

Belong

PENTECOST

HOMELESS
NO MORE

WE ARE
ONE

THE ASCENSION
AND YOU



Photo: Chalabala, istockphoto.com

HOLY SPIRIT



GREG WILLIAMS
info@gracecom.church

Have you ever experienced the power of the wind? My most vivid memory was living in Fayetteville, North Carolina, when the outer bands of Hurricane Fran blew 80 mph gusts through the wooded acre of my backyard. The combination of the high-pitched whistling sounds and the cracking of limbs as they broke and fell was unnerving, to say the least.

Wind is a common theme in the Bible. It has been compared to the breath of God in Genesis, to the length of life in Psalms, and to the Holy Spirit. We see Jesus referring to the wind in his conversation with Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel and a Pharisee. He was talking to Nicodemus about being born again when he said:

The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)

Jesus is reminding Nicodemus that just as you cannot see the wind or know it is there, except by what it does – rustling the trees, blowing the dust around, wreaking havoc in your backyard – you cannot see

**“THE SPIRIT IS
CONSTANTLY
BRINGING US INTO
A RELATIONAL
KNOWING OF THE
FATHER”.**

any outward signs in those who are born again. But you can tell who is born from above by the fruit produced in their life. Just as the invisible power of the wind accomplishes things that can be seen, the invisible power of the Holy Spirit works in converted Christians producing fruit like love, joy, patience, and kindness.

Jesus' words about the Holy Spirit are mysterious, powerful, and transforming. Later in his Gospel account, John provides more insight into the work of the Holy Spirit:

But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you. (John 16:7-15)

We don't know what we don't know. Jesus knew this all so well. Therefore, before going away, he made sure the disciples heard the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit will bring conviction about what really matters. And what really matters is Jesus. It isn't sin that gets center stage; it is Jesus who has conquered sin. What really matters isn't righteousness we somehow accomplish or earn on our own; it is the vicarious righteousness we receive because of Jesus. What really matters isn't the fear of judgment, since condemnation has been placed squarely on Satan, and there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Hallelujah! The Spirit is faithful every day to remind us of these truths about Jesus and the impact that truth has on us.

Belief in Jesus allows us to find grace, not guilt,



Photo: modera76, istockphoto.com

for our past. The Father is not deterred by the lack of understanding of a new or growing believer. He meets us where we are, and by the power of the Spirit, grows us up in his grace. Notice Jesus' promise to us:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:13)

This guidance of the Spirit of truth extends into "the things that are to come." The "things that are to come" are not the world events on your newsfeed, rather it is the kingdom into which Jesus is bringing us. The Spirit has sealed or marked us as citizens of the kingdom and is guiding us to that reality. Our identity as kingdom citizens who belong to Jesus is secure by the presence of the guiding Spirit.

We understand the kingdom in relational terms – Jesus brings us into the divine life that the Father, Son, and Spirit share. The work of the Spirit is confirming this now. The Spirit is constantly bringing us into a relational knowing of the Father. The heart of this truth is that God is a God of love. This is what Jesus was revealing about the Father through his life, death, and resurrection. The Father

is not an angry, vindictive God but rather the God of compassionate love. This is what the Spirit continues to declare to us as we move toward the future reality of the kingdom.

So, if the Spirit is doing this amazing, mysterious transformation in us, what about our neighbour? Do we watch and listen closely enough to see how the Spirit is blowing and rustling the thoughts and mindsets in others around us? Do we trust that the Spirit is able to bring about the convictions of who Jesus is in their lives? Do we pray that the overwhelming love of God would capture them, like it has us? I am talking about a more focused participation with God, the Holy Spirit. I say this out of a personal confession that all too often, instead of trusting the Spirit, I very clumsily try to do the Spirit's work for him.

I believe for GCI to continue to grow in church health and to be a beacon that points to Jesus, we need to think about the Holy Spirit as a mighty, rushing wind that is capable and willing to transform the lives of the people around us. As we are now just a few days away from Pentecost, let's have a heightened awareness and anticipation of the amazing work of the Holy Spirit. This isn't about us rolling up our sleeves and trying harder. Rather, it is about patient, faithful reliance on the Spirit and witnessing the amazing, mysterious ways he operates as he glorifies Jesus and draws humanity into this union.

Pentecost is coming!

Dr Greg Williams is the President of Grace Communion International

HOMELESS NO MORE



BY BILL HALL
info@gracecom.church

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend the Saskatchewan Homelessness Conference. For two days I listened to presenters talking about the causes of homelessness and what is being done to address the plague of homelessness.

I was again reminded that homelessness is the symptom of many issues. That any one of us could find ourselves in the same situation given our life circumstance. Or as one speaker said, "When life life's us." Many times, addictions cause homelessness. Yet, there is always something behind those addictions. People don't just wake up some morning and say, "Hey, I want to be addicted to drugs or alcohol." Their addictions are a way of coping with the times when "Life life's us."

But what are some of the solutions? Time, and time again, I heard the mantra of reclaiming one's "identity" and the importance of "community." In a first nation's context, this means trying to keep people in their smaller isolated communities, instead of having them become lost in a larger urban centre,



away from their family support systems.

During that conference I heard the terms of "identity" and "community" in relation to those who find themselves homeless, but these are things all humans deal with.

For those of us who are versed in God's written word, the theme of identity and community fill the pages of the Old Testament, starting with the story of our first parents, Adam and Eve. Before "the fall," Adam and Eve had a firm identity as the children of God, and community referred to humankind in relationship with the God who created them.

When they rejected that community or relationship, they also lost sight of their identity. Instead, they sought a different identity and community of their own making.

As God interacted with different individuals, such as Abraham and his descendants – ultimately the nation of Israel – we see time and time again that it was God’s desire to introduce them to a restored identity and community: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians” (Exodus 6:7 ESV).

As they say, the rest is history. Each time when “life life’d” these descendants of Abraham, they lost their bearings and connection with God. As a result, they fell out of the identity and community that God had intended for them (1 Kings 17).

Fast forward to the birth of that baby in the little town of Bethlehem, in the Roman occupied country of Judea. Although those living by then had reclaimed a semblance of their identity and community, there was still something lacking, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matthew 23:37 NIV).

The religious leaders rejected Jesus’ message that a new kingdom had arrived and through his reconciling life, death and resurrection, a new identity and community was being offered. It was a fulfillment of prophecies such as those found in Jeremiah, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33 NSV).

While some thought the death of this troublemaking prophet or rabbi, who claimed to be God’s Son was the end – believing that “life life’d” even Jesus – something quite the opposite happened. Jesus conquered the grave and began to appear to his followers.

He then told them to gather in Jerusalem to wait for the Holy Spirit which would give them power to tell

people about him everywhere (Acts 1:8). It was on that momentous day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit entered the lives of those believers in that upper room, that something miraculous happened. Those initial believers and those who followed afterward, became part of a new community – the Church, the *ekklesia*. Their identity now was in Jesus.

As Paul mentions, “So, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28 NIV).

In other words, we are homeless no more.

Bill Hall is the National Director of GCI Canada.



Photo: jacoblund, istockphoto.com

THE GIFT OF “GOTCHAS”



BY CEEJAY MALMKAR
info@gracecom.church

I've enjoyed event planning for as long as I can remember. As Jesus drew me back into church and ministry, that passion never changed. In fact, it opened a whole new world of ministry for all of us in a little church in Oklahoma.

As a Pioneer/Connector personality type, I love to bring people together, and I love to think outside the box. I have been blessed with an amazing Love Avenue team who are diverse, unique, and full of passion. What started as a neighborhood camp and a water balloon battle has flourished into six big events we plan throughout the year (one every other month). I cannot begin to explain how wonderful it has been to have found a healthy rhythm of events/outreaches that work in our target neighborhood. Once we found the events that worked, we were able to continue to build on them and make them better each year. We do this through our tradition of debriefing after each event.

There's a common understanding that once you do something, it's always easier the next time you do it. While this may be true as we become more comfortable and confident in our ability to actually execute a repeat event, it does not mean the event will automatically grow in quality or attendance.

Chances are, you have heard some form of the saying “Those who cannot remember the past, are doomed to repeat it.” This is why debriefing after any outreach, mission, or event is vital. I'm 38 years old, and my husband likes to say that I have a “steel trap” when it comes to memory. While his confidence in my brain power is flattering, I can't remember what I did last week most of the time. I have learned that this is true for most people, regardless of age. I live my life always utilizing a planner and lots of notes.

I'm currently knee-deep in planning our neighborhood camp. This is our 4th in person neighborhood camp, and we still have much to learn. Every year, we make major changes based on the experience of campers, staff, and leadership the

year before. Debriefing after any outreach is key to opening ourselves up to hear all the things that God did during the event, and how we can more effectively participate with him in loving others well. Debriefing allows us to hear all the voices on our teams. I've come to see that diversity is the most beautiful thing about unity, and every voice on our teams is important. Debriefing allows those voices to be heard and helps us flourish in our planning. We are truly better together.

It was a few years ago when my friend, Nikki Payne, helped me understand that “debriefing” is celebrating all the positives, and then working together to find the “gotchas.” I absolutely fell in love with that term because it makes everything less personal and more positive. When we are debriefing (finding the gotchas), it's important that we create space for everyone to be open and honest without the leadership feeling personally attacked.

I believe we should always start with recognizing and celebrating all the heart and work that goes into planning and executing an event. After celebrating all the wonderful things, it's just as important to come together and ask the team, “What were the gotchas?” There is no such thing as a “perfect” event or neighborhood engagement. We are always learning and growing. After years of doing some of the same events, we find new “gotchas” each and every time, and it is exciting to be able to find creative solutions together.

The gift of “gotchas” is simply that – a gift. It's a gift to be able to work together alongside our amazingly loving and relational God. It's a gift to be able to celebrate our participation with him while also relishing in relationship with one another. That's the beauty of being team-based. As a team, we all want to reach out to love and serve our neighbors the best way we can. We are always better together.

I highly encourage everyone to utilize the gift of “gotchas” by always debriefing after an event or outreach. Every volunteer has unique experiences that we need to hear about, enabling our future events to have an even bigger and better impact for both the people we serve as well as those of us serving. If done with respect, honesty, and love, debriefing gives us the opportunity to reflect on our ministry engagements together and provides clarity on how we move forward.

There will be debriefs where discoveries are made that changes our course of ministry events. Sometimes we are led to make changes, and sometimes we may need to rethink an entire event. Regardless of what details and revelations your debrief brings, it will certainly always bring a sense of clarity in the direction we are moving.

Lastly, it's important to know when to debrief. You want to bring your team together as soon as possible after an engagement event. Much of the time, this may be the same day, or the weekend following the event. In my experience, I have found that it is often during an event that people will come to me with suggestions or “gotchas.” I have learned that in those instances, to always respond with a “please write that down and bring it to our debrief meeting?” I cannot tell you how many times I thought I would do something different next time but forgot to write it down and ended up duplicating my flaws over again.

Debriefing allows for so many things to happen in our ministry teams. It allows us to examine and analyze through the lens of loving others well. It allows us to support one another, and it brings our teams together. It allows us to take a step back and reevaluate the “how” and the “why” we do things as a church family. It is indeed the final step to any event or outreach, and it is just as important as planning the event itself. We are better together. Let's relish in that while we embrace the “gift of gotchas” known as debriefing.

Ceejay Malmkar is the Love Avenue Champion in Surrey Hills, Oklahoma.



Photo: unsplash.com

THE ASCENSION AND YOU



BY RICK SHALLENBERGER
info@gracecom.church

The ascension of Jesus signaled the successful end of his earthly ministry, the return of his heavenly glory, his exaltation by the Father, the beginning of his new work as high priest and mediator of the new covenant, and it allowed him to prepare a place for us.

The Ascension was not a retirement, it was the beginning of a new job and glorified job description. He had finished his task of dying for the salvation of the world (John 19:30) and began living for believers as our intercessor and advocate. When he ascended to the throne of God and sat at the right hand of the Father, his kingly ministry for us began.

According to the theologian T.F. Torrance, four verbs are employed in the New Testament that speak of the ascension of Christ. All four of these words speak of the role of Jesus being the king, priest, and prophet.

- *anabainein*, to go up or ascend.
- *kathizein*, to sit down.
- *analambanein*, to take up.
- *hupsoun*, to exalt.

Anabaino – to go up, to ascend – is used in the Old Testament and speaks of the ascent of Moses of Mount Sinai, when he ascends to speak to the Lord. It was also used when referring to the high priest going into the holy of holies. Additionally, it was used when referring to the offering of sacrifices. When used to describe Christ's ascension, it speaks to the ascent of the king to his enthronement as the king of glory; to the ascent to the temple or the presence of God for priestly service, and of the ascent of God as the whole burnt offering – or prayer.

In these ways the term ascension is essentially concerned with the royal priesthood of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ, a priesthood exercised from the right hand of divine power. (*Atonement*, p. 267)

Kathizo – to sit – reminds us of the mercy seat in the heart of the holy of holies. The priests were not to sit, but our great high priest sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2) Here he rules as the messianic king who dispenses divine mercy and peace.

Analambano – to take up – refers to the lifting up of our hearts in prayer. It's only use in the New Testament is in Luke 9:51, where it is often translated "receiving up," and refers to the death of our Lord. Torrance says the indication here is that the ascension of Christ began with his being lifted up on the cross.

Hupsoo – to lift up – refers to Jesus' exaltation from humiliation to glory. Again, this points to a connection between the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension. The exalted one is no longer bound by human restraints and self-limitations, but is clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49). Note, that Jesus tells the disciples that we will be clothed in the same way.

Questions for reflection:

- How does the idea of Jesus being the "whole burnt offering" change your view of your relationship to God?
- What does it mean that Jesus is the perfect sacrifice? (Hebrews 9:23-10:18)
- What does it mean for you and me that Jesus is sitting on the seat of mercy?
- In what ways do you see a connection between the ascension and the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord?

Torrance sums it up like this:

The ascension of Christ in this sense is his exaltation to glory and power but through the cross, certainly an exaltation from humiliation to royal majesty, but through crucifixion and sacrifice. For the power and glory of the royal priest is bound up with his self-sacrifice in death and resurrection. (Atonement, p. 270)

David prophesied about the exaltation of Christ in his messianic psalm, saying, "The Lord says to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" (Psalm 110:1)

The ascension was the beginning of a new ministry for our Lord. He finished the task of dying for the world and offered salvation to all who believe. He now lives as our intercessor and advocate – our high priest. The ascension has a powerful impact on the life of all believers. Here are just a few things the ascension brought for us.

- The blessing of a mediator, advocate, Savior, and friend who sits at the right hand of the Father – (1 Timothy 2, Hebrews 4, 1 John 2, John 15).
- The sending of the Holy Spirit – we will celebrate this at Pentecost and live in this reality year-round – (Acts 2, John 14-17, 1 Corinthians 6).
- The giving of spiritual gifts – as he sits on the mercy seat, he imparts gifts to us through the Holy Spirit – (Ephesians 4, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12).
- The indwelling of the Holy Spirit and imparting us with spiritual power – (Luke 24, Ephesians 1, Romans 12)
- The preparation of our heavenly home – he reminded us that the Father has many rooms – (John 14:3).
- The promise of salvation, justification, sanctification – (Ephesians 2, Romans 8).

As we look forward to Pentecost, I encourage you to reflect on these blessings of the Ascension. They give us cause for praise, and they point to our participating with Jesus in his work of bringing many sons and daughters to glory. Focusing on the Ascension enables us to better celebrate Pentecost and look forward to the season of Ordinary Time.

Rick Shallenberger is the editor of GCI Equipper.



Photo: istockphoto.com

HE KNOWS THEIR NAME

Our youth are struggling for identity, let's remind them of the One who knows them and calls them by name.



BY DISHON MILLS
info@gracecom.church

On the last day of last month, we celebrated Easter, a day when we rejoice over Christ's completed work of salvation. The empty tomb was and is an open door to a new humanity in Jesus. It is at this time of year that we often retell the story of Christ's resurrection, and we also give our attention to those who bore witness to the moment of our redemption.

One story that always touches me is Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Lord (John 20:1-18). When Mary sees the empty tomb, she is distraught, thinking that someone stole away Jesus' body. She speaks to Jesus, thinking he was the

gardener. She does not recognize him and boldly asks to be shown to the Lord's remains. Then, something amazing happens:

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). (John 20:16 NIV)

We do not know why Mary did not recognize Jesus. On other occasions, Jesus supernaturally obscured his identity somehow, so that could be a possibility.

Or perhaps Mary's vision was distorted because of her tears. We do not know for sure. What we do know is that Jesus said Mary's name and she instantly knew him. She also remembered herself. She called Jesus "teacher," which implied that she was his disciple. By saying her name, Jesus said

something about who he was and who Mary was at the same time.

It is during the adolescent and teenage years that young people begin to ask questions like, “Who am I? Who do I want to be?” It is during this period of time that they begin to develop and assert their identity. It can be a time of experimentation and confusion as they try to figure out the kind of person they want to be. When it comes to the discipleship of children and youth, it is really important that we teach our young people that God knows who they are. He has perfect knowledge of their identity. Not only that, he is ready and willing to tell them. He knows their name and he desires to let them know.

As we do our part to support young people through this sometimes difficult time, let us teach them to turn to God in prayer and ask, “Who am I, Lord? Who did you make me to be?” We can teach our youth that God deliberately and joyfully made them. He has a purpose for them and is even now preparing a place that is perfect for them. No matter how confusing life gets, God knows them. He is willing to say their name and reveal himself to them. He is willing to say their name and reveal them to



themselves. Our identities flow from him and it is only in Christ that we can find our true selves.

I am so thankful that God knows my name. I pray that your young people can make the same confession. Have a blessed Easter!

Dishon Mills is the Pastor in Charlotte, North Carolina.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT:
GRACECOM.CHURCH



WE ARE ONE



BY JILLIAN MORRISON
info@gracecom.church

All these [gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body— whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. (1 Corinthians 12:11-13 NIV)

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost gave birth to a new living entity, a body whose international members powerfully proclaimed the revolution of Christ's kingdom on earth: diversity does not have to mean division, and unity does not have to be uniformity. Instead of giving in to the temptation to compare ourselves with other people and let our differences divide us, let us celebrate humanity's rich diversity of cultures and languages.

Instead of thinking we're better than other people or feeling insecure around others with gifts we don't have, let us celebrate the fact that we belong to one another and that we need each other to be the unique part of the body no one else can be.

Christ came to break down social and ethnic barriers so that his followers may be unified and healed in him. In the body of Christ, no one person and their gifts are "better" than another. Every follower



Photo: unsplash.com

of Jesus has an indispensable role to play in the restoration of creation through unity and self-giving love.

Prayer: Abba Father, thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit. I need your Spirit to transform me into a new person, one who lives and loves more like your Son Jesus. I need your Spirit to discern the spiritual gifts you've given me to build up the body of Christ. I need you, Holy Spirit. Come and fill me anew. Amen.

Jillian Morrison, Associate Pastor, Glendora, CA, US



Belong is an in house publication of Grace Communion International (UK), 9 the Point, Rockingham Road, Market Harborough, LE16 7QU, UK

Tel: 01858 437 099
Email: info@gracecom.church

Copyright © 2024, Grace Communion International, is registered as a charity and private company in England and Wales.

Company No. 654913.
Charity number (E&W): 311098
Scotland: SC040008.
All Rights Reserved.

All Scriptures unless otherwise stated are quoted from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers