

THE Plain Truth

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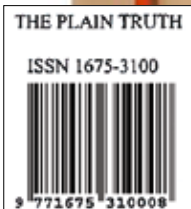
A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Oct - Dec 2016

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Vulnerability of God

by
Dr. P. Sellappan

Many assume God is almighty so he could do anything he fancies. In one sense, that is certainly true. For example, he desired humans. So he created them and included them in his life. And to support them, he made the sun, moon and stars, sky and earth, land and sea, flora and fauna.

Yes, God could do anything he wants, but would he? Like wiping out all the thieves, liars, adulterers, hypocrites and the greedy, the corrupt, and the murderers? That might pretty much wipe out the whole human race!

Yes, God is almighty. No question about that. But he would *not* do anything that is contrary to his nature. Here is why.

God is love

That is his essence - his *nature*. Everything God does stem from his love. Love is the basis for all his actions (and non-actions). He will not do anything that is not consistent with his love, anything that his love will not permit. *If he did, he will not be true to himself.*

All his attributes – power, wisdom, knowledge, faith – are *subject to or consistent* with his love. Apostle Paul declares this truth brilliantly in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. Although God could move mountains, perform mighty miracles, give his body to be burnt, give all his possessions to the poor and have great faith, without love he is nothing. Yes, love is the greatest quality. Love is not just a quality; it is what he does and is. *You cannot separate what he is from what he does.*

His love is vulnerable

God's love is vulnerable. Vulnerability is the basis for intimacy. *The Father, Son and Holy Spirit love each other so intimately that they give themselves to each other totally and unconditionally.* Theirs is a vulnerable life, but they will never use their vulnerability to harm each other as that would be inconsistent with his love.

Jesus, as God in the flesh, was totally vulnerable. He took everything humanity threw at him – slander, accusation, abuse, scourging, spitting, mocking and death on the cross. He died a brutal and agonizing death. Like the Frankenstein monster, humanity killed their Creator. Of course, they did ignorantly. They really didn't know him.

While Jesus had immense power to still storms, cast

out demons, turn water into wine, walk on water, feed thousands with a meagre amount of food, yet, he never used his power to hurt his enemies – those who accused and killed him. He could have zapped them, but he didn't. Why? That was because he loved them and gave himself to them. He was willing to take their brunt and suffer.

Religion portrays a different kind of god. It portrays a god who is almighty and invincible. It portrays a god who is ready to unleash his power and destroy his enemies. It portrays a controlling, authoritarian, revengeful and vindictive god. It portrays a god so different from the one Jesus came to reveal.

That's why many rejected Jesus' messiahship. That's why they mocked him, saying, "If you are the son of god, save yourself". They couldn't understand why an all-powerful god had to die like a criminal on a cross. Who needs a helpless, powerless god?

After 2000 years, many today still don't believe in his messiahship. They say, "If Jesus is so powerful, why doesn't he solve the world's problems - stop the violence, remove the corrupt leaders, abolish poverty and disease, prevent natural disasters? Why is he not healing my sickness, solving my financial problems, restoring my strained relationships? Why am I still unhappy, miserable and unfulfilled?

Let's emphasize. God is love. *Raw power* is not his essence. Wisdom, power, faith and knowledge are all great attributes, but these don't define him. Love does. All of God's actions stem from his love. And we cannot separate *who he is from what he does.*

If God uses his raw power to deal with humanity, we would all be dead long ago! Instead, he chose to love us, suffer with us, and forgive us. After all, we are all his children. As a loving Father, he will never forsake us even we deny him. His love for us will never allow him to reject us. That's why he reacted to our violence by forgiving us. He would rather suffer our abuse than destroy us. He would rather die for us than let us die. He would rather enter our hell than send us to hell. Jesus lived a truly vulnerable life. And he hasn't changed his nature one bit since then. The same Jesus is alive and dwelling in us today. If his love reins over us, can we live any other life except his vulnerable life? ☐



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What our readers say:

Ed: Dear brother and sisters, as the year ends with this issue, we like to take this opportunity to thank you for your prayers and support for this ministry. We trust you will continue to extend that support through year 2017. You are always in our prayer. May the Good God bless you and your loved ones richly!

I am a lucky receiver of the Plain Truth magazine for several years now. I love your magazine for staying true, current and fresh. As a young Christian, I have so many questions and thirst for answers. One particular question that I have is: "God will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life." I felt inadequate in my faith, always wondering if I have done enough. The article 'What must you do to be saved?' by Johannes Maree has literally answered my prayer. Kudos to the writer! My spiritual journey has changed since reading the article. I have gained new confidence in my relationship with God. Thank you for that. God bless you.

**Botthe Toimin-Suzuki
Matunggong, Kudat
Sabah**

Ed: We are glad the article has helped you to see God in a different light and help you build a more confident and joyful relationship with him. Your joy is our reward!

I like to ask this question which has been troubling me for quite a while: Why is the world in such a mess – confused, anxious, fearful, hurting, unhappy and miserable? Did God create humanity for such a messed up life?

**Jayashree
Damansara Utama**

Ed: It is a good question. I am glad you asked as it is probably also the question many have in their minds. Here is a short answer to your long question. God created us in his image and likeness for communion (fellowship) with him, to participate in his life as his own beloved children. That is what he desired and purposed for us. He intended for us to model after him, to reflect/imitate him. And to make that possible he gave us mirror neurons, which gives us the reflective capability. As we reflect (behold) him we become like him, we are transformed into his image. But our first parents didn't believe God. Instead of reflecting him, they chose to reflect their own perverted and twisted desire – a desire that is self-seeking and contrary to his way of life, which is self-giving. This twisted (mimetic) desire has been operating in humans since then but they are simply unaware of its

destructive dynamic. It is contagion that has spread to all nations and peoples (1 John 5:19; Revelation 12:9). Jesus came to expose and destroy its deadly works which has been plaguing humanity for so long. As we turn our gaze away from our own confused desires to God and reflect his desire for us we will experience his kind of life. Hope this answers your question!

The Plain Truth is very informative, interesting and touching. As I read your magazine, I feel God is close to me and I have more faith. The articles are good to read and refreshing. Thanks a lot. I want to donate but I don't know how! I am only a maid here in Singapore. I'm a Filipino. Thanks.

**Arlene Tiu
Singapore**

Ed: We are glad that this magazine is enriching your life, Arlene. You seem to be underestimating your self-worth when you say you are only a maid. While that may be your profession (which is just as important as any other), that is definitely not your true identity! Your true identity is in Christ. You are truly a child of God! That's how God sees you! Thanks for your desire to support this ministry. You can find the payment details on page 4, last column, at the bottom.

I would like to subscribe to the Plain Truth magazine. Thank you for such an inspiring and educational magazine for helping us to understand our Christian faith better. After reading a few issues, I have found my mind and my life changing...for the better. I like to contribute/donate to this ministry in any way possible. Thank you!

**Jessica Das
Kuala Lumpur**

Ed: We are glad that this magazine is helping you to have a closer walk with God. Thanks Jessica for your desire to support this ministry.

My family and I thank you and your co-partners for supplying us with this wonderful magazine which inspires me in many ways. May the blessed hands of God be with you all in your daily undertakings.

**Subramaniam Paul
Seremban**

The Plain Truth has filled my spiritual needs. It provides spiritual truths and practical Christian principles. It is informative, relevant, and thought-provoking. It helps me to become more knowledgeable and mature in understanding the Word of God. It helps me to grow in faith in God and teaches me to look to the Almighty Lord in times of pain and suffering.

**Rayappan Joseph
Ipoh**

The Plain Truth helps me to interact in my small group meetings in my church. It is helping me to be more polite towards people and be obedient to my parents.

**Jagdeesh Sandhu
Klang**

Ed: We are happy to hear that this magazine is benefitting many young people.

We have always enjoyed reading your articles. They are very refreshing and serve as a revision in my bible class. The articles examine this present challenging world from different perspectives and offer age-old solutions from the bible. Thank you for the good work you all are doing. Do continue and we pray the good Lord will guide and sustain you always.

**Peter Wang
Kuala Lumpur**

The Plain Truth articles are interesting and enlightening. They make me think more deeply. I share the magazine with my friend.

**Selvaraju Chidabaram
Klang**

The Plain Truth articles are thought-provoking, helpful, relevant and more importantly, they are based on the Bible.

**Gan Tian Eng
Klang**

Although THE PLAIN TRUTH is sent free of charge, it is not without cost. Each copy is made possible by the generosity of others. So we are very grateful for those readers who send a donation, and make it possible for us to continue to publish the good news of the Gospel. Donations should be sent to the addresses listed on page 3 or sent electronically to the bank account:

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God's Gift this Christmas

Everyone likes to receive a gift. There's the anticipation, curiosity, excitement, and thrill of discovery. Sometimes there's even urgency about opening the gift and seeing what it is. Then there's the special joy and delight that someone has thought of you – enough to give you something, especially for you. Gift-giving, joy, and celebration go together.

Well, maybe not for everyone. And, if you've ever seen the comedy *The Big Bang Theory*, you will know it is certainly not an occasion for celebration for super-smart physicist Dr Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon may be able to grasp quantum mechanics, but he has trouble getting his head around the basics of human social interaction, as hard as he might try.

And receiving a gift is quite terrifying to him. "You haven't given me a gift – you've given me an obligation" he wails to his neighbour Penny when she tells him she has a Christmas gift for him.

Sheldon can only see the gift-giving exchange in terms of a transaction that requires exactly equal reciprocation. So now he stresses himself with a hyper-vigilant response: how much, exactly, will Penny's gift cost? How can he get her a gift to the exact same dollar amount? To cover the possibilities, the only solution he can see is to buy a whole bunch of gifts so he can select the one that is the same cost as the one he receives on Christmas Day. Gift-giving in particular, and Christmas in general, becomes a time of enormous anxiety, fear and guilt. How will he be sure he has fulfilled his obligation?

While for most people exchanging gifts is a natural and enjoyable part of Christmas, there is of course a deep irony in addition to the humour here.

Christmas celebrates the greatest gift ever given to humanity, the gift to us of the Son of God. Jesus comes from the inner life of God, God not only revealing himself, but giving himself to us. He comes to us as a baby, in the humblest of circumstances, identifying with our struggles, hardships, disappointments – with all that it means to be human. He comes to give his life for humanity.

Jesus is full of grace and truth.¹ He is grace personified.

by
John McLean

And "grace" has the same origins as "gift". He is God's "incredible gift" to us,² for whom we can only give thanks and rejoice.

He comes to us, becoming human, one of us, so he can share his life with us – to include us in the joy of the Trinitarian communion of Father, Son and Spirit. There is nothing we can do for our salvation. All we can do is accept it with open hands, and joyfully receive it with gratitude.

Sometimes this sounds too good to be true.

That little voice in the back of our heads, from our upbringing, school, work, and yes, church experience, can tell us it can't be so. It's not a transaction we are familiar with – it's not reciprocal, fair. Like Sheldon, we can, instead of responding with joy and gratitude, become stressed, hyper-vigilant, determined we must do more to balance the ledger, to even the score. Driven more by guilt, fear and anxiety than by faith, hope and love, we can set out to do more, work harder, to earn such a gift – to try rather than trust, to deserve rather than to gratefully receive.

Yet this gracious self-giving of God is the heart of the gospel, and why it's good news.

That's why this has been called the "wonderful exchange" – Jesus became who we are so that we can become as he is. That we can share in his relationship with the Father. "The prime purpose of the incarnation [the coming of Jesus as a human], in the love of God, is to lift us up into the life of communion, of participation in the very triune life of God", writes James B. Torrance.

It's not a transaction, in which we can balance the books. The gift, the grace of God is so vast we can only receive it in faith and gratitude.

Our giving then is not trying to give back to God. It is participating in the nature of God, who shows himself in Jesus to be loving, gracious and giving. It is participating in the love between Father, Son and Spirit. Christmas is a time for gift-giving, joy and celebration. Because we celebrate the greatest gift of all – God's gracious gift to us of himself. □



¹ John 1:14

² 2Corinthians 9:15

Truce on earth, good will toward men



About 15 years ago, I met an old soldier. A very old soldier. Frank Sumpter was more than 100 years old when we met.

He was one of the dwindling ranks of veterans who had fought in the trenches of the First World War that raged from 1914 to 1918. Frank is dead now, as are all those who fought with him and against him. The last known WWI combat veteran died in Australia in May this year.

I wanted to meet Frank because he was one of the few people who had personal memories of a remarkable event that happened at Christmas in the first year of that devastating war nearly a century ago. The old soldier's body may have been fragile but his mind was still sharp and focused. He told me a fascinating story.

Let me set the scene for you.

The dreadful conflict that history remembers as The Great War had been building in Europe for years. Germany in the late 19th century had become a formidable, united nation, and felt threatened by its neighbours. The rest of Europe, in turn, was alarmed by Germany's growing power.

Great Britain had been the unchallenged superpower of the day, but Germany was becoming a serious rival. The German leader, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was the grandson of Queen Victoria of England, and the two nations were

by John Halford

not natural enemies. But storm clouds were gathering as political and economic tensions steadily increased across the continent.

By August 1914, Europe was ready for war, and a madman's murderous assault on the Archduke of Austria provided the catalyst. Germany invaded Belgium, and Britain and France had pledged to come to the little nation's defence. So hundreds of thousands of young Britons, Germans and Frenchmen cheerfully went off to fight for King, Kaiser or Country. Both sides expected a quick victory. "Home by Christmas" was the patriotic slogan.

But it was not to be. A fierce winter set in over the battlefield, and neither side could gain a quick victory. By December 1914, the two huge armies were stalemated, bogged down in a line of trenches that stretched from the Belgian coast to the Alps. Losses to both sides were appalling as they fought to gain or regain a few feet of land.

It soon became obvious that this war would be different from anything the world had seen before. It would not be decided by one or two pitched battles. The front-line soldiers lived for weeks on end, knee deep in mud, literally in each other's gun sights. They had once shared the same youthful enthusiasm, the same belief that they were fighting for a worthy cause. But as winter clamped down, friend and foe realized that, far from being home for Christmas, they were

trapped in the grim trenches, cannon fodder for the first modern industrialized war.

“Happy Christmas Tommy”

Then on the evening before Christmas of 1914, a remarkable thing began to happen. Frank Sumpter remembered: “The Germans started it. They were in the trenches about 80 yards away, with rolls of barbed wire separating us. As Christmas Eve fell, the German troops called across ‘Happy Christmas, Tommy.’ ‘We called back ‘Happy Christmas, Happy Noel.’ Then the Germans signaled to us to come out and we began to move.”

“The Officers became extremely annoyed and called out ‘Get back in the trenches.’ But we ignored them. We had no particular feelings of animosity towards the individuals on the other side. We were soldiers, and soldiers don’t hate each other. We put our hands through the rolls of barbed wire and shook hands with the German troops.

“One man asked me where I was from, and I told him. ‘Do you know the Jolly Farmer Pub?’ he said, and I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘I used to be the barber next door!’ As far as we were concerned there was no hatred between us.”

Similar exchanges began to happen all along the front line. German soldiers adorned their lines with candles and makeshift Christmas trees. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, men who only a few hours before had been trying to kill each other sang carols and songs across the trenches. Soldiers left their muddy trenches and met each other in No Man’s Land. They shared drink, food and cigarettes. Some even played football.

Soldiers on both sides wrote home about this extraordinary event. One German soldier wrote: “Is it possible? Are the French really going to leave us in peace today, Christmas Eve? Then; listen; from across the way came the sound of a festive song. A Frenchman singing a Christmas carol with a marvelous tenor voice.

“Everyone lay still, listening in the quiet of the night. Is it our imagination or is it maybe meant to lull us into a false sense of security. Or is it in fact the victory of God’s love over human conflict?”

And from a letter written by Sergeant A.

Lovell of the 3rd Rifle Brigade:

“Climbing the parapet, I saw a sight which I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description...as I stood in wonder a rousing song came over to us.... Our boys answered with a cheer. Eventually a party of our men got out from the trenches and invited the Germans to meet them halfway and talk. And there in the searchlight they stood, Englishmen and Germans, chatting, and smoking cigarettes together midway between the lines. A rousing cheer went up from friends and foe alike.”

The diary of Lieutenant Geoffrey Heinekey of the 2nd Queen’s Royal West Surrey regiment recounted an astonishing development, as Christmas dawned over the front line:

“The next morning a most extraordinary thing happened—I should think one of the most curious things in the war. Some Germans came out and held up

their hands and began taking in some of our wounded, and so we ourselves immediately got out of the trenches and began to bring in our wounded also. The Germans then beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us bury our dead. This lasted the whole morning, and I talked with several of them and I must say they seemed extraordinarily fine men. It seemed too ironical for words. There, the night before we had been having a terrific battle and the morning after, there we were, smoking their cigarettes and they smoking ours.”

Sanity prevailed over madness

No one gave the order to fraternize like this. It happened spontaneously, in many different places, all along the front. It was just that the ordinary Tommy, Fritz and Jacques had had enough, and for “one brief shining moment,” sanity prevailed over the madness. The generals didn’t like it. They realized that if opposing soldiers became friendly, it would weaken their resolve to continue the struggle. Nevertheless, in some places the unofficial armistice continued into the New Year. (Certain areas of the line actually remained quiet for even longer by an unspoken, mutual consent.) But eventually the fighting started again.

It lasted for nearly four more years, until the 11th minute of the 11th hour of the 11th month of 1918. So terrible had been the carnage that politicians confidently said it had been the war to end all wars. It wasn’t. Twenty-one years later, World War II saw the next generation fighting each other again. It never ends.

Of course, there is another way—a way humanity longs to go but cannot. But that path, the path of love, the path of peace, is a path humanity is incapable of walking. Even when we are weary of the fighting, hating and killing; even when we weep the tears of deepest pain and anguish for our sons, and now our daughters, who are sent away to war to return broken and traumatized, if not in body bags. Even then, we always do it again. In the words of the musical, *Shenandoah*, set in the U.S. Civil War, “They always got a holy cause to send you off to war.”

Jesus changed all that

Christmas is our way of celebrating the Incarnation, the “becoming human” of the Son of God for the sake of humanity. He became one of us. He took up our cause into his own being. He lived our life for us.¹ He died our death for us.² He is our righteousness.³ And he draws all people, even you and me, to him.⁴ He has made us one with him, one with each other, and in him, one with the Father.⁵ In Jesus Christ, at what the Bible calls “the day of his appearing,” the day will at last have arrived when “Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”⁶

Ninety-seven years ago, at Christmastime, for one shining moment in the midst of a ghastly war, the spirit and hope of peace transformed the hearts of soldiers at the front. The day is coming when such a moment will last forever.

References:

1) Louis Orgeldinger, *History of Württembergische Reserve Infantry Regiment No. 246*, Stuttgart, 1931.

2) Lerner and Lowe, *Camelot*. □

¹ Colossians 3:4

² 2 Corinthians 5:14

³ 1 Corinthians 1:30

⁴ John 12:32

⁵ John 14:20

⁶ Isaiah 2:4

You are valuable beyond measure!

You are valuable, you are loved, and someone knows you even better than you know yourself. There is an image and likeness imprinted upon your being that is the basis of your value ... a value beyond your wildest dreams.

Coins used to have the face of the person who guaranteed their value, minted onto them. Any note or coin has a guarantor, a person or institution that guarantees its value. Even if a coin gets lost, the coin never loses its value.

by
**Andre and
Mary-Anne**

When, where and why you began

Whatever your age you have a beginning that cannot be measured in time.

You have the most awesome origin. In the beginning, before creation, before time as we experience it, before the existence of evil, there was a dynamic exchange of love, a relationship without boundaries, an enjoyment of total abandonment ... a being we now call God. It was in the very midst of this fiery love, at the core of this passion, that the idea of ... you came into being!



The one who invented and designed you, stamped you with His own image and likeness declares your worth.

He knows you better than you know yourself ... He knew you even before you were born. You might not know Him, but He has always known you. You might not be aware of Him, but He has always had you on His mind.

You might think why would anyone have such an obsession with me? Well, the creator of this universe sees a value and a beauty in you beyond anything in this natural world. He even sees a possibility of romance!

The God who is love planned to share this love with beings created in His image and likeness. This God, who is all-knowing and able to accomplish all of His purposes, planned a love-affair that would span over eons and conclude with a final victory in which His love conquered all – no contradiction; no evil.

This good news is not some new idea, but the ancient, original thought of God.

Let's imagine this beginning, let's allow the spirit of God to draw us to this place in which all things had their origin. Although no science can explain it, although

the greatest minds have tried and failed to define it, God is confident that you are able to comprehend the unsearchable; to appreciate the motivation that gave you birth; to remember where you began. In this place there is no space, yet no limit; no creation, yet no emptiness – there is only God in all His fullness. He is not lonely or in lack. It is out of His fullness, out of the overflow of love that you are conceived.

God did not imagine a pet that would simply entertain Him! This God-dream is about a being who has the capacity to intelligently appreciate, to receive, to produce and to exchange the same quality of love that flows within God. His plan is not vague or speculative philosophy, but clear and specific ... so clear, that He uniquely identifies and names the individuals who would form part of the plan and become part of creation. And so before the foundation of this world, He saw you in Christ. At this point, He made up His mind about you! No matter what detours, no matter what contradictions would come, He determined that you would be His treasure – blameless and innocent before Him in love.

When did you begin?

Before creation, before time itself.

Where did you begin?

In the very heart of love, a love relationship we call God.

Why did you begin?

To be loved, adored ... and ultimately for that love to be awakened in you.

The Word made flesh

The original, authentic Word was face to face with God from the very beginning. God Himself is the content of this communication – revealing His personal presence and unique expression in all that exists.

In fact there is nothing original or innovative outside of Him! He is the only Creator and the source of all inspiration and creativity. Everything that is, has 'Made by God' stamped on its existence.

*The very life of God is what ignited the existence of man. This original light still shines even in darkness and no amount of darkness can put this light out.*¹

The time lapse between the original thought of God and now is obviously vast. Has this original thought not been lost through time?

No, this authentic dream began before time and was preserved, set apart, in a person called Jesus Christ. In Him the logic of God was kept until the right time when it was made visible in flesh. He came and demonstrated in human form, the kind of life God had in mind from the very beginning ... a life where God and man is so fully united that we cannot even tell them apart.

Man began in God. No matter how far man has fallen from his original place of innocence, God has never been confused about the true identity of man.

Jesus Christ is the place, the event and the person in which God and man meet once again. In Christ Jesus, God has taken the initiative to reconcile man back to

Himself – to restore man to blameless innocence.

Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, and as such does not only represent God's initiative, He also represents man's perfect response of faith to God's initiative.

Jesus reveals the heart of God more than any other story ever told or any scripture ever written. In Him God reveals that He does not want to be God apart from us. He does not want to be a distant or unknowable God. The only way in which He wants to be God, is with man, in man, and as a man.

Jesus reveals the truth about man more accurately than any other story, or even the factual history of man. In Him we see that the only way to be fully man, the only way to be fully free, is in union with God.

This passion of God to restore man to that place of union, would drive Him to pay any price, to go to any depth to see it accomplished. And so in the act of becoming man, He places Himself in a position of conflict. Everything that has ever stood between God and man, every obstacle and every form of separation (called sin in the Bible) would meet and come to a final conclusion in this God-man, Christ Jesus.

When your timeless Creator became a man, He mystically united Himself with you, so that He could bring an end to everything that stood between you and release you to be fully and truly yourself again. In this unity He faced everything you faced ... and conquered! In His death, you died! That old state of being, separated from Him and united with sin, was brought to a final end in Him. He has wiped your slate clean, forgiven you of every wrongdoing.

In His resurrection, you were resurrected to newness of life – that original life that God imagined for you from the beginning. In His ascension, you were raised to the most glorious place of honour – a place where God delights in you!

The only thing that has ever kept you from enjoying these realities is blindness. Not seeing what He sees, keeps us from enjoying what He enjoys. But these very words you are reading now, are reminding you of your union with Him.

*As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake in thy likeness.*²

What should I do?

You might ask, what should I do ... how does one respond to such news? Well the good news is that the hard work has already been done for you! Jesus defeated everything that stood between you and God! Gratitude ... love awakened, is all that's left to do. Some call it faith.

Here's a simple suggestion to give expression to this faith. Turn your focus inward. Become aware of the One who made you and united Himself with you ... within you. In your own thoughts and words respond ... something like: Thank you for who You are and what You have done for me. As You gave yourself in love to me, in Jesus Christ, I give myself in love to You. You made me in Your image and likeness, I acknowledge Your ownership. You made me to be loved ... here I am, love me!

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<http://www.alwaysloved.net>. ☐

¹ John 1:1-5

² Psalm 17:15

Simeon's surprise

The old man's face reflected the local landscape – weathered, lined and creased. He was a good man, prayerful and devout. He lived "in prayerful expectancy of help for Israel."¹ He remembered the promises made to Abraham. He remembered God's costly redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt. He remembered the promises made to the nation then. He remembered the exciting promises made to David. He remembered with profound longing the promises made through the prophets. He remembered the sad tragedy of captivity and exile, and the promises of the subsequent prophets for redemption and complete restoration.

But for four hundred years the prophets had been silent. Troops from the current reigning military powers had used the national territory as a regular route for their marches or their battles. As a buffer state, Israel suffered the ongoing misery, destitution and destruction from the brutal fallout of war—either indirectly from the battles between the current powers, or directly through invasion such as those by Antiochus Epiphanes and Pompey.

Some people had given up hope. Some joined resistance movements. Some tried to be more religious, more worthy of God's blessing, believing that if everyone kept the law perfectly, Messiah would come.

As Simeon looked around him, he saw the oppression of Israel under the heel of the mighty Roman Empire.

Politically and militarily his people were subjected to the rule of Rome and her appointed authorities. And while the temple dominated his nation religiously and economically, he saw the strange cooperation of the Sadducees with the occupying forces, the resistance of the Pharisees, and the various extreme versions of Messianic fervour that regularly burst forth from the depth of hope that burned brightly in the hearts of many religious people. Where was God? Why didn't he do something?

In his mercy, God had convicted Simeon through the Spirit that he would see "the Messiah of God" —God's anointed One—before he died. Simeon then lived daily in eager expectation of that hope. Then, one day, "led by the Spirit", Simeon entered the Temple. He saw Mary

by John McLean

and Joseph bringing in the child Jesus. He took the child in his arms and blessed God: "With my own eyes I've seen your salvation; it's now out in the open for everyone to see". What a surprising moment; what an unlikely source of help for Israel—and indeed as Simeon points out, help for the whole world to see.

What an unlikely Messiah. A helpless baby. What a surprising source of salvation and hope for all mankind. Yet even so, Simeon's expectations were about to be exceeded in spectacular ways he could never have anticipated. In the midst of the current strife, mess, confusion, discouragement and stress, in the midst of war and occupation, God focused the hope of his entire, eternal plan in his Son, Jesus. He wasn't what



was expected—even by those who knew the Scriptures best. In place of a glorious military warrior, he was presented as a dependent child. Instead of a conquering king, he came as a servant.

In Jesus Christ all the promises of the Old Covenant would find their complete and ultimate fulfilment. Jesus was the Father's beloved Son. He called God "Abba", Father. He was nothing less than the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe,² entering into the life of his creation. He came from the inner life of God to reveal God to us—to show us who God was, what he was doing. And it wasn't what most people thought God was like!

This God was not some lonely, judgmental, angry, disapproving being. This God was not someone who was out to punish every mistake and failing. This God was a God of love. A God who in himself, in his Triune communion of Father, Son and Spirit, is and always was love. A God whose love was so great that, from the very beginning, he wanted to share his life of beauty and joy with others, to include his creation within the circle of his life and love as his beloved children.³

In Jesus, we have "redemption, the forgiveness of sins."⁴ And so very much more. In Christ, we have fellowship, communion with God. We are included in the very life of the Triune God. He came "in the flesh", to take on our nature, and in doing so unites the human and the divine in himself. And he takes our humanity

Continues on pg. 11

back to the Father through the resurrection and ascension—redeemed, cleansed, reconciled. As Paul describes him to Timothy, he is quite simply “Christ Jesus our hope”. And the gospel is that message of hope, of reconciliation and salvation, for all mankind. Simeon would have been more astonished than anything he could have hoped or imagined when he held that tiny baby in his arms, had he known the full extent of what he was privileged to witness.

This is the amazing, astounding good news Christians celebrate at Advent season. Why get distracted with dates, commercialism, and a pseudo-celebration of “Xmas” when this is the greatest event, the greatest truth, anyone anywhere can celebrate? It’s news that is so good it’s hard to believe. An inner voice often tells

Continued from pg. 10

- 1 Luke 2:25-32
- 2 John1:1-4; Colossians 1:15
- 3 Ephesians 1:5
- 4 Colossians 1:14

us it’s too good to be true. But the advent of Christ into our world tells us it is so. And that’s something that we can’t help but celebrate and share.

It’s why the traditional Christian worship calendar includes Christmas in the Advent season. It’s a central celebration of Christ-centred theology, of living and sharing the good news of the gospel. It’s a time to focus on giving as the theme of our lives, as it is expressed in the other-centred, lavish outpouring of love expressed by the Father in the Son. It’s a time to share afresh Simeon’s joy at holding that tiny baby in his hands—amazed and surprised at who that baby was, and all that he is and has done. It’s a time to join with the angels singing “glory to God in the highest” for the greatest good news the world has ever heard. ☐

Lesson from the scar

One afternoon I was busy distributing bagels to my neighbours. I always take this time not only to give them physical bread, but also to build friendships with them. This particular time, as I was still talking and praying with one of the women, another woman called and asked if I had leftover food, for she was hungry. So I said, “I will go home and get some food for you.” She is homeless.

On my way home, I happened to see another neighbour, so I thought I should give her bagels as well. As soon as I knocked on the door I heard a dog barking. All of a sudden, the dog came out of the door. I thought she was just scaring me with her bark, but she bit my right knee. When the owner of the dog screamed, I was reminded of the song, “Who Let the Dogs Out?” by Anselm Douglas. The little girl who opened the door was afraid because she let the dog out.

This was my first time to be bitten by a dog. I knew to wash the wound. I also put natural antibiotic on the bite, but it got worse. I almost did not sleep the whole night for I was afraid. I asked the owner if the dog had a vaccination. I also have my tetanus shot. I searched the Internet and found if the dog is safe for 10 to 15 days, then I am safe too.

When I was young, I prayed for God to protect my legs from scars. But now that I am serving the Lord, it dawned on me to look at Jesus’ body. He was scarred from head to foot because of his love. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”¹ First John 3:16 says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

The more I understand this love, the more I am compelled to share it with our neighbours. I prayed: “Lord, may this incident turn out for good that

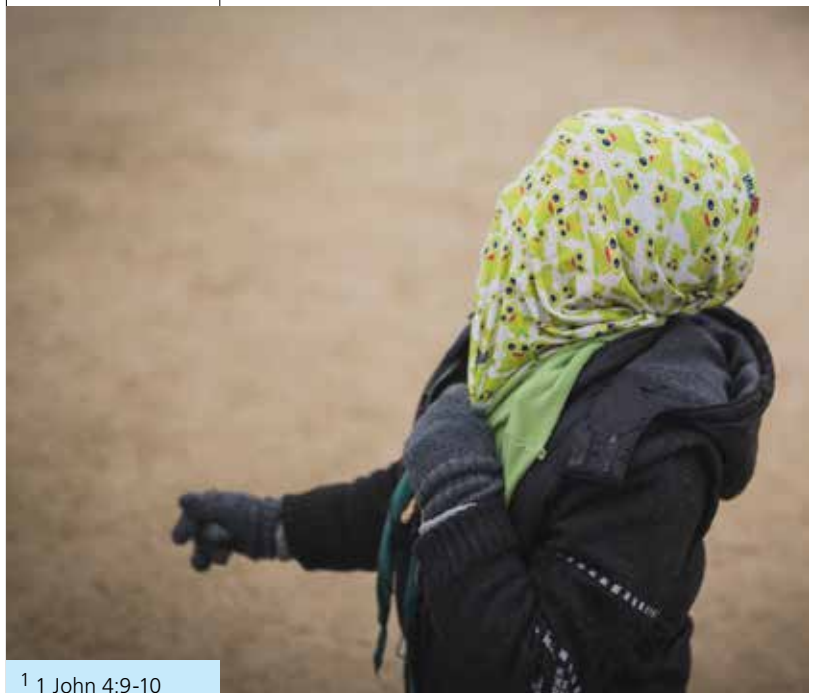
my neighbours may come to know how much you love them and care for them. May they have a deep relationship with our Lord who gave his life as a ransom. He redeemed us because of that great love for us.”

Now that I know I am safe, I can look at the scar as a reminder that once upon a time I was bitten by a dog. It’s also a reminder that because of the scars Jesus wears, I am safe for eternity. ☐

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for bearing my sin and scars. You loved me so much that you were willing to suffer for me and with me so that I might be awakened to your love for me. May your scar always remind me of your great love for me. In your name I pray, amen. ☐

by
Angelita Tabin



¹ 1 John 4:9-10

Trinity, Incarna

The doctrines of *trinity*, *incarnation* and *adoption* may appear abstract, if not intimidating for many but they are the core beliefs of the Christian faith.

This article explains these doctrines in layman's language so you can know what the Christian faith is all about and how you can embrace it.

Trinity

Trinity tells us that God is a *relationship* God. The trine God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is a *relational* being. They relate by giving themselves to each other fully, unconditionally, withholding nothing. Their relationship is dynamic, intimate, wholesome and joyful. God created us so we could participate in his life as his own children.

Their relationship is not hierarchical (unlike human systems). The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are *coequal* and *co-essential*. The Father is not greater than the Son and the Son is not greater than the Holy Spirit. The need for hierarchy doesn't arise because they simply give themselves to each other freely and unconditionally. God's kingdom (family) is not about power, position or status. It's about living life in union and communion with one another as equals.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are *distinct* from each other. The Father is distinct from the Son in the sense that he is *the* Father of the Son. The Son is distinct from the Father in the sense that he is *the* Son of the Father. And the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son in the sense that he is *the* Spirit of the Father and the Son. This distinction is both necessary and essential for relationship. Without distinction there can be no relationship. In God's kingdom, *everyone* will be distinct from each other. We will be distinct from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and also from one another. It will definitely not be a community of cloned people which will be utterly dull and boring!

Although the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct from each other, they are nevertheless *united* and *function* as one being.¹ They do everything together even though one may initiate or take the lead. All their actions are joint actions—whether creation, reconciliation, salvation or adoption. In God's kingdom all will be united and function as one family.² There will be unity in diversity.

God's love is *dynamic*, not static. The Father loves the Son and *pours* himself into the Son. He adores, honours, trusts and rejoices in the Son. He gives glory to the Son. The Son likewise loves the Father and pours himself into the Father. He adores, honours, trusts and rejoices in the Father. He gives glory to the Father. They glorify each other in the Spirit.³ We are called to participate in this kind of life where everyone honours, respects, appreciates and values one another.



by
Dr. P. Sellappan

Their life is an open book—totally *transparent*. The Father knows the Son *fully* in the Spirit and the Son knows the Father fully in the Spirit. They know each other intimately because the *same* Spirit indwells them, and the Spirit knows the deep things of God.⁴ In God's kingdom everyone will live transparently. We will have nothing to hide. It is sin (shame) that causes us to hide from each other. In his kingdom there will be no sin, no shame and no hiding!

The Father and Son *dwell* in each other in the Spirit. The Father dwells in the Son and the Son dwells in the Father. The apostle John describes this *mutual indwelling* (embrace) thus: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."⁵ In other words, they have their being in *union and communion* with each other. In God's kingdom, we too will commune (fellowship) with God and also with one another in the Spirit.

Trinity is about *relationships*. It is about living in union and communion with God and with one another. It is about participating in Jesus' intimate relationship with his Father as his brothers and sisters. It is about using our individual distinct talents and gifts to creatively love and share life with one another.

God loves *all* people and is drawing them to himself through his Son and by his Spirit. The Spirit leads us to Jesus and Jesus empowers us to participate in his intimate relationship with the Father. God is inviting us to intimate fellowship with him and with one another. That is why we can call God affectionately as 'Abba Father', and call each other as brothers and sisters.

Incarnation

Incarnation tells God became Man in the person of his Son Jesus.⁶ Jesus came as a *human*, as *one of us*, and *continues* to live as human (in *glorified* form) but *without* ceasing to be God.⁷ He is both God and *Man*, fully God and fully man within his one person. As God-Man, he came to *unite* God and man. As God, he expressed his Father's unconditional love toward us. As Man he fully submitted to God and his will. By this he has forged an unbreakable bond between God and man. In Jesus, God has bound *himself to humanity - eternally*. That means humanity henceforth would never be alone. That's the purpose of Jesus' incarnation.

The first Adam, representing humanity, brought death to all. The last Adam, Jesus, also representing humanity, brought life to all. He lived a sinless life *for us, with us, as us*. Thus he has qualified us for salvation and eternal life. You *might say he came to live the true human life that God intended for us when he first created us*.

Sin brought death to all humanity. But Jesus came to give life to all. He assumed our sin and died our death on the cross. But he didn't stay dead. He rose from the grave to give us *his resurrection life and his righteousness as a free gift*.⁸ He ascended into heaven to give us the glory he received from his Father. He is now at the

tion, Adoption

right hand of God as a perfect human on our behalf. That is how we are perfected. That is why we say our life is *inseparably* bound up in his life.⁹ *Indeed, he is our life.*¹⁰

God's kingdom is holy, so we too must be holy. But we are powerless to make ourselves holy. Thanks to Jesus who has made us holy and has given us his own perfect life as a free gift. That's how we become holy.

Adoption

God created us for adoption into his family as his own beloved children.¹¹ He planned this before the foundation of the world, before time began. He created us to participate in his life.

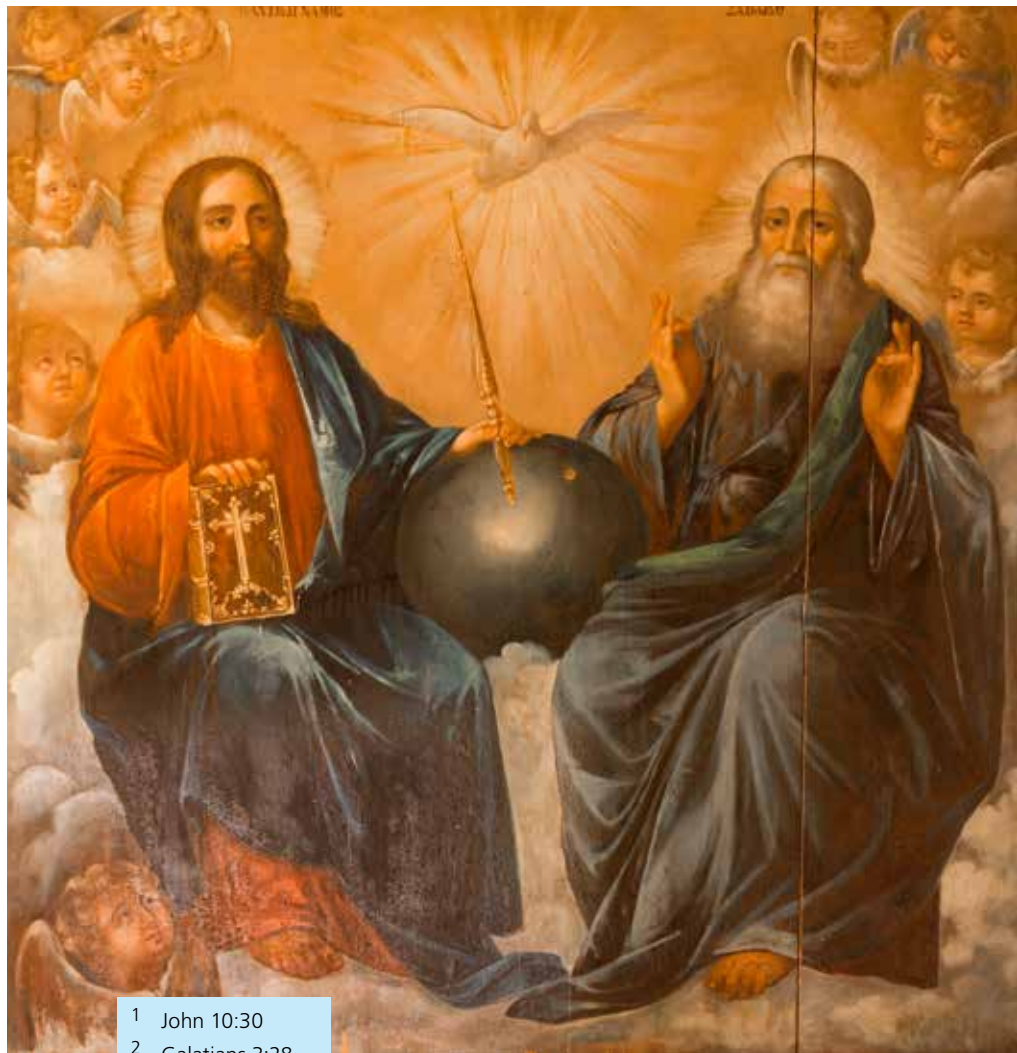
God's adoption process is different from the human adoption process. In God's adoption, an estranged child is restored to his (or her) original status and given all rights, powers and privileges.

We are God's children but we went astray - we *alienated ourselves from him* (not vice versa). In our twisted thinking we lost the knowledge of God and of ourselves. We don't know who God really is, and we don't know who we really are. Jesus came to reveal the true God and our true self (identity).

God sent Jesus to deliver us from sin and death. He assumed our sin into himself and destroyed it on the cross. And he rose from the grave to justify us - to make us right with God. That is how he has saved us. By his Spirit, he is now revealing our true self, our son-ship, and our union with God. As we discover our true self in Christ and participate in his life we get to experience his love, joy and peace. That is our hope and destiny.

God loves us *immensely*. It is his desire and good pleasure to give us his kingdom. As his children we are heirs and coheirs with Christ. We inherit all the rights, honours and privileges accorded to Christ. God shares *everything* with Jesus and Jesus shares *everything* with us. He shares all that he *is* and *has* - his own intimate relationship with God and the whole universe that he created. *Love means sharing everything*. That is how much he loves us.

God is no respecter of persons. He loves *all* people - male and female, young and old, rich and poor, all races and colours - *equally*. He doesn't love some people more and some people less (as we do). *Indeed, he loves us as much as he loves his son Jesus*. And his love for us doesn't depend on how good we have been or how many good things we have done. *He loves us because he is love*.



- 1 John 10:30
- 2 Galatians 3:28
- 3 John 17:1-5
- 4 1 Corinthians 2:10-11
- 5 John 14:11, John 17:21
- 6 John 1:14
- 7 1 Corinthians 15:47-49, 1 Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 7:6
- 8 1 Corinthians 1:30, 2 Corinthians 5:21
- 9 Ephesians 4:6
- 10 2 Corinthians 5:17
- 11 Ephesians 1:5, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:5
- 12 1 Corinthians 1:30

Let's summarize: The doctrines of trinity, incarnation and adoption are core beliefs of the Christian faith. Trinity invites us to a *relationship* with God—to participate in the intimate life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But for that to happen we must first be *united* to God. That's the purpose of Jesus' incarnation. As God-Man, Jesus has forged an unbreakable *union* with God and has given us his own *perfect humanity* as a free gift.¹² That union empowers us to participate in God's life. *Adoption assures us that we belong to God and that we are his children*. As his children and as heirs and coheirs with Christ we inherit all the rights, honours and privileges accorded to him. These doctrines - trinity, incarnation and adoption - are the essence of the Christian faith. May you embrace this truth, participate and experience his abundant life—here and now and forever in his kingdom! ☐

I don't understand...

You, like most Christians, probably have many questions you would like to ask God: Here are some questions I have:

How can You be One God, yet three divine Persons?

How old is the earth?

Why do you allow such incredible evil in the world?

Are You actually aware of everything that happens?

How can You listen to the prayers of multiple Christians at the same time?

Why do You allow us to go through difficult trials?

Why do you let some Christians with seemingly great potential die young?

How will You deal with the billions who never heard the gospel?

What will heaven be like?

Someday we will learn much more. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."¹ In the meantime, our understanding of God's mysteries remains shrouded. But thankfully, He does tantalize us with some vague 'reflections.'

Glimpses of answers

For example, Scripture clearly tells us that God is One, but also a Trinity. Many people have used various analogies to try to explain how that can be. Saint Patrick likened the Trinity to a three-leaf clover—one stem with three leaves. Others refer to water—one substance, but appearing in three forms—solid, liquid, and gas. Still others believe human language is inadequate—the three Persons are not persons as we understand "persons."

Admittedly, all analogies used to explain the Trinity fall short. However, what we do know about the Trinity is very meaningful. All three members of the Godhead have different roles, yet they are in total harmony in bringing us to salvation. "Let us make man in our image..."² He/They are one in purpose, lovingly transforming us into His/Their eternal kingdom. In that we can marvel, be thankful for, and find vision and motivation to live lives pleasing to God.



by
Paul Hailey

God has revealed all we need to know about the way to salvation. He also reveals His loving character through the life of Jesus, and gives us enough glimpses of the future to bring anticipation and excitement. That's enough for me. I probably couldn't handle any more than that anyway.

Let's relish what we *do* know.

The hidden things belong to God

As the Lord told Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."³

You and I have enough understanding to compel us to stand in awe of God's glory and majesty.

I expect that as time goes on, God will reveal more to us. I believe we will forever stand in awe of Him. Thankfully He reveals enough of Himself to merit our continual love and worship here and now. As Elizabeth Elliot said, "If God were small enough to be understood, He wouldn't be big enough to be God."

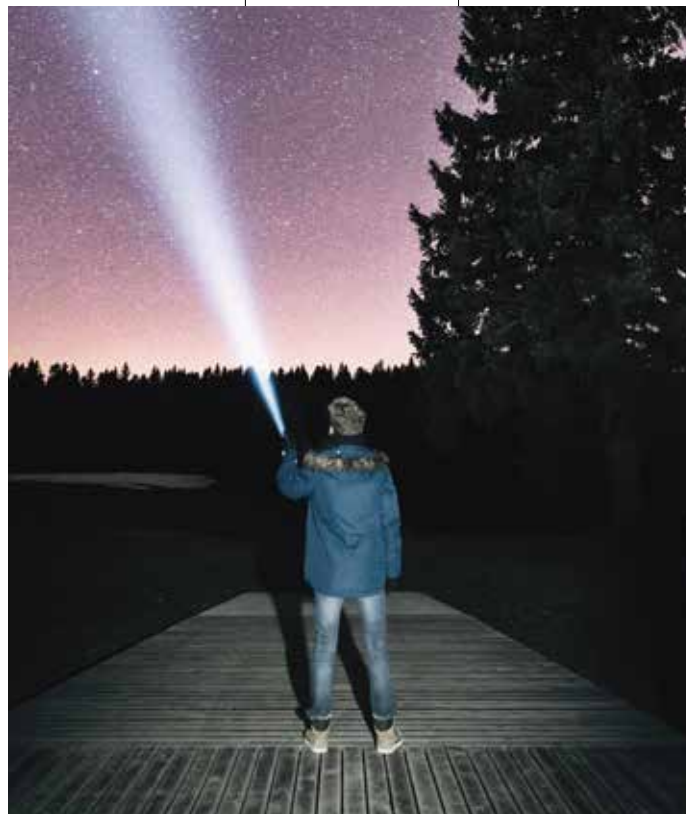
Some day we will understand more

There's much you and I don't know. Questions remain. Let's embrace the mysteries and not be bothered by our limited understanding. As we look at all the evil in the world, let's remember, evil is temporary and somehow God is allowing it for a good purpose. Some day when we are capable of understanding more, He will enlighten us. In the meantime, let's be thankful

for those things He has revealed to us and for His all-encompassing love for you and me. ☐

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for your promise of everlasting life. We marvel at your love, patience and wisdom in bringing us into your heavenly kingdom. Sometimes we desire to understand more about you and your plan. We look forward to the time when we will be with our Lord and be able to comprehend more of you. In the meantime, may we walk with patience and faith, knowing that your timing and wisdom are perfect. We pray in Jesus name, amen. ☐



¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12

² Genesis 1:26

³ Isaiah 55:8, 9

My one word for 2017—renew

Since beginning my annual one-word journey, I am always excited to learn what new lessons God desires to teach me each year.

After an exciting and then emotional end to 2016, I was inspired by a thought-provoking sermon on the new covenant. In 2 Corinthians, much is written about the difference between the old and new covenants. The third chapter speaks of the new being, “more glorious, having greater glory, surpassing glory and ever-increasing glory!” In the new covenant, the ministry is new, there’s new hope and new-found freedom that transforms us into his likeness so his life may be revealed in us. All of this “in the new” is for his glory.

God giving us a *new* covenant made me think about the *new* year and how he lavishes us with *new* beginnings. Temporal things are not perfect, so we need (and are gifted with) many fresh and new starts—a *new* year, a *new* month, a *new* week, a *new* day, a *new* hour, a *new* minute, a *new* moment. We are given many opportunities to start over when the need arises. Could it be God gives us so many new starts because he wants us to get used to the idea that one day we’re going to have the most spectacular *new* start ever?

In the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, my eyes zeroed in on encouragement not to lose heart. Even though we waste away on the outside, inwardly we’re being renewed day by day. The word renewed popped out at me and I began to wonder. What does renew mean? I took out pencil and paper to put into words what it meant to me: to make new again; even though it’s been used, it’s as good as new; as from the start; to have another chance to do something over; to begin again with a clean slate.

Then, quite unintentionally, as if my brain were downloading from an internal listing, I continued writing: restore, regroup, repeat, replenish, re-adjust. The re words continued to come to mind: *re-evaluate*, *review*, *re-think*, *re-establish*, *refresh*, *re-invent*, *remember*, *re-do*, *re-focus*, *reflect*, *reclaim*, *redeem*, *revitalize*, *realize*. Because my mind was engulfed with so many words and thoughts on this subject, I felt my word for 2017 was meant to be renew. I then found as I defined what I understood about each of those words, I had begun a series of lessons on being renewed each day by his Spirit.

by
Senior Pulley

Restore: Repair, put back in better order.

Regroup: Slow down, think about it and begin again.

Repeat: Another chance to get things right; a do-over with no limit as to how many times I can try!

Re-do: If I’ve not done it right, do it again.

Replenish: Refill what I’ve used or re-moved.

Re-adjust: Make necessary changes and continue on.

Re-evaluate: Go over the facts as often as necessary.

Review: Look over again to make sure I’ve done it right.

Re-think: Think again about an issue; don’t be hasty.

Re-establish: Put back that which is important.

Refresh: Freshen up and add some nourishment.

Re-invent: If it doesn’t work, figure out a better way.

Remember: Bring back to mind.

Re-focus: If off track, slow down and get back on it.

Reflect: Think about the important things.

Reclaim: If it’s truly mine, retrieve it.

Redeem: Trade in for something better and make good use of it.

Revitalize: Add some new life.

When I recall what Christ has done to re-new my life and realize how he has restored and repaired what has been broken, how he has redeemed each one of us and reconciled us to himself by peeling away the old to reveal newness of life

and to transform us so his life may be revealed in us; how he has re-established in our minds the purpose of humanity and reclaimed us as his own, all for his glory, as I reflect on all of the benefits of being renewed in him, I feel revitalized and full of rejoicing! ☐



Hope, despite evil

It took just eight or nine gunmen to terrorize Paris and alarm the entire Western world, fuelling debate about global terrorism and the growing refugee crisis. Though evil is ever-present in our world, and seems to grow more dramatic by the day, we have hope knowing that the day is coming when Jesus will have put down all remnants of evil. I pray that day comes soon, and I'm sure you do too. Our thoughts and prayers are with those who were injured and all who mourn the death of their loved ones.

When terrible things like the Paris attacks occur, I remind myself that the fullness of God's kingdom is yet to come. I also remind myself that we are blessed to experience God's kingdom now in our relationship with Christ, by the Spirit, under the grace of God. But I'm also aware that we live as aliens in a tainted world where the kingdom's fullness is not yet seen. As the apostle Paul tells us, we live in the present evil age while we hope for the age that is yet to come.¹

It can be perplexing, even discouraging to know that before we fully experience that new age, we must continue through this time of evil with the pain it brings. But we are encouraged knowing that events like those in Paris are not outside God's love for us. Though we face events we don't understand, we have faith and hope knowing God is fully present and is suffering with us. We know this because he proved his willingness to suffer from evil and bear its pain on our behalf. Yes, we grieve (and we pray), but not as those who are without hope.²

Philosophers and theologians have wrestled with the problem of evil for centuries, struggling to define its nature and character, as well as to explain why evil continues to exist. A variety of explanations have emerged. Buddhists say evil isn't something that exists; it's an illusion (**maya**). Some atheists say evil is the natural result of a universe without design or a designer. Here is what atheist Richard Dawkins wrote:

"In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, and other people are going to get lucky; and you won't find any rhyme or reason to it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good. Nothing but blind pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is, and we dance to its music."

This atheistic explanation is not persuasive, especially since most of us have had enough bad things happen in our lives that we are convinced that evil is real and ought not be. Although evil is regular (and thus "ordinary"), it's not necessary nor, in that sense, natural. The proclamation of naturalism that, "What is, is," does not serve as an explanation of why we sense that what is, ought not be.



by
Dr. Joseph
Tkach

The Stoics taught that evil is the corruption of reason and should simply be endured. They advocated indifference to pain, pleasure, grief, and joy. This stiff "grin-and-bear-it" approach to life may sound virtuous, but it quickly becomes empty when an innocent child is kidnapped or you are falsely accused of doing evil. Ignoring evil is not a way of recognizing the evil of evil, and actually dealing with evil is no small task. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Problem of Pain*, "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free-wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself."

Evil exists because God permits and gives humanity the possibility of choice. How we choose to use our wills is horrendous at times, as some misuse their wills in striving for evil. We see this every time there is a terrorist attack, including the recent one in Paris. God gives us the power to choose, to act. We can use our wills to do some good or to do some evil. But there is a strict limit on what we can do. What we cannot do is absolute good or absolute evil. Both our good acts and our evil acts are partial, provisional and temporary. We cannot and do not act as only God can act. We do not define reality, or good and evil for that matter. We act within limits, although those limits always seem to be too unrestrictive when great evils occur. But the fact that we cannot enact absolute good or absolute evil does not mean that there isn't an absolute good that can and will conquer all evil, which is, in the end, not absolute, but relative to the goodness and power of God. Fortunately we know God in Jesus, who is absolute good, and who conquered evil absolutely so that evil has no future.

Despite this understanding, we still ask, why doesn't God stop (absolutely) all evil now? A good number of theologians and philosophers have answered this way: Try to imagine a world where God intervened to prevent carelessness and irresponsible behavior from occurring. There would be no criminal activity, no accidents, and no natural disasters. Sounds good, doesn't it? Yes, until we realize that such a world would eliminate human choice and will. Whenever God saw something bad start to occur, he would intervene and suspend or modify our wills. This would lead to a world without moral meaning, for every time an evil action began to raise its ugly head, human willing would be overcome by external force and the deliberation to discern and choose the good would become morally meaningless. In such a world there would be no practical difference between a good and an evil action. In other words, we would not be living as human persons who could mirror their creator God in choosing and willing the good. We would, in effect, become non-moral beings, like animals or robots.

So what do we do with evil? A common Christian explanation is to combat and conquer it ourselves with whatever means are at hand. But this "fight fire

with fire” approach poses a major problem—it can be a stumbling block to belief in God. It both grants too much to evil (as evil as evil is) and not enough to what God has done, is doing and will do through his and our doing good. What Paul tells us is that as God’s children, rather than being “overcome by evil” we are to “overcome evil with good.”³

It is not uncommon for those struck by tragedy to question their faith, or even abandon it when facing the pain that evil brings. In those situations it can seem that evil is as real or more real than God and his goodness. If we attempt to combat evil and conquer it simply by sheer force of our own strength, “fighting fire with fire,” we get lost in our own efforts and can quickly spiral down a path of unbelief—believing that evil has the same or greater status as good. We also can be tempted to believe that good cannot overcome evil, not even God’s good! Conversely, when we focus on God’s sovereignty as displayed in Jesus Christ during a time of evil—in the midst of pain and grief—we can experience his comfort in the truth that he is with us in the midst of our suffering, and that evil has no future.

Of course, when we face suffering as the result of evil, it can seem to us that God is at a distance, standing back from the evil that confronts us, or otherwise is uninvolved in our situation. But the opposite is true—God is **always** with us. As Phillip Yancey wrote in **Disappointment with God**, “All feelings of disappointment with God trace back to a breakdown in that relationship.” That breakdown always occurs on the human side as we are challenged to have faith in God—to trust that he is good and can and has overcome evil. That trust in God gives us hope and in hope we can act here and now on the basis of the truth concerning the ever-present God who accompanies us in our suffering.

To show his willingness to join us in our suffering, the eternal Son of God came in the flesh as Jesus and made his dwelling with us. And though he was rejected by many, Jesus made atonement for all through his life, death, resurrection and ascension. What Jesus has done for us shows clearly that God does care for us and is with us now in our suffering, and one day, in triumph, will bring in the fullness of his kingdom where there will be no more evil and the suffering it causes. God’s desire is to be in a loving relationship with each one of us—living in us, experiencing our suffering and our joys with us, all the while changing us from the inside out. We can meet and know Jesus in suffering and in hope.

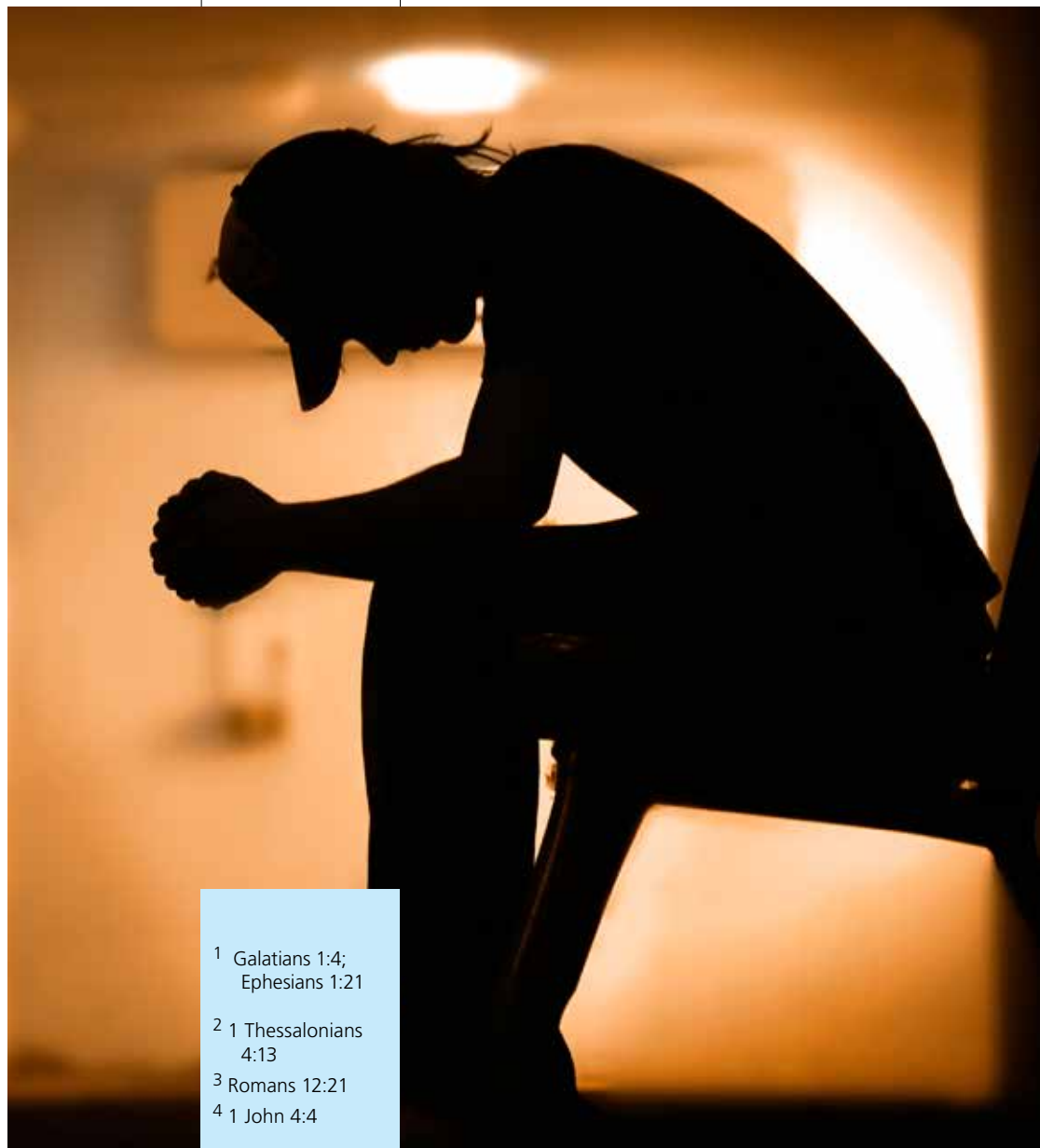
Along with his mission to change us from the inside out, Jesus works to turn the world inside out. Yes, there is evil in this present age, but

we live here not in fear and despair but with hope and confidence knowing that “The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”⁴ Most assuredly, one article like this cannot answer everything about evil and suffering. But I hope it brings you some comfort as we are reminded that, on a day and in an hour that no human knows, Jesus will bring an end to the actual nonsense that ought not be.

As we await that blessed hope, let’s join together in praying for the time when there will be no more terrorism, no more cancer victims, no more drive-by shootings, no more tears and sorrow. Right now, life is not fair, but God is, as we clearly see in the whole life of Jesus. He does not allow anything he cannot redeem. Fair and loving, he has made just and fair provision for all through his life, death, resurrection and ascension. In Jesus we see that God takes no pleasure in our suffering and has acted decisively to bring it to an end. We may not yet see this end clearly now, but we most certainly will see it and experience it fully in eternity.

Be encouraged dear sisters and brothers, God is faithful. He will finish what he has started.

Maranatha! Come quickly, Lord Jesus. ☐



¹ Galatians 1:4;
Ephesians 1:21

² 1 Thessalonians
4:13

³ Romans 12:21

⁴ 1 John 4:4

Living life eternally



Many of us used to view the progression of conversion as a yardstick by which to measure ourselves. In doing so, life became burdensome and exhausting. “The way to God de-generates into a struggle up a ladder or progress by degrees.... Following Christ then becomes a work that is never finished, rather than a life that is never ending.” (Alan Jones, Soul Making)

Living this life with the conviction it will ultimately transition into eternity doesn’t mean everything will go smoothly. Acceptance of inescapable adversity and heart-ache is a necessary part of the process. This is not easy for me because embedded in my spiritual DNA is the yardstick notion that good things happen when you’re good and bad things happen when you’re bad. Somehow life will be perfect if I just do the right things. If I don’t measure up, God doesn’t love me any-more.

There’s a big difference between measuring life negatively as a work that is never finished and positively living life that is never ending. Now just so we understand, no way can I, or anyone else, live life eternally every minute of every day. I hardly know what eternity is. It is a mystery.

I remember my dad in his 90s literally, and often, dreaming of the holy city as he slept because he thought about it constantly, picturing what it would be like. Having a good imagination is helpful, but I don’t have a colourful, vibrant imagination as he did. My dreams are usually silly and don’t make any sense, kind of like the Mad Hatter’s tea party.

by
**Joyce
Catherwood**

Here’s what I do know: the Son of God tells us eternal life is to know the only true God and Jesus Christ.¹ To know Jesus is to know the Father. And to know Jesus is to love him. Emotionally connecting to the greatest story ever told—that Jesus did indeed come to this earth clothed with humility, that he lived and interacted with his own creation, that he died a cruel death at the hands of his own creatures—is pivotal. We cannot help but be drawn to him. And loving him puts us on track to loving each other.

Even if we could fathom all mysteries, have all knowledge, understand all prophecies, have faith that can move mountains yet lack genuine love for God and humankind, it is meaningless. Comparing ourselves with and judging each other is futile. Using yard-sticks to measure and climbing ladders becomes work that is never enough, never finished.

Then what does last forever? Loving God and experiencing the peace and joy that flow from this love is living this earthly life as it will be in eternity. Exhibiting patience, kindness, compassion, sympathy and forgiveness toward others is living life eternally. Not being easily angered, proud, boastful or envious is living life eternally. Not showing dishonour to others or being self-seeking is living life eternally. And so much more.

As fallible human beings, we can expect to fall short, but that will only serve to remind us to increase our awareness of the aspects of God’s love deficient in our daily lives. This is living life that is never ending. □

¹ John 17:3

Is the word of God relevant today?

Many of us who trust and worship an almighty God may not have considered the fact that there are people who have no regard or belief in a divine being also known as the creator. Religion encompasses the notion that there is a supernatural being or beings whose existence is non-physical or spirit and are actually responsible for the creation of this physical universe and life on Earth. Mankind would be considered as the highest form of created physical life capable of intellect and self-awareness. However, there are many who despise the notion that their existence is the product of the creative genius of an infinite spirit being. They argue against the existence of God and often do it by ridiculing the scriptures and the accounts in the Bible.

Many of these skeptics have a wide audience and are popular talk show hosts. Bill Maher a famous comedian and talk show host makes no qualms about his disdain for God. His perception of God is, "Let's face it; God has a big ego problem. Why do we always have to worship him?" Another famous atheist Richard Dawkins, an English Ethnologist, evolutionary biologist and author, is even more vicious in his comments. He particularly condemns God as revealed in the scriptures of the Old Testament as a violent bully.

At the other extreme there are those whose belief in God has given them a warped sense of self-righteous superiority. However, the greatest pressure for those who believe in a divine creator comes from a subtle changing mindset worldwide that regards the moral boundaries set in the Bible as archaic and not suitable in a modern world. Biblical restrictions on homosexual practices or adultery, for example, is frowned upon and activists seeking freedom for people to practice their sexual preferences now label those who adhere to the word of God as extremists, fanatics, narrow-minded, intolerant and dangerous. Somehow believing God and his word as stated in the Bible is not fashionable and many who worship God are ridiculed as being outdated and not in touch with present day modern society. Those who believe the word of God are being prodded and pressed to compromise their values or face persecution. How then can one serve God and remain loyal to his expectations when confronted with a fast changing environment that is not favourable to the word of God?



by
Devaraj Ramoo

When the situation around us is beyond our control, when the forces against us are too strong for us and when we have no say in the matter, then the strength to stay loyal comes from God himself. The relevance of the word of God lies not in the efforts of those who believe in him to fight against those who oppose the word of God. It lies in the steadfastness of staying true to those values even in the face of vicious opposition. The Prophet Daniel faced such a situation during the reign of King Darius over Babylon around 522 BCE. Daniel was one among three governors over the kingdom. He distinguished himself above all the other governors and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him.¹ Daniel was unique because he not only was faithful in his duties but steadfast in his reverence for God.



His enemies decided to put him in trouble by directly interfering in his worship of his God. They convinced the King to establish a decree whereby for thirty days the entire nation had to worship only the King and no other God. Anyone not obeying the decree would face death. It cannot get any worse than this. Daniel's environment changed overnight and there was direct confrontation to his belief in God and his worship of the almighty. There was nothing that he could do to change the situation. Daniel responded by calmly going home and bringing the matter to God by kneeling before God and giving thanks. He resolved in his heart that he would not budge from his commitment to God.² Daniel's enemies made sure that he was exposed and pressed the King to pass judgment that would result in Daniel's death. The King, deeply distressed, reluctantly commanded that Daniel be thrown into the den of lions. The Bible account states that God himself caused the lions not to harm Daniel and he was delivered.³

The situation is the same for us today. The world may change its values. God and his way of life may be ignored, considered foolish and hated. But those who know their God trust in a very real God who is well able to show us the way out of difficult circumstances. For did not Jesus himself say, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."⁴ □

¹ Daniel 6: 1-3

² Daniel 6: 10

³ Daniel 6: 22

⁴ John 10: 27

A different kind of revolution

As you know, Nelson Mandela died recently at age 95. He led the black majority in the Republic of South Africa in a long struggle to cast off the oppressive rule of the white minority with its evil policy of apartheid (racial segregation). When Mandela became his country's first black president, he refused to call for revenge against the oppressors, becoming an international symbol of the power of forgiveness.

Though far from perfect, South Africa is a much better place because of Nelson Mandela.

Mandela was unusual in that his struggle for freedom and equality did not lead to an early grave, though he suffered many long years "buried" in prison. Others who espoused non-violent resistance to oppression met violent deaths—Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. spring immediately to mind. These were imperfect men, but their lives eventually made a significant difference for the cause of peace.

And of course, none can compare to Jesus of Nazareth who has the title, "Prince of Peace." His life was perfect. He brings us God's own peace, a peace that this world can never give.

The urge to be free is a strong drive in human beings. Recently I visited the historic St. John's Episcopal Church where delegates from Virginia met in 1775 for the second time and Patrick Henry made his famous speech in which he said, "Give me liberty or give me death!"

As I enjoyed the visit to that historic church, I thought about the choice made there that resulted in the Revolutionary War, in which so many died. But that is the result when we make the choice—liberty or death.

As Christians, we celebrate a different kind of revolution—one planned from the foundation of this unhappy, fallen world. That revolution, on behalf of Adam, Israel and all humanity, was brought about by the Incarnation, through which Jesus embraced us all in our fallen brokenness. In doing so, he in himself resolved the conflict, giving humanity new life. As



by
**Dr. Joseph
Tkach**

Thomas F. Torrance wrote in *When Christ Comes and Comes Again*:

"Far from being rebuffed by the disobedience and rebellion of man, the will of God's love to see and create fellowship with man established the covenant of grace in which God promised to man in spite of his sin to be his God, and insisted on binding man to Himself as His child and partner in love. God remained true and faithful to His covenant. He established it in the midst of the people of Israel, and all through their history God was patiently at work, preparing a way for the Incarnation of His love at last in Jesus Christ, that in and through him he might bring His covenant to complete fulfilment and gather man back into joyful communion with Himself."

Patrick Henry laid a choice before the Virginia delegates when he said, "Give me liberty or give me death!" That is still the choice offered by the multitude of

"freedom fighters" in our world today. Sadly, the result in most cases is death followed by the establishment of a different type of tyranny. So often, today's freedom fighters become tomorrow's oppressors and their "freedom" ends up being another form of bondage.

"Liberty or death" is not the choice that Jesus offered. In fact, it wasn't even an offer, or a choice. Jesus does not say "I am come that they might have a choice of death or freedom." He says, "I am come that

they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."

The liberty that Jesus gives us is not something we gain by armed struggle, or even passive resistance. It is God's gift of loving reconciliation with God and with others that we cannot obtain in any other way except through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. ☐



Emmanuel, Our Redeemer

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Redeemer, the opening words from a beautiful hymn keep running through my mind: "There is a redeemer, Jesus God's own son." Redemption isn't something we normally think about at Christmas, but that's really what it's all about. We don't often use the word in everyday life, unless we're talking about turning in a coupon to save money or exchanging points for merchandise. Some of us remember saving green stamps in books and redeeming them for just about anything. We sometimes talk about redeeming time, particularly making up for a misspent youth or wasted time.

Many think of *redemption* as a churchy word and might not be clear on the meaning. One well-known story of redemption is found in the book of Ruth, a biblical love story, if you will, of a young woman's tragedy and triumph, and her hero-kinsman-redeemer, Boaz. Ruth's experience helps us understand what it means to be redeemed.

Under Israelite law, the closest relative of a widow (enter Ruth) could, upon her request, marry her and thus restore the land belonging to the family, as well as continue the family line of the deceased husband. When Ruth lay at Boaz' feet on the threshing floor, she wasn't being inappropriate; she was claiming her right to make him her kinsman-redeemer. A closer relative who had the first prerogative declined to marry Ruth and the rest is history – Ruth took her place in the genealogy of Jesus.

By marrying Ruth, who was a gentile daughter-in-law of the wife of one of his relatives – a nobody to him – Boaz restored her honor, dignity, land and inheritance. By extension, Naomi also got back her life and was given a future and hope for more sons.

Boaz was a type of Christ, pointing to the time when

Jesus would be the kinsman-redeemer of all humanity and would buy us back from sin and death. In what has been called The Great Exchange, Jesus gave himself for us, restoring our hope and future. His sacrifice saves us from bondage to the wrong master and frees us to be in Christ, with blessings now and hope for eternal life with him.

The most beautiful thing about our redemption is that it wasn't a transaction. Just as Ruth had nothing to offer Boaz but herself, we have nothing to offer Jesus but ourselves—no coupon or green stamps required. It was a plan God formulated before the foundation of the universe, and it was motivated and shaped by one thing: his amazing love.

by
Tammy Tkach



1 Isaiah 53:3

By becoming human and going through each stage of life – from zygote to embryo to fetus, then infant to child to preteen and on to teenage and adulthood – Jesus redeemed every bit of life by taking our lives into his own life. Just as Boaz changed Ruth's life, making her part of his family and no longer an outsider, so Jesus has brought us into the circle of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we are outsiders no more. Our Kinsman-Redeemer became one of us to make us one with him. □

Parable of the fig tree

You can find this parable in Luke 13:1-9. It reads:

There were some present at that very time who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

In response to a retelling of the tragic story of Pilate murdering a group of Galileans as they were worshiping and making sacrifices, Jesus adds the equally tragic story of 18 people killed when the tower at Siloam fell. With both events in mind, Jesus challenges the common, though mistaken assumption that tragic events are always the result of sin and guilt. He tells his audience that they need to repent of presuming that the Father is adding up our sins and punishing us through random acts of violence and tragedy that come our way. He warns, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Jesus knows that if we carry this wrong-headed thinking about the Father in our hearts, the suffering and tragedy we all experience will be a weight too heavy to bear, killing us even in our worship of God.

Jesus then follows up that discussion with his well-known (but frequently misunderstood) **parable of the fig tree**. He does so to help his disciples think differently about what kind of God the Father is and how he deals with our sin and guilt. The owner of the vineyard in the parable is a stand-in for the erroneous viewpoint that people typically hold about God. The vinedresser is the Christ figure who helps us see how God actually deals with humanity, which is represented by the fig tree.

As with all fruit trees, under the law of Moses fig

by
Lance
McKinnon

trees were protected from being cut down. They were precious and meant for the enjoyment of the owner. Note that in this parable, the fig tree was planted in a vineyard not an orchard. The Father did not "plant" us in his garden to market us or to produce fruit for his livelihood. We were created for his pleasure and enjoyment.

In Leviticus 19:23-24, we see that it was forbidden to take fruit from fruit trees for the first three years. In the fourth year the fruit would "be holy, an offering of praise to the Lord." For the Jews hearing this parable, the act of the owner wanting to cut down the fig tree because he couldn't find fruit on it for three years would have run counter to what the law stated. If we see God looking to cut us down when we don't produce, we hold an image of God in our minds that contradicts his own revelation to us.



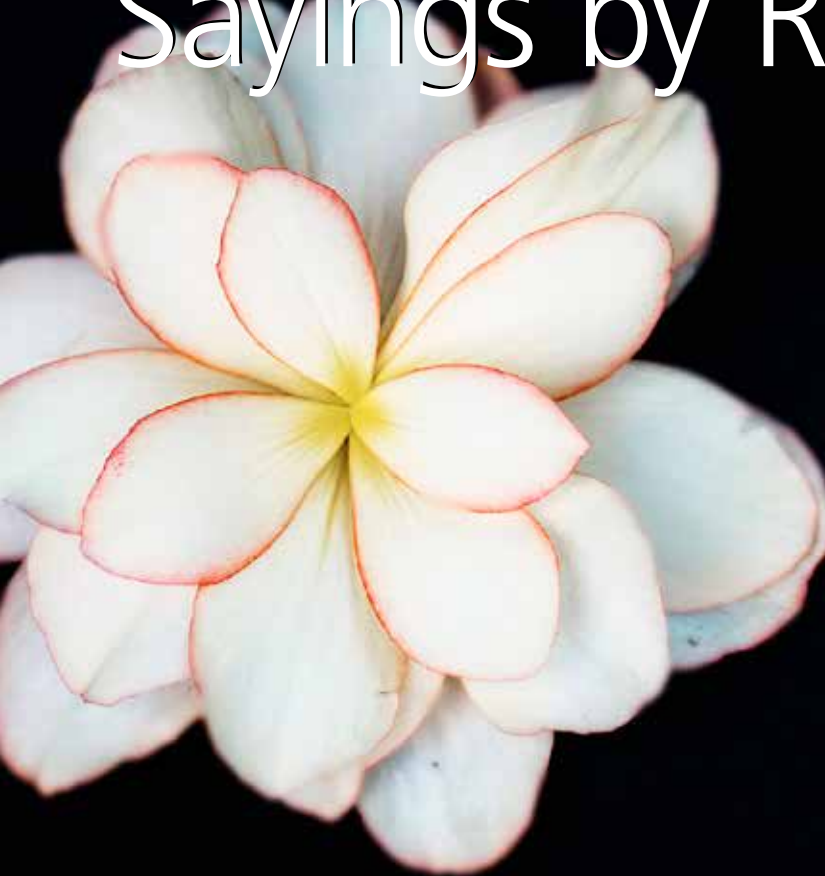
The vinedresser at this point speaks to the man—the mythological god we have created—and echoes what the law would have said to do: "Leave it alone for one more year." This phrase "leave it alone" comes from the Greek **aphes**, carrying the meaning of forgive. It's the same word Jesus utters from the cross in Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive (**aphes**) them...." The vinedresser takes upon himself the fruit bearing of the fig tree by digging around it and fertilizing it with dung. It would be a smelly job of blood, sweat and tears but he gets to the root of the problem.

This parable in the hands of Jesus challenges any concept we might hold of a God whose patience runs out on us and looks to destroy us like some sort of axe murderer. Rather, he comes to us in Jesus and operates through grace; through **aphes**. Through the crucifixion, digging into

the dirt and dung of death, Jesus has rooted out our unfruitfulness. We are called to repent of any wrong-headed notions that it is up to us to produce fruit in the fear of an axe-crazed owner bent on our destruction. We abide in the fruitfulness of our Savior who works only through **aphes**.

The parable ends with the vinedresser saying to the man, "If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then [you] cut it down." We can trust in Jesus working through grace for our fruitfulness, or we can perish in our wrong-headed belief in a mythological god. The mythological god will cut us down every time, but the real God never will. □

Sayings by Richard Rohr



This life journey has led me to love mystery and not feel the need to change it or make it un-mysterious. This has put me at odds with many other believers I know who seem to need explanations for everything.

It's not correct to say Jesus is God. Now, don't run and report me to the bishop, all right? It's not correct to say that - Jesus is the union of the human and the divine. That's different.

We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.

Faith does not need to push the river because faith is able to trust that there is a river. The river is flowing. We are in it.

Every time God forgives us, God is saying that God's own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with us.

Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves you so that you can change. What empowers change, what makes you desirous of change is the experience of love. It is that inherent experience of love that becomes the engine of change.

Before the truth sets you free, it tends to make you miserable.

It's a gift to joyfully recognize and accept our own smallness and ordinariness. Then you are free with nothing to live up to, nothing to prove, and nothing to protect. Such freedom is my best description of Christian maturity, because once you know that your "I" is great and one with God, you can ironically be quite content with a small and ordinary "I." No grandstanding is necessary. Any question of your own importance or dignity has already been resolved once and for all and forever. □

I feel there is only one way at the moment to reduce evil in the world. That is be the vessel that carries and pours out love.

When we describe God, we can only use similes, analogies, and metaphors. All theological language is an approximation, offered tentatively in holy awe. That's the best human language can achieve. We can say, "It's like . . ." or "It's similar to . . ."; but we can never say with absolute certainty, "It is . . ." because we are in the realm of beyond, of transcendence, of mystery. We absolutely must maintain a fundamental humility before the Great Mystery; otherwise, religion worships itself and its formulations instead of God.

Men and women are most alike at their most mature and soulful levels. Men and women are most different only at their most immature and merely physical levels.

Jesus is much more concerned about shaking your foundations, giving you an utterly alternative self-image, world image, and God image, and thus reframing your entire reality. Mere inspiration can never do this.

The Plain Truth Magazine



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