

GARY KENT

Getting Off The Mountain



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Editors: Irene Relihan, Dorothy Pansare
Graphic Designer: Doreen Neo

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible texts are from the
Authorized King James Version

Published by The Incredible Journey
PO Box 5101 · Dora Creek · NSW 2264 · Australia

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GETTING OFF THE MOUNTAIN

They found Juanita at 20,000 feet in the Andes mountains. She was perfectly preserved in the ice, curled in a foetal position, wrapped in fine woollens of chocolate brown and cream stripes. Juanita had soft brown hair and high cheekbones.

Why did this 13-year-old girl have to die on an isolated mountaintop? Why had she been deliberately killed in this way?

The answers to such questions take us into the mystery of the human heart, where we must reach out to God.

In the summer of 1995, anthropologist Johan Rienhard set out on a reconnaissance trip, spurred on by information about an erupting Peruvian volcano. It had been spewing hot ash on nearby ice-covered mountains, and Johan believed this could be the opportunity he had been waiting for. He had been exploring icy Andean summits for years in search of archaeological remains of the great Inca civilisation. Perhaps the volcano had dislodged something.

He trekked to the summit ridge of a mountain called Ampato. There, he was excited to find that the heat of the eruption had melted away the ice and snow. Johan

spotted feathers sticking up out of the thin ridge. It proved to be the headdress of a small Inca statue.

Then, something further down the slope caught his eye. He scrambled down and came upon the find of a lifetime: the frozen, perfectly preserved body of an Inca girl. It appeared that she had tumbled from the summit as the snow melted around her grave.

Johan examined the 500-year-old icy coffin of the girl he would name “Juanita”. He found shards of ceramics, fragments of food, bits of wood, pieces of bone. She was wrapped in fine woollens.

It became clear to Johan that he had discovered a ritual offering, a human sacrifice. This child had been killed by Inca

priests to appease the gods; specifically, the god of the mountain.

As darkness fell, Johan took out a pick and began carefully separating Juanita from the ice that still encased her. This sacrificial girl had been entombed in the mountain, locked in its frozen embrace for five centuries.

Juanita has given archaeologists new insights into the Incan culture. Other mummies have been discovered on Andean summits as well, all of them children without blemish, all of them killed as sacrifices to the mountain god.

Johan reasoned that a volcano must have erupted near Ampato 500 years earlier. No doubt, ash and lava from the explosion would have contaminated water supplies

and destroyed crops. Something had to be done to appease the angry mountain and quell the fire in its belly. The Incan solution was to bring Juanita to this summit ridge. The volcano would have melted the ice then, just as it did in 1995. Juanita would have been sacrificed, most likely by being drugged to sleep and then buried alive.

It's very difficult for us today to imagine sacrificing a 13-year-old girl to a mountain. We think we know better than trying to appease a volcano.

Little Juanita, however, frozen in that icy summit for all those years, does embody a dilemma we all face, a struggle that involves us all, whether we realise it or not.

We struggle with guilt, and we wonder about God. The problems of life can make

us wonder whether we're under His curse or His blessing.

Sometimes we nod our heads when people tell us how much the Father in Heaven loves us. At other times, we feel very far away from a God of absolute holiness. In fact, the closer we come to the awesome Almighty, the more insecure we feel about our own standing.

Today, few people sacrifice children to appease God. However, we often do all kinds of other things to try to make ourselves worthy. We have our rituals. We have our compulsions. We try to atone for our sins by our good deeds.

This can sometimes seem as if we are trying to climb a great mountain. The more we try to be like God, or like Jesus,

the more slippery the slope becomes, and the more we realise how weak and selfish we really are.

The good news of the gospel is that God Himself has solved this fundamental human problem. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul refers to the alienation that much of the world feels. He talks about people who have “no hope and [are] without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

Then he goes on to make a powerful statement that enables us to understand the heart of the gospel: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

The blood of Christ brings us near to

God. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross reconciles us to God. That's the divine solution.

This is not new to anyone who has any knowledge of Christianity. However, most people still have questions about Jesus' death on the cross, about this concept called "the atonement".

Why did Jesus need to die?

After all, if God really does love us, why can't He just forgive us, full stop? Why does He need this gruesome shedding of blood?

Did Jesus give Himself up on the cross in order to appease a wrathful, holy God? Is Jesus the merciful One and God the Father the angry One?

This question, then, of why Jesus needed to die on the cross is a very important one. It's important because the cross is at the very centre of the Christian faith.

I believe that if we really understood the cross, we wouldn't get caught up in the rituals that occupy the time of so many sincere people. An understanding of the cross of Jesus can help us avoid a great deal of compulsive behaviour. It frees us from climbing that huge mountain.

In short, I believe the cross is how we "get Juanita off the mountaintop". We can end all these fearful sacrifices, these human efforts to appease, to be accepted, if we really grasp what happened at the cross.

First, let us address this question: "Why did Jesus need to die?"

We find the best step-by-step explanation in Romans. In this letter, Paul presents the doctrine of “justification by faith”. It is a clear statement of how sinful human beings can be accepted by a holy God.

The first two chapters of Romans focus on the law, the judgment and God’s wrath.

Our alienation from God isn’t just a feeling; it isn’t something that we simply need to cope with or adjust to. It’s based on one hard fact that Paul states in the book of Romans, where he cuts to the very heart of the matter. He says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

We keep falling short of God’s standards. We don’t even live up to our own standards most of the time. Paul goes on to tell us

that “by the deeds of the law, no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Romans 3:20).

The law makes us increasingly aware of our weakness. It reveals God’s will and demonstrates how we’ve fallen short of it. It makes us more fearful of judgment. We can’t solve our problems just by trying to be good enough, following all the rules, doing all the right things.

We can’t climb that mountain. There’ll always be more stretching ahead. That’s our essential problem. We keep falling short.

Sin separates us from God; that separation means death. God wants to solve our problems. He loves His children intensely. He loves us even when we’re cruel, even when we’re indifferent. He wants, as the Bible says, to reconcile us to Himself (2

Corinthians 5:18).

But the ultimate result and penalty for sin is death. God can't arbitrarily change that. He can't take sin lightly and still be God. He's committed to treating us as morally responsible beings. So God faces a problem. How can He remain just and still rescue sinful human beings? How can He uphold His eternal, moral law and at the same time welcome law-breakers? In a fair universe, sin's cruelty must result in death.

Despite the tragedy of human sin, God doesn't want any of His weak, sinful children to perish. That's His dilemma.

But praise His name, for He has created a way out of an apparently impossible problem. God *can* be just, *and* the

justifier of all who fall short. Paul goes on to describe God's solution for people's alienation from Him:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in

Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

Let us explore the meaning of this passage. Human beings need righteousness in order to be accepted by a holy God. They don't have it; nor can they achieve it. So God decides to create a different kind of righteousness. Something that's transferable.

He becomes a man in the Person of Jesus Christ. He lives a perfect life. He fulfils the requirements of the law. And then He lays down that perfect life at the cross. His life spills out for us like the blood running down His body.

Christ accepts the penalty for sin, which is the death that sin always brings. And He offers His righteousness to all who place their faith in Him.

That's how Jesus becomes our substitute on the cross. He stands in our place. He suffers what we deserve so we can receive what He deserves.

Paul puts it very clearly in 2 Corinthians: "For He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Weak human beings can be accepted in Christ. We are joined to the beloved Son by faith. This is how God reconciles us to Himself.

God's great love compelled Him to stand in our place, and to suffer the terrible consequences of sin. This enables Him to offer us the righteousness of Christ as a gift. This is the only way He can satisfy

the depths of His justice and mercy, and save us.

The way this can transform our lives is illustrated by the extraordinary story of two teenagers who visited the jungles of Ecuador during a school break. They sought out a specific location on a particular river.

Steve and Kathy had decided to accept Christ, follow the Bible and be baptised. They wanted to express their commitment to Christ in a special way. The location for this act of commitment was important because they wanted a certain man to perform the baptism. They asked members of the local Auca Indian tribe to officiate and a pastor named Kimo to baptise them.

Standing on a sandbar in the river, Kimo

said a few words about the meaning of baptism. He talked about how we are buried and resurrected with Christ in the waters of baptism; about how we then become identified with Christ.

Then Kimo led Steve and Kathy out into the cool, flowing river until they were waist deep. He raised his hand over Steve's head and began to repeat those timeless words: "I baptise you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Kimo was the last man on earth you would expect to be presiding at this baptism. He was the last man on earth that you'd expect those two teens to have wanted there.

The hand that was raised above Steve and Kathy had once been raised in anger. Kimo's hand had once clutched the spear

that had killed Steve and Kathy's father while he pleaded for his life.

This is how it happened. Nate Saint was one of a group of young missionaries who had taken up the challenge of reaching the isolated Auca tribe of Ecuador. They wanted to share the gospel with these Indians whom everyone else had written off as hostile head-hunters.

Hundreds of years before, rubber collectors had invaded the land of the Aucas. They had plundered and burned and murdered their way to riches. As a result, the Aucas had developed a deep fear and mistrust of all outsiders. They were a very closed society.

But Nate and his friends began flying over Auca territory and dropping small

gifts. They eventually got a few friendly waves, so they decided to chance a face-to-face encounter.

The missionaries landed on a long sandbar in the main river going through Auca territory. There were five of them. They emerged from their plane and made friendly gestures toward a group of Aucas who were approaching.

But Auca suspicions were just too strong. The Indian hunting party armed with spears, bows and arrows killed the strangers who suddenly dropped down from the sky. Kimo was one of those killers.

Amazingly enough, several of the missionary widows decided to stay in Ecuador. They still wanted to reach the

Auca people.

Eventually, they did make friends among the Indians. The widows hung their hammocks with those of the natives and lived out their forgiveness each day.

Kimo was one of the first to respond to the gospel they shared. He saw, in the sacrifice of Christ, a means of cleansing his guilt from the cruelty of the past. He went on to become a Christian pastor. From then on he worked to spread the gospel that had made such an impact on his life.

That is how Steve and Kathy's special day came about, and why they chose Kimo to baptise them.

Kimo lowered Steve and Kathy into the waters of the same river where their father

had shed his blood, near the same sandbar where he'd landed, seeking to share the love of Christ.

How could it be that these two fatherless teenagers had chosen Kimo to welcome them into the arms of their Heavenly Father? It was possible because Steve and Kathy no longer saw Kimo as their father's murderer. They didn't see the cruelty of his past. Rather, they saw him as someone their father had died for, and most importantly, as someone rescued and redeemed by Christ.

This is what God does. He looks at us through the sacrifice of Christ when we join ourselves with Christ. He doesn't see the ugliness of our past. He only sees the goodness of His beloved Son. Jesus takes our place. Jesus is our substitute.

The Father regards us as righteous because His Son is righteous. This is what we need to accept by faith; the good news we need to take to heart. This gift comes to us from the cross.

We don't escape the penalty of sin by being good enough. We don't escape the results of sin by working harder, by doing more religious things.

It comes to us by grace alone. It comes to us when we open our empty hands to receive it.

Have you been struggling to climb that big mountain alone? Do you keep slipping down the slope when you try to get closer to God? Then stop trying. Stop trying to make sacrifices to become worthy. Stop trying to build security by the things you

do. Stop trying to earn God's affection to make Him accept you.

If you come to God demonstrating how good you are, if you present to God all the righteous works you've performed, you will fail. If you look within yourself for righteousness, if you look at what you do to recommend yourself to God, you will see only ugliness.

All our best works are tainted at times by evil motives. No matter how good we try to be, there is still a wicked, corrupt heart within us. This is the reason we can never approach God with our own goodness, for that will simply result in becoming buried on the mountain, frozen there forever like poor little Juanita.

Instead, you must come empty-handed

to the cross. The cross demonstrates how much sin costs. Yet this is how much God loves you. You must come on the terms that He has laid out very clearly, because that is the only way you can build a healthy, secure relationship with God.

The most challenging thing in the Christian life is not to work your way to heaven; it is to give up. This means giving up your good works; giving up your sins; giving up your selfishness and pride. It means giving up your total self to Him.

This is much more than seeking some god within you. This is much more than seeking some ray of enlightenment in your own mind. This is coming to Jesus.

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The Incredible Journey
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Dora Creek NSW 2264

New Zealand
020 422 2042
infonz@tij.tv

The Incredible Journey
PO BOX 76673
Manukau, Auckland 2241



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Pastor Gary Kent is Speaker for The Incredible Journey ministry. He has spoken and produced numerous documentaries on subjects including the Bible, Bible prophecy, world events and natural health. His passion is to share the good news of Jesus' imminent return.

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Australia
0481 315 101
info@tij.tv

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020 422 2042
infonz@tij.tv