. This was the will of God, and that was what mattered to him. “Not my will, but yours be done” is the way of life in the kingdom of God. The pain would be temporary; the joy afterwards would last for eternity, for this was, in fact, the greatest love story ever told! This was the reason Christ had come to earth, the climactic point in all human history!

“It’s not fair!” we humans exclaim many times, in all kinds of situations, from the time we are toddlers until our old age. Often someone will counter, “Who said life was fair?” The truth is, life on this earth is riddled with injustice. All of us have sin natures. Even people with sincere faith have dual natures, a new spiritual nature (which guarantees us eternal life) and an old human nature with which we were born. Sometimes the two natures battle within us, and sometimes the old nature wins. When it does, we may be among those treating people unfairly, lashing out, harming others, often the ones we love. Paul reminds us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). On earth some people get away with brutal crimes, while others are tried, convicted, imprisoned and even put to death for crimes they did not commit. “It’s not fair!” we cry. No, it’s not.

In contrast, righteousness and justice are hallmarks of the kingdom of God, the spiritual realm where God rules and in which we who believe have citizenship (along with the citizenship we have on earth). In the spiritual realm, no one gets away with anything; every sin is paid for. All of us are indebted to the ruler of the kingdom, for he chose to take all of our debts and at one point in time, pay the penalty due for all of them. Your sins and mine were included in that enormous debt he paid. And what was the penalty? Death! What was happening at the trial and at the cross? God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

Was it fair that Jesus should die so that we could go free? It depends on your perspective. From an earthly standpoint, it does not seem fair. We should be responsible for our own actions, we think. That’s the way Adam and Eve must have felt when they saw the animals being killed instead of them. But from God’s point of view, the crucifixion made perfect sense; it was not only right, but it was loving, gracious, and merciful. Sin is so serious that we could never finish paying our debt if we tried; we would always be separated from God. And that is not what God wanted. God’s own purposes were being served by the death of Jesus. Doesn’t that seem fair?

God’s self-sacrifice on Calvary’s cross was more than redemptive. It also serves as an awesome example of how sacrificially we are meant to live as citizens of his kingdom. This gives deep meaning to the second commandment that summarizes the law: love your neighbor as yourself.

One of the books I brought with me to Drum Hill is a children’s book, The Whipping Boy, by Sid Fleischman. When I spied the book some years ago, while browsing through a used bookstore, a faint recollection stirred in my brain. Were there really whipping boys at one time in history? The author says yes: “Some royal households of past centuries did keep whipping boys to suffer the punishments due a misbehaving prince. History is alive with lunacies and injustices.” In this fictional story, it was forbidden to spank, thrash or whack the heir to the throne, Prince Horace (known by others as Prince Brat). Jemmy, an orphan boy, had been plucked from the streets to serve as whipping boy for the arrogant and spiteful prince. If the prince misbehaved, Jemmy was punished. Was that fair?

And yet that is so much like what Jesus was doing on the cross, only in reverse. We misbehaved and he took our punishment for us. But we are the “commoners” and he is ROYALTY! Who ever heard of such a thing?! Listen to the Scriptures talking about this transaction:

*– Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We*

*all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).*

*– He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).*

*– Christ died for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God (1 Peter 3:18).*

*– God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

At the end of the fictional story, after an adventure in which their identities were mixed up, the prince and Jemmy became friends. Surely that was the intention God had in mind for us when he endured the indignities, the shame, the unfairness of the cross. We owe our Lord a big debt of gratitude and much, much love. If you ever wonder if God loves you, just think of the cross. No one has ever loved you more! And if you ever find yourself chafing about the unfairness of life and your inability to change the situation, climb up Mt. Calvary with Jesus and take heart: he has overcome the world. One day righteousness will rule and all will be fair. Thank God!

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For about eight years I was a teacher in the religious education department at Pleasantville Cottage School, a boarding school for troubled children. What a privilege it was to teach the boys and girls who came to me weekly in this voluntary program! They needed stability in their lives, and I was happy to tell them that this is available through a personal relationship with God. I taught them that by believing in Jesus they would become a part of God's eternal family with all the wonderful benefits involved, including a home in Heaven when they died.

But I couldn't promise them a life without problems. Among other things, I used the story at the end of the sermon on the mount to help me explain reality to them. I told them that even if their lives are built on God, our Solid Rock Foundation (as one house was built on rock), we face the same storms of life as those whose lives do not acknowledge God (depicted by the house built on sand). The difference is that the lives of believers are not destroyed by the battering, because no one can destroy God, to whom we are united.

Then came a blow I knew would be hard for my students to take. In the spring of 1995 we teachers were informed that, for budgetary reasons, the entire religious education program was going to be terminated in June. We all agreed to break the news to our students on the same day. I tried to think of an illustration I could use to explain the situation to my boys and girls and give them teaching that they could remember for a long time. I found my answer in a toy store.

I bought a 36-inch-tall inflatable toy called a "bop bag," with a picture of a smiling Yogi Bear printed on it. When the day came, there was an inflated Yogi perched on a table in my classroom. The students played with the toy for a while, knowing full well that the reason Yogi bounced back into an upright position after being punched was because of the heavy sand-like material that had been put at the base inside the toy.

Then I made the application. All believers have inside of them plenty of good material to help them bounce back after receiving various kinds of blows. We have new spiritual natures; God lives in us by his Spirit; Jesus even said the Kingdom of God is within us. Also inside is our way of thinking. This is where we must make a choice: will we develop our thinking so that the spiritual realm is real and helpful to us when life's blows come, or will we remain earthly in our thinking, leaving our spiritual resources underdeveloped?

And then I told them the news. There were different reactions, according to their different personalities. Some hugged the toy and some punched it hard, but Yogi always came smiling back! I don't know if any of my former students remember the lesson of the bop bag or not, but I do. I have used Yogi Bear to illustrate a number of sermons and teachings, including in Cairo, Egypt and now here in Drum Hill. The bop bag helps me to visualize the resilience of Paul and his coworkers, for example, in such passages as 2 Corinthians 4:9: *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.* Well versed in living on two levels, they were always bouncing back!

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The practice of seeing and living life on two levels is wonderful preparation for ageing and dying. After a while the spiritual level takes over your thinking. You not only sing, but you believe that "This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through." You know Heaven is your real home, your allegiance is to God and your family consists of all people of faith. The things of earth, including money, lose their hold on you, for your treasures are laid up in Heaven. Your food and your drink is to do the will of your Father in Heaven. You find trust overtaking worry, knowing that worrying cannot add a single hour to your life. A peace fills and surrounds you, a peace that comes from our Lord and can be felt by others. You know that whether you live or die you are the Lord's, so it really doesn't matter. And you have a stability within that enables you to recover from the blows that life continues to bring your way.

My son George was with me in the summer of 2003 when my neurologist told me that I had a progressive neurological disease and that he did not feel it would be safe for me to drive. "Then I will never drive again," I said. Two big blows at once, and I certainly felt each one. About ten minutes later, on the way to the car, I said to George, "It's all right." Amazed, he asked, "You processed all that in ten minutes?" "No, George," I replied, "it wasn't ten minutes. It was a lifetime and ten minutes."

And so it was. I have lived simultaneously on two levels for so long that it's automatic now. In the earthly realm I am becoming more and more incapacitated by PLS. My speech is almost gone and I certainly can't walk. But in the spiritual realm wonderful things are happening! I am privileged to be able to write material that is useful in God's kingdom now and that I can leave behind for the glory of God when I move to Heaven. If I were walking and talking, I would not be writing. "*Be content with what you have,*" the Bible says (Hebrews 13:5). I am.

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Verna Kwiatkowski

[www.vernakwiatkowski.com](http://www.vernakwiatkowski.com)