

THE Plain Truth

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THE PLAIN TRUTH

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Bible: The inspired word of God

One of my favorite biblical characters is the unnamed man who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus and asked for healing. The disciples had been unable to drive out the demon, and the desperate man asked Jesus directly:

“...if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“If you can?” said Jesus.

“Everything is possible for him who believes.”

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”¹

Now, there was an honest man. And if we are also honest, we will admit that there are times when our belief needs some help. We want to be so sure in our faith that nothing can shake us. Then something comes along and the cold, clammy fingers of doubt start clawing at our belief in God and his word. For example, ever since *The Da Vinci Code* hit the headlines, the integrity of the Bible has been under attack.

Although most of us realize that *The Da Vinci Code* is a work of fiction, and that there is no basis to the allegations of the story, the book and movie raised the profile of some awkward questions about the Bible. Questions such as, How do we know the Bible is the inspired word of God? How can we be sure it has been translated accurately? And what about all those extra Gospels and epistles? Why didn’t they make it into the Bible? Who decided what went in and what was left out?

These are questions most of us have never really asked, and they can be a bit unsettling and faith-eroding for some. It is tempting

to just ignore the concerns and hope they will go away. But many people are made uneasy because of the biblical issues that have been raised. Perhaps you are too. So we need to talk about them. First, I must give you a word of warning. If you like neat, packaged answers with all the T’s crossed and the I’s dotted, you won’t find that here. As they say on TV, turn the channel now. But if you want to face some important issues, and come away still trusting the Bible as God’s inspired word that is able to make us “wise unto salvation,”

by the methods we use to prove things scientifically. I once asked a prominent Christian scientist what he would tell a genuine seeker who asked him to devise an experiment that would help him know if God existed. He thought for a moment, and then said gravely, “I think I would ask him to pray.”

What at first might seem a cop-out is actually profound insight. God is not interested in being the result of a successful experiment. He wants our encounter with him to grow into a relationship. A relationship based on faith.



There has been a tremendous expansion of information about the early manuscripts and history of the Bible in recent years. These discoveries have altered our understanding about many aspects of the Bible. Much of the 19th-century scholarship that so vigorously asserted the absolute inerrancy of Scripture or

its historical accuracy has been shown to be inadequate.

We now have a much better appreciation of how and when the books were written and how they all came together in the book we call “the Bible.” The picture that emerges is more complex than we thought. But it in no way diminishes the Bible as the inspired word of God, a reliable guide to matters pertaining to salvation.

There is nothing to be gained by denying the facts. And nothing to lose by looking at them. I believe that you will see the Bible’s relevance and meaning in a new way. □

then I think you are in for a pleasant surprise. The truth—about anything—has nothing to fear from facts. But let’s be clear what we mean by *facts*.

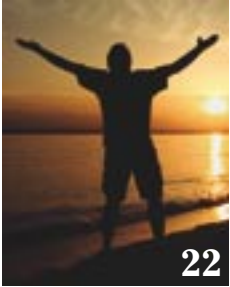
Science and mathematics can prove that two and two make four, and that sodium and chlorine make salt. However, not all facts can be established by scientific methods. Science can’t prove why you love your children, or why we find some things beautiful and others ugly, or why some music is inspiring. We know these things are facts, but they are not subject to scientific proof.

The existence of God cannot be established beyond all doubt

¹ Mark 9:22–24

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What our readers say:

All THE PLAIN TRUTH articles are well written and very edifying and the cover on the tsunami issue is great, so are all the photographs in the magazine.

**Francis X Chang
Melaka**

The articles truly prove to be valuable. Mr Armstrong, the founder of this Christian PLAIN TRUTH magazine, offered the magazine free of charge to its subscribers. That Godly inspired Mr. Armstrong, through God's touching grace of love, found some noble-minded, generous, painstaking, sincere, true, broad-minded, simple but great hands to follow and upkeep his original, inspirational and generous purpose. Yes, without exception I would like to express my deep appreciation to all the contributors—all articles provide some food for thought and action. The editorial is a good guide and it is interesting. I feel that the noble task of Mr. Low Mong Chai, the generous committee members and all who are involved in this inspirational Christian PLAIN TRUTH deserve a helping hand to achieve the goal of encouraging, enlightening and broadcasting the message of hope and assurance to men from all walks of life in this confused and corrupt world. May this THE PLAIN TRUTH help many people including me to change the mindset for a better and broader outlook as well as for the greater glory and praise of the good God of love and mercy. Frankly, this old man of 80 years is contributing in a small way to the subscription of this magazine. May God shower His abundant blessings upon all you noble hands who generously take the pains to help people like me in your great task. This old man is also joining the paying subscribers—even though with a very small sum—as a support for the noble magazine. May God bless you all with peace, joy, good health and happiness in all areas of your life. Yes, grateful thanks to you nobles with great hearts of charity pouring out your own pocket to



help humankind with the love of God. God never promises us a life without problems but when anxiety weighs the mind, the good Lord of all is surely there to hold your hands and help you accomplish His inspirational task. Thanks and praise to the God of all.

**Charles Abraham
Kuala Lumpur**

I found many articles very enlightening and thought-provoking at times. I do enjoy reading the articles and have been sharing the magazine with my friends and relatives as well. Do keep up the good work. I hope to receive your regular magazine for many years to come. Thank you!

**Dz Chyu Ng
Singapore**

Thank you for the latest issue (Feb–Mar 2006) of THE PLAIN TRUTH. Again, all the articles are well written and very edifying. I especially liked the article “Why were you born?” by Michael Morrison. I have read it twice and maybe I will read it a third time! Everyone should read it because it explains clearly what human life is all about—why we were born and what is the hope. Keep up the good work and God bless you all!

**Pal
Petaling Jaya**

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me to understand better about God and about life. It covers a wide range of topics which help me to see things through God's eyes. It contains beautiful articles which give insight to the soul. Keep up the good work.

**Alice John Gending
Kota Kinabalu**

Thanks a lot for THE PLAIN TRUTH magazine. It helps my spiritual growth, understanding and what is more important, it encourages me to read the Bible more often.

**Yeoh Boi Teony
Manjung, Perak**

THE PLAIN TRUTH often brings me back to earth. Sometimes we forget that the simplicities in life are the most comforting and satisfying.

**Fenson Chin
Kota Kinabalu**

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles are so informative and inspiring. Thanks and keep up the good work.

**Chieng Shaw An
Kota Kinabalu**

My spiritual knowledge is enriched and my Christian faith is renewed after reading every article in THE PLAIN TRUTH.

**Angelina Thien
Kota Kinabalu**

THE PLAIN TRUTH enriches my Christian knowledge. It is enlightening, inspiring and reassuring and it shows how God wants us to lead a spiritual life and to love one another.

**Francisca Mansa
Penampang**

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me to learn more about God and reading it makes me warm and comfortable. It also teaches me more about facts of life and when I'm under stress, reading THE PLAIN TRUTH makes me happy. Thank you very much for sending me THE PLAIN TRUTH.

**Evelyn Lazarus
Kota Kinabalu**

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me in my daily living and smoothens the “ups and downs” of life. May your message spread to more people.

Francis See

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.

No instant spiritual transformation

“Lord, give me patience and give it to me now!” This prayer-joke is usually said in jest, but is more and more becoming a truism in our instant gratification, microwave world. Few are willing to wait for anything these days. Dinners aren’t home cooked anymore—who wants to wait on the oven? Drivers don’t have time to stick to the speed limit. Young people can’t wait to grow up, and as Christians, we often find it difficult to wait to become spiritually mature as well.

change. Legalism, for example, is a way of thinking that goes deep into the heart and mind. It’s also subtle and deceptive. A person with this mindset is often not even aware of the ways legalism can warp one’s attitudes and perception of the world.

One of the worst effects of legalism is self-righteousness, which makes a person believe they don’t need much transformation. It can also have the equally devastating effect of discouragement, which leads

by
Tammy Tkach

feel I need more time for God to work on me. Paul expressed these thoughts well in Philippians 3. He realised all his law-keeping hadn’t made him perfect. He understood he was a work in progress through God’s grace, but he wasn’t worried about it. Like Paul, we can’t think about how much more there is to do. We can only keep going, putting the past behind and pressing forward to the goal.

Paul likened life to running a race.¹ In Hebrews 12:2, we are told to run the race with endurance, which would indicate we are in a marathon,



Transformation is a process, not a quick fix. Romans 12:2 tells us not to be conformed to the world, but to let ourselves be transformed by the renewing of our minds, or as the *New Living Translation* puts it, “Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.”

Even though we can be quick to change our minds about something such as the type of sandwich to eat, wrong ways of thinking become ingrained and not easy to

people to give up because they’ll never be good enough. Both of these mindsets can inhibit God’s work of transforming us into spiritual, mature Christians.

As I’ve discovered in my short time on earth, letting God change the way I think isn’t so easy. I can’t say I haven’t made some progress, at least I hope so. (How does God measure this kind of progress? I believe we shouldn’t try.)-

No, it seems it may take a lifetime, and even then, I’m sure I’ll

rather than a sprint. I’ve never run in a marathon (I don’t like running at all), but anyone who has can tell you the key is just to keep going.

With God’s help, we can, slowly and steadily, keep letting Him change us, even though it will take a lifetime. If we trust our hearts and minds to the One who gives us the desire to obey Him and the power to please Him,² He will continue to change the way we think and give us the prize, regardless of the progress we think we may or may not have made. □

¹ 1 Corinthians 9:24

² Philippians 2:13, (NLT)

In His

“Whatever you ask in my name,” Jesus said, “I will do it.”¹ Some people seem to think that Jesus is giving us a blank check—we can ask for anything at all, and He will sign His name to it and pass it along to the Father, and it will be done—guaranteed.

We all know that this doesn’t work—and it’s a good thing it doesn’t! Some people pray for rain at the same time as their neighbours pray for sunshine. The home seller prays for a high price, the home buyer prays for a low one.

If God had to answer every request He was given in the name of Jesus, the world would be chaotic, driven by the whims of well-meaning but foolish people. Even if humans could all agree, we simply don’t have the wisdom to be telling God how to run the universe.

So what did Jesus mean?

Whatever we ask

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.... Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”² Does this mean that we fill out the request form, and Jesus signs it and sends it to His Dad? “Hey, Dad, I’ve got a buddy here who wants a million dollars. How about doing it as a favour for me?”

No, that is not the way it works. Jesus is not a middleman who stamps His signature on our request, pretending that our request is really His. He says: “I am *not* saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father Himself loves you.”³ We have permission to go to the Father directly, because God loves us just as much as He loves His own Son. (Does that thought astonish you as much as it does me?)

Hebrews tells us that Jesus gives us permission to go to God directly. We



by
Joseph Tkach

do not need a middleman. So what does it mean to ask in the name of Jesus?

Let’s imagine that we are in an ancient palace. The king is sitting on his throne, his prince at his right hand, dozens of guards at attention, hundreds of loyal servants waiting for orders so that every decree will be carried out immediately.

And now imagine that we go into the palace, and the guards immediately make way for us, knowing that we have permission to approach the king. They swing aside, snap to attention and give us

They believe we have to get His name right—like a secret password—before the request will get through the heavenly filters. But when ancient peoples talked about someone’s “name”, they were not worried about the right pronunciation—they were referring to a person’s status or importance.

We can see that in the book of Hebrews. It begins by telling us that Jesus has inherited a better name than the angels have. The name in that context seems to be “Son”, but the precise word isn’t really important—the point being made

is that Jesus is superior to the angels. He has a higher status, a greater glory.

When we talk about the superior name of Jesus, we are really talking about his superior importance.

When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are not dealing with a special word—we are dealing with a special person. When we pray in His name, we are praying according to the way that He is—according to His nature. Our praise and requests should be something that fits His character.

Let’s use another analogy. Suppose that a police officer says, “Stop in the name of the law”—it means

that the officer has the force of law behind the command. But suppose that same officer asks for a bribe: “Give me \$20,000 cash in the name of the law”. Using the words “in the name of the law” does not automatically give the officer legal support, does it? When the officer says “in the name of the law”, he is supposed to be acting within the rules of the law.

In the same way, when we use Jesus’ name, we are not obligating him to support our own whims and desires. Rather, we are saying that we are already in accord with what He wants. We are saying something that He has authorised us to say.

“...when we use Jesus’ name, we are not obligating him to support our own whims and desires. Rather, we are saying that we are already in accord with what He wants.”

the royal treatment. We walk into the throne room, bow before the king, bow before the prince, and then tell the king: “In the name of the prince, I ask you for a better job and a nicer home.”

Maybe my palace protocol is a little rusty, but it seems a little odd for me to speak “in the name of the prince” when the prince is sitting right there. Maybe this is not what it means to ask “in the name of Jesus”.

More than pronunciation

Some people think that Jesus was talking about pronouncing His name in a certain way.

name

Rather than forcing Him to conform to our wishes, “in His name” means exactly the opposite: We are conforming to His wishes, we are acting within His will.

we are conforming to the words of the Lord’s prayer: Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let it be done in my life. If my request is not according to your will, then



When we speak on His behalf, we need to make sure that we are saying something that He would agree with.

When we say “in Jesus’ name”,

feel free to change it to what it needs to be. “In Jesus’ name” is our affirmation that, as best we know, our request is within His will.

Let your requests be known

However, if we have to pray according to God’s will, what’s the point of praying? Isn’t He going to do His will whether we ask for it or not? Doesn’t it go without saying that if we ask God to do what He already wants to, that He will do it?

But God is the one who is telling us to pray. In His wisdom, God has decided to do certain things only in answer to prayer. Sometimes this is so that we will learn, in the process of prayer, what His will is, and whether our request is for selfish purposes. We don’t always understand what God’s will is, and praying can sometimes help us come to a better understanding.

But I suspect that on many things, God’s will is not set in stone. God may not have decided, for example, which person we should marry—but He has already decided how we should treat the person we marry. He requires that we choose the person, and choose each day how we will interact with that person. Prayer can help us here, too.

Prayer changes us—but it also affects what God does. Since He has decided to do certain things only in answer to prayer, He decides what to do based in part on what we do, on what we need in the situations we have chosen, and on what we ask Him to do. He has the power to carry it out, the compassion to help us in our needs, and the wisdom to know what is really best for us.

“In everything,” Paul says, “by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”⁴ Whatever is on your heart, whatever it is that you want, ask God for it.

Jesus has given us the authority to ask—but it is a request, not a command. We can trust God to answer in the best possible way, at the best possible time. But whatever we do (prayer included), we are to do it for the glory of God.⁵ When we do that, we can be confident that we are praying in Jesus’ name. □

¹ John 14:13

² John 16:23–24

³ John 16: 26–27

⁴ Philippians 4:6

⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:31

Do you know—really know

In the last issue we studied God's attempt in building a relationship with man from the time of creation to the time of God's chosen people going into slavery. We will continue picking up the threads in this fascinating story of requited love.

Spurned again

The trend of disappointment continues. Surely the Hebrew slaves in Egypt felt a profound disappointment with God? Four hundred years of slavery! Just think about it. Four hundred years ago India was a divided country ruled by warring rajyas some of whom were despots. Many of the people lived in abject poverty. Four hundred years is a very long time. We are talking of sixteen generations. That's how long the Israelites were slaves.

Then God intervenes with a power never seen before in human history. Ten times He intervened on a scale so massive that not a single person in Egypt could doubt the existence of the God of the Hebrews. For the next 40 years God looked after all the needs of His people just like any human parent would do for his infant. He fed the Israelites, clothed them, planned their daily itinerary and fought their battles. He punished evil and rewarded good. He even spoke to them directly on Mount Sinai when He gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments.

We say when we are faced with trials, "If only God would intervene powerfully in this matter." God did for the Israelites, but what happened? The Israelites took the power of God for granted and at the least excuse grumbled, griped and doubted God's intention to free them from slavery.

There were ten major rebellions against God in the 40 years sojourn

by
Joe D'Costa

in the wilderness. God desires love and faithfulness from His people, yet the experience of the Israelites shows us that even though God's power is omnipotent; still it is unable to generate love. When God's love was spurned like that, we can imagine, speaking humanly, that God might have felt just as helpless as any parent feels who has lost his children to—say—drug addiction. But, as we are beginning to realise, God is not like

"...God may be hidden but His face is streaked with tears. And while He is at it, He is willing to forgive at any moment. Often, in the midst of a stern reproof, God stops—literally mid-sentence—and begs Israel to repent."

his Creation.

Hitler and his army learnt this lesson during World War II. By power and force they succeeded in making people placed in concentration camps renounce God, curse their family, work without pay, eat human excrement, kill and bury their closest friend or even their mother. But all that power could not *make* them love Hitler. God has always known this, of course.

God too near

In the beginning when God created man He knew that He had given man the potential to rebel but He chose to counteract that rebellion with love, education, patience and even discipline. But none of this worked with the Israelites, as He knew it wouldn't. God cried out, "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!"¹ Since God knew that this was not to be, He also said, "I will certainly hide my face on that day"² meaning that He would leave them to their own devices, as many human parents are forced to do with their wayward children, for a time.

Just as the holy God found it difficult to live with the Israelites in the wilderness, unholy man found it difficult to live with God. They ate only manna, day in and day out. Their closeness involved doing certain things to keep clean, numerous washings, sacrifices and rituals. Sex, menstruation, content of clothing and dietary habits all fell within the purview of the law. God is unlimited and a Spirit, man is limited and physical. The two cannot meet. Eventually only two people of all

the thousands of people that fled Egypt survived God's presence and entered the Promised Land. Similarly, it may not be to our advantage to have God too near to us in the same way the Israelites experienced God.

"Okay," some may say. "Maybe having God near me, powerfully intervening in my life when things go wrong may not be such a good idea. How about God giving me powers to deal with my life? What if God gave me some super human powers like walking on water,

—that God loves you? (Part 2)

strength to deal with the bully that troubles my friends and me? What if He made me so smart that I could come out first in my class without studying? What if He made me rich and powerful and gave me all that I desired. Surely anyone who has all his wishes granted would love God with all his heart, wouldn't he?" Well, actually, No!

When his son Solomon ascended the throne, he got what every child receives only in his dreams. God offered him any wish—long life, riches, anything. But when Solomon chose wisdom, God added as a bonus gifts of wealth, honour and peace. He would rule over a Golden Age, a shining moment of tranquility in the long,

and gold by the ton. Solomon had artistic talents as well: he wrote 1,005 songs and 3,000 proverbs. Rulers travelled hundreds of miles to test Solomon's wisdom first hand and to see the great city he had built.

One such ruler, the queen of Sheba, said of him: "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is



The wilderness wanderings of the Israelites prove this theory to be wrong.

Still flawed

Another example. Lusty king David broke every law in the book save one, he loved God with all his heart, all his soul and all his mind.

tormented history of the Hebrews. Solomon became the richest man of his time. The Bible says that silver was as common in Jerusalem as stones. A fleet of trading ships sought out exotica for the king's private collection—apes and baboons from Africa, peacocks and sandal-wood from India, ivory

true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the reports I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your

God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel”³ Impressive words from a queen who, as a farewell gift, gave Solomon four and a half tons of pure gold!

What do we suppose God felt? In human terms, relief, pleasure and delight. The Bible hints at all these. Israel’s chronic grumblers had died off and Solomon went out of his way to show God his love. He lavished the wealth of his kingdom on the tremendous temple, fashioned by 200,000 workmen, that ranked as one of the wonders of the world, far more magnificent than the Taj Mahal. From a distance, it shone like a snow-capped mountain. When Solomon dedicated the temple in a public ceremony witnessed by thousands, God filled the temple with His glory and even the priests were driven back by the blast. The crowd spontaneously stayed another two weeks to celebrate what God had done. As they saw it, His promises to Abraham and Moses had finally come true. The Israelites had finally got land, a nation with secure boundaries, and a gleaming symbol of God’s presence among them. No one present on that famous day could doubt God.

At first it seemed that Solomon would gratefully follow God. His prayer in 1 Kings 8 is one of the most majestic prayers recorded. But by the end of his reign Solomon had squandered every advantage he had gained. The poetic man who had sung of romantic love, had broken all records for promiscuity: 700 wives and 300 concubines. He lived extravagantly and committed the greatest sin by introducing idol worship into the holy city where the temple dedicated to the God of the Hebrews was built. By the end of his reign his kingdom resembled the Egypt the Israelites had left behind several generations earlier. The more we enjoy the world’s good gifts, it seems, the less we think about the Giver.

Through the prophets

After Solomon we find God turning from the kings to His prophets as His spokesman and guide to the Hebrews.

God exhibited the dramatic shift in His dealing with mankind by sending fire from heaven. Elijah, the wildest and woolliest of prophets journeyed across Israel to Mount Carmel to take on 850 false prophets, single-handedly. What courage, what faith!

In a dramatic public showdown, God through Elijah clobbered the forces of evil. Elijah was so inspired by this miracle that he ran all the way back to Jerusalem before Ahab’s chariot—only to flee equally fast, if not faster, in the face of a threat to his life from Jezebel!

We find no enthusiastic revivals broke out in Israel in the wake of this exhibition of God’s power. After a brief flurry of religious fervour, the nation settled back into its long, steady slide away from God.

After Elijah and Elisha, God seems yet again to rein in His supernatural power, turning from dramatic signs and wonders to words. Isaiah, Hosea, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others had no stunning displays of omnipotence to dangle before an audience; they had only the power of words. And as God seems, in human terms, to draw farther and farther away, these prophets themselves began to ask questions: eloquent, haunting questions, questions wrapped in pain, similar question to those we ask today.

Why do godless nations flourish? Why is there such poverty and depravity in the world? Why so few miracles? Where are you, God? Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Show yourself; break your silence. “Truly you are a God who hides himself,” Isaiah said, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!”⁴ Jeremiah loudly protested the failure of “success theology.” In his day, prophets were being tossed in dungeons and wells, and even sawed in half. Jeremiah compared God with a weakling, “a man taken by surprise... a warrior powerless to save.”⁵ Habakkuk challenged God to explain why, as he put it “justice never prevails.”⁶

But God didn’t remain silent to these questions from the prophets. The prophets themselves record God’s response. God defends the way He runs the world. He lashes out, storms, and weeps.⁷ He says, “I am not silent; I have been speaking through my prophets.”⁸ We as human beings tend to rate God’s revelations by, at the top, their dramatic effect, spectacular personal appearances, followed, at the bottom, by supernatural miracles and words. But God

doesn’t consider mere words as an inferior form of proof. Personal appearances, signs and wonders, or words don’t have any lasting impact on the people. Just like any exasperated parent God says, “From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. But they did not listen to me or pay attention”.⁹ God knew that the people didn’t really want a word from the Lord, and they proved Him right, as they are recorded as saying to Isaiah, “Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions... and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel”.¹⁰

So God withdrew His presence still further. Yet He says that when His people suffered, He suffered. He even wept for other nations of the world. He says, “I wail over Moab, for all Moab. I cry out... My heart laments for Moab like a flute”.¹¹ God may be hidden but His face is streaked with tears. And while He is at it, He is willing to forgive at any moment. Often, in the midst of a stern reproof, God stops—literally mid-sentence—and begs Israel to repent.

Hope for the future

Yet, while God in His righteousness oscillates between a desire to destroy all mankind and in His love the desire to forgive, while we see the history so far of man as a sad attempt by a loving God, we are told that this history will end with joy, that this sad period is just a transition from Eden to a new heaven and new earth. We are told in the prophets that all this will end in success. In the meanwhile, God suffers in silence, hidden from man and declining to mete out justice. After the prophets there is dead silence for 400 years—400 years of disappointment with God, 400 years of wondering whether God is asleep, dead, deaf or blind or all of the above. Still, despite everything, the chosen people of God waited for the Messiah, their only hope for the future.

In the next article we will see what happens when the promised Messiah arrives on earth, and how that God “risked everything” for His creation. How His sure plan for mankind, allowing for all the problems we face today, reveals that, in “risking everything”, God has already redeemed all His creation. It’s an inspiring story. □

¹ Deuteronomy 4:40

² Deuteronomy 32:20

³ 1 Kings 10:6–9

⁴ Isaiah 64:1

⁵ Jeremiah 14:9

⁶ Habakkuk 1:4

⁷ Isaiah 65:1–7

⁸ Jeremiah 1:

4–10; 7:25

⁹ Jeremiah 7:25

¹⁰ Isaiah 30:10

¹¹ Isaiah 15:5

Dead to sin—oh really?

I grew up on a farm, so I know something about animals—great and small. Animals are still part of my life. Our home is surrounded by bird and squirrel feeders. There's also a birdbath where on hot dry summer days the little critters sometimes have to wait in line for a drink. I own a horse. He doesn't get ridden much, but I scratch his back and feed him tidbits anyway. I love animals.

Not long ago while we were helping a daughter move, I noticed through the window a couple of birds flopping around in the street. They seemed to be fighting. Then one bird flew off, but the other continued rolling around unable to get up. When I investigated, I saw the poor creature was injured. It couldn't fly; it couldn't even walk. Its back was raw and bleeding from where other birds had been pecking it. I knew what had to be done, but I didn't have the stomach for it.

When I returned a little later to see how the bird was doing, my heart ached. It didn't move at all now. It was dying—slowly and painfully. I looked into the sky and asked God for strength. He gave it.

As I recalled the scripture that says God sees every sparrow that falls, I thought about life and death. Death, as far as this physical flesh is concerned, is so final, whether for a little creature or a human. This led to thoughts about the difference between life in the flesh and life in the spirit, the life that isn't subject to the death of the body. I thought about Paul's words to the Romans about being dead to sin but alive in Christ. Would that we were as dead to sin as we are dead in body when this physical life is over.

When I was baptised, I realised I would occasionally slip into sin, but nothing too serious. You know, maybe pass along gossip or tell a little white lie or yell at my husband or kids. God doesn't categorise sin the way we humans do, so this was how I was thinking.

After all, I was now dead to sin. Imagine my chagrin when I found myself tempted beyond my ability to resist—at least beyond what I thought I could resist or wanted to resist. Without going into any deep dark secrets, more than once in my Christian life, I've had to prostrate myself before my Saviour and desperately plead for help in either getting myself out of a horribly sinful situation or avoiding one.

And yes, the words of the apostle were ringing in my ears. "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."¹

God has shown me, sometimes the hard way, that there's more to the Christian's new life than sauntering along life's path with a knowing smile on my face that I've got it made. So what in the world was the apostle talking about?

To delve deeply into Paul's theology would take much longer than space allows. Many books have been written on "just what did you mean, Apostle Paul?" Briefly, many scholars feel there was an "already—not yet" aspect to Paul's conception of salvation. As Professor James D.G. Dunn writes: "Believers are 'in Adam' and continue to be 'in Adam'; they have not yet died. But they are also 'in Christ', and have begun to experience life, though they have yet to share in the full experience of Christ's resurrection—in the resurrection of the body" (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 464).

Note the before—and—after characteristics of these passages. Paul writes: "If we have been united with Him like this in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His resurrection. For we know that our

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old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him."²

Paul taught salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. To some Christians and non-Christians of his time, his teaching of salvation by grace was thought to encourage sin, to teach that all was now lawful. No, Paul said, in baptism a person dies to sin. But then a person lives to Christ. For Christians, there's an obedience to Christ that goes far beyond keeping the letter of the law.

What does Christ require? What are His standards of righteousness? One has only to read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 to realise how desperately we humans fall short and need His grace.

Paul writes that as a Christian I'm to live as if I'm dead to sin. Will I sin? Oh, yes. As much as I hate to admit it, I'll still be spending time on my knees, confessing my sins and thanking my Saviour for His forgiveness, mercy and grace.

I had mercy on that poor bird's physical suffering, but my suffering, and yours, the suffering of sin, God took on Himself in our place and then raised us up to new life in the spirit with Him. In spite of my personal weaknesses, I know I've left the "before" of living in sin and I'm in the "after" of living to God in Christ Jesus. "The death He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life He lives, He lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."³ □

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¹ Romans 6:2–4

² Romans 6:5–8

³ Romans 6:10–11

Character's li

It is said character is destiny. In what way is Jesus Christ related to a Christian's character and destiny? Scriptures reveal God had predestinated those whom He calls to be conformed to the image of His Son Jesus Christ.¹ What is the image of Christ that God wants us to conform to? Undoubtedly, we are to reflect the character of Christ—to image Him in the way we think, behave and live. Being Christians, the spiritual formation of Christ's character in us is therefore of utmost importance to our spiritual calling and destiny.

Image and likeness of God and Christ

Jesus Christ preexisted in the form of God and in His incarnation He became a human being—in the form of man. In truth, He was fully God and fully man! Jesus Christ perfectly images God's attributes and character in His life and ministry on earth. The divine character of Christ is expressed as the "fruit of the Holy Spirit"—which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, compassion, mercy, righteousness, godly wisdom and holiness.²

Man created to manifest God's character

God created human beings in His image and likeness. Being God's image-bearers, we are unique and far exceed the value of any other creatures on earth. What then is the chief purpose of God creating humankind? God is Spirit, invisible. We are, however, made to be visible impression or expression of God's image and likeness. We exist to make visible the invisible, spiritual character of God in our human conduct to glorify Him. Hence a Christian's destiny is ultimately to be made like Jesus, to image Him as He perfectly images God. In reality, a Christian's calling is to live a life in spiritual union and oneness with God the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit.³ So we glorify God by manifesting the life and character of Jesus Christ in our behaviour.



by
**Yong
Chin Gee**

Humankind comes short of God's glory

We must be realistic in recognising human beings throughout ages have failed to express the image and likeness of God. In fact, God

started off with our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. How did that happen? They were innocent in the beginning. Eve, being naïve, chose to believe Satan's deception. She disobeyed

declares in the Bible that there is none good or righteous. Sadly, all human beings have sinned and come short of the glory of God—failing to express His glorious character.⁴ Human sins

God by eating the forbidden fruit, thinking she could be independent like God knowing what is good and evil. Adam who knew better sinned as well by pleasing his wife rather than obeying God.

nk to destiny

Their sins evidently proved that human nature is weak, flawed and self-centered rather than God-centered! Human beings are derivative creatures—not autonomous—being dependent

holy character epitomizes all that is good, righteous and perfect. Sin, however, is evil, immoral, and even satanic. It is the antithesis of who and what God is. Sin is deadly as it corrupts our character and



and contingent on God to live and move and have our being.⁵

Why is sin evil? Because it mars and distorts God's image and likeness in us! Plus sin alienates our relationship with God. God's

destroys our very being. Hence, the lack of morality and spirituality in our society is a result of human sinfulness where people do what seems right in their own eyes.

Character's link to destiny

God created human beings with the freedom of choice. The choice that we make in life ultimately forms our character, which in turn decides our spiritual destiny. God offers us two choices to our spiritual destiny.

1. His way of life—represented by the “tree of life”—which is our individual choosing to have an intimate relationship with God and living in union with Christ. God's desire is to dwell in us—manifesting His divine character in our Christian living. God offers us His gift of salvation. Our destiny in this choice is to inherit eternal life in His Kingdom as His adopted children.
2. Our way of life—represented by the “tree of good and evil”—which is characterised by self-dependence, doing what seems right in our own eyes. In rejecting God's way of life human beings inevitably follow the sinful way of Satan—being morally wicked and evil. The result of this choice is eternal death in the lake of fire.

Christ can change character and destiny

Satan through Adam and Eve introduced sin and death into the world. Being sinful and lacking Godly character, they caused the fateful change in their own destiny. Have we no hope then? There is good news for us all. Christ has the power to change a person's character and destiny! How can that come about? Jesus Christ is called the second or last Adam. Unlike first Adam who failed his test of expressing Godly character against Satan, Jesus however passed His test with flying colours. Despite Satan's severe temptations, having to face great shame and sufferings on the cross, Jesus remained sinless, steadfast in character, being faithful and true to God till the very end of His life! He conquered Satan, sin and death. He glorified God the Father by living a holy, righteous, perfect life on earth. Jesus Christ being the perfect image of God the Father



and perfect image of man—being a God-man—He is the perfect Saviour for all humanity. His offer of salvation can change humanity’s destiny from eternal death to eternal life! His redemption can transform sinful human nature to God’s divine nature—thus renewing and restoring God’s image in us. Jesus Christ lived out His divine life perfectly in history, and now He wants to live out His life in, as, and through us. In truth, Christianity is Christ living and working out His life and character in a Christian.⁶ Scriptures say, “For since death came through a man [Adam], the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man [Jesus Christ]. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive... The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit...The first man was of the dust

of the earth, the second man from heaven...And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.”⁷

Spiritual formation of character in the process of salvation

Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of all humanity was not an afterthought, not something God began to do after Adam and Eve had sinned against Him. This plan of salvation was set in motion by God long before He created the world. The offer of eternal life in salvation through Christ is a gift of God, unachievable by human moral behaviour, religious piety, or personal good works. St. Paul emphasised this important truth by saying, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and

this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”⁸

Since human beings are saved through God’s grace and faith in Christ for the purpose of doing good works to glorify God, what does Christ actually do in order to fulfill our destiny? Being our redeemer, mediator, high priest, intercessor and advocate Christ works on transforming our human nature to His divine nature—restoring and renewing God’s image and likeness in us. Christ’s indwelling Spirit moulds our character and fashions us to be like Him. Doing good works is to reflect Christ’s character in our daily life in whatever we think or do. 2 Peter

1:3 states that, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

Glorifying God doesn't happen automatically. Just because we have God's Spirit in us doesn't assure us of being able to walk in His Spirit and reflect godliness. The ability to do good works to glorify God depends on a constant choice between reflecting Christ's way of life and glorifying self in going our selfish way. We bear the responsibility for choosing God's way to glorify God. Jeremiah 9:23–24 (AV) says, “Let not the wise and skillful person glory and boast in his wisdom and skill; let not

the mighty and powerful person glory and boast in his strength and power; let not the person who is rich [in physical gratification and earthly wealth] glory and boast in his [temporary satisfactions and earthly] riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me (personally and practically, directly discerning and recognizing My character), that I am the Lord Who practices loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth; for in all these things I delight, says the Lord.”

Christ being our Saviour reconciles us to God and fully restores our broken relationship with Him. Believers are justified, having all sins forgiven and made righteous before God. Following justification God sanctifies us through His Holy Spirit empowering us to overcome temptations, sinful habits and behaviour. Conforming to Christ's image—to behave like Christ—is a progressive experience for all Christians. The more closely we follow Christ, the more we reflect His character and attitude to life.

Human beings to be like God

God's ultimate purpose for us is to be living in communion with Him. All “good works” of Christians should be the outworking of His life and character. We resemble Him as we image Him. This spiritual likeness will only be completed when we are resurrected and transformed into immortal children

conduct and sinful character. Why? God says human heart or mind is sinful and hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so!¹⁰ The good news is God has a solution to this sinful human nature and character problem. God loves humanity so much that He gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins—saving sinners from

condemnation and doomed destiny. In accepting Christ as our Saviour, God through Christ's Spirit will transform our sinful nature as we allow His Spirit to write His law of love in our hearts and minds.

Growth in Godly virtue and character

How do Christians grow towards Spiritual maturity in Godly virtue and character? Obviously we have to choose to trust and obey God—to be led by His Holy Spirit so as to produce good and righteous spiritual fruit in life. Spiritual growth in character, faith and love needs to undergo the process of testing—of overcoming trials, temptation and problems in daily life.¹¹ St. James said, “Consider it pure

joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”¹² St. Paul wrote, “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”¹³

An offer we can't refuse

What good news does God have for us? God's good news is about His Kingdom and His plan of salvation. God has a wonderful spiritual destiny in store for us as His adopted children in His glorious Kingdom. When Christ returns God's Kingdom will compose of resurrected human beings made immortal. Being good, loving and righteous in character all will live a perfect, joyful, spiritual life with God in the new heavens and new earth.¹⁴ We can't even imagine the magnitude of our spiritual inheritance and all that awaits us as God's children. This is God's ultimate destiny for humanity—for all those who choose to respond to His salvation. And what a fabulous offer! □

“God created human beings with the freedom of choice. The choice that we make in life ultimately forms our character, which in turn decides our spiritual destiny.”

¹ Romans 8:29

² Galatians 5:22–23; Ephesians 5:8–9; Colossians 3:12–14

³ John 17:21–22; 13:34–35;

1 John 4:11–16

⁴ Romans 3:10–12, 23

⁵ Acts 17:24–28

⁶ Galatians 2:20

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45, 47, 49

⁸ Ephesians 2:8–10

⁹ Isaiah 44:6, 8; 45:5, 6, 21

¹⁰ Romans 8:7

¹¹ 1 Peter 1:6–7; 2 Peter 1:5, 9

¹² James 1:2–4

¹³ Romans 5:3–4

¹⁴ Revelation 21:1–7

of God. Our immortality, however, will never be equal to that of God as a deity. Unlike human beings reproducing children of their own species in a family, God does not reproduce, create or clone more Gods! God says He is the only God there is—apart from Him there is no other God.⁹ Humankind's ultimate destiny is not becoming Gods but immortal adopted children bearing God's image and likeness.

Character change only through God's Spirit

Are human beings alienated from God capable of changing our flawed, sinful nature to become holy, righteous, perfect character? Take ancient Israel for an example. Under the Old Covenant, Israelites were God's chosen nation. They were given God's laws of love to regulate all aspects of their individual and national life. History, however, showed Israel, as individuals and as a nation, sinned against God time and again. No matter how good and righteous God's laws were, they couldn't and didn't have any transforming effect on ancient Israelites' immoral

Provoking chil

It was a hot, dry day in August about 45 years ago on the plains of the USA in western South Dakota. My father and I were out in the hayfields, stacking hay to be used as feed for our cattle during the harsh winter to come.

I learned to drive the tractor when I was six or seven years old, and dad decided it was now time for me to learn how to use the “Farmhand” to stack the hay. “Farmhand” was the brand name for a hydraulic device that could be attached to an ordinary tractor so hay could be scooped up and piled into stacks measuring about 20 feet in diameter and about 20 feet high (between 6 and 7 meters in diameter and height). It was controlled by moving just one lever four ways to raise, lower, tilt or dump the long tines (or “teeth” as we usually called them) on the large forked hay scoop (generally called the “hay buck”) on the front of the Farmhand.

One of the final steps in finishing the haystack involved boosting a man up to the top of the stack so he could walk on the hay to pack it down a bit. (That could be a bit dangerous as occasionally there would be a rattlesnake hiding there, especially in hay made from the native prairie grasses.) The last step was to use a pitchfork to form the top of the haystack into a mound to help shed any rain or snow. Western South Dakota does not receive much rain so hay stored outdoors this way usually lasts one or two years.

When the time came to put the finishing touches on the haystack, my dad climbed onto the front of the Farmhand and motioned for me to boost him to the top. He finished in a few minutes and signaled for me to come back so he could get down. He climbed back onto the Farmhand teeth and I backed away from the stack.

Ever have one of those moments when your mind goes completely blank? Well, I do and this was one of those moments. I looked at the control but couldn’t remember which way to move the lever to lower the

Farmhand. So I guessed. With four ways to move it, I had a 25 per cent chance of being right. I pushed the lever in and the worst thing possible happened. The teeth flopped down as they would to dump a load of hay and dad’s cap and pitchfork fell to the ground. Dad was left hanging onto the top of the hay buck with his feet dangling in mid air above the hard dry ground. I shouted to him asking what to do, but I couldn’t hear him above the noise of the tractor. He didn’t dare let go to give hand signals to me. Somehow I managed to move the lever the correct way and the teeth came back up to their normal position. Dad was now safe. Or was he?

I still had to get him down. Trying to shout above the noise of the tractor to get some help was of no use, the tractor was just too loud. In my panic, I couldn’t remember which way I had moved the lever the first time so I guessed again and dumped him a second time. Fortunately he had kept a good grip and didn’t fall off. After what seemed like forever I guessed correctly and was able to lower the Farmhand and get him safely on the ground.

Now before I tell you what my dad did next, let me ask you, “What would your father have done if you had done something like this to him?” After you answer that, let me ask you a second question, “What would you do to your child if this had been done to you?”

In Ephesians 6:4 (NASB), Paul wrote: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Other translations render “do not provoke your children” as “fret not your children to anger”, “do not exasperate your children”, “vex not your children”, “don’t overcorrect”, “do not irritate your children”, “must stop exasperating your children” and “must not goad your children to resentment”. Apparently this was as much of a

by
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problem in Ephesus as it is in many families today.

There are times when children do something wrong and simply do not see it. This is a time for parents to gently teach, perhaps by doing the task together. There are times when children deliberately and wilfully do wrong things. This is a time for parents to wisely correct and teach, but never an excuse for verbal, physical, mental or emotional abuse. But there are other times when children make mistakes, recognise it, and determine in their hearts to never make that mistake again. What should a parent do then? If the child has already learned the lesson and it’s clear they have determined not to repeat the mistake, there is no further need for correction on the matter. Unfortunately, in the midst of frustration or anger, we parents may not see this awareness and aggressively lecture, punish or in some manner overcorrect, leaving the child angry or discouraged. It is this that the apostle Paul is warning fathers to avoid doing to their children.

These situations need to end with children knowing that even though they may have been wrong, they themselves are always wanted and loved. A kind look, gracious words, a hug or preferably all three will send a message of true love, unconditional love. Furthermore, a child’s perception of God’s love is formed by these interactions with parents. Conditional love from parents paints an entirely false picture of the love of God, a love that is unconditional.

I remember the relief I felt when dad was safely on the ground. Had he lost his grip, he most likely would have been seriously injured or killed. My youthful male pride was wounded because I found out I was not as good at operating machinery as I had imagined.

What did my dad do when he was back safely on the ground? He picked up his cap and pitchfork

Children to anger

and went back to work. He didn't lecture, didn't express anger, but the way he walked away showed his relief of having escaped unharmed. It was obvious to him that I had learned my lesson and it was now time for us to go back to work together. I never made that mistake with the Farmhand again.

Thirty years later, my wife, children and I were visiting dad on the farm and just talking

My father was a very quiet man, never spoke much. He never preached at me, never hit me, never verbally harangued, manipulated or abused me, but let the way he lived do the teaching. His living example of the wise application of Ephesians 6:4 taught me more than a whole book full of words or months of lectures could ever do.

Where did dad learn that kind

was young and the life of Jesus lived in him and was passed on to me.

Dad passed away in January 2000, and it was my responsibility to deal with all the matters that accompanied his death. On a hot August afternoon later that year I was back on the farm getting all of the equipment ready for sale. One of the items to be sold was the old tractor with the Farmhand. When I started the two cylinder engine, the familiar sound of the "A"



about old times. I asked him if he remembered the incident and what his thoughts had been. He said he remembered feeling badly because he had not spent enough time teaching me how to operate the equipment. Even in the midst of such a life threatening situation, he hadn't thought of himself, he had thought of me! It reminds me of Jesus. His life, His teachings, His sacrifice were not for Himself. They were for us.

of love? I never asked him but suspected that he learned it from his parents and teachings from the Bible in church when he was young. Whether he learned it from his parents or in church, the original source is Jesus. The stories of Jesus in the New Testament clearly portray an unconditional love for all people, a love so deep that He took on Himself all our sins and carried them to His death. Dad was taught those stories when he

John Deere tractor coming to life kindled some very strong emotions and tears flowed freely down my face. Tears of grief, but also tears of joy for the many happy times dad and I had shared together. Thanks to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I will see dad again some day and our good times together will continue for ever and ever.

Oh, and by the way, I still remember how to operate those controls. □

It isn't just about how he died

I didn't see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* when it first came out, and I still haven't. I don't want to. Hearing that the movie is grisly, sparing us no detail of the crucifixion, is enough for me. People say it leaves an indelible "special effects" impression of how Jesus died. And I wonder if that is really such a good thing.

Crucifixion was a brutal business, and that anyone would deliberately put himself at risk of the cross for others is, of itself, an impressive demonstration of love. But the fact that Jesus was crucified is, to some extent, just a detail. If he had been born a Roman citizen he would have been beheaded. If he had lived in another time or place he could have been hanged, stoned or shot. Today we would have electrocuted him, or strapped him to a gurney for a lethal injection, probably after spending several years on Death Row.

My point is that the graphic details of crucifixion focus primarily on making us feel sorry for Jesus, and therefore on wanting us to feel that we "owe it to him" to accept him after all he went through. That is the effect many people say the movie had on them.

But it seems that the emotion it stirred up was temporary. The movie was touted as "the greatest evangelistic tool for 2,000 years," but it has had a minimal impact on church attendance. So maybe wallowing interminably in the blow-by-blow details of Jesus' scourging and crucifixion is not as persuasive as some had hoped.

Besides, Jesus and his Father want us to follow him because he lives, because as one of us he not only died, but was raised from the dead and dwells in the joy of perfect communion with the Father and wants to share that joy and communion with us. He's not looking for your sympathy; he's looking for you to come home to the love of your

heavenly Father and your older Brother. That's why he took away our sins—to give us life, to call us home—not to garner our pity.

Maybe it is simply the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, the One through whom all things were made and who upholds all things by the word of his power¹ became human for us and died at all that demonstrates most dramatically the depth and meaning of his sacrifice. For Jesus to face death in any way and in any form was so utterly foreign to all that he is.

"In him was life," John's Gospel



by
John Halford



tells us. "And that life was the light of us all." C.S. Lewis, in a discussion about what it meant for Jesus to come and live as a human being, wrote: "The Eternal being who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man, but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab" (*Mere Christianity*, chapter 5).

For about 30 years the Creator and Architect of human life shared in its limitations. Then he allowed

his life to be ended in a brutal display of cruelty. For three days, the one who was life lay in a cold dark tomb.

I have a friend who has been for many years in a maximum security prison. He has become used to it, and manages to live a productive Christian life. I love and respect my friend, and visit when I can. But the thought of spending even one night in his environment is frightening. It helps me understand just a little bit the sacrifice Jesus made.

I wonder if instead of focusing on the depth of Jesus' sacrifice by remembering how he died, perhaps it is the fact that he died that underscores the depth of his love for us. He made our burden his so that he could make his joy ours. He shared our experience, including death, in order to destroy the power of death over us.

Jesus did not ask us to remember his death by dwelling on the grisly details. Instead, he gave us a simple ceremony. At the end of what we call "The Last Supper," he took some of the leftovers and established the simple ritual that we call communion. "Do it in remembrance of me," he said.

Communion: the word means "to join with." To join with others—a reminder of our commitment to love as we have been loved. To share, serve, tolerate and regard our neighbor's needs as highly as we do our own.

Communion is not an empty religious ritual. Nor is it an outburst of emotion after exposure to some masterfully wrought special effects. Communion is something Christians do again and again. But it should never become routine. Each time we accept the symbols of Jesus' body and blood we commit ourselves to him and to all that he stands for. □

¹ Hebrews 1:2

Ideas on Time Management

by Jim Rohn,
America's Foremost Business Philosopher

Someone will master and someone will serve.
Either you run the day or the day runs you; either you run
the business or the business runs you.

Learn how to separate the majors from the minors.
A lot of people don't do well simply because they major in
minor things.

Don't mistake movement for achievement. It's easy to get
faked out by being busy.

The question is: Busy doing what?

Days are expensive. When you spend a day you have one less
day to spend. So make sure you spend each one wisely.

Sometimes you need to stay in touch but be out of reach.

Time is our most valuable asset, yet we tend to waste it,
kill it, and spend it rather than invest it.

We can no more afford to spend major time on minor things
than we can to spend minor time on major things.

Time is more valuable than money. You can get more money,
but you cannot get more time.

Never begin the day until it is finished on paper.

Learn how to say no. Don't let your mouth overload
your back.

Time is the best-kept secret of the rich.

Courage

by Lee Wise

Facing life with a sense of determination and realism that says...

"I know I will face setbacks,

I will allow for them,

I will move through them,

And I will be grateful

for each victory I enjoy!"

"I know I will face setbacks."

That's reality.

"I will allow for them."

That's a realistic expectation from the inside out.

"I will move through them."

Hope awakens courage. He who can implant courage in the
human soul is the best physician.

Karl Ludwig von Knebel (1744-1834)

Make time your ally and time will make you.

Thomas Watson (1874-1956)

Wise Choices

*There are easy choices, and there are
choices that reflect wisdom. Consider
these wise choices that bring happiness
and success...*

Choose to love rather than hate,

Choose to learn rather than loaf,

Choose to smile rather than frown,

Choose to build rather than destroy,

Choose to analyse rather than guess,

Choose to persevere rather than quit,

Choose to praise rather than gossip,

Choose to heal rather than wound,

Choose to give rather than grasp,

Choose to act rather than delay,

Choose to forgive rather than curse,

Choose to pray rather than despair;

Choose to get up rather than give up.

*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
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The Esau s

Many are familiar with the story of Jacob and Isaac recorded in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Jacob and Esau were twins, sons of patriarch Isaac and his wife Rebekah. Esau, the elder son, grew up and became a skilled hunter while the younger Jacob became an indoor man. Each parent had a favourite son: Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Not an ideal family situation for sure.

abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.”²

By trickery and cunning, Jacob stole both Esau’s birthright and blessing.



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.”³

Isaac had only one blessing to give and that went to Jacob. Esau thus lost out and his destiny changed from one of greatness to one of shame—all because he didn’t appreciate or value the birthright and all the blessings and privileges that it carried.

The author of the book of Hebrews describes Esau’s attitude

Stole birthright and blessing

One day, after returning from a hunting trip, Esau was very hungry. He craved for the stew that Jacob had prepared. Esau pleaded with Jacob to give him some stew. Jacob said he would give him some provided Esau sold his birthright to him. But Esau despised it and sold it for the stew. Esau thus lost his birthright and all the privileges that it carried.¹

Later, Isaac was getting old and blind, so he wanted to bless Esau before his death. He summoned Esau to go and hunt game and prepare his favourite dish. Esau set out to fulfil his father’s wish.

Meanwhile Rebekah had overheard the entire conversation between Isaac and Esau. She was not happy with Esau receiving the blessing. Instead, she wanted her favourite son, Jacob, to receive the blessing. So she quickly hatched a plot where Jacob would disguise himself as Esau and steal his blessing. The plot worked and Isaac blessed Jacob: “May God give you of heaven’s dew and of earth’s richness—an



A curse

Esau was very angry with Jacob for stealing both his birthright and blessing. Esau wept and pleaded with his father to bless him also, but to no avail. Instead of a blessing, Esau received a ‘curse’. Isaac ‘blessed’ Esau: “Your dwelling will be away from the earth’s richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow

in this way: “See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the eldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.”⁴

Two attitudes

Esau and Jacob were both wrong in what they did. Their attitudes

yndrome

and actions were ungodly. Esau despised his birthright and sold it for a bowl of stew. He didn't appreciate the inheritance which carried great blessings and privileges. Like many people today, he was only interested in satisfying his immediate physical gratification. Apparently, he never repented of his attitude and action. He only felt sorrowful that he had lost it.

Jacob valued the inheritance and the blessing, but he used a wrong method to get it. He got it by trickery and lying. God corrected him. He had him sent to his father-in-law, Laban, to help him see his own craftiness and deception. Jacob tricked Esau twice, but Laban—a master trickster—cheated Jacob ten times! God humbled Jacob and he learned the lesson. He repented of his attitude and action. God changed his name from Jacob (usurper) to Israel (one who prevailed with God).

Talking about these two attitudes, St. Paul writes, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."⁵ He quoted it from a book in the Old Testament.⁶ God didn't hate Esau, but hated his attitude.

Application

What lessons can we learn from this story?

Esau lived for Now—he didn't care for Tomorrow. What about us? Do we only live for now and not care for tomorrow? In a recent conference on global warming, the world's top scientists warned leaders of nations that unless significant measures are taken to arrest the deteriorating environmental situation, there would be catastrophes of immense proportions that the world has ever seen. These are strong words!

God describes Esau as godless. He wasn't seeking God or the things of God. What about us? Do we spend all our time, energy and resources pursuing the physical things of this world—money, power, fame and pleasure—that

people can see and applaud? Or do we seek the eternal things of God—love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, integrity and holiness—that God values greatly?

Esau was profane and godless. He despised his birthright for a bowl of stew. He failed to appreciate the birthright and the blessings and privileges that it conferred—abundance, prosperity, power and more. He was only interested in satisfying his immediate physical needs. Although Jacob usurped Esau's blessing, he nevertheless valued the birthright with its privileges. He saw the long-term blessings and went for it!

The inheritance and blessing that Isaac passed to Jacob nowhere compares with what God is offering to us now. God is giving us the *right* to become His children even though we don't deserve it. This right carries tremendous blessings and privileges—eternal life with love, joy, peace, power, contentment, fun and more. As His children, He is asking us to inherit the whole universe and become co-heirs with Jesus Christ.⁷

St. John writes, "Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the *right to become children of God*—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."⁸ Again he writes, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*"⁹ Again, he writes, "For 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.* For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."¹⁰

God is inviting us to His glorious kingdom which spans the whole

universe. He is offering us eternal life. He is asking us to seek His kingdom and His righteousness first.¹¹ He is asking us to pursue righteousness and holiness.¹² He is asking us to set our affections on the things above.¹³ He is asking us to crucify our sinful nature.¹⁴ He is asking us to resist the world's corrupt and deceitful lifestyle. St. John admonishes us: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. *The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*"¹⁵

Chapter 18 of the book of Revelation¹⁶ tells us that the world's system—economics, politics, social order and religion—influenced by the Devil will collapse once and for all. In this context, the word Babylon in verse 2: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" refers to the world's system influenced by the Devil.¹⁷ The kingdoms of this world will be replaced by the kingdom of God. St. John records this event thus: "The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever.'"¹⁸ That will be the end of man-made, Satan-influenced civilisation.

God doesn't want any of us to be like Esau who sold his birthright for a bowl of stew. He doesn't want us to exchange our heavenly birthright for the world's proud and deceitful lifestyle. He wants us to 'get real'—to seek the eternal things of God. Those who don't value God's calling will lose out in the end, but those who seek it will be blessed beyond measure. □

¹ Genesis 25:27–34

² Genesis 27: 28–29

³ Genesis 27: 34–40

⁴ Hebrews 12: 16–17

⁵ Romans 9:13

⁶ Malachi 1:2–3

⁷ Romans 8:16–17, 1 Peter 1:4

⁸ John 1:12–13

⁹ John 10:10

¹⁰ John 3:16–18

¹¹ Matthew 6:33

¹² 1 Timothy 6: 11–12

¹³ Colossians 3: 1–2

¹⁴ Matthew 16: 24–25

¹⁵ 1 John 2:15–17

¹⁶ Revelation 18

¹⁷ 1 John 5:19, Revelation 12:9

¹⁸ Revelation 11:15

Has God b

Scripture tells us that God blesses those who look to Him. For example, one verse reads, “Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.”¹

What does the word ‘blessed’ mean to you? If you are like me, you probably think of robust health, family togetherness, prosperity, meaningful work, and other things that make life pleasant. After all, the word ‘bless’ often carries the meaning of being ‘happy’. But when sickness, financial difficulties, family problems or other unhappy stuff comes along we may feel like we are not blessed, and may even wonder if God is punishing us.

Perhaps we need a broader view of what it means to be ‘blessed’. Could it be that God’s view of being blessed is different from ours?

Certainly some of God’s blessings such as radiant health, loving family, and fulfilling jobs do contribute to our happiness. But He also blesses us in ways that far exceed the physical things of life. So what does God mean when He says He “blesses” us?

Not all blessings bring happiness here and now

Let’s consider the lives of some of the people that God said were blessed, starting with Jesus’ own mother, Mary. We can read the words of the angel Gabriel who was sent to tell Mary that she would be the mother of the Lord. “Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.”² A short time later Mary herself said, “My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me...”³ Yet Mary’s life was not all bliss and happiness. It was difficult living in Israel under Roman domination. As a young mother she had to flee to Egypt to save her Son’s life. The responsibility of motherhood was especially heavy upon her with the realisation that her Son was special, the Saviour of the

world. She also bore the taunts and accusations of becoming pregnant before marriage.

Scripture records the words spoken to Mary by the old man Simeon, “...a sword will pierce your own soul, too”⁴, probably referring to the time when she would see her own Son dying in agony. But God said that she was “blessed” and “highly favoured”.

The Apostle Paul considered himself blessed, yet he suffered shipwreck, persecution, beatings, a stoning, health problems, and was finally put in prison and eventually beheaded. Not our usual concept of being blessed!

Would you consider persecution a blessing? Jesus said it was. His famous Sermon on the Mount contains the Beatitudes, or beautiful attitudes that His disciples should strive for. His short and simple beatitudes begin with the phrase “Blessed are...”. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”⁵ “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”⁶ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”⁷ Huh?

These are blessings? To mourn, to be persecuted, insulted, and falsely accused? It doesn’t sound like happy stuff to me. If these are blessings, who needs difficulties? I would rather avoid those difficulties, wouldn’t you?

So we can see that when God blesses someone it may not always be a guarantee of being surrounded by bliss and luxurious abundance.

The real meaning of being blessed

Perhaps a better definition of being blessed is “divine favour”.

Mary received divine favour



by
Paul Hailey

because of all the young ladies in the world God chose her to be the mother of the Lord, and thus to be a vital part in God’s plan of salvation. It is a blessing to be used by God, even in seemingly insignificant ways. He rewards those who let God use them. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.”⁸ Mary, as Jesus’ caring mother will undoubtedly be blessed with a great reward.

Let’s consider Peter, the fisherman who was given the weighty burden of leading the early New Testament church and who eventually was crucified upside down. Was he blessed? Jesus once told him that he was. Let’s see why. Reading from Matthew, “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” He asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”⁹ So here we see that it is a blessing to know that Jesus is the Son of God. When Thomas finally realised who Jesus was, Jesus responded, “...Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”¹⁰ There can be no greater blessing for us today than to understand and accept Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour. That understanding is a priceless gift of God from which flows the way to forgiveness, salvation, and everlasting life.

The word ‘bless’ has a far deeper meaning than being rich in happiness or in the physical aspects of our earthly life. Even

Blessed you?

in some of the harsher-sounding beatitudes Jesus mentioned some profound spiritual blessings. He was looking into the future as well as the present. Those who mourn *will* be comforted. Those who are persecuted *will* receive the kingdom of God, and a heavenly reward.

The Apostle Paul while living a

We have been blessed now and forever

No matter what life has brought you—health or frailty, abundance or poverty, difficulties or happiness—if you know and serve the Lord you are already blessed with forgiveness and assurance of everlasting life. “Blessed are they whose offenses have been forgiven

with us. He is going to give us a new birth to immortality, and instilled with perfect righteousness. (That’s something to look forward to—I wish I had perfect character *now*, but I guess I’ll have to wait and maybe learn a little patience.)

Some day the returning King will say to you “Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your



life of persecution and hardship wrote this, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”¹¹ If we know our Saviour, we have already been highly blessed.

Peter too, recognised the enormous blessings that God has already given us. “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness.”¹²

- ¹ Psalm 2:12
- ² Luke 1:28
- ³ Luke 1:46–48
- ⁴ Luke 2:35
- ⁵ Matthew 5:4
- ⁶ Matthew 5:10
- ⁷ Matthew 5:11,12
- ⁸ Mark 9:41
- ⁹ Matthew 16:13–17
- ¹⁰ John 20:29
- ¹¹ Ephesians 1:3
- ¹² 2 Peter 1:3
- ¹³ Romans 4:7–8
- ¹⁴ Hebrews 12:11
- ¹⁵ Matthew 25:34
- ¹⁶ Romans 8:18

and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”¹³ Forgiveness is a blessing that brings assurance, peace and joy here and now.

Even in our difficulties we can take comfort because we know that God is working with us and that a better life is coming. “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however; it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”¹⁴

Let’s be assured that the fullness of God’s blessings will come later. Jesus is going to share eternity

inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”¹⁵

The Apostle Paul put it all in perspective. “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”¹⁶

May God bless you. That is, may He bestow His divine favour on you, and I hope that includes health and happiness, but if it doesn’t, remember that if you know who Jesus is and are serving Him, God has already given you the greatest blessing of all—His personal guarantee of everlasting life. □

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