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**Sunday 27 August 2023 to Sunday 3 September 2023**

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Sunday 27 August 2023

**Question one**

by Emma Strelan

***‘But what about you?' he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ (Matthew 16:15).***

Read [Matthew 16:13–20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+16%3A13%E2%80%9320&version=NRSVUE)

Exams have two types of questions. The first kind requires you to regurgitate things you’ve read and learned by rote. The second type is the kind students usually complain about because they must apply their knowledge. They have to go deeper. This question usually starts with something like, ‘In your own words, describe …’

In today’s passage, Jesus gives his disciples an exam in two stages. Firstly, he asks, ‘Who do [other] people say the Son of Man is?’ Easy. They’ve heard what others say; there are no tough deliberations to be made: some say he’s John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Ten out of ten, full marks.

But then Jesus gets to part two – ‘Who do you say I am?’

And, suddenly, without much warning, Jesus asks the singularly most important question in the gospels. The question the gospels themselves pose in the very act of being written: ‘Given all that you’ve seen and heard, who is Jesus to you?’

And the answer differs. For some people, Jesus is just a ‘John the Baptist figure’ – a crusty old dude standing at a distance, shouting at them to repent their sins. Or maybe he’s a wise prophet figure like Jeremiah with some cool sayings, but now he’s just a part of ancient history.

Maybe if Peter were around today and Jesus asked him, ‘Who do you say I am?’, he would have spouted off one of the many creeds we have to explain Jesus: the Logos, word-made-flesh, second person of the Trinity, God’s only Son, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made … and so on. That’s why we’ve formulated creeds, right? – so we can have a theologically sound answer to the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’

But Jesus wants to know the difference between the general knowledge we can recite because others have taught us and the deep knowledge that has personally made its way into our hearts and actually brings about transformation.

And our answer to this question has major consequences. Peter is the very proof of that.

So, welcome to the exam today. The first question is: In your own words, who is Jesus to you?

Your time starts now.

***Lord God, thank you for challenging us to have a personal relationship with you. Please help us to examine who you are to us, not just in an intellectual way but in a way that truly transforms our hearts. Amen.***

*Emma lives in Adelaide and is studying a Master of Divinity at Tabor College. She also works as a freelance videographer, filming weddings, events and factual videos. She’s currently trying to work out how these two passions can fit together. Emma has a heart for youth camping ministry and for effectively communicating Christian concepts to the younger generations. Despite being in her early 20s, she’s a self-confessed grandma who loves reading, gardening, embroidery, cardigans and drinking tea.*

Monday 28 August 2023

**Body issues (part one)**

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Tuesday 29 August 2023

**Love does**

by Emma Strelan

***Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud (1 Corinthians 13:4).***

Read [1 Corinthians 13:4–13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+13%3A4%E2%80%9313&version=NRSVUE)

Ah, we’ve come to the part of the Bible that even non-believers can get around. As part of my work, I’ve had the privilege to attend a couple hundred funerals and weddings (Christian and non-Christian) over the last few years. And next to Psalm 23, this passage is probably the most commonly chosen. It speaks so poetically of love and all that love means. It rolls off even the most incompetent reader’s tongue.

British evangelist G Campbell Morgan wrote that examining this chapter is like ‘dissecting a flower to understand it. If you tear it apart too much, you lose the beauty’. This is kind of ironic, considering this Bible passage is probably one of the most commented on and spoken about. I’ve heard many different interpretations, from preachers substituting the names of the bride and groom for where ‘love’ is written (and there’s always a giggle when the minister says, ‘Harry is patient’, and everyone knows full well that Harry is not of the patient sort). Or substituting the word ‘love’ for God, even, which makes sense, given he is love. Many preachers also speak of the Greek term here, *agape*, as the ultimate, sacrificial love. The kind of love that only God can perfectly fulfil. And many talk of love as a doing word, not just an emotion.

This message of love can be found in most prominent secular stories, too; the protagonist in Hollywood blockbusters and best-selling novels always finds out that a great act of sacrificial love triumphs over every and all evil. Love saves the day. Love wins. Love actually is all around.

We read all this, and it makes it seem like love is all-powerful and stronger than anything. But the irony and the paradox is that, as CS Lewis points out, ‘to love at all is to be vulnerable’. True love is completely vulnerable and relinquishing power – hence the sacrifice part. This is the thing that continues to make heads spin when we try to think about it. But perhaps that’s the point. We can’t think about it. We just have to do it.

Christian author Bob Goff wrote a popular book titled *Love Does*. In it, he says, ‘When love is a theory, it’s safe, it’s free of risk’. We risk a lot by doing love. But the best part of being a Christian is knowing that our God experienced that himself. God is love, and love does.

***God, the fact that you are love continues to boggle our minds. Please continue to surprise and challenge us with what love means. Thank you that you did the greatest act of love. Help us, through the Holy Spirit, to not just feel love but to do it. Amen.***

Wednesday 30 August 2023

**It’s all Christianese to me**

by Emma Strelan

***If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me (1 Corinthians 14:11).***

Read [1 Corinthians 14:1–12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+14%3A1%E2%80%9312&version=NRSVUE)

I once went to a cinema in France to watch a movie. Having studied French throughout high school, I had enough of a grasp to follow a French film, provided there were subtitles. It turned out that there weren’t any subtitles in either French or English and consequently, I did not get a lot out of the movie. I still found it a very beautiful film with lots of feeling, but I couldn’t tell you any of the nuances of the characters or what they had been saying to each other.

I want us to take a minute today to really meditate on the sanctification that our Lord has provided through the blood of the lamb. Remember that we’re no longer Gentiles because of the wounds of our Messiah. And we raise a hallelujah to our redeemer when we consider that we don’t live by the flesh, but we’re all a part of Christ’s body and are made pure as temples for the Holy Spirit.

If you didn’t blink an eye reading that paragraph, congratulations – you speak fluent ‘Christianese’!

At the outset, today’s passage doesn’t seem very applicable to most of our churches. Paul is addressing a specific issue within the Corinthian church. Namely, that of disorder caused by what appeared to be an uncontrollable use of the spiritual gift of tongues. I don’t see or hear many pastors stressing about congregation members disrupting worship services with foreign and/or heavenly languages. Speaking in tongues was just an issue for the early church, right?

But perhaps Paul had a wider message about the accessibility of worship. Perhaps, if he was writing 1 Lutherans 14, he would address our way of speaking in Christianese – words that sound weird, crazy and nonsensical to an outsider but, to regular Christians, come with rich meaning.

It is great that our faith comes with rich and deep ways to express its various aspects. But if outsiders are coming into the church and our faith is not shared in an accessible way, is it really any different from publicly speaking in unknown tongues?

Unless we could somehow subtitle our real-life conversations, we should stop and notice how we speak around others and examine whether it edifies, improves understanding, and provides order. And what’s more, having the ability to explain the words we use helps us to speak with greater meaning and richness anyway.

***Lord God, the Word-made-flesh itself, thank you for the gift of languages. Thank you that we can express our faith through our words and convey deep and rich meaning in what we say. Help us be aware of the words we speak and use them to edify and enrich the lives of those around us. Amen.***

Thursday 31 August 2023

**Paul’s got feelings, and so do you**

by Emma Strelan

***So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding (1 Corinthians 14:15).***

Read [1 Corinthians 14:13–25](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+14%3A13%E2%80%9325&version=NRSVUE)

Heart versus head. Thinking versus feeling. Emotion versus logic. Spirit versus understanding.

Finding the balance between these two ‘sides’ of us feels like a constant challenge. We all seem to swing one way or the other. And even in couples, there’s usually the ‘emotional’ one and the ‘logical’ one. (I hate to admit I’m the ‘emotional’ one!)

I’m not always very good at actually processing the words I sing during worship. I can easily just sing a song and think about how nice the music makes me feel. If it’s got a good tune, I may not even notice what the main themes of the song are.

On the other hand, when we say our creeds and liturgy, I often don’t feel like I really mean the words. I know exactly what I’m saying, but it certainly doesn’t always feel like worship. Even the corporate prayers we say together, like responsive psalms, tend to just roll off my tongue like a monotone school kid reciting their times tables before they’re allowed to go to lunch.

Paul seems to be grappling with this same thing here. He wants to bring these two approaches into the very heart of faith, into the most intimate and personal aspect of being a Christian – prayer. He points out that we can live and pray in both spirit and understanding.

In this part of 1 Corinthians, Paul deals with order in worship. His intention is to illustrate and define Christian worship that is balanced between the Spirit’s guidance, established formats, and participation of the people.

The good part about liturgy is that it’s been created to include different elements and ways of engaging in worship. The trouble comes when we forget the engaging part. In other words, the gospel. It’s not up to the pastor or church leaders to ensure worship stays engaging. It’s up to us to allow both our hearts and our minds to pray, sing, confess, lament, rejoice and praise.

I encourage you to do one of two things today: find a worship song you haven’t paid attention to the lyrics of before, and really listen to it (then sing it with meaning if you can). Or, whip out your Luther’s *Small Catechism* or an old service order, and read one of the faith statements or creeds and pray it intentionally and with your heart.

***God of spirit and understanding, it is sometimes a struggle for us to balance these things. But we take comfort in Paul’s words to pray and sing with our hearts and minds. You are the greatest demonstration of mind and spirit, and you have imparted the gift of intellect and feeling to us, so we thank you for that. We offer these both to you today. Amen.***

Friday 1 September 2023

**Order up**

by Emma Strelan

***Everything must be done so that the church may be built up … For God is not a God of disorder but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:26b,33a).***

Read [1 Corinthians 14:26–40](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+14%3A26%E2%80%9340&version=NRSVUE)

Paul seems to be giving some very specific advice in this part of 1 Corinthians. He details exactly how many people should prophesy, precisely who should be allowed to speak in church and when, and how and when people should speak in tongues.

We Lutherans have an established system for how the Sunday service goes, how the church should be run, and who is to run the church. And any decisions or action is made under the orderly guidance of a committee (and, of course, the roughly three to five sub-committees). We’ve really got this instruction from Paul to be orderly down-pat, haven’t we? So good, in fact, that it’s prone to putting one to sleep from time to time (not speaking from experience or anything).

But I want to pause and reflect on the overarching message behind this part of 1 Corinthians. Based on the rest of the letter and Paul’s writings, he clearly wants us to remember that the God we worship is a God of order and peace, not chaos. But more than that, the Jesus we worship always gave space for the quiet, the humble, the people who weren’t always the loudest in public. And you have to think that this is somewhat of what Paul is trying to do here – make sure that certain rowdy Corinthians weren’t just using worship as a time to show off their own talents and skills. As a corporate body, the church should be a space where all feel heard. Where all get to be part of the worship. Not just the loudest or the most charismatic or the ones who have always done the speaking, and that’s just how it is. And that’s what orderly worship should be for – not for keeping the same people in control year after year but for allowing everyone to participate at the right and fitting time.

Some of the most seemingly chaotic/disorganised church services I’ve been to have been where children are involved, or we’ve tried to include multiple languages and people of differing backgrounds. But although these services seemed chaotic, everything still happened at the right time. And most importantly, the joy felt by the people in God’s house was like no other (and there was certainly no one asleep)!

God’s sense of order tends to be a little different to ours: I wonder what embracing that means for your own worship time – both in and outside the church building?

***God, you call us to seriously consider the ways in which we worship. We thank you that, throughout the Bible, you demonstrate many ways to worship. Please help us to worship you in a way that is orderly and peaceful but also full of life and inclusive of all your people. Amen.***

Saturday 2 September 2023

**Body issues (part two)**

by Emma Strelan

***Lord, I love the house where you live, the place where your glory dwells (Psalm 26:8).***

Read [Psalm 26:1–8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+26%3A1%E2%80%938&version=NRSVUE)

When David talks about the house where God dwells, he’s referring to the Tabernacle – what the Israelites understood to be the literal dwelling place of God’s Spirit on earth (at that point in history).

It was easy for them to see this literal tent as a place of glory and God’s presence because it was made of fine fabric, adorned with precious metals, there were constant sacrifices, priests attending to it, and God even demonstrated his glory visibly from time to time through supernatural cloud, fire and smoke. And everything relating to the Tabernacle was to be done with utmost respect and appropriateness.

Since Jesus walked on this earth and the Holy Spirit came into every believer, God’s temple is considered to be all of our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19,20). I find it pretty difficult to truly wrap my head around the implications of this.

We tend to go one of two ways regarding our bodies (or sometimes both simultaneously). Either we worship them, doing everything we can to keep them at their prime, prioritising only that which will achieve the perfect body. Or, we abuse them, using our bodies as a way to feel something – pleasure, pain, gluttony, adrenaline, etc.

I struggle to see my body as a temple, especially when it can feel more like something I’m trapped inside of, rather than a place of refuge and retreat. And I am a reasonably able-bodied person – so I can only imagine how much worse it is for those who aren’t so mobile and active.

But imagine if we could sincerely talk about our bodies as David does about God’s house: ‘I love [my body], the place where God lives, the place where his glory dwells.’

You don’t worship the temple but the thing for which it was built. It is the same for our bodies.

I really hope I don’t get smoke or fire billowing out of me as a demonstration of God’s presence. But I know what I will have, as a result of the Holy Spirit, is grace, love, mercy, joy, sacrifice, refuge and peace.

***Abba Father, we can’t fully comprehend that your glory dwells in us. It is too great a mystery to ever appreciate fully. But we know that because of this, we can treat ourselves and each other respectfully. We can be the refuge for the broken, sinful and ashamed. Please help us to neither worship our bodies nor shun them. Instead, we acknowledge that what we worship is your glory and greatness. Help us to live our lives holding on to that knowledge. Amen.***

Sunday 3 September 2023

**Seek discomfort?!**

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

***Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it (Matthew 16:24,25).***

Read [Matthew 16:21–28](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+16%3A21%E2%80%9328&version=NRSVUE)

My son and I watch a YouTube series called *Yes Theory*, where the hosts travel to countries/situations that are intentionally uncomfortable: ‘We believe that life's greatest moments and deepest connections exist outside your comfort zone.’ By their own admission, they find adventure in uncomfortable settings – travelling to impoverished or troubled countries, entering the lives of local people, hearing their stories and helping them. Their motto is ‘Seek discomfort’.

To a degree, I relate to this as a follower of Jesus because it goes against the grain of modern society’s motto, ‘Seek comfort’! We are told to seek comfortable modern homes, comfortable clothes, ‘comfort’ foods, comfortable situations, a comfortable job and a comfortable level of retirement savings. The motivation behind revolutionary technology is often to make life easier and better. Our medicine should magically make our maladies disappear. Our parenting revolves around ‘keeping our kids happy’. And so when discomfort or adversity inevitably arrives, we find ourselves unprepared and annoyed; ‘This wasn’t meant to happen! How dare this happen to me!’

Some of us find vigour in discipline. Many of us don’t (chief among us is myself!). A case in point for me is physical exercise. Growing up on our farm, ‘exercise’ was rounding up sheep and carrying bags of wheat – an uncomfortable task that made me and my dad tired and grumpy! In his words, ‘Why would I want to do physical exercise when I finish work? I do this all day long!’ Nowadays, my medical condition requires me to exercise. I have learnt that I can’t do it alone – I need assistance, reminders and someone to do it with me.

Jesus’ words on discipleship here are an ‘anti-motto’ to our modern way of thinking. They are really shocking: ‘Accept your device of torture and death and follow me.’ They are a reminder that the trappings of this life are an illusion and temporary. Being a disciple means letting go of the power they wield over us, venturing out of our comfort zone and not being surprised by discomfort. But we are not supposed to do this alone. Following Jesus means being with him – and others, as we follow him. Jesus is with you in your discomfort; be with others in their discomfort!

***Lord Jesus, help me to let go of the trappings of this world, the ties that bind, and the illusion of this life’s comforts. I lay them at your feet. Lead me in your ways. Be with me in the discomforts I face. Help me to be with others in their discomfort. Amen.***

*Stephen Abraham is a retired Lutheran pastor and musician who served as a school pastor and church planter in Mawson Lakes, South Australia. Stephen retired early due to a spinal injury, leaving him largely housebound with chronic pain (documented by Lutheran Media on its Messages of Hope YouTube channel and radio program). As his condition allows, Stephen still preaches, takes chapel and serves his local church and school. He also writes and records personal songs, worship songs and Christian meditations, which he shares on his YouTube channel (*[*youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic*](https://www.youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic)*).*