



April 21, 2026

# MESSENGER

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Sundays at 1 PM

942 Altadena Dr.

Altadena, CA 91001

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## INFO

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## Contact Information:

Due to the fires, our mail has been forwarded. Please send mail to PO Box 91055, Pasadena, CA 91109. You may still call the church phone at 626-797-8970;

general office communication:  
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## SYMBIOTIC SALVATION

Plant and animal species have been living beside each other for millions of years. During that time, they have developed some interesting kinds of relationships. A form that you're probably familiar with is **parasitism**, which means one kind of organism lives *at the expense of another*. We know about predators; they eat their prey. Parasites are like predators that don't kill their prey right away but siphon off their resources over a longer span of time. It's a strategy that works pretty well for them. Some examples are ticks living off the blood of a deer, mistletoe tapping into its "host" tree to get water and nutrients, a wasp laying eggs inside another insect's body which ultimately hatch and grow by eating the "host" from the inside.

You're probably not as aware of another model in nature known as **symbiosis**. The name literally means "life sharing." This is a relationship between two species that *benefits both of them*. An example often cited is a coral reef, in which tiny polyps produce calcium carbonate structures, which become a safe place for the development of green algae, which produce the nutrients on which the polyps feed, and the cycle goes on. Another symbiotic relationship is seen when an ant colony protects a "herd" of aphids from harm in exchange for the ability to "milk" them for the nourishing "honeydew" they produce.

A classic symbiotic relationship exists right under your nose --- well, about two feet under your nose --- where about 30 trillion microscopic bacteria live in your stomach and intestines. Almost all of them are either beneficial or harmless, though a few may cause diseases. What they get out of the relationship is a safe place to live, a steady food source from the things you gulp down and a residence for the future generations of offspring they will produce. What you get out of the relationship is help in digesting the weird things you eat, changing your food into usable carbohydrates, proteins, etc. and removal of some potentially toxic things you've ingested. You wouldn't be alive without them.

The picture above shows how confusing these relationships can get. Oxpeckers are birds that live entirely by feeding on the backs of large mammals, such as water buffalo. This has been considered an example of symbiosis, in which both species benefit: the birds have the protection of an environment where predators wouldn't dare attack them; in exchange, the buffalo has a built-in terminator that eats harmful insects from its hide. However, recent studies suggest that the little birds also occasionally peck wounds open to suck a bit of buffalo blood; this can lead to infection and even death. So, is it symbiosis or parasitism? Science is making new discoveries about these species relationships every day.

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You want to go on a bizarre trip? Think about all the human relationships you observe, from your own family to the plot of the last movie you've watched on TV. Think about each relationship and ask, "Is it parasitic? Symbiotic/ Neither? A little bit of both?"

**Parasitic human relationships** can be really sad. The young woman who can't separate from her mother and constantly plays on her sympathy, while mom continues to enable the daughter because of her maternal instinct. The salesman who is so driven by his desire for material success that he misrepresents the product he's selling to poor people who are already overburdened with debt. The woman clutching desperately to her abusive husband who is destroying her soul.

On the other hand, **symbiotic human relationships** can be very beautiful and productive. There are some married couples who seem to magnify each other's personalities, gifts and talents. Sometimes a particular teacher will bring out the best in a student, while at the same time discovering something in their field they've never seen before. Those who have been involved in team sports often have memories of one magic moment when it all seemed to come together, when everyone was on the same page, and they were able to compete as one.

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Here's a miracle: God wants a **symbiotic** relationship with you!

It looks like this relationship should be, by its very nature, *parasitic*. He is the Creator, you are the creature; he is everything; you are nothing. Some pagan religions portray God as flicking off human subjects like vermin. Some even show him devouring them. The Bible reveals a God who creates a person "in his image" just so he can relate to him and have fellowship with him (Genesis 3:8). The Christian Gospel is that he wanted that relationship so much that he was even willing to "become" a human.

Jesus said God's desire is to be *this* close to you: "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20). That's not equality, but it sure sounds like symbiosis!

Pastor George Van Alstine