

Go the Distance † Home

“...come...deny...take up...follow...”

In the name of Jesus, God’s intimate connection to human hearts, dearly loved by God:

Take a road trip out West. You’ll see vistas like the picture on our bulletin cover with prairie stretching to mountains on the horizon. Reminds me of my high school years running distances in track. There’s the long, lonesome road, the fences, the fields. Just take out the mountains to match South Dakota. You could run “forever” and feel no closer to the goal. But as soon as you turned around, you could understand why horses always run faster on the way back to the barn. Understand why God keeps putting heaven in front of us to help us **Go the Distance † Home**. Your running Partner says,

† “...come...”

To set this up, consider one of six questions from members of CASH (Campus Atheist club): “If God who is relationship and love itself created humanity to be in a relationship with him and enjoy all the blessings of life, why does he share a less intimate relationship with modern humans than he did in Old Testament days? We no longer seem to have God speaking to prophets and new gospels being given to us, which would indicate that God is not reaching out to have a relationship with us in real-time.”

God answered part of this question in the first few verses of His letter to Jewish Christians: ***“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”*** (Hebrews 1:1–3 NIV84) All the Old Testament prophets pointed to Jesus the Messiah. There is really only one Gospel. It’s the inviting story of Jesus’ life and ministry which God has preserved in four accounts by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Gospel means Good News. It’s all about how God is still calling in love, as intimate as ever for lonely hearts. Only now Jesus has ascended to heaven to rule all things for the good of His Church, His holy Bride. Intimate love!

Instead of prophets, we have *the* Prophet: God’s own Son Jesus Christ. He’s calling us personally today: ***“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me...”*** People were coming to Jesus from great distances on foot to hear His preaching and be healed. None of the Old Testament prophets ever did so many miracles: feeding thousands; healing the blind, deaf, sick; raising the dead. If you don’t know about this spectacular display of God’s love and God’s longing for a relationship with you, listen to His invitation to you again today. ***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*** (Matthew 11:28–29 NIV84)

† “...deny...”

One reason I believe the Bible and not the critics is because of what Jesus says next: ***“...deny...”***

Jesus just started telling His disciples about rejection by their Jewish religious leaders, His death and also His resurrection after three days. If the Bible is a book of myths and legends as the critics insist, why would any religious leader foretell His own shameful, painful, dreadful demise? Why would His closest disciple disagree so dangerously with His mission? Jesus turned and rebuked Peter: ***“Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”***

Too often our goal in life can be summed up like the atheists' club: CASH. See what was tripping Peter? Everything he knew about Jesus made Him the long-promised Messiah who would conquer their enemies and put Israel back in the spotlight of history as God's chosen nation. Peter was falling for the "theology of glory" like so my Christians today. Such greed kills your soul. Yet modern preachers like Jewish rabbis leave something out because it's not popular. In many passages we find that the Messiah would suffer as foretold by the prophet Isaiah (700 B.C.): "***It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer....***" Made-up myth and legend don't show us our wretched sin. But Jesus suffered to fulfill the other half of Isaiah's passage: "***...the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.***" (53:10 NIV84)

God's own Son came as His Suffering Servant to give us all what money cannot buy: freedom from guilt, death and despair. God's intimate relationship through Christ gives your soul peace and confidence. With Jesus you **Go the Distance** no matter how long and lonely the way **Home**. God loves you enough to be honest through His Son. Things can rob you of this treasure. So Jesus says, "***If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself....***" Haven't you noticed? What feels good and tastes good can often kill you. God tells us what can harm us spiritually, physically, eternally. He calls all this "sin." Jesus came to save us from self destruction. The way back to God is first to **come** to Jesus and then **deny** your own pride, arrogance, attitude – as if you know better than God how to run your own life.

✦ "...take up..."

Is that any way to start a religion like all the other religions of the world? There is something so different about Jesus' message. All the others say, "Do – or else!" "Do – so you can get!" But in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God says, "Done!" Your happy **Home** in heaven awaits because God already paid your debt of guilt and sin. He paid the mortgage on your mansion in the sky.

Jesus is kind and honest: "***If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross....***" Many Christians confuse the "***cross***" with normal aches and pains, heartaches and hurts that everyone has to suffer in this world. But the ***cross*** Jesus is calling us to "***...take up...***" involves only those things you suffer because you are a Christian. It may be the ridicule of humanists so sure they don't need God, that their own intelligence and creativity can "Save the planet!" If you work in academia and PhD's discover you do not accept that there was nothing and nothing blew up and became everything, you will be despised. If you kids don't talk bad like your friends or you refuse to watch bad stuff on the computer with them, maybe they won't like you anymore. That's a ***cross***. Jesus says to pick it up, in other words, choose Jesus first. If some family or marriage relationship requires you to choose them over Jesus, it's a ***cross*** to "***...take up...***" because life with God is far more important. You and I have good reason to ***take up*** our cross: God's own Son is our Savior who lovingly, intimately calls us to...

✦ "...follow..."

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

It would have been so easy to do what CASH and the critics say God is doing. Jesus could have stayed in heaven. Who wouldn't want a cabin far north or a tropical resort and let the world go run itself? Jesus had perfect pleasure as God with His Father and the Holy Spirit in heaven, adored by myriads of angels. He left all that to come here and suffer extreme poverty with no cash, not even a place to lay His head at night. He owned nothing more than the clothes they stripped off Him for beating and crucifying Him. He gave up everything, even His life, to give us a place in God's heart and a home in heaven.

What kind of God do we "***...follow...***"? The kind who said about atheists too, "***Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.***" Repent and believe like one of the soldiers who crucified Jesus and confessed, "***Truly, this was the Son of God!***" His sacrifice empowers you to **Go the Distance** ✦ **Home** to "***no more death or mourning or crying or pain....***" (Revelation 21:4 NIV84) Amen.