

THE Plain Truth

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A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Dec-Jan 2007

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THE PLAIN TRUTH

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Public apathy—who is to blame?

It's time again for the news on television. The newscaster in all seriousness proclaims the devastating destruction currently occurring in Iraq as a result of the relentless bombings carried out by insurgents. Death and destruction affecting ordinary citizens are shown. Then, the news shifts to the brutal murders for the day. A woman's badly mutilated body was discovered in a public toilet. A drug addict murders an old lady because she wouldn't give him money. A snatch thief is responsible for a woman lying in hospital in a coma. A man is slashed repeatedly until he drops the briefcase of money he's carrying. After that we get the stomach churning court cases of rape and murder and worst of all brutal child abuse that never seems to cease. This is the typical 'normal' load of news we get every day with disasters and images of human suffering to top it up. At the end of the news the newscaster finishes by wishing everyone a nice day.

As long as all these horrible events don't involve us personally, most people just carry on as though they never happened. After all what do these events have to do with us? How callous and desensitised we all have become! Violence and evil doesn't affect us much. We don't have sleepless nights after watching the news. In fact we just forget all that we see and hear, for the next day will bring more of the same. It takes a super disaster or an unimaginable murder to make people sit up and notice. Some write in to the newspapers expressing their disgust and demand that something be done. But the vast majority of people just have no time to care. Let someone else solve the problems. Besides, what can an ordinary person really do to change the situation?

What about every-day normal situations? Burst pipes can be seen shooting water a few feet into the air and even though hundreds of people witness this fountain few would care to report it to the authorities.

We all see the increasing number of school students loitering around cybercafés and shopping complexes during school hours. We lament about the growing incidents of indiscipline among teenagers but all we do is blame the authorities and schools for not doing enough. What about the increase in drug addiction among youths? Again we shrug our shoulders and say it isn't our problem. We have all become

experts in turning away from the problems we see. Those few who do try to make a difference by caring, often find themselves fighting a losing battle. People just don't want to get involved. Why have we become like this?

A man once asked Jesus Christ what he should do to inherit

eternal life. Jesus explained that he should first love the Lord God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind. Then he added another commandment. We are also to love our neighbour as ourselves.¹ This is the crucial factor missing in society today. We are all becoming like the respectable citizens mentioned in the parable of the Good Samaritan who upon seeing an injured man on the road chose to pass by on the other side.² People with the means and power to act chose to avoid getting involved. But how can we as individuals make a difference when problems around the world are so immense and so complex? How do we stop crime, eradicate famine, cure the millions

of sick people, feed the hungry or save the children who are victims of war? Perhaps the way to begin is to care for those around us starting with our family, friends and neighbours. Maybe we can start a neighbourhood night patrol to keep our housing area safe and get to know our neighbours. When was the last time we visited some old folks at the old folk's home or brought some gifts for the orphans at the orphanage? Is there a lonely widow whom no one has visited for a while? Have we made our feelings known about an injustice done to someone? Just stop and ponder a while and there will appear a heap of things that we could do to make a difference. They don't have to be major humanitarian projects. If everyone can stop and make an effort to care in the little things of life, the contagious effect will soon change the very society we live in; for public apathy can only be overcome when personal apathy is conquered. Jesus did not ask us to change the world rather He asked if we had taken time to give someone within our reach the food and drink that he needed or if we cared for a person who lacked the basic necessities, and did we stop to feed someone hungry or visit someone who was sick or in prison? He equated such deeds as serving Him personally.³

If such attitudes are sown in the hearts of individuals, conditions such as personal or public apathy will not exist since many would be stirred to action. Jesus also taught us not to keep the good news of the kingdom of God to ourselves. The world needs to know the way out of all human problems. In reality it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that can shake the public out of its apathy and show the way out of the mess that humanity is in. Only then will people begin truly to care. □



¹ Luke 10:25–27

² Luke 10:30–32

³ Matthew 25: 34–45

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What our readers say:

THE PLAIN TRUTH is very special to me. Before I received it I seldom go to church. Now I am very active in the church. THE PLAIN TRUTH is a very good magazine to read. I love it very much. Thank you for your kindness for sending it to me.

Jeffrey Ahmad Mon Kuching

THE PLAIN TRUTH enhances my spiritual life and strengthens my faith in Christianity. Testimonies by others from all walks of life were also encouraging and realistic enough for me to learn how to face problems that I encountered.

Steve Ong Siang Chai Kuala Lumpur

I find THE PLAIN TRUTH helpful because of the thought-provoking and relevant articles of this modern time.

Ting Kim Yong Johor Bharu

THE PLAIN TRUTH touches on many subjects related to social behaviour of the human race in various aspects, the good and the bad, for which a solution can be found so that everybody can live peacefully in our world.

Tam Mun Kwong Kuala Lumpur

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps increase my faith in God. It is easy to understand and the articles do not have complicated words. After reading it, I will pass it or share it with another friend.

Agnes Ooi Alor Setar

The articles are challenging and well written. I do enjoy reading this magazine and I give the second copy you send me to a niece and her husband. Thank you. The topics covered are very down to earth and contemporary. Keep up the good work.

Joyce M Mui Subang Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH gives me the wisdom to understand what is happening around and why. It also gives me the



will to live on.

B Pradhaman Singh Kuala Lumpur

THE PLAIN TRUTH guides me in my daily work and gives me peace and strength to face the unknown in the future. Enclosed is a small token for THE PLAIN TRUTH. Keep up the good work. Thank you.

Amarjit Kaur Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH contains numerous articles on all aspects of life. The beauty is that all explanations are made with reference to the creator and how He actually touches our daily lives. The presentation/format is also marvellous. The format is eye catching!

Amarjeet Singh Gill Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me to understand God's words better. In addition, I enjoy the issues/topics raised in the magazine as most of them are usually intriguing and thought-provoking.

Samuel Oh Singapore

Each copy of THE PLAIN TRUTH is read by two families of four members each. We are an emotional lot and many of your articles had made us cry. Thank you.

Royston Leow Singapore

Some of the articles are informative. I have been seeking for this type of articles and I found them in THE PLAIN TRUTH magazine. I have always shared my experiences (based on the articles) with friends.

Phang Wien Ho Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH is a fantastic publication that I would never want to miss it.

Ng Sin Kwee Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH is able to relate everyday life experiences to the

word of God. It enlightens and spreads the message of hope to those who believe.

Kong Nam Kwong Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH provides a channel to read about others' experiences and reflections in Christ. Such testimonies are a source of encouragement and inspiration for me. The articles in THE PLAIN TRUTH affirm the spiritual struggle of Christians, wherever they are. Well done, THE PLAIN TRUTH.

James Lew Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH has helped me with useful truths in times of need. God bless you and your ministry. Please pray for my family for a financial breakthrough.

Gideon Hari Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH is well written and enlightening and the encouraging articles help us to be more thankful to God who is all merciful and good to us all.

Florence Lee Singapore

This magazine is very uplifting and encouraging. Here's a small gift for the wonderful work done. Thank you and God bless you.

Belinda Quah Siew Lan Kuala Lumpur

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.

Am I good enough?

How good are you? Some people work very hard at being good. They take care of family and community. They are always helping the poor. They worship their God regularly. Others don't care. They believe that they should live life to the full. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.

Most, however, believe that there is some sort of life after death.

How good do we have to be to qualify for this life after death? Some people think that everyone will be resurrected to a good life after they have died. Others think that only a few people who have earned enough merit will enjoy a life after death. Some feel that all their good deeds must outweigh their bad deeds if they are to enjoy eternity.

To understand the Christian view, we can look at the life of a man named Cornelius. Cornelius was the first Gentile (non-Jewish person) converted to Christianity (Acts 10). Some of the nicest things said about any human being in the Bible are said about Cornelius. "He was a

religious man; he and his whole family worshipped God. He also did much to help the Jewish poor people and was constantly praying to God."¹

Would you like such nice things to be said about you?

You and your family worshipped your God regularly. You helped those who were poor. You were constantly at prayer. And more—your name and actions were recorded in a sacred book for people to read for thousands of years! Wow!!

So Cornelius was a very nice person. But is being a nice person all that there is to being saved—to

enjoy a life after death? As we will see with the life of Cornelius, there is more to it!

In spite of being a very nice person, the Apostle Peter tells us that Cornelius was not yet saved. He was instructed to send for Peter and that: "He will speak words to you by which you and all your family will be saved"²

In other words, although he was a nice person he was not yet saved.



So why didn't Cornelius qualify for eternity? The reason is that even our best deeds are tainted. The Bible tells us that "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags."³

Think of the best thing you have recently done. Let's say you gave to a charity—perhaps the appeal to help those who were suffering because of the Asian tsunami. How 'good' were you? Did you do it to help reduce your tax? Did you boast to others how generous you were? Such attitudes show that we are not perfect—even our best deeds are often tainted. We are told that all we really deserve is eternal death: "For the wages of sin

is death."⁴ As good as Cornelius was, he could not earn salvation. Instead he deserved—just like you and me—eternal death.

Peter arrived and preached the Gospel to Cornelius and his family. And what was that good news preached by Peter? Even though Cornelius deserved eternal death, God had made a remarkable offer: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ

Jesus our Lord."⁵

So you can be a very nice person like Cornelius—a person who prays, reads the Bible and helps other people who are in need. But that does not mean you are saved. There are a number of steps you must do to become a Christian and be saved.⁶

Firstly, you must repent of your sins. "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."⁷ This means that you are deeply sorry for the bad ways you have treated God and your fellow human beings. You must declare your faith in Jesus and accept His sacrifice for your sins. The Apostle Paul said people "must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."⁸

You must then be baptised as a symbol of the washing away of your sins. If you were baptised as an infant, at this stage you may be "confirmed". Hands are then laid upon you so that you receive the Holy Spirit. "Repent and be baptised... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."⁹ Times have not changed. If God has led you to realise that you are a sinner—like all of us—then you need to follow the same steps. If you would like to talk to someone about baptism, or any other aspect of this article, contact information can be found on the back page of this magazine. □

by
**David
Hefferman**

¹ Acts 10:2

² Acts 11:14

³ Isaiah 64:6

⁴ Romans 6:23

⁵ Romans 6:23

⁶ Acts 2:37–39

⁷ Acts 2:38

⁸ Acts 20:21

⁹ Acts 2:38

Christmas past and p

The Advent-Christmas season is almost upon us, that joyful time of year when we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you ever wondered how Christmas came to be part of the annual Christian calendar? Here's the fascinating story, which we begin with a surprising observation. Neither Jesus nor the apostles commanded or even suggested that the church should have a Christmas festival—and no evidence of such a celebration in the New Testament.

In the church of the second century, we see evidence of an annual celebration of Jesus' resurrection in the spring (our Easter), but no celebration of His birth. (It's possible that the roots of the resurrection celebration go back to the apostolic church.)

The church also added Pentecost and Epiphany to its yearly worship calendar in the second century. Epiphany, on Jan. 6, celebrated not the birth of Christ, but the manifestation of His divine son-ship, His kingship and His divine power as displayed in His baptism, the visit of the Magi, and His miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. Pentecost commemorated the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Epiphany was the church's earliest annual celebration in connection with the Incarnation of Jesus. However, it was not until the fourth century that we have clear evidence of the birth of Jesus being celebrated on Dec. 25.

Why Dec. 25?

One theory for the origin of Christmas is that it was intended to compete with or supplant the pagan celebration of the sun-god on that date. According to this hypothesis, accepted by most scholars today, the birth of Jesus was given near the date of the winter solstice. On this day, as the sun began its return to the northern skies, the pagan devotees of Mithra celebrated the birthday of the invincible sun. The cult was particularly strong at Rome when Christmas celebration arose.

**by
Paul Kroll**

The idea is that the church tried to counteract this pagan worship with its own celebration of Jesus' birth. That makes good sense, since the church was, in effect, providing its members with a Christian worship and fellowship opportunity while the pagans were cavorting and doing homage to their gods. It was also an opportunity for the church to preach the true gospel. If this reasoning is correct, what Christians did, then, was to redeem in Christ an understanding that He (not a pagan sun god) was the true Son and Sun of Righteousness¹—the true light that lights our path with His grace.²

Another idea as to why Christmas celebration began and expanded throughout the church has to do with its need to combat a then rampant heresy about Christ's Person. The council of Nicea in 325 had condemned Arianism, which claimed that Jesus Christ was only an exalted creature and not a true God.

It was not long afterward that the Christmas festival first appeared in Rome, and then spread to the churches in other parts of the Roman Empire. In this view, the controversies of the fourth century about the incarnation and person of Christ impelled the church to create a festival that would celebrate the mystery of God becoming man, as a kind of teaching tool for the church.

Birthdays of Jesus?

Why wasn't Jesus' birthday celebrated earlier than the fourth century? One reason might be that neither the day nor month of Jesus' birth is given in the Gospels or any other early Christian writings—and cannot be determined with any certainty. Despite this, it seems to have been the opinion of some church leaders in the first four centuries that Christ was actually born on Dec. 25.

Theologian John Chrysostom (347–407) appealed, in support of this view, to the date of the

registration under Quirinus (Cyrenius). He apparently believed that the census and tax records of Jesus' family were preserved in the Roman archives. Justin Martyr (100–165), in his noted *Apology*, stated that Jesus was born at Bethlehem, saying such can be ascertained “from the registers of the taxing” (*Apology I*, 34).

Tertulian (160–250), spoke of “the census of Augustus—that most faithful witness of the Lord's nativity, kept in the archives of Rome” (*Against Marcion*, Book 4, 7). The early church father, Hippolytus (180–236), came up with a Dec. 25 date, which he attempted to calculate from information in the Gospel of Luke regarding the ministry of the priest Zechariah, John the Baptist's father.³

Whatever the facts might be about the date of Jesus' birth, it is clear that the church sensed the need to have a festival that commemorated the birth of our Saviour. In the words of the church historian Philip Schaff, it was inevitable that the church would have “sooner or later called into existence a festival which forms the groundwork of all other annual festivals in honour of Christ” (*History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, “Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity,” page 395). Schaff points to Chrysostom's observation that without the birth of Christ there would be no salvation history in Christ—no baptism, passion, resurrection, ascension or outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Hence, there would be no celebration of Epiphany, of Easter or of Pentecost.”

However meaningful Christian worship was during the Christmas season, we must also acknowledge that Christmas was often celebrated with the same sensual excesses as some pagan feasts had been among the general populace. Truly, at times in the history of the church, it was needful to put Christ back into Christmas.

resent in the church

Puritans in Britain and America

“Puritans” was the name given in the 16th century to a group of Protestants that arose from within the Church of England. As part of their broad-based reform agenda, they demanded that the church should be purified of any liturgy, ceremony or practices that were not found in the Bible.

Since the Christmas celebration was not mentioned in Scripture, the Puritans concluded that it must be stopped. When the group came to political power in England under Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), they immediately proceeded to outlaw Christmas. Cromwell and the Puritans even banned special church services, not just on Christmas but also on Easter and Pentecost. Christmas Day was a regular work day and shops remained open. Parliament was to sit as it usually did. Criers were sometimes sent through the streets, shouting, “No Christmas today, no Christmas today.”

The year 1642 saw the first ordinance issued forbidding church services and civic festivities on Christmas day. These were issued regularly in the ensuing years. On June 8, 1645, the Puritan-dominated Parliament abolished the observance of Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide and the Saints’ days. In 1660, things changed. The Monarchy was re-established, and the Puritan clergy were expelled from the Church of England. Many Puritans migrated to New England in America, beginning in the second decade of the 17th century.

In Puritan New England, Christmas was a regular workday, and any violation of this was punishable by fine or dismissal. In 1659, the Massachusetts Puritans declared the observation of

Christmas to be a criminal offence. Offenders had to pay five shillings as a fine. In Massachusetts, Dec. 25 did not become a legal holiday until 1856. It is hard to realise now that worship on Christmas was outlawed in New England until the second half of the 19th century.

Twelve Days of Christmas and Advent

“The Twelve Days of Christmas” is more than a secular, traditional Christmas song. At one time

Lawrence Stookey, in his book *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church*, explains it this way: “The primary focus of Advent is on what is popularly called ‘the second coming.’ Thus advent concerns the future of the Risen One, who will judge wickedness and prevail over every evil. Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God; the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death... The beginning of the liturgical year takes our thinking to the very end of things” (p.121–122).

Meaning of Christmas

For the church, the entire Christian year centres on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christians do not “celebrate” or “keep” days as though holy in themselves, but rather worship Christ and recall the great events of our salvation, using those special times as opportunities for worship.

The purpose of the annual worship year is to

keep our minds focused on the story of salvation and to worship Jesus Christ in a way that ministers to His glory. Specifically, Christmas, Advent and Epiphany were meant as vehicles to celebrate Jesus Christ.

The yearly Christian festivals remind us of the leading events of the gospel history, and beckon us to participate in worship of Christ. In the words of Philip Schaff: “The church year is, so to speak, a chronological confession of faith; a moving panorama of the great events of salvation; a dramatic exhibition of the gospel for the Christian people” (*History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, p.387).

May you have a blessed and joyous Christmas! ❑



it was common for Christmas worship and celebration to last 12 days, from Dec. 25 until Jan. 5, the beginning of Epiphany. This tradition has virtually disappeared.

Today, the season of Advent begins the yearly worship or liturgical calendar. Advent is celebrated on the four Sundays preceding Christmas. It is devoted to the commemoration of the coming of our Lord in the flesh as well as to His return at the final judgment. That’s why they are called Advent Sundays, since advent means the coming or arrival, especially of something extremely important. (What event could be more important than the coming of the Son of God in human flesh—and then His coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords!)

¹ Malachi 4:2

² John 8:12

³ Luke 1:5, 8–10

A command Paul did not obey

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul deals with a number of questions the Corinthian Christians had. Some of them felt free to eat meat in pagan temples; others thought that would be sinful.

Paul explains that Christian liberty must be voluntarily limited, and in this case the “free” Christians should stay out of pagan temples so they would not hurt the faith of weak Christians. He illustrates his conclusion by saying that he would not eat meat at all, if eating would cause someone to fall into sin.¹

What? Doesn’t Paul have the right to do what he wants? Why should his freedom be limited by other people’s immaturity?

Paul explains that love requires self-sacrifice, and he gives an example from his own ministry. In this example, the Corinthian church is “weak,” and Paul is giving up his rights to avoid offending them. Though he is free, he chooses to be a slave for the sake of the gospel.

The rights of an apostle

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.”²

Apparently some people in the Corinthian church did not respect Paul, did not accept him as a genuine apostle and were refusing to give him any support. Paul replies that he has full apostolic credentials, but even by a lesser definition, they should accept him as an apostle because he is the one who brought the gospel to them. And because of that, he has certain rights.

“This is my defence to those who sit in judgment on me. Don’t we have the right to food and drink? Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?”³

Other apostles are being given support—enough to support their

by
Michael Morrison

wives, too. The Corinthians apparently agree that those apostles have a right to financial support, but they deny it for Paul. (The other apostles were conveniently far away, barely aware of the Corinthians and unlikely to ask them for support.)

This is not fair, says Paul. Barnabas and I are doing the same kind of work, and we should be able to have the same kind of support. Paul gives some examples from secular society: “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?”⁴

“Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain’”⁵

This law is not simply about animals, Paul says. It is a principle that applies to people, too. “Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the ploughman ploughs and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.”⁶ Yes, people should be paid for the work they do.

The Lord’s command

Paul then applies the principle to his own situation: “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more?”⁷ In other words: If I have given you the gospel, you should be willing to support me as I preach the gospel. If I have given you something of eternal value, surely you should be willing to give me things of temporary value.

We have this right, Paul says, “but we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the

gospel of Christ”⁸ Paul is willing to set aside his rights—the gospel is more important to him than his own privileges. Paul’s example is relevant for many modern situations, and his comments challenge those who receive money as well as those who should give. All sides are called to self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel.

This is common sense, Paul seems to say. The principle is true for oxen, soldiers, farmers and shepherds. If the work is worth doing, it is worth supporting, and this is true in religion, too: “Don’t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?”⁹

To clinch the argument, Paul quotes Jesus: “In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.”¹⁰ But then Paul again notes, “I have not used any of these rights.”¹¹

Paul clearly calls this a command of the Lord, and just as clearly says he does not obey the command. He makes his living by making tents—he understands the Lord’s command more as a command for giving than for receiving. The focus is on the responsibility of believers to support the work of the gospel.

The priority for Paul is not money, but the gospel. He willingly sets aside his right to financial support so that people will not think his message is just a speech designed to get money. Some Greek orators made their living by travelling and entertaining audiences with speeches. Others formed schools and charged students for lectures. Paul does not want anyone to think his message is motivated by selfish concerns.

But Paul’s willingness to support himself does not change the Lord’s command. Ministers of the gospel have a right to financial support, and believers have an obligation to provide support. But Paul is not

y: a study of 1 Corinthians 9

asking for his own support. “I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast.”¹²

Even in this letter, Paul is not asking the Corinthians to support him. His request may have been for the collection he was coordinating

have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.”¹⁴ Paul feels compelled, not quite sure whether he is a volunteer or a slave. As he does his duty, he also feels rewarded.

“What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel

I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.”¹⁵ Paul felt good in being able to preach without asking for money. That approach may be good when preaching to unbelievers, but eventually the time comes, as it has here for Paul, when believers must be taught about the Lord’s command. Those who accept the gospel of grace must become gracious.

for the believers in Jerusalem.¹³ He wants to make it clear that he does not preach for his own benefit. Rather, he preaches because the Lord commanded him to preach. The gospel is his priority: “When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I

A slave of everyone

Paul again uses himself as an illustration of how believers should respond to the gospel with self-sacrifice: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.”¹⁶ His goal is the gospel, not himself. He sets aside his rights, gives up his freedom, to

do the work Jesus has given him.

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.”¹⁷ Jesus, as a Jew, was born “under the law.”¹⁸ Jews were under the law, and Paul obeyed the law when he was with Jews. Why? To win the Jews, to help them accept the gospel.

But Paul also notes that he is not under the law. Rather, he is free to live like a gentile¹⁹, to live as though he does not have the law, as we see in verse 21: “To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.”

Paul’s priority is to win people, to make the gospel attractive. He is obligated by the law of Christ to set aside his personal preferences so that he can serve others. He uses his freedom in Christ to be a slave, to adapt his behaviour to the situation. His main goal is not to uphold tradition or to fight tradition, nor to side with one ethnic group or another, but to preach Christ.

“To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”²⁰

Paul does not want to disqualify himself²¹ by living a self-centred life. He goes out of his way to serve others, to serve the gospel. His example is consistent with his message: the message that God loved the world so much that He sent Jesus to die for us. Although we were enemies, Jesus gave up His rights and gave up His life as a ransom for us.

The example Jesus set includes a command for all of us: Those who receive spiritual blessings must be willing to share material things. □

¹ 1 Corinthians 8:13

² 1 Corinthians 9:1–2

³ 1 Corinthians 9:3–6

⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:7

⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:8

⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:9–10

⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:11–12

⁸ 1 Corinthians 9:12

⁹ 1 Corinthians 9:13

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 9:14

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 9:15

¹² 1 Corinthians 9:15

¹³ 1 Corinthians 16:1–4

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:16–17

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:18

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:19

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:20

¹⁸ Galatians 4:4

¹⁹ Galatians 2:14

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 9:22–23

²¹ 1 Corinthians 9:27

A lesson abo

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as His disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

The consecrated bread consisted of 12 loaves placed on the golden table outside the most holy place in the tent of meeting. It was a special offering to God, and was set out fresh every Sabbath. It was to be eaten only by the high priest and his sons.¹

Nevertheless, in the absence of any other food, David and his men ate it.² Jesus cited this incident as an example of how rules, even God-given ones, are not intended to take precedence over human need. In this way, Jesus tells us something important about divine rules: God made them, and He made them to serve humans, not to rule humans.

Love

In Jesus, God shows us that the core of authentic human life is love. The person who loves, Paul wrote, fulfils the law. We could say that the only reason the law of God exists is to point us toward the life of love. To love is to enter into the divine fellowship of the Holy Spirit, to dwell in the eternal love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father.

People are more important than systems and programmes. People are more important than rituals and religion. John wrote that if a person loves God, then that person will love his brother.³ William Barclay wrote: "The best way to worship God is to help men" (*Gospel of Mark*, Rev. Ed.,



by
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Saint Andrew Press, 1991, p. 64). It might be easy to think that loving God and loving one's neighbour are two different things. They are not. Our love for God is expressed precisely in how we treat others. If we are mean, hateful, cruel and inconsiderate of others, that is a demonstration of how devoted (or not devoted) we are to God.

God loves all people, even the ones we have no use for, the ones we treat as though they don't matter. When we behave poorly toward the people God loves, then we are behaving the same way toward God. God is interested in people, not in rituals for rituals' sake.

Sabbath

When it comes to the Sabbath, an idea has got around that the Sabbath is greater than God. Let me explain. It is as though God is the guardian or protector of the Sabbath, making sure that people keep the Sabbath holy, and finally awarding salvation only to those who are faithful Sabbath keepers. In other words, in this kind of thinking, the main thing is the Sabbath; God is the enforcer of the Sabbath. God made the Sabbath, then made Himself subject to it, then made people subject to it.

Jesus cleared all such convoluted recipes off the dinner table. He made things plain: people were not made to be servants of the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made to be a servant of people. Furthermore, Jesus was not talking to or about all people. He was talking to first-century Jewish teachers of the law. And He was talking about Israel, the specific human beings to whom God gave the Sabbath.

For Christians to assume that the Sabbath commandment is for Christians is to misunderstand the covenant between God and Israel. And for Christians to hold out the Sabbath as a criterion of the truly faithful believers is to misunderstand the new covenant

written on the hearts of all God's people, Jew and gentile alike.

Evangelism

The gospel declares God's love. It's interesting how carefully calculated step-by-step programmes for evangelism seem to come and go, much like the latest fads in business and management.

Maybe one reason is that programmes, by nature, are contrivances. They might work well for business endeavours, where advertising and manipulation of emotions is crucial to selling a product. But the gospel is not a product; it is a declaration of God's love.

Love doesn't come by programmes. It comes in its own way in its own time. It is strengthened and proven in the crucible of self-sacrifice, patience and forbearance. It cannot be explained; it can only be lived. It's something you live out, not something you evaluate on a scale of measurable outcomes. It's messy, not predictable. Sometimes it hurts, sometimes it thrills. It's never static. It doesn't play by the rules; the rules can't keep up.

The main reason most people come to church and keep coming to church and become believers is the same today as it was 2,000 years ago—they meet people who like them and accept them and become their friends. Programmes don't do it—love does it.

New command

Jesus gave a new command to His disciples: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another."⁴

That's a novel thought in our highly organised, programmatic society. Suppose Christians were well known for being the kind of people anybody would enjoy having for a friend. Suppose they weren't known for being pushy

ut God's love

and judgmental. Suppose they weren't known for well-rehearsed emotional spiels designed to press people into a so-called "decision for Christ."

Suppose they were genuine, caring and harmless people, who in the love of Christ loved others for who they are. Suppose they didn't make friends with people as part of some new evangelism programme,

but simply because faithful friendship is what Jesus Christ is all about.

Peter said we should always be ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within us.⁵

Paul said we should let our conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that we may know how to answer everyone.⁶

Neither Peter nor Paul said we should press people to ask. Instead, we are told to live the life of love. We are to make no secret of our faith. But neither are we asked to push it on others.

The Holy Spirit moves people to ask. And the Holy Spirit works in us to give an answer that is "seasoned with salt" and full of "grace."

Some people call this kind of living "whole-life evangelism" or "relational evangelism" or "life-style evangelism," etc. But by giving it a name, we run the risk of turning it into a just another programme.

Imagine a young man walking up to a young woman outside Lakeside Ice Cream Parlour and saying: "Excuse me. Do you know me? Well, I know you and I know you're miserable and pathetic and need a great husband. I can fix all that. If you'll just repeat after me these words, 'I will marry you,' and we'll live happily ever after."

She'd slap his face, of course, or

The gospel is the truth about the reconciliation God has already brought about in Jesus Christ.⁷ Jesus' work of reconciliation doesn't depend on us. If it did, we'd never be reconciled, for our faith and our behaviour are always substandard at best. God did what He did in Christ because He loved us, not because we loved Him first.⁸

That's why we can trust Him for our salvation fully, from beginning to end. That is why we do not have to carry a burden of fear that our ever-present weakness in faith or behaviour is the crack in the hull that will sink our salvation.

Jesus Christ is Lord of the Sabbath. We rest in Him, not in our own works. His love binds us to Himself,

and He loves us for no other reason than that He wants to! He makes us new in Himself, only because He loves us and has chosen freely not to be without us. Paul wrote, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"⁹

That's good news. God has made people—including you and me—His priority. He loves us, and we can't make Him stop loving us. In that place of refuge, in the security of God's endless love for us, we are free to make Him our priority. Therein lie the unshakable peace, joy, and fullness of life we so crave. Therein lies our true rest. □



call 911, or jab him someplace with her keys.

That's not how good relationships start. Yet, something akin to that is how some Christians have been taught that a good relationship with Jesus Christ should begin. Thank God, He can and does clean up our messes and turn lemons into lemonade, but what makes us think that is how Jesus wants us to help people learn who He is for them?

Trust

Another word for what Jesus was confronting in this story is legalism. Legalism is incompatible with the gospel. Jesus Christ is who He is for us before we ever do anything.

¹ Leviticus 24:5-9

² 1 Samuel 21:1-6

³ 1 John 4:20

⁴ John 13:34-35

⁵ 1 Peter 3:15

⁶ Colossians 4:6

⁷ Colossians 1:

19-20

⁸ 1 John 4:19

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

Shortly after

Shortly after you die, you will find yourself in a queue outside the pearly gates, waiting for an interview with St. Peter. If you pass muster, you will be invited in, issued with a white robe and a regulation harp, and assigned your own cloud. As you begin to strum, you may recognise a few (perhaps not as many as you'd hoped for) of your friends, and probably many people you tried to avoid in your lifetime. And so begins your eternal life.

You don't really believe that, do you? Mercifully you don't need to, because it isn't true. But what do you think heaven will be like?

Most of us who believe in God also believe there is some kind of afterlife, in which we will be rewarded for our faithfulness or punished for our sins. That much is true—it is why Jesus came for us, died for us and lives for us. The so-called 'Golden verse' reminds us that "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

But what does that mean? If the reward of the righteous is anything at all like the popular images, well, we may hate to admit it, but the other place sounds like it will be more fun.

Thinking about heaven

In this article we'd like to get you thinking about heaven, perhaps in ways you never have before. Please understand that we are not being dogmatic. That would be foolish and arrogant. Our only reliable source of information is the Bible, and that is surprisingly vague about what comes next. But the Bible does promise that if we choose to obey God, we will receive many benefits in this life (along with challenges) and we can expect this to continue forever in a world to come. Jesus was quite clear about that. But He was not so forthcoming about what that world to come will be like.

St. Paul wrote, "We don't yet see things clearly." We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. Paul was one of the very few human beings to be given a 'visitor's pass' to heaven,



by
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and he found it hard to describe what happened. But whatever it was, it was real enough to change his priorities for the rest of his life. Death held no fears for Paul. He had seen enough of what came next actually to look forward to it. But most of us are not like that.

More of the same?

When we think about heaven, we have no alternative but to imagine it in terms of what we know. For example, mediæval artists painted an earthly paradise, filled with details of their contemporary ideas of physical beauty and perfection. (Although where on earth did they get the idea that cherubs resembled aerodynamically improbable naked babies?) Styles, technology and tastes change, and these ideas of paradise don't really help us imagine a utopia today.

Modern writers use more up-to-date imagery. C.S. Lewis's imaginative classic, *The Great Divorce* describes an imaginary bus-trip from hell (which he pictured as a vast and dreary suburb) to heaven. The purpose of the trip was to give those in 'hell' a chance to change their minds. Lewis' heaven takes some getting used to, and many of the sinners don't like it, preferring the hell they are used to. Lewis stresses that he has no special insights into the nature of eternal life, and intended that his book should be read strictly as an allegory.

Mitch Albom's fascinating *The five people you meet in heaven* also makes no pretence to theological accuracy. He sets heaven in the context of a seaside fair ground, where the main character had worked all his life. But Albom and Lewis and others like them may be on to something. Heaven may not be quite so different from the environment we experience here below.

Jesus, when describing the Kingdom of God, often said it was 'like' aspects of life as we know it. Not exactly the same,

but sufficiently similar to draw an analogy.

Then and now

For most of human history we had very little scientific understanding of the nature of the cosmos. If they thought about such things at



all, people believed the earth was flat, and the sun and moon went around it. Heaven was somewhere above, and hell was below. The traditional ideas of pearly gates, harps, white robes, wings and an interminable praise and worship service are what you'd expect from

er you die

sincere people trying to interpret what little the Bible says about heaven in terms of the world as they knew it.

Today we know so much more about the nature of the physical cosmos. We know that the earth is a micro-speck in an enormous and



apparently expanding universe. We know that what seems like solid reality is, at a fundamental level, a wispy web of energy, bound together by forces so strong that for most of history we did not even suspect that they existed. We know that perhaps as much

as 90 per cent of the universe is made up of 'dark matter'—about which we can theorise with mathematics, but cannot see or measure. We know that even such apparently indisputable ideas like the passing of time are relative. Even the dimensions that define our ideas of space (length, width, height and time) are just visible and comprehensible aspects of a much more involved and intricate reality. Although it is impossible to imagine how they work, we know that there are at least seven more dimensions. Scientists assure us that those extra dimensions are as much a part of reality as height, length, breadth and time. They operate at a level that our finest instruments cannot measure, and even our minds can wander but briefly before becoming bewildered and disoriented.

The scientific breakthroughs of the last few decades have shattered traditional understanding of just about everything. So what about heaven? Do we need to look again at our ideas of what life might be like hereafter?

Here. After

That's an interesting word. *Here*—after. Not *there*—after or *where*—after. Is it possible that eternal life could be spent in a rather familiar environment, doing things we have learned to enjoy, with people we know and with bodies that we recognise? Could it be that what comes next will be an extension of the best of life as we know it, but without any negative stress, anxiety or suffering? Well—and read this carefully—the Bible does not say it will not be like that. (I'd better run that by you again—the Bible does not say it will not be like that.)

American theologian, Dr. Randy Alcorn, has spent years studying the concept of heaven. In his book, *Heaven*, Alcorn while carefully avoiding sensationalism and fantasy, subjects every Biblical reference that alludes to heaven to careful scrutiny. The result is

a fascinating portrait of what the afterlife may be like. He writes: "We get tired of ourselves, of others, of sin and suffering and crime and death. Yet we love the earth, don't we? I love the spaciousness of the night sky over the desert. I love the cosiness of sitting next to Nancy on the couch in front of the fire, blanket over us and dog snuggled next to us. These experiences are not heaven—but they are *foretastes* of heaven. What we love about this life are the things that resonate with the life we are made for. The things we love are not merely the best this life has to offer—they are previews of the greater life to come."

So why allow our view of heaven to be limited to yesterday's worldviews? Let's speculate about what our enhanced understanding of our environment might tell us about life in heaven.

Heavenly bodies

The Apostles Creed, the most popular Christian Statement of Belief, affirms the 'resurrection of the body'. You have probably repeated it hundreds of times. Have you ever thought about what it means?

It is popular to think of the resurrection in terms of a 'spirit' body, a wispy, ethereal, unreal, ghostlike sort of form. But that is not a Biblical idea. The Bible indicates that a resurrected human being will have a real body. But that body will not be physical as we understand physical.

Our concept of physical—or 'real'—is bound by the four dimensions with which we experience reality. But if indeed there are many more dimensions, then our definition of what is 'real' is woefully inadequate.

After He had been resurrected, Jesus had a real body. He could eat, walk, and appeared quite normal. He could be touched. Yet He was able to step in and out of our 'reality' at will, appearing to walk through a wall like Harry Potter at King's Cross. We interpret that as unreal, but perhaps it is quite normal for a body that can experience the full spectrum of

reality.

So can you look forward to living forever in a form that is recognisably *you*, with a real body that is not subject to death, sickness and decay, and is not dependent on air, food, water and the circulation of blood for its existence? It certainly seems so. Imagine life with your mind—it would still be *your* mind—with the junk cleaned out and the priorities reordered, free forever to plan, dream and create. Imagine an eternity reunited with old friends and the limitless potential to make more. Imagine relationships with others, and with God, without anxiety, tension or upset. Imagine never having to say ‘good bye’ to people you love.

“Who knows how we’ll end up!” says the Bible. “What we know is that when Christ is openly revealed, we’ll see Him—and in seeing Him, become like Him.”

Not so far

Far from being trapped forever in an interminable church service, eternal life seems to be a greatly enhanced version of the best of what we know now.

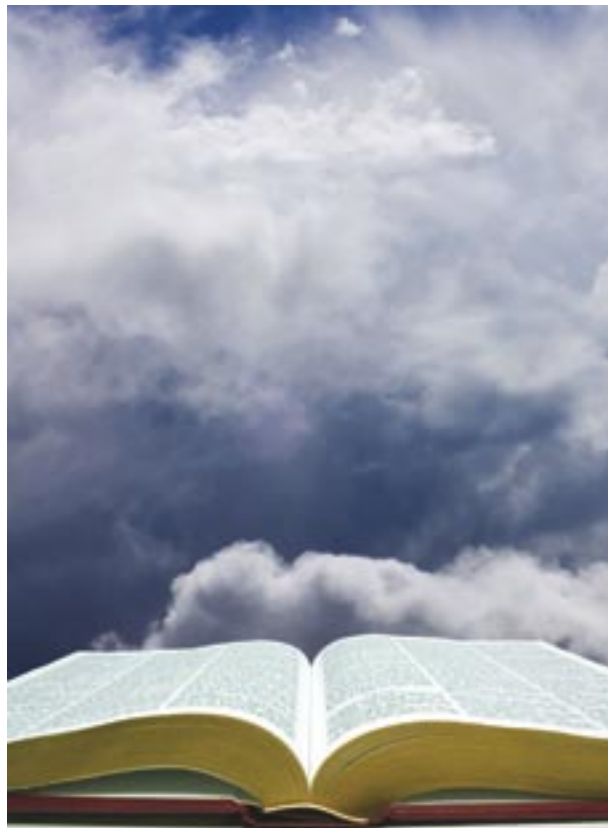
There is much more ‘out there’ than we can discern with our limited senses. Occasionally, God opens the door just a crack to show us a glimpse of a greater reality.

St. Paul told the superstitious people of Athens that God was “not far from them.” Heaven is certainly not close in any ways we can measure. But it may not be “a happy land, far, far away.” Could it indeed be all around us in ways we don’t have the words to describe?

Let your imagination run free for a while.

When Jesus was born, angels suddenly appeared to the shepherds in the hills. It was as if they stepped into our world from the realm that they inhabited. Is that also what happened when Elisha’s frightened servant suddenly saw legions of angels appear? Stephen, about to be stoned by an angry mob, was given a glimpse of sights and sounds that are normally beyond human experience? Is that how John saw the visions of the book of Revelation?

Theologian Dallas Willard writes, “We can be sure that heaven, in the sense of our afterlife, is just our future in the universe. There is not another universe besides this one. God created the heavens and the earth. That’s it. And much of the



difficulty in having a believable picture of heaven and hell today comes from the centuries-long tendency to ‘locate’ them in ‘another reality’ outside the created universe.”

Randy Alcorn points out that “just as blind people cannot see the world, even though it exists all around them, we are unable to see heaven in our fallen condition. Is it possible that before sin and the Curse, Adam and Eve saw clearly what is now invisible to us? Is it possible that Heaven itself is but inches from us?”

These are fascinating speculations. But they are not fantasy. Science has shown us there is much, much more to the Creation than we can observe and experience with our present physical limitations. It seems that God has created us in ‘safe mode’.

Safe mode

If you have a computer, you can do something that might help you grasp these ideas. Start it up in what is called ‘safe mode’. What you will get is a very much subdued version of what you are used to. Graphics are grainy. Many programmes don’t work at all. Only the essential systems will function. The computer is just a pale shadow of its normal self.

You usually do this after a

malfunction, to give the machine a chance to sort itself out without damaging its entire system.

I find putting my computer in ‘safe mode’ a rather depressing experience. Gone is the flexibility, the speed, the richness of the colours and the energy and potential that the machine usually has. Normally it is way ahead of me, as it explores its (for me) unfathomable cyber-environment. It zips and zaps its way around cyber-space, offering hints, correcting mistakes, reminding me of things that I have forgotten, bringing me messages from all over the world, and, unless I tell it to cease and desist, presenting me with an endless selection of not-to-be-resisted bargains.

But when I start it up in safe mode it mutters and splutters about, responding lugubriously to my commands. My computer doesn’t seem to like safe mode. It is not its natural way of operating, and it quickly springs back to its hyper-self as soon as I lift the restrictions.

Has God started us in ‘safe mode’? This earth-bound human life is a greatly limited expression of what we will eventually be. Jesus came to us in ‘safe mode’—subjecting Himself to the limitations of a human being, including the ultimate fate of all merely physical life forms—death? Just before His crucifixion, He prayed, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” And remember, He also prayed, “Father, I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see My glory, the splendour You gave me, having loved Me long before there ever was a world.”

Wait. There’s more!

There is much more we could talk about. Providing we keep a sense of balance and don’t go off on tangents, to explore the possibilities of our lives after death is an exciting study. But my computer’s word count and the Managing Editor’s memos are reminding me that this article is still subject to the limitations of time and space.

So we will continue to explore the promises and potential of heaven in the future issue. □

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Meet the Christ of Christmas

“**A**nd there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and they saw the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’”

“*Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests.’*” These passages in the book of Luke briefly describe the birth of Jesus Christ.

Greatest event in human history

Imagine yourself witnessing the unfolding of events leading to the Saviour’s birth and being part of the greatest event in human history. Looking at Him in a manger seemingly helpless only to realise that here you are gazing at the future Saviour of mankind, the Creator of the universe, and God in the flesh. No wonder, the angel said He brought good news of great joy to the people. While you are imagining these things, listen to the host of heaven declare God’s glory.

“*The shepherds went back to work, glorifying and praising God for everything that they had heard and seen, which had happened just as they had been told.*” They may not have understood the deeper meaning and significance of this event but they were exceedingly happy being witness to the fulfilment of the prophesied birth of the future Saviour of the world.

Christmas celebrations

As the world celebrates Christmas, attention is being focused on the lavish trimmings and preparations

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in offices, schools and in the homes. In the Philippines, Christmas is a time for reunion of families, a time of remembering loved ones, exchanging gifts, and other activities supposedly in honour of Jesus Christ.

In schools, programmes are prepared to re-enact the birth of Jesus. In offices, Christmas parties are hosted by companies for their friends while bonuses and merit increases are given to deserving employees. Department stores are teeming with shoppers out to get the best bargain gifts for their



relatives, friends and loved ones.

Before the great event comes, homes are decorated with glittering Christmas lights and Christmas trees are all dressed up elaborately. Many homes are repainted or remodelled to greet Christmas with a fresh look. Bonuses are spent on buying new appliances, cars for those who can afford, toys for the young, and new outfits for everyone. Is something saved for the Lord on this day?

Nothing is spared to make this Christmas a better one than the previous year. Somehow, a better Christmas seems to be measured in terms of how much food is on the table and how many new things are purchased. But for those who are less privileged, Christmas could be a source of grief and sadness. Their poverty seems to be more pronounced and emphasised

because of the affluence around them.

Still for others, Christmas could be a poignant reminder of unhappy past Christmases because of the absence or loss of their loved ones. A more intense feeling of sadness and emptiness pervades their life as the day approaches.

This reminds me of a poster in one of the department stores many years ago which said, “Have the best Christmas ever.” A guy who was reading it, said, “It might be hard to duplicate the last one.” Why do these feelings surface on the day which is supposed to be the happiest occasion in the entire year?

Remember Jesus Christ

The birth of Jesus should remind us that our Saviour was born and He is now alive sitting at the right hand of God the Father and interceding for us. We sometimes forget the perfect Being who once emptied His life so that we may be reconciled to God but remember instead the helpless baby born in a manger. We celebrate the baby but we sometimes forget the Saviour. Should we not focus on Jesus Christ this Christmas to remind us that He is no longer the baby He once was but He is God? It is good to remember the baby in the manger but let us celebrate Christ now as our Risen Lord! Let us not worship the baby and bow not only at the manger but also at the cross.

The birth of our Lord is much cause for rejoicing, whereas His death reconciles us to God and His resurrection assures us of eternal life. So as Christmas approaches this year, let us not worry too much about the usual trimmings. Let us focus instead on Jesus Christ and experience His great love for us so that like the good shepherds—going back to their sheep praising and glorifying God after witnessing His birth—we can do the same and truly say that this Christmas we have encountered the Lord, the Saviour of mankind! □

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Keep your ton

A Japanese proverb says the tongue is but three inches long, yet it can kill a man six feet tall! Spoken words have the power to kill or heal. Being an important communication tool, our tongue can tear down or build up relationships in daily living. Though a small organ caged in the jaw and teeth, it plays a great role in being a kind servant or a cruel master! Much good in life comes from right and wise use of our tongue. Conversely, problems, sufferings and regrets often arise from wrong or foolish use of it.

Nature of our tongue

Scriptures say the person who is never at fault in one's speech is a perfect man.¹ Who in all honesty can say they are perfect? All too often we go through life offending and being offended. Being human, sins of the tongue are hardest to avoid. However, if we can tame our tongue we certainly can control our whole being.

Just as a tree is known by its fruits, even so our words reveal our innermost thoughts and emotions, reflecting the true state of our heart. In rebuking the self-righteous religious leaders in His days Jesus exclaimed, "You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him."² How true Jesus' words are—that our tongue says it all—who and what we truly are, since words mirror our mind and character.

Beware of what we say

Freedom of speech does not mean we can say anything we like and however we please. God holds us morally responsible for what we say. We read in Proverbs and Psalms that the wicked speaks folly, lies and blasphemes God; the mouth of a fool will bring him to ruin. The righteous speaks wisdom, truth and goodness

to the praise and glory of God. On Judgment Day God will hold all of us accountable for what we have said during our earthly life. Christ warned the evil-speaking religious leaders, "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."³ Do we realise that our own words will be the very evidence for passing judgment on ourselves! So, in this sense, the tongue has power of life and death.

Our sinful tongues

The Bible has much to say about our sinful tongues. Let us look into some words that can deceive, hurt, and destroy human relationships. Just think about the great and terrible damages when sins of the tongue stir up quarrels, provoke fights, ignite wars, break up marriages, estrange children, turn friends into enemies, kill innocent people, and drive people to suicide!

Proverbs 6:16–19 listed three things out of seven God hates. All are sins of the tongue, namely lying, false witnessing and sowing discord. Isn't it a crime to commit perjury in court when one lies under oath? How wicked and sinful it is for one to bear false witness against an innocent person causing him or her to be condemned to death? Remember, Jesus Christ was a victim of such injustice!

All lying is bad, but when one deliberately lies to deceive God it is even worse. An unfortunate incident happened in the first century Church in Jerusalem. Ananias and his wife Sapphira, inspired by Satan, became so dishonest, greedy, and covetous that they misappropriated part of the money dedicated to God. They lied to the apostles, sinning against God and His Holy Spirit. Their sin of lying and deceit was heinous and spiritually disastrous



by
**Yong
Chin Gee**

because it destroyed their belief in truth and trust in God. Consequently, they met with swift and drastic judgment from God. Their death stood as an indelible warning to the Apostolic Church that God hated lies and deceit in spiritual and personal matters. Subsequently, great fear seized all who heard what had happened.⁴

Contentious and quarrelsome people are notoriously prone to sow discord. They stir up dissension and spread strife, causing disunity and disharmony among people. God hates such sin of the tongue because it is motivated by the evil intent of the heart that is full of envy, malice and strife.

Under the umbrella of "evil-speaking" we find various words with slight difference in nuances such as slander, gossip, talebearer, innuendo, whispering, backbiting and maligning. All these sins of the tongue are condemnable for they unquestionably injure the name and wound the reputation of another person. If we treasure friendship and value all other forms of loving relationship we have to be wise to control our loose tongue.

Other sins of the tongue commonly spoken in modern societies are blasphemy, profanity, cursing and swearing. All these bad, sinful languages emphasise abusive rage, spite or bitterness expressed in irreverent use of religious terms and names applied to God. Nowadays many adults and even children are in the habit of using foul, vulgar, obscene language and lewd remarks to shock, embarrass or humiliate others. They may even think it is macho and chic to speak filthy words disregarding how others feel. Their immoral way of speaking tells the hearers how little respect they have for themselves and their fellow human beings.

The Bible has various descriptions of sinful tongues and here are a few examples: flattering,

gue from evil

proud, deceitful, perverse, destructive, malicious, unclean, mischievous and wicked tongue. Does it surprise us how flawed and evil human tongues can be!

Oh, yes, Scriptures describe the human sinful tongue as a fire that inflames people, burns up goodwill among nations, and destroys good relationships between loved ones. It is a world of evil that corrupts the whole person, setting the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue! It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue one praises the Lord God, and with it one curses men, who are made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. This ought not so to be.⁵ Who then can deliver human beings from the cruel, wayward use of the tongue? Is there a solution to such moral dilemma? How do we keep our tongues from evil?

Tongue control

Tongue uncontrolled or running wild spells unending troubles in life. However, a more serious issue is mentioned in James 1: 26, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." Yes, if our religion has any worth at all our tongue will be our best proof. Genuine religion exerts a positive influence on our life. It is a life changing force. A person who speaks truthfully, kindly, patiently, humbly, gracefully and lovingly is best testimony of one's religious belief. On the other hand, if a person just performs the rituals of religion and exerts no controlling

restraint on one's speech, then it is merely an external sham! The Bible says such person is self-deceived whose religious acts do not make any difference in the way he or she lives.

that "The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" As a matter of fact nobody can tame or control the tongue as long as sinfulness exists in the heart.

Have you ever come across a person that never offends in word, and one whose speech is always perfect? I haven't. Nothing is more telling on the tongue than the heart! A sinful heart naturally produces a sinful tongue. If human beings cannot tame the tongue and bring it under control, who can? Surprisingly, Christ's words point to the answer, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."⁶

Tongue links to the heart

Since Christ said "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks", so a change of heart will definitely change the way we speak. Controlling the sinful tongue therefore lies in the transformation of our evil heart and our sinful human nature. Are you surprised that Christ's Gospel is the good news on how this change of heart and tongue can really come about? Upon repentance and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour spiritual rebirth takes place. What happens is God the Father and Jesus Christ come to dwell in us through the Holy Spirit. By co-operating with God's Holy Spirit we are empowered to overcome our sinful, evil nature. Once we begin to

participate in God's divine nature we will be renewed, restored in God's image. As our hearts are being transformed, so will be our tongue.

Transformation of self

Heart transformation is the key to tongue control. Developing Godliness is the antidote to evil speaking. What does it take to undergo this change of heart? It is not an easy task. It



Who can tame the tongue?

Apostle James made a rather shocking statement that all creatures on earth have been tamed by man but no man can tame the tongue! Was he right for being pessimistic about the human tongue? Certainly, he was just being realistic about sinful human nature. Jeremiah 17:9 concurs with Apostle James' view

demands the death of our old self in order to become a new self. We have to get rid of our egoism, i.e. our selfish attitude of only caring about ourselves, thinking about our own desires or interests, and believing we are more important than other people. Besides, we have to exercise spiritual discipline and faith in God in overcoming Satan's temptations and evil influences of the world. Apostle Paul laid down a guideline on how to put spiritual formation into effect in Colossians 3:5–10: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual

immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which are idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and

have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

Putting on a new self involves the cultivation of Godly virtues, producing the divine fruit of love through the working of God's Holy Spirit in us. Paul elaborated further in Colossians 3:12–14: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

Love for God and neighbour overcomes evil-speaking

Why should love for God and neighbour be the greatest principle, law or commandment for human

beings to live by in life? God is love, and He created human beings in His image and likeness to have similar capacity to love and to be loved. Love is the greatest virtue that we all cannot live without. It is natural to speak well of people when we love them. But when we curse or speak evil of others, obviously love is absent.

Can believers love God and not love our neighbour? Of course not. That would be duplicity and inconsistency, practising a double standard of moral behaviour. James 3:9–10 illustrate this



important point: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be." The curse of the tongue does not come out of love. Instead it grows out of unrighteous anger, bitterness and hate. 1 John 4: 20–21 says, "If anyone says I love God, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For everyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He (Christ) has given us this command: whoever loves God must also love his brother." So, it is obvious that we cannot separate the love of God from the love of neighbours or our fellow human beings. In actual fact we cannot truly love God while neglecting to love others who are created in His image and likeness.

On the other hand, can we truly love others unconditionally without loving God? It can't be either. Human love is basically self-centred, loving self more than anybody else. It is conditional rather than unconditional. Conditional love, in general, is an act of reciprocating, i.e. we love those who love us. We speak well of people who speak well of us. We can't trust ourselves to love and speak well of our enemies.

Jesus Christ expected His followers who loved God to practise unconditional love by loving their enemies and doing good to those who hated them. They were taught to bless those who cursed them and to pray for those who mistreated them. Christ did what He preached by forgiving those who crucified Him! Unless we have the power of love from God it is highly unlikely if not impossible for us to express such unconditional love as instructed by Christ.

Benefits of keeping our tongue from evil

What actual benefits do we gain in life by keeping our tongue from evil? Perhaps the words of Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3:10–12 are something worth thinking about: "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

Let us, therefore, endeavour to use our tongue for the edification of others. □

¹ James 3:2

² Matthew 12: 34–35

³ Matthew 12: 36–37

⁴ Acts 5:1–11

⁵ James 3:6–10

⁶ Mark 10:27

I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as they were great and noble.

Helen Keller
U.S. writer

When you're through changing, you're through.

Bruce Barton
American advertising executive

Promises. Keep them.

If asked when you can deliver something, ask for time to think.

Build in a margin of safety.

Name a date.

Then deliver it earlier than you promised.

The world is divided into two classes of people: the few people who make good on their promises (even if they don't promise as much) and the many who don't.

Robert Townsend

How do you know that love is gone? If you said that you would be there at seven and you get there by nine, and he or she has not called the police yet —it's gone.

Marlene Dietrich
Film actress

Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.

Mother Teresa

Thoughtful people, creative people, people who try, who care, people who are concerned, pay a price—but the rewards are indescribable.

It is these rewards which are returned from respect for one's own values, one's own way of living—in trying to be incorruptible, at least in trying not to be corrupted. The state of internal contentment we call happiness means using the resources of the mind and the heart—as deeply and fully as you can.

Leo Bosten
American writer

Reconciliation is more beautiful than victory.

Violeta Baios De Chamorro
President of Nicaragua

Class is an aura of confidence that is being sure without being cocky. Class has nothing to do with money. Class never runs scared. It is self-discipline and self-knowledge. It's the surefootedness that comes with having proved you can meet life.

Ann Landers

There is nothing wrong with men possessing riches. The wrong comes when riches possess men.

Billy Graham

Anonymous Sayings:

Sending kids to college keeps getting more educational for parents. It teaches them how to do without a lot of things.

Those who lose riches lose much, but those who lose courage lose all.

We too often love things and use people, when we should be using things and loving people.

Silence is never more golden than when you hold it long enough to get all the facts before you speak.

Lack of opportunity is often nothing more than lack of purpose and direction.

Speak softly and sweetly. If your words are soft and sweet, they won't be as hard to swallow when you have to eat them.

When someone is no longer anxious to do better, that person is done for.

Music is one of the greatest gifts of all. It asks nothing in return but that we listen.

Sometimes it's better to ask some of the questions than to know all the answers.

A high school class in music appreciation was asked the difference between listening and hearing. At first there was no response. Finally, a hand went up and a youngster offered this wise definition: "Listening is wanting to hear."

An artist is anyone who takes pride in doing a job well.

Friendship between two persons depends upon the patience of one.

There are two kinds of people who don't say much, those who are quiet and those who talk a lot.

Work to become, not to acquire.

To handle yourself, use your head; to handle others, use your heart.

One sign of maturity is the ability to be comfortable with people who are not like us.

Don't confuse fame with success. Madonna is one; Helen Keller is the other.
Erma Bombeck

When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.
Ethiopian Proverb

When we are reading, we often find something that attracts our interest. It's not earth-shattering, or life-changing. But it's worth cutting out and keeping, or sticking on the refrigerator door; or maybe sending to us for this page!

We invite all our readers to contribute news items, quotes, or poems, that make you say 'Hmm'. It could be in today's paper, or in a book hundreds of years old. Try to send the original clipping, or a copy of the page to:

Hmm... The Plain Truth, Locked Bag 2002, 41990 Klang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Learning to live—

Ever thought that our life here on earth is like a training camp? We are here only for a brief period to learn the lessons of life, and most of us go through life successfully avoiding that training!

Some time ago I had the opportunity to attend a 3-day camp sponsored by my previous employer. There were 30 of us and five instructors. Activities included rigorous physical exercises as well as motivational, problem-solving and team-building sessions. Our day started at 5:30 a.m. and ended at 12 midnight with short lunch and dinner breaks.

I was totally exhausted at the end of the camp and I took one whole week to recover from it. But it was a good camp in that it taught me several valuable lessons about living the Christian life.

Be thankful

The facilities provided at the camp dorm were basic. There were no showers, phones, fans, air-conditioners, TVs, or sumptuous meals. We just had to rough it out. The meagre facilities made me realise how much we in Malaysia and Singapore have been blessed. Many of us own homes or condos with a lot more amenities. Millions of people today don't have even the basic facilities that we had at the camp.

Are you thankful for the blessings that you have? The apostle Paul wrote, "Be joyful always; pray continually; *give thanks* in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."¹ Despite the hardship he endured (hunger, danger, imprisonment, persecution), he always thanked God for providing his needs.² He recounted his experience thus, "...for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."³

Similarly, in our lives we need to be thankful for what we have. Unfortunately even Christians often fall short.

Show kindness

One of the daily activities was stretching and marching. Our instructors were very strict, and we had to follow their instructions strictly or else we would be penalised. The penalties included running around, pumping, carrying bricks, etc. Some of us had to pay these penalties.

Later we found out why our instructors were so harsh towards us. They did this intentionally because they wanted us to examine our lives to see if we had been harsh towards others such as towards our spouses, our children or our subordinates if they failed to meet our expectations. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to agree that we have been guilty of being harsh towards others at one time or another.

The Bible exhorts us to show *kindness*, gentleness and mercy towards people. The golden rule says, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."⁴ God warns us that if we are harsh towards others, He will also be harsh towards us⁵, and if we don't show mercy towards others, we will also not receive mercy from Him.⁶

Work as a team

Many activities at the camp involved teamwork. Each team was given a specific task or problem to solve. We had to brainstorm and find solutions as a team. Unless we worked together, the whole team would suffer setback or defeat. So, helping and supporting each other was crucial. Either we made it as a team or we lost as a team. There was no room for personal glory or finger pointing.

How true that is in life. At home, all members of the family must work together to accomplish



**by
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a project or task. At church or office, all the parties must work together as a team. The Plain Truth magazine, for example, is a *team* effort. It requires many people—writers, editors, proof-readers, graphic designers and others who support us with finance and prayers. God gives different gifts to different people so that we can complement each other and work together. Teamwork, however, is not always easy because we have to put up with people's idiosyncrasies and shortcomings. It requires us to show kindness, patience and humility. The best example of teamwork is God Himself. All three Persons in the Godhead—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—work together in perfect harmony. And we are called to imitate Him.⁷

Travel light

Another activity in the training camp was jungle tracking. It began at 12 midnight. We were instructed strictly to follow the signage placed along our designated route. If not, we could get hurt or lose our direction. We were only allowed to take a small bottle of water, a matchbox with a few matchsticks, and two candlesticks. Our team had to walk through a stream with some thick grass. There were also barbed wire traps set along the way just to test whether we had been following the signage. As we didn't always follow the signage, sometimes we got hurt and sometimes we got lost. After some meandering, we finally returned to our camp at about 6 a.m.—totally exhausted.

One of the lessons I learned on this trip was that we must travel light. Carrying heavy burden and walking long hours in difficult terrains was no fun. Even the small bottle of water we carried was quite burdensome. Retrospectively, we were very grateful to our instructors because they forbade us from carrying so many items that initially we planned to pack.

Lessons from camp

So often in our society people are preoccupied with amassing things.

Similarly, Christians are often preoccupied or wrestled with sin. The Bible calls sin a burden.⁸ It is a burden because it enslaves us and produces unnecessary suffering. That's why God asks us to repent and change—to quit sinning as a way of life. Jesus Christ died on the cross to take away our sins and burden. He asks us to cast our

corruption, gambling, smoking, adultery, abuse of power, and disloyalty. We were all urged to 'curse' these 'sins' and pledge not to indulge in them in the future. To impress this upon us, we were told to burn our 'sin' lists in the bonfire that was set outside the hall for this purpose.

If we examine our lives, it's true that each of us has real 'sin' lists. The lists that we made up

pledge not to indulge in them as a way of life.¹² Merely cursing and burning the sin lists in the bonfire would, regrettably, not stop us from sinning. Because sin ultimately causes death, we need divine help to overcome sin. Jesus came in the flesh to take away the curse of our sins. His blood can cleanse our sins and make us spiritually whole. His divine power can help us overcome our sinful nature, albeit gradually. That's why we need Jesus to save us from sin and death. The good news is God is ready and willing not only to forgive our sins but also help us grow to become more and more like Him.¹³ The righteousness of God, through Jesus, is applied to us, and so, when God looks at us, He only sees the righteousness of His son in us, and we become acceptable.

Persevere

Another session was a video presentation. It was about a true story of a pilot who crash-landed his aircraft due to a mechanical failure. He was badly injured and had to be hospitalised for months. The doctors had given up hope and told him that he would never be able to walk again. But that didn't dampen his spirit. He was determined to get well and walk out of the hospital. So he did all that he could (moving, stretching) to recover from his injury. Gradually, he got better and better, and he became a source of inspiration to other patients. Finally, he recovered completely and walked out of the hospital to the embarrassment of the doctors!

Life has many challenges, e.g. a strained relationship with our spouses or children, debilitating sickness or unemployment. Or it might be a bad attitude or habit that we are struggling with. At school or office, we might be asked to undertake a difficult project which requires hard work, patience and endurance. Some of us lack the determination or 'sticking' power to overcome such challenges. We don't want to take the risk. We are afraid to fail, so we never really try.



entire burden on Him so that we might travel lightly and enjoy our new life with Him.⁹

Hate evil

Another activity at camp was personal soul searching. One of the instructors gave a powerful message on the need to hate all forms of evil in our lives. We were individually asked to make our own 'sin' lists—things we do and our attitudes which hold us back from success in life. Some of the 'sins' that were highlighted included selfishness, greed,

at the camp were small ones. If we look into the perfect law of God, each of us will come up with much larger lists! That's because God's definition of sin is a lot more comprehensive than our definition of sin. For example, if we look at a woman lustfully, we have already committed adultery in our heart—a thought of which we need to repent.¹⁰ Similarly, if we have the means to help someone in need and if we don't help, we have committed a sin.¹¹

God is our instructor and He asks us to 'burn' our 'sin' lists and



Perhaps some of our lives could have been better had we tried a little harder, endured a little longer. Setbacks are not necessarily failures; they simply tell us to do things differently. A good example is Thomas Edison who invented the light bulb. He succeeded in producing the light bulb but only after hundreds of repeated failures. He didn't allow his failures to dampen his spirit to succeed. What about you and me? Do we give up so easily when difficulties come our way or when difficulties arise in our Christian lives? Do we similarly give up and fail to persist?

God calls us to endure difficulties and remain faithful to Him.¹⁴ Jesus endured the cross so that we might receive forgiveness and eternal life in His kingdom. We are called to imitate Jesus who is the Captain of our salvation.

Enjoy humour

Another activity at camp involved crawling through a pool full of mud with barbed wire set one foot above the pool level. We had to crawl through from one end of the pool to the other. If our heads accidentally touched the wire we had to start all over again. Everyone in the team had

to participate including the ladies. At the end of this activity, all of us looked really awful—full of mud from head to toe! We quickly jumped into the nearby stream and washed ourselves clean. Our clothes were permanently ruined.

The lesson I learned: although life is a serious business, we need to see the funny side of it—to laugh at ourselves and to laugh with others (not at them). It was quite easy for us to do this at the camp because we were all in the same boat—full of mud and dirt!

Having a similar attitude in life helps us through the trials and tribulations that come our way. It's also true in a spiritual sense: we are all sinners and need the cleansing blood of Jesus and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Just as we had to discard our soiled clothes and put on clean ones, so we must discard our own brand of righteousness and put on Christ's righteousness.¹⁵

Have fun

The last activity at camp was sky diving along a rope tied between two huge trees located several hundred metres apart. Armed with our safety gear, we climbed up a

high stand and glided along the rope shouting and yelling in front of so many onlookers. It was fun. Life is not all work. God wants us to take time and enjoy life the right way.

Jesus came so that you might have an abundant life.¹⁶ That life starts the moment you accept Jesus as your personal Saviour. It continues on into the kingdom of God where you will have lots of fun and pleasures forever.¹⁷

Our earthly camp

The intent of the camp was to motivate us to become better employees, spouses, parents, neighbours and citizens. Although the camp was brief, it taught me several valuable lessons.

Our life here on earth is like a camp. We are here only for a brief period and God wants us to learn some lessons such as developing perseverance, working together as a team, showing kindness and being thankful. He wants us to learn these and other lessons so that we might be better equipped for the really long life that He is intending to give us. So enjoy your camp on earth! □

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

² 2 Corinthians 6:4–10

³ Philippians 4:11–13

⁴ Matthew 7:12

⁵ Matthew 7:1–2

⁶ Matthew 6:12

⁷ John 17:21–23

⁸ Hebrews 12:1

⁹ Matthew 11:28–30

¹⁰ Matthew 5:28

¹¹ James 4:17

¹² 1 Thessalonians 5:22

¹³ Ephesians 2:8

¹⁴ Matthew 24:12

¹⁵ Philippians 3:9

¹⁶ John 10:10

¹⁷ Psalm 16:11

Safe in God's hands

Where was God when the tsunami struck Dec. 26, 2004? Is God useless in a crisis? What is the fate of those who perished? As we face such questions, it helps to rehearse the basic principles of our Christian faith.

Some of the religious leaders at the time of Christ saw most instances of mass human destruction and untimely death as God's judgment against sinners. Christ condemned such uncharitable explanations, saying that those who so judged should repent of their hurtful attitudes. He said that victims of tragedy were not worse sinners than others.

Even today, some writers and speakers judge victims in the same way as those religious leaders did—but Christ's instruction remains, that we should turn to God and stop judging others.¹

That life is unfair is part of the human condition. Ecclesiastes 9:11–12 tells us that “time and chance” happens to us all, “like fish taken in a cruel net.” God does not plan out in advance all the details of our lives and then make them happen. Time and chance are part of the very fabric of the universe, the way God freely chose to make things.

What God did plan in advance and bring to pass was to send Christ for the redemption of the world.² In Christ, we have been freed from sin, and that freedom enables us to trust God for our lives and for the lives of others. It also enables us to trust God to give us what we need to endure suffering. In Christ's love, we have hope that goes beyond death, and we have courage to reach out to help others in times of need.

The Christian message is that through Christ's wounds and sacrifice God understands our suffering and pain. Matthew 25:35–40 reminds us that Jesus identifies with victims. In helping someone in desperate need it is as if we are helping Jesus Himself. Mother

by
**James R.
Henderson**

Theresa of Calcutta interpreted it this way: “When we touch the sick and the needy, we touch the suffering body of Christ” (*Mother Theresa: In My Own Words*. 1996, Gramercy Books, New York, p. 26).

In Christ, our response to calamity and evil is a reflection of God's infinite compassion. As we pray for the survivors, we participate in Christ's love and compassion for those who suffer. Prayer gives voice to love. In Christ's love, we pray for all those who grieve, whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed, whose health is in danger because of possible disease, who need to rebuild their shattered existence.

We pray that they may find comfort and courage in God. And, as we are able, we give to help them in their desperate need. Acts 10:4 shows us that our prayers and our almsgiving—giving of our substance to those in need—are a memorial before God. God tells us that He does not take pleasure in the physical death of anyone.³ In fact, God hates death and will destroy it.

So what happened to all those who perished in the tsunami, and to the nearly 3,000 who were killed in New York on 9/11? Or to the estimated 3.1 million who died of AIDS in 2004? What about the 937,000 Tutsi and Hutu moderates who were slaughtered mercilessly during the Rwandan genocide attempts of the 1990s? And the reported 240,000 deaths in Chechnya since 1994? Or to the teenage pregnant girl who bled to death in some backstreet abortion? Are all these people lost to God? We know that the Christians who perished are with the Lord, but what about those who, as far as we know, never had the chance to receive or reject Jesus Christ? Are they gone forever?

God reveals Himself in the Bible as loving the world, and as sending His Son into the world not to condemn it but to save it.⁴ If God is anything, He is merciful.

“Mercy triumphs over judgment.”⁵ The answer to the question lies in the mercy of God.

In Psalm 88, David wonders whether death signifies the abandonment of God, and then in Psalm 139 he refutes that idea and proclaims that the Spirit of God finds us even in the grave. Similarly, in Ecclesiastes 3, the writer, called the preacher, queries what happens to a person's spirit or soul. Then, in chapter 12:7, he asserts that the “spirit will return to God who gave it.” Dead or alive, human beings are in the hands of the merciful God. The Bible tells us that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”⁶

God is faithful to His covenant love. In His faithfulness God sent His Son to die for us while we were still sinners. In His faithfulness, God loved us even before we loved Him. In His faithfulness, God reconciles to Himself the world He created.⁷

Because of God's faithfulness, we can put all our trust in Him. We can trust Him to be who He says He is. He is the God who loves the world, who redeems the world, and who in Christ has shared in human suffering. He is the God who promises that beyond death, in the new creation He has prepared for us, we will see our Lord Christ as He is. In Christ, we can rest in God's word of faithfulness concerning His mercy and grace for all His creation, for all people, even for those who may die without yet having met Christ.

The tsunami was not Judgment Day. Only God can decide how Judgment Day plays out, and the Bible tells us that God has decided that the final result of Judgment Day is that there will be “no more death or mourning or crying or pain.”⁸

The Song of Solomon says, “Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it.”⁹ Neither can tsunamis, earthquakes, diseases, violence or war. God's love is the hope of humanity. And nothing separates anyone from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. □

¹ Luke 13:4

² Revelation 13:8

³ Ezekiel 18:32

⁴ John 3:16–17

⁵ James 2:13

⁶ 2 Peter 3:9

⁷ Colossians 1:
19–20

⁸ Revelation 21:4

⁹ Song of
Solomon 8:7

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