

**Christmas in Seven Carols**  
**Part 4: Down to Earth**  
**December 23, 2018**  
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Scriptures: Colossians 1:11-23; James 2:14-18

*Down to earth as a dove,  
came to all, holy love;  
Jesus Christ from above  
bringing great salvation,  
meant for every nation.*

("Down to Earth," v. 1)

## **I. Down to Earth**

Our carol for the morning, "Down to Earth" seems a bit out of place in today's world. Consider the title itself. Living at a time in human history when we are aware of the fact that the Universe extends for nearly 14 billion light-years in every direction, we have to wonder which direction is "down" and which is "up." What might appear to be "down to earth" to some might very well be "up to earth" when seen from a different angle!

Of course, the language of Spirit is always metaphorical, which is why biblical literalists always run into trouble. The scriptures refer to Jesus as the "Lamb of God," too, but this does not mean that Jesus had curly white fur and hooves. Did a literal lamb come "down" (or "up") to earth 2,000 years ago? On this point, even biblical literalists concede that the Bible speaks in metaphors, at least sometimes.

One reason why literalists are uneasy with metaphors is that they always come loaded with a whole host of meanings, not just a single one. So metaphors are harder to nail down in terms of what they signify, or why we should even care.

At Christmastime, for instance, we are reminded continually that Jesus was no ordinary baby but the "Son of God." We know Jesus is not a *biological* Son of God. The phrase is a metaphor. But what does this metaphor signify on the spiritual level? Given that it's a metaphor, there is no single meaning.

How would you respond if someone asked you, "What is *the* meaning of your being a son/daughter of your parents?" Is there a single one? If you offered a hundred different ways that being a son/daughter has meaning for you, would even this adequately describe your relationship?

Isn't it interesting how we readily accept the fact that the meaning of being a son or daughter of earthly parents is so great as to be impossible to adequately describe, though a hundred different meanings may all be true, yet when it comes to the claim that Jesus is the Son of God,

many people are ready to kick others out of their faith community if they don't offer a precise definition of what this means?

Over my lifetime – including my years as a minister – I've believed many things about what Jesus being the "Son of God" means – even contradictory things. My beliefs have ranged from believing Jesus to be a "Son of God" just as you or I might be called sons and daughters of God, to Jesus being the "God incarnate" ... and everywhere in between. I've believed many things about the meaning of Christ's death on the Cross, too, ranging from his death being little more than a tragic mistake that God never intended, to Christ's death being an "atoning sacrifice for our sins" that God had planned from the beginning ... and I've believed lots of things in between these extremes.

My beliefs even about Christ's resurrection have ranged quite a bit over the years – from believing his resurrection is a "beautiful story that never actually happened" to it being "an event that must have happened or all faith is in vain" ... and everything in between.

Curiously, while my beliefs have been all over the map about Jesus, the central message of his life, death, and resurrection has remained the same:

***Jesus shows us that we are loved beyond our wildest imagination and invites us to reorient our lives according to this discovery.***

To me, this radical claim about God's love sums up the many meanings of another term we have a hard time nailing down with precision: salvation. Contrary to what many Christians claim, I don't think of the salvation Christ offers as a "get out of Hell free" card. Rather, salvation is first and foremost about *healing*. "Salve" is the root of the word, after all.

When we discover that we are loved beyond our wildest imagination, rather than hated or ignored by the One who created us – internalizing this awareness to the point where it is deeply embedded and ever-present within us – we experience healing on a level that goes far deeper than any physical healing I know. In fact, given the choice between being healed of cancer and being healed of the false belief that God thinks that you and I are worthless, I'll take the spiritual healing over the physical one any day of the week. I may live a few less days, but I'd trade even a thousand days of living apart from this awareness for a single day of awareness of God's love and grace for me and you.

Yet salvation is not just about being or becoming aware of God's love for us. It's about forging a connection – a *relationship* – in which we receive God's extraordinary love, and respond to it by loving God back. The primary way we love God back is by loving God's creations – including loving our neighbors as our very selves. Love of God and neighbor are twin facets of how we embody and give back what we receive from God. That is to say, how we respond to God's love and grace in a way that makes an actual difference in our lives and that of others – in a way that *heals*.

Receiving and giving God's extravagant love and grace creates the *healing* that we are saved for (spiritual health and wholeness), but this does not fully explain what we are saved from.

## II. Fear Put to Flight

The second verse of our carol describes what we are saved from:

*This is love come to light,  
now is fear put to flight.  
God defeats evil's blight;  
giving for our sorrows  
hope of new tomorrows.*

To many, salvation means being saved from eternal punishment in Hell. Until you “get saved,” you have every reason to fear God. In fact, even after you get “saved,” you have every reason to fear God because you never truly know if you’ve satisfied God’s requirements fully enough.

Yet to me, Jesus saves (heals) us not simply from Hell but from the very belief that Hell exists, at least as a place of eternal punishment in the afterlife. (I see plenty of evidence of Hell that we create for ourselves on earth!) After all, how can you really believe in the God that Jesus revealed, who continually taught us to love even our enemies and do good even to those who abuse and persecute us, who prayed even on the Cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing” ... how can you believe all this while simultaneously believing in a God who does the exact opposite of what Christ teaches: a God who hates God’s enemies, who remains eternally unforgiving and, in fact, tortures and abuses them all the while?

No matter how you may conceive of Jesus being “Son of God” – from being a mere inspired mortal to being God incarnate walking the earth – if Jesus in any way reveals who God is and how God acts toward God’s creation, then his life, his death, and his resurrection all reveal that our belief that God loves us “beyond our wildest imagination” is not merely “wishful thinking.” We’re not just making this up to suit our own interests.

In fact, if Jesus reveals who God is, then not only does Hell not exist as a place of eternal punishment for those of us who believe in Jesus, but it does not exist for those who have no belief in Jesus, or who are even against Jesus. Any correction that takes place for any of us in the afterlife must come under the overall framework of God’s extravagant love and grace.

How can I make these outlandish claims about God and Hell?

I hope you’ll indulge me in a little fanciful thinking. My thinking is, in part, inspired by Season 4 of the Netflix series, *Black Mirror* – which is a series that takes a fairly “dark” view of certain technological developments in our society if they continue to develop in the path they’re on. It may seem a little hard to know where I am going with this for a few moments, but I won’t leave you stranded in the dark.

Imagine that one day we are able to create robots who actually have human-like consciousness. Not just intelligence, but actual human consciousness. They can think and reason, but also *feel*. They can feel joy, love, and even pain – both physical pain and existential pain, like the pain of heartbreak. Also, like human beings, they can *inflict* both kinds of pain on others.

Let's imagine that you own one of these robots. We'll call "her" Robbi. At first, you're elated to have such a high-tech piece of machinery that thinks and feels so much like you. But then you discover the dark side of owning a robot who is so close to being human. Robbi is capable of negative human emotions, not just positive ones. Robbi gets angry one day and, in her rage, she intentionally hurts you. In fact, she gets so angry that she decides to hurt you so deeply that the hurt can't be undone. Because Robbi is an intelligent robot, she knows that the surest way to hurt you in this way is not to hurt you directly, but to hurt someone you love dearly – hurting them over and over again until your loved one dies.

Now consider this question: If you could push a couple of buttons on your computer to send a signal to your robot that would inflict excruciating pain for a certain period of time, how would you respond to what Robbi has done? There's a dial on your computer that allows you to adjust the length of time Robbi feels this pain. Would you set the dial for a day, then forgive and forget? How about a week? A month or year? Remember what she did to someone you love – with full knowledge of what she was doing and intention to do it. If you could keep turning that dial until Robbi would feel excruciating pain for *eternity*, would you do it?

A lot of how you respond depends upon the level of empathy you are capable of feeling. Robbi is "just" a robot, yet she's a robot who has feelings and ability to feel pain just like you and me. She has these feelings because we created robots like her this way.

This hypothetical situation may seem a little "far out," especially considering that we're reflecting on a Christmas carol, but do you see where I am going with this illustration? If not, I'll tell you straight out:

The only way that you would be able to turn that pain dial to "eternity" – and keep it there without ever changing your mind and turning it back – is if you had absolutely zero sense of empathy for any sentient being that experiences pain, human or otherwise. In other words, you'd have to be a sociopath to keep that dial turned up. That's because sociopaths can't feel empathy, and empathy is the quality that allows a person to experience another person's pain as if it were their own.

What this should tell us is that, if God can effectively turn up the pain dial to eternity on even a single "sinner" in God's eyes, the only way God could inflict pain for this length of time is if God were a sociopath – fundamentally incapable of experiencing a person's pain as if it were God's own.

Yet Jesus reveals something central about who God is. We can therefore be assured that God is no sociopath. In fact, through Jesus, we can rest assured that God's love for us is so great that if even one of God's creations were being tortured in Hell for eternity, God's deep empathy would become Hell for God. I am convinced that God would follow that person into Hell, for it would be no better than being in Heaven, at least for a deity with such supreme empathy. After all, how can Heaven ever be "heavenly" if you know someone you love is being tortured while you dwell in "paradise"? If the most orthodox Christian theology is correct, that in Christ God "came down" to earth to dwell among us in a sinful world, God would certainly dwell with us in Hell, too, if we were there.

Putting this all together, if you believe that Jesus reveals who God is, and how God loves us, then you know something of the “salvation” God offers us in Christ. That is, a firm and bold assurance that God loves you – and all of God’s creations – beyond our wildest imagination and that God asks you to join God in loving others – even your enemies – as God loves you.

Not only do you receive *these* assurances, but you also receive the assurance that if you’ve got any of these beliefs about God or Jesus wrong, you won’t have “Hell to pay.” Even if you’ve regularly turned your back on God – to the point of committing the worst sins listed in Scripture – the “fires” of Hell may await you, but *they are not torturing fires*. Rather, they are the *refining fires of God’s fierce and abiding love for us*.

These fires are the **fires of God’s generosity** that burn away any semblance of stinginess within us; the **fires of God’s grace** that burn through our constant condemnation of others and ourselves; the **fires of God’s forgiveness** that utterly consume the hardness of any unforgiving heart; the **fires of God’s mercy** that obliterate anything that keeps us from feeling compassion – and empathy – for others. These fierce fires burn away anything that blocks us from God, anything that burdens us and weighs us down in such a way that we cannot dance God’s dance of life.

God’s fires make us whole again, and holy, so that we may join in singing the constant refrain of today’s carol with everything in our being:

*Let us sing, sing, sing, dance and spring, spring, spring!*  
*Christ is here, ever near!*  
*Gloria in excelsis.*  
*(“Glory in the highest”)*