



Bryan M. Litfin

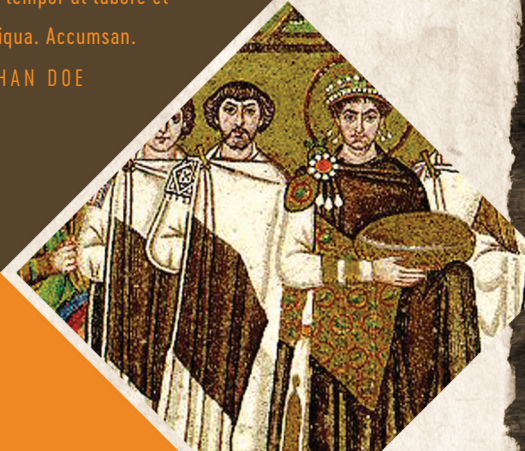
# WISDOM from the ANCIENTS



30 Forgotten Lessons from  
the Early Church

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— JONATHAN DOE



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the ANCIENTS



Bryan M. Litfin



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## Introduction

For better or worse, the lessons you learn from your parents stick with you for the rest of your life. Perhaps your parents did a great job. Or maybe not. They might have been a total bust. Probably, they were somewhere in between. If I had to guess I'd imagine your mom wasn't Mary Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life*, but neither was she Cruella de Vil from *101 Dalmatians*. Your father was probably better than Luke Skywalker's, but not quite as good as Beaver Cleaver's. Am I right? Whoever they were, your parents surely taught you some unforgettable lessons.

My dad taught me two important things when I got my first job. Back in the 1970s, people still had their newspapers delivered by kids on bicycles. In Dallas, Texas, where I grew up, there were two daily papers. I delivered the afternoon paper: the *Dallas Times Herald*. On weekdays, I would roll them up and secure them with a rubber band, or maybe put a plastic bag around the rolls if it was a rainy day. The Sunday paper was a different story. Those thick slabs of wood pulp filled the canvas bag on my handlebars as if someone had poured concrete in there. Sometimes I had to deliver half the Sunday papers, pedal home to get the rest, then ride out again with the second batch.

One of the lessons my dad taught me was a lifelong nugget I've never forgotten. The other was the exact opposite of what he intended,

but it was a good lesson nonetheless. The positive lesson was: “Son, go the extra mile with your customers. Make sure you throw the paper onto the porch.” According to my boss at the *Times Herald*, it was sufficient to heave the newspaper onto the front lawn in the porch’s general vicinity. But my dad taught me to put it right at the doorstep. If I missed the porch, I would stop, go back, and set it there. I received no extra reward for this. I was just doing the job to the best of my abilities. Exceeding expectations. Going the extra mile. Very wise advice from my dad!

The other lesson, which I still believe today, is to invest in excellent equipment to do the job right. Unfortunately I had to learn the hard way that what might seem like clever thriftiness can come back and bite you in the rear—literally! My dad and I found an old bike frame that had been dumped in the creek at the end of our street. We spray painted it, oiled the chain, and bought a new seat, handlebar grips, and tires. It looked great! That is, until you tried to ride it. I can still remember its wobbliness under the heavy load of the Sunday edition. Sometimes the handlebars would fall forward and spill my papers everywhere. After struggling to finish my paper route on those days, I’m convinced my makeshift bike’s hard rubber seat actually did bite my rear a few times. I should have invested in a groovy 1970s BMX bike like all my friends had. Live and learn.

In this book you’ll meet some spiritual mothers and fathers who have important lessons to teach us as well. There is great wisdom in listening to the previous ages. We need to learn the lessons of history lest we miss out on a blessing, or, as the saying goes, be doomed to repeat our mistakes. But to do this requires humility. Americans in particular tend to think of the future as the best place to cast our eyes. The next best thing is always around the corner. Yet as Christians, we have to be humble enough to pay attention to our ancestors and not always be looking ahead. Think about how much history the Bible records, both in the Old and the New Testament. Surely God wants us to learn from it! Hebrews 12:1 reminds us that there is a “cloud of witnesses” who ran the race before us. Shouldn’t their experience on the racetrack of life give us something valuable?

When it comes to church history, each generation has something important to pass on. But the part of history I want to emphasize in this book is the ancient church period. We can also refer to it as the “early church” or the era of the “church fathers.”<sup>1</sup> This historical era goes beyond the New Testament period—beyond the age of the original apostles. As you probably know, those first apostolic Christians lived and wrote and evangelized in the Roman Empire of the first century AD. But Christianity, of course, continued into the second, third, fourth, and fifth centuries and beyond.

Then, around AD 500, the empire of Rome fell to barbarian invaders. At that time church history made a pivot into the so-called Middle Ages (the ages between antiquity and the modern era). This book will focus only on the first 500 years after the birth of Christ—the ancient Greco-Roman world. Many great Christians lived in that foundational era about 70 generations ago. So please let me invite you to sit at the feet of your godly great-great-great (and so on) grandparents. I promise these ancients have much wisdom to pass on.

But to really gain something from these ancient lessons, you’ll have to be willing to set aside your preconceived notions. You’ll have to decide to be open-minded, to think outside the box. When I used to teach undergraduate theology, I would sometimes come to the first day of class with a stack of cups. I would set them on a table before those freshmen, who had been high schoolers until just that May. But now, in August, they were timid Bible college students. (Actually, some of them weren’t timid, but rather cocky. They needed my lesson even more.) In front of the watching students, all of whom were at a major life transition, I would set the cups on the table, one by one, upside-down. “These cups represent doctrines,” I would tell the expectant freshmen, “and *this* is the main thing you need to know to learn theology”—and then with a sweep of my arm, I would knock all the cups onto the floor. “A clean slate,” I declared.

The lesson didn’t end there. I would immediately bend down and

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1. Although most ancient writers were men, certainly there were some wise church mothers as well. But for the purposes of this book I will use *church fathers* as a collective term for all the writers of this era.



pick up most (but not all) of the cups and replace them on the table. Unlike a secular university professor, I wasn't trying to break down the Christian beliefs of my students. My goal wasn't to deconstruct their faith into little bits, leaving these young people spiritually barren and nihilistic. No, I just wanted them to *own* what was on the table. I wanted their doctrines to be there on purpose. You see, it's one thing to accept what has always been part of your Christian upbringing without thinking about it. It's much different to put the cups back on the table after having wiped the slate clean. Then they're truly *your* cups. You chose to put them there. And the wise person will realize that a few of those cups probably shouldn't have been there in the first place. The trick is knowing which ones to leave on the floor.

Let me say at the outset that some of what you encounter in this book might sound startling. Perhaps you flipped through the table of contents and thought, *I don't agree with that, or that, or that. And hey! That one's heresy!* Please understand: My goal isn't to be provocative. This book isn't trying to be edgy just to be edgy. My only desire is to get you thinking in new ways about old topics. I want to put you in touch with the past so you can gain insight for the future. So go ahead; dig into the chapters—even the “heretical” ones—and I think you'll see what I mean. My prayer is that these insights are wise, useful, and biblically based. You might not agree with all my interpretations of the ancient fathers. That's fine. An open-minded learner can gain just as much from disagreeing with someone as from agreeing with them.

Some of what you read here might sound like Roman Catholicism. Perhaps you might think that's my starting point. Not at all. I am an evangelical, born-again Christian, and I desire to be nothing else. Therefore, my advice is to put Roman Catholicism out of your mind. The early Christians belonged to the little-c catholic church (that is, the “universal” or “whole” church), but they weren't Roman Catholics as we think of that term today. This book does not try to engage with Protestant-Catholic debates that happened a thousand years after the ancient period had ended. I have no desire to be anachronistic, to force a modern Christian mind-set back onto ancient times. The point is to

go the other way—to let the views of the church fathers come forward, not inject our own views backward.

In this book I want to help you think like your spiritual ancestors thought and to learn from them if you can. Maybe we'll see that some of the things found in modern Roman Catholicism have their roots in ancient wisdom. And maybe you'll realize that some of the things we think are "essential" to Christianity actually come straight from modern Western views—but we can't see it because we're on the inside, like the goldfish in the bowl that doesn't realize it's wet. This is precisely why it helps to look back to the ancient times, before Protestants and Roman Catholics became divided in the 1500s. The ancient church fathers can give us a window into what earliest Christianity looked like before so many centuries had passed, before the faith had even left the Roman Empire in which it was born. There is so much to be gained from a backward glance like that—but only if you're willing to receive it. If you are, turn the page and let the wisdom of the ancients be their lasting gift to you.



## The Cross of Christ Isn't Enough for Salvation

Here is an exercise I've used with my theology students over the years. It's a little bit tricky, but at the same time, I find it very illuminating. Let's see if it tricks you too.

Imagine an unbelieving friend of yours wants to convert to Christianity. Knowing that you're a Christian, the person asks, "What must I do to be saved?" And let's imagine you reply like this. You say, "My dear friend, you first need to know that everyone is a sinner. Not just you, but everyone. We all fell into sin when our forefather Adam sinned. Therefore we all need a Savior, since we can't reach God through good deeds. No amount of human good works would be enough to earn God's favor. But thankfully God has provided a Savior for us! His love for his creatures is so great that he sent his only Son, who is fully God, to come to earth and become incarnate as a true man. Jesus committed no sin but was crucified on a Roman cross on our behalf. His death on the cross is a substitute that pays the divine price that our sinfulness demands. Whoever places their faith in Jesus Christ alone, trusting his death on the cross to take the place of the penalty we owe, will have eternal life. All you have to do is believe by faith in Jesus' atoning work and you will spend eternity with God. You will not be judged guilty because the shed blood of Christ covers you. The way to heaven

is by faith alone. So, my dear friend, would you like to put your faith in Christ's finished work at the cross?"

"Yes!" your friend replies with great joy.

And you just sent that person to hell.

Now before you throw down this book, hear me out. I'm not a heretic—unless you think the apostle Paul is a heretic too. I will let him speak for me: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). At no point in my so-called gospel proclamation did I ever mention the resurrection! I left Jesus on the cross, dying there as a substitute without conquering death, bursting from the tomb, and offering resurrection life to his followers. I emphasized the defeat of Good Friday but never mentioned the victory of Easter. It's a false gospel. Without the resurrection, "your faith is futile." And that is something no ancient Christian ever would have missed.

### The Two-Word Gospel

The ancient church could—and often did—summarize the gospel in only two words: "Jesus is Lord." Now if you are a stickler for such things, you are probably thinking, *Come on, Litfin, that's three words.* Fair enough. But in Greek the expression was *Kyrios Iēsous*, with the "is" implied. *Kyrios* means "Lord," and I think you can recognize the second word. This was a triumphant proclamation, a Christian victory cry. The church fathers were saying, "No matter what you might think, you demons, you idols, you caesars with all your soldiers, in reality, Jesus is Lord!"

Can you hear the rejoicing in their voices? Can you feel their sense of release from bondage to pagan religion? This ancient expression is layered with so much more meaning than we might see at first. We are so accustomed to hearing about the "Lord Jesus" that we don't easily recognize all that this title implies. But the early Christians couldn't help but hear the Old Testament as they confessed Jesus' lordship with rich overtones of deity and exaltation. The Hebrew name for God, *Yahweh*, was never uttered by the Jews. Instead, they said *Adonai*, or Lord. And in the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the

Septuagint, the translation of *Adonai* was *Kyrios*. So when you hailed Jesus as Lord in the ancient church, you were associating him with the glory of the one true God. The early and enthusiastic use of this expression is one of the main proofs that Jesus was worshiped as divine right from the beginning of Christianity.

Why was Jesus recognized as Lord? Because of his resurrection. After he rose from the dead, the lordship of Christ took on new meaning. The interesting thing about *kyrios* is that it can sometimes be a rather plain term. It can mean “sir,” like you’d call some respectable man you might meet on the street; or “master,” like a slave would say to his owner. With this more common nuance, the word was applied to Jesus as the disciples’ master. However, once he rose from the dead, the disciples realized who Jesus really was: not just a mighty prophet but God in the flesh. Think of what the disciple Thomas exclaimed when he came face to face—and finger to wound—with the risen Christ. “My Lord and my God!” he cried in wonder (John 20:28). And when Peter was preaching the risen Christ to the Jews, he said, “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36 ESV). The Messiah’s deity and his victorious resurrection were handily summarized in the expression, “Jesus is Lord.”

Have you ever recited the Apostles’ Creed? We will talk about creeds in a future chapter, but allow me to mention one thing now. Jesus is called “Lord” in that creed. Over time, the creeds we know today expanded from early tidbits of apostolic preaching, like Peter’s preaching in Acts 2. At the very core of this message was the triumphant proclamation, “Jesus is Lord.” Such glorious truth was supposed to be uttered aloud. That is why the apostle Paul said in Romans 10:9, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Do you see? The resurrection is the heart of the gospel. It is the essence of what Christians must say and believe in order to be saved. From this primitive confession, the creeds gradually expanded to include even more content about God, the works of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the church. But at the fountainhead of early Christian belief was the lordship of Christ based on his empty tomb and exaltation to the Father’s right hand.

The declaration that Jesus is Lord also made clear who isn't deserving of that title. The early believers knew that the rulers of Rome claimed lordship as well. Increasingly, the emperors began to accept divine titles, even worship. Temples and idols to their imperial majesty sprang up across the landscape. Every citizen with a coin in his palm was holding a miniature idol that celebrated the glory of Rome and the demonic spirits that inspired its leaders. Ancient Rome demanded total lordship. The emperor was the earthly embodiment of divine power. Christians who refused to honor this false god could be killed.

In the year AD 156, a man named Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, stood before a judge in an arena filled with pagans ravenously calling for his blood. The judge ordered Polycarp to offer incense and swear an oath to the demonic power of Emperor Antoninus Pius. "What harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is Lord?'" the judge asked him. But Polycarp's famous answer was, "For eighty-six years I have served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How could I now blaspheme my King who saved me?"<sup>1</sup> Upon making this courageous reply, Polycarp went to the flames with boldness and eternal hope. It was yet another example of what Acts 17:7 had recorded: "They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." The ancient Christians rejoiced that the Roman Empire—with its brutal government and foul gods—no longer held them in bondage. The risen Christ had crushed his enemies underfoot. He alone was victorious!

### The Cross and the Crown

As my tricky illustration above revealed, modern Christians can so easily focus on the cross that the resurrection gets overlooked. None of us intends to exclude the empty tomb from our gospel proclamation. The cross just seems so important! And of course it is. Yet we too often forget, except for one day a year, to repeat the angel's words, "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said" (Matthew 28:6).

Unlike us, the early church always put the resurrection front and

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1. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.3, translation mine.

center. One reason for this difference is that the ancient Christians experienced crucifixion more vividly than we do. They were much closer to its hideous realities. A cross was no mere symbol for them. Many of them would have seen, or at least heard stories of, those naked and bloody victims writhing in agony and gasping for air while impaled on wooden stakes. For the ancient Christians, Jesus' crucifixion couldn't be the main focus of the story. That would imply the story had ended in tragedy and defeat. But thanks be to God, it didn't!

Now, for sure, the cross was proclaimed in the ancient church. Those first believers didn't shut their eyes to its horrors. In fact, the written manuscripts of their Scriptures often drew a little picture of a crucified man whenever the word "cross" or "crucify" was used.<sup>2</sup> Archaeologists have even found a mocking piece of graffiti that somebody scrawled on a Roman bedroom wall. It shows Jesus upon the cross with the head of a donkey, while a man named Alexamenos worships his seemingly foolish God. Clearly, the early Christians were known—and scorned—for revering a crucified Messiah. Yet they always emphasized that while Rome had killed their Lord, he had overcome the grave and offered eternal life to his followers.

### Christ the Victor

In historical theology, this emphasis on victory is called the *Christus Victor* motif. Various understandings of Christ's atonement have emerged at different eras in church history. Sometimes one theme came to be widely celebrated, while at other times a different facet of Christ's work was the most emphasized. The ancient fathers certainly understood that the cross was a substitutionary sacrifice that paid a price in blood. Isaiah 53 and the book of Hebrews had made that clear. Yet the early Christian view of salvation didn't emphasize a law court in which a judge demanded a penalty and Jesus paid the price in our place. Rather, the ancients felt the weight of the fearsome idols that

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2. The figure, called the staurogram, was formed from the Greek letters *tau* and *rho* superimposed to make the shape: ✝.



surrounded them, the government that oppressed them, the grave that beckoned for them, and the devil who tempted them. In the face of such dangers, the earliest believers rejoiced that these terrible chains had been shattered when the stone was rolled away at Easter's dawn.

Do you want to know how the ancient Christians pictured this great truth in their art? They didn't draw an old rugged cross on a hill, or a grave in a hillside with its round stone ajar. Rather, they depicted three scenes from the life of the biblical prophet Jonah. In the first scene, Jonah was shown being swallowed by a sea monster that represented the chaotic and deadly underworld, the abyss from which no one returns. But just like Jonah was ejected from the fish after three days, Jesus returned from the grave after three days! (Matthew 12:39–41) So the second scene was Jonah bursting from the sea monster's mouth, while the third was Jonah resting under a vine in the garden of Paradise. There are many depictions of this sequence on the walls of the ancient catacombs and on marble coffins. Perhaps closer to home, the Cleveland Museum of Art owns a set of beautiful Christian statues that depict the same scenes. These were visual reminders not to fear death, since the grave would one day give up its dead and the believer in Christ would reign in heaven forever.

The early Christians knew that death and Satan haunted their footsteps. The devil's power was personified by Rome and its gods. The demons were real, and they would hurt you if they could. Previous generations had lived in dread of this occult power all around them. But no more! The enemy was defeated. Death had lost its sting. Jesus Christ was alive. The magnificent truth that the ancients emphasized is just as glorious for us as it was for them: He is risen!

And all God's people said?

*He is risen indeed.*

*"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.*

*But thanks be to God!*

*He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*