

THE Plain Truth

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Feb-Mar 2009



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PP 12578/03/2009 (020603)

Riding the global financial crisis

Suddenly, the world is plunged into an unprecedented financial crisis plaguing financial institutions around the world. The US government has pumped in some USD 700 billion to rescue her beleaguered financial institutions. Other countries like Britain and Japan have also taken similar measures to restore confidence in their financial institutions.

Stock prices have plummeted making investors jittery. They are not sure if they can recover their investments, let alone earn dividends. Many are angry at the fund managers who promised much but delivered little. They are asking: “Who can we trust?”

The Bible predicts that one day a collapse of our economic and financial systems will rip the hearts out of investors. Their dreams to secure financial security for their loved ones will be dashed.¹ But that’s probably another crisis yet to happen in the future.

In a crisis like this, however, everyone suffers, not just the investors. The real value of money drops and everyone loses. There is no absolute guarantee that our investments will be secure. So what can we do to shield against these uncertainties?

The cause

The root cause of the financial problems is greed. We want more, so we work to acquire more. Then we compare what we have with others and convince ourselves that we need yet more. So we strive harder to acquire more and end up in an endless chase for money, for things. This becomes our consuming passion, our dream and our idol. And when enough people join this idol worship we eventually run into crisis. Then we wonder what has gone wrong.

The fundamental problem is that we are living our lives outside of God’s intended purpose for us. We are created to participate in God’s abundant life—as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit experience. That is the sole purpose why we exist. Failure to seek this God-ordained goal will result in unfulfilled lives. Worse, it can take us to activities that produce negative effects like anxiety, fear, confusion and misery. Financial worry is just another of these negative emotions.

Long ago, God through Prophet Haggai advised Ancient Israel to join Him in His spiritual work.² But they refused. Instead, they pursued their own selfish goals, and reaped confusion. It’s a timeless lesson. If we don’t pursue God’s intended purpose for us, we too will end up in misery. Jesus told a parable where a

rich man made a windfall but he was selfish and was not willing to share his money with the poor and the needy. He put his trust in his money, but Jesus told him that that very night he would lose his life.³

St. Paul likewise advised his audience not to put their trust in money. He warned them that money could get them into trouble if they don’t seek God’s will in their lives.⁴

The antidote

So what can we do to shield ourselves from all these financial woes? Simply by living out God’s purpose for us—to participate in His abundant life.

While we need money and financial institutions, we are not to put too much trust in them because ultimately they will disappoint us, just as it is happening now. For a Christian, money can never be our security: God is.

Jesus advises us to store our wealth in heaven where it is safe from all the vagaries of this life. To do so also has a positive side effect—it causes us to focus on the eternal things of God rather than on the cares of this life. He tells us “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁵ That’s timeless advice that can help us to ride out the current and future financial crises.

St. Paul advises us: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”⁶

All our monies (and indeed our lives) belong to God and He wants us to be good stewards. Seeking God’s purpose for us, participating in His life, produces abundant life. He assures us that He will never leave nor forsake us.⁷

God asks us to invest in rock-solid, blue-chip stocks from Heaven Unlimited, and He promises to bless us with overflowing returns—love, joy, peace, friendship, excitement and more. God is *self-giving*. In and through Jesus He has given us literally *everything*. He has given us *Himself* and *all* that He has. There is nothing more to give. He is our true treasure and security. Put His goals first and He will see that we will weather the financial storms we face.⁸ □



¹ Revelation 18: 9–20

² Haggai 1:2–11, Malachi 3:8–12

³ Luke 12:16–21

⁴ 1 Timothy 6: 9–10

⁵ Matthew 6:19–21

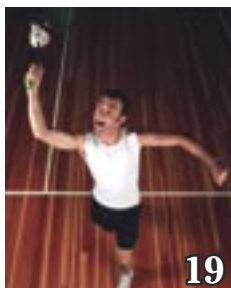
⁶ 1 Timothy 6: 17–19

⁷ Hebrews 13:5

⁸ Matthew 6:33

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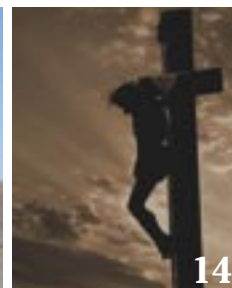
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What our readers say:

THE PLAIN TRUTH changes my way of thinking and enhances my faith in God. May God's showers of blessing be with you faithful servants of God throughout the years ahead. Thank you all.

Francis Tan
Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles are full of spiritual inspiration for those who wish to know God. The articles are printed in quite large prints easy for people who have reading problems. It helps to improve my knowledge and understanding of Christianity.

Ng Fook Seng
Singapore

The truth is I read every single line of endearment, encouragement, hope, understanding and goodwill to all mankind. I appreciate the dedication of your entire hardworking team. Since I got a stroke some years back, my mobility is not what I used to be. However THE PLAIN TRUTH is there to guide me.

Lee Yit Kong
Ipoh

As a lay reader in my church, I have used this magazine for reference.

John D Santhosham
Ipoh

Even though the articles are about spiritual matters yet most of them are down to earth and show us the plain truth. I personally would like to see more articles on family, human trafficking in Asia, and in particular drug abuse in Malaysia. Perhaps, even political abuse.

Gerard Chung
Kota Kinabalu

THE PLAIN TRUTH is really interesting and meaningful. I appreciate your sacrificial ministry in publishing this great magazine. The magazine helps me a lot in overcoming this illusive world.

Salai Lau Jyan Shan
Bukit Mertajam

THE PLAIN TRUTH is informative, relevant and thought-provoking. It provides encouragement, enlightenment, faith, hope and love from God to alleviate human mental suffering due to greed, hatred and illusion.

Francis Goh Beng Sai
Kuching

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me understand the problems and happenings in this world with the word of God as the basic approach to understand everything in this world.

T P Cherian
K Terengganu



THE PLAIN TRUTH is rich and inspiring for everyone who reads the magazine.

William Siew Wei Leong
Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles written are very inspiring for me and motivate me to be more Christ-like and compassionate. I would like to thank all the writers and THE PLAIN TRUTH staff for being so generous in giving us the free magazine.

Theresa Tay
Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me to be more knowledgeable about many different topics. It is a wonderful magazine. It gives me invaluable message and food for thought, especially the Hmm section.

N Muthusamy s/o K P Nalliah
Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH really motivates and enlightens my spirit whenever I am feeling down.

Daisy Francis Kim Sung
Kota Belud

For the past 2 years, THE PLAIN TRUTH has helped me through my daily walk with God. I read through the bible verses taken from the magazine itself before reading THE PLAIN TRUTH. It's really an encouraging magazine. I run a resort with my family. We give our old issues of your magazine to guests who frequent our resort. I have also forwarded your free subscription offer card to some of my guest and friends as well. I believe God has a plan for each and every one of us. There is no such thing as a coincidence. God is in control of our lives. Nothing happens by accident, everything occurs for a purpose.

Jennifer J M Periera
Port Dickson

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.

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or sent via electronic mail to: ptasia@myjaring.net

The editor reserves the right to use letters so addressed in whole or in part, and to include your name and edit the letter for clarity and space.

Sinners in the arms of a loving God

What is hell, is anyone going there, and if so, why?
“The world will probably be converted into... a vast ocean of fire, in which the wicked shall be overwhelmed... their heads, their eyes, their tongues, their hands, their feet, their loins, and their vitals, shall forever be full of glowing, melting fire... they shall eternally... feel the torments... without any end at all, and never, never be delivered.”^a

This scary description of an ever-burning hell comes from the pen of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the most influential Christian theologian of Colonial America and one of its most powerful preachers. Edwards’ sermons, such as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, taught that the unrepentant and spiritually lax would end up in an ever-burning hell-fire. One can understand why people listening to Edwards and other preachers with a similar message might, as some did, wail and shriek in horror, writhe in fearful hysteria and even go insane.

This brand of hell-fire preaching has been a long-standing and common strain woven into the fabric of the Church throughout much of its history until recent times. However, you probably won’t hear a hell-fire and brimstone sermon in church today.

Hell—to preach or not to preach?

A growing chorus of evangelical scholars—including F. F. Bruce (1910–1990), Michael Green, John Stott, John W. Wenham, to name a few—have voiced opposition to the traditional view of hell. Clark Pinnock, a Canadian theologian and biblical scholar, didn’t mince words in the book *Four Views on Hell*. He wrote: “Everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for His enemies whom He does not even allow to die.”^b

Although Pinnock has drawn fire from some of his more conservative colleagues, his view of hell-fire preaching is shared by many Christian teachers and scholars, even if they don’t state their objections in such stark terms. They, like Pinnock and a growing number of others, “consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine” and a “theological and moral enormity”.^c Moral enormity might be an understatement when we consider the fact that some who teach an ever-burning hell also teach that God has arbitrarily chosen only a tiny minority of people for a heavenly life and has automatically, from eternity, consigned everyone else to a fearful destiny in hell forever.

Not every Christian teacher and theologian agrees that the idea of an ever-burning hell as torture chamber is a ghastly teaching. Some insist that we need more preaching about hell. Theologian Larry Dixon, writing some years ago in *Moody* magazine, decried the lack of hell-fire preaching. “When was the last time you

by
Paul Kroll

heard a sermon on hell?” he asked. “In your witness for Christ, have you recently warned anyone about eternal judgment?”^d Theologians Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson say we must “proclaim the whole counsel of God—yes, including hell—to Christians and non-Christians alike.”^e

Dixon believes, as some Christian teachers do today and have throughout the Church’s history, that people need a fear prod to get them to commit to Christ. He insists, “Self-sufficient North Americans will never really listen to the gospel if we don’t at some point warn them about judgment.” His view is, “If all we speak of is love and affirmation, comfortable pagans will politely listen for a while, say they were happy for us, and go on their way.” He concludes by saying, “Unless they fear His wrath, many won’t seek His love.”^f

This approach seems to assume that Americans don’t already believe deep down in their psyche that some kind of “hell” exists. It appears to be a wrong assumption. In virtually every poll taken in recent years, a majority of Americans say they do believe in a real hell. According to a mid-2007 Gallup poll, 69 percent of respondents said they believed in hell. In some polls, the percentage of people expressing their belief in hell has been even higher.^g

Yet, if they haven’t heard about hell in church, where does a person’s belief about hell come from? Ultimately, from the Bible, since the Bible is the primary source of information about hell. The problem is that a lot of misinformation has been mixed in with the biblical teaching about hell. God has been all-too-often pictured as an angry Judge, ready to toss people into the torments of hell with minimal provocation.

But that is a decidedly unbiblical view both of God and hell. The New Testament testifies that God has no intention of condemning people to “hell” out-of-hand. His goal is to *save* us from our sins and *heal* our spiritual brokenness.

Gaining perspective on hell

When you read the New Testament, you find that hell is a decidedly minor motif. One can literally count the passages that directly speak of hell on one’s fingers and toes. Yet, it is true that every New Testament author has something to say indirectly about hell by speaking of a future self-judgment on anyone who willfully rejects God’s loving grace and the good life God has purposed from eternity to give to His human children.

Here’s a passage from Matthew 25:41—from the lips of Jesus—about anyone who remains faithless: “Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” In Mark 9:43, He spoke about those who might “go into hell, where the fire never goes out.” The book of Hebrews speaks of “a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”¹

Hell, then, is serious business, so we don’t want to

discount it, because the witness of Scripture does not do this. We must seriously think about the fact that some kind of hell does exist, whatever its nature might be, if we believe the testimony of the Bible. The question remains: What kind of a hell does the Bible really teach and who actually ends up there?

Many Christians have a legalistic view of God's relationship with humanity. They see God as a condemning Judge, who is angry with the world and throws "bad people" into the flames of hell for all eternity. He carries only "good people" with Him into

themes, writes, "The old baloney about heaven being for good guys and hell for bad guys is dead wrong. Heaven is populated entirely by forgiven sinners... and hell is populated entirely by forgiven sinners. The only difference between the two groups is that those in heaven accept the forgiveness and those in hell reject it."^h

Capon's words resonate with Scripture. In Christ, God reconciled humanity to Himself even while people were still His enemies and in spiritual darkness. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us," is the way the



an eternal heavenly bliss.

God is for us, not against us

The witness of Scripture gives us an entirely different picture. It tells us that the Triune God has opened the door of His accepting love for *everyone*. God, who is love,² is so devoted to *saving* humanity from the destruction of sin that He took the human condition on Himself. He entered His creation as a human being in the Person of His Son.

Jesus, God in the flesh, took on our fallen human nature and remade it in His perfect and righteous image, forgiving and destroying human sinfulness. In Christ, says Paul, we are enabled "to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness," which means we are His own work, created in Christ in His image.³ It's all God's doing for us and in us through Christ and by the Spirit.

Robert Farrar Capon, retired Episcopal parish priest and author of many books on important Christian

apostle Paul puts it.⁴ Paul again says that even when people hated God in their hearts and were totally ignorant of His eternal promise for all humanity, they "were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son."⁵

Paul insists this gift of God's grace and love is universal—meant for *everyone!* "God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them"⁶ is the way Paul expresses God's merciful love for us. In fact, *everything* in heaven and earth has been reconciled to Him in Christ, Paul says.⁷

What does this have to do with hell? If we're going to talk about how anyone could end up in hell, alienated from God, we have to first understand that this is totally contrary to what God wants for everyone. That's why He has already acted to save everyone. *No one* need ever go to hell, except by their own recalcitrant choice.

Who's in hell and why?

"Whatever we say about hell must be said under the

rubric of a universal and effective reconciliation of all things in Christ,” says Capon. “If we choose to explain *how hell can be*, we must somehow say that Jesus accepts our choosing of it *without willing us into it* in any deterministic way.”ⁱ God wants everyone to be saved, to experience forever the joy of fellowship with Him. But love is not love if it is forced. God will, in the end, let us have what we really want. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘Thy will be done.’ ”^j

gloriously good news that God our Saviour “wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth,”⁸ and “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”⁹

Hell is a dismal, tragic, gloomy and unnecessary disaster. It is in total contradiction to everything God wants for us. A Christian pastor once summarised what it means to be with God as opposed to choosing to be without God in hell. He said simply, “Heaven—goood. Hell—baaad.” Amen to that! ☐



When understood theologically, hell is not a jail or a place into which God tosses people He hates. Hell is a state of denial of who God is and who God created us to be—reconciled in Christ, in eternal relationship with Him, sharing His life. Hell is refusing to accept the love of God, preferring instead the selfish world of our own making.

Those in hell are there because they want no fellowship with the God who made them and loves them. Those in heaven are there because they throw in their lot with Christ, accept Him as Saviour, follow Him as Lord, and trust in His loving and free grace. Lewis wrote, “No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.”^k

People in hell are there *in spite of* God’s will for them, not because of it. They have what *they* want, not what God wants for them.

God condemns no one to hell by predetermined decree. The testimony of Scripture gives us the

- ¹ Hebrews 10:27
- ² 1 John 4:8
- ³ Ephesians 4:24
- ⁴ Romans 5:8
- ⁵ Romans 5:10
- ⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:19
- ⁷ Colossians 1:19–20
- ⁸ 1 Timothy 2:4
- ⁹ 2 Peter 3:9

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- ^g Gallup Poll conducted May 10–13, 2007.
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- ^k *Ibid.*

Jesus came to save, not condemn

Another article about John 3:16, the most quoted and well-known verse in Christendom? Almost—but not quite.

John 3:16 states very plainly that God sent His own Son into the human arena, and that all who believe what He says will not die but live for eternity.

It's an excellent reference for the converted or anyone professing to be a Christian. But what does it say to those who are not so well-versed in the writings of the Holy Bible? What does it tell us about God's plan of salvation for all humankind? In fact what does it tell us about God Himself?

A common viewpoint of Christianity from believers

by
Phil Gale

not come to condemn! His desire was to see all people saved.

I think the problem quoting John 3:16 by itself is that it is incomplete even though the majority of professing Christians believe the verse serves an important purpose. A more complete scripture reference, if one wants to quote one passage, is John 3:16–17, and there are some very important reasons why.

If I were to ask you to state in one short sentence the basic gospel message that the world needs to hear, what would you say? One short sentence is all you have to tell a non-believer the purpose behind Jesus Christ, and how it fits into God's eternal plan.



and non-believers is that there is a heaven and a hell. If we live a good life, we go to heaven. On the other hand, if our deeds are not so good, we risk going to hell, purgatory, eternal damnation.

But John 3:16 says “God so loved the world”. If God loves the world so much, why would He prepare a place of eternal suffering? Not much room for grace or mercy there—in fact it shows a God who believes in eternal punishment for those of us who have been “naughty”. The two principles of Godly love and eternal punishment seem to be incongruent.

But John 3:17 comes to the rescue, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” Christ did

“Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world.”

That sentence tells us the deep, profound truth about who Christ is and the mission He came to fulfil on earth, and John 3:17 gives us that same message that Jesus was more concerned with saving people, not in condemning them. For example, He saved the woman caught in adultery, He saved Nicodemus, and did not condemn him, and He saved the thief on the cross who was crucified alongside Him.

For me, the world around us needs to hear more about the God of love who demonstrated edification and encouragement wherever He went; He only did good deeds. He didn't punish anyone, He didn't hurt anyone, He didn't kill anyone, and the only people who

received a lashing from His tongue were the money-changers, who had turned His Father's house into a commercial business area, and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy.

He cried over Jerusalem, because like a mother hen who seeks to pull her chicks under her wing and protect them, Christ came to His nation Israel—the one and only Jewish nation. But, for the most part, they rejected Him, their own Creator and Benefactor. If it weren't for Him, there wouldn't be a nation of Israel.

Jesus cried when Lazarus died, and resurrected him from the dead. He fed 4,000 hungry mouths and performed the feat a second time with 5,000 people. He dared to touch a leper and healed him, when no other person wanted to come within miles of the disease.

He healed a blind man on the Sabbath which incurred the wrath of the priests, and after the poor man had been thrust out of the synagogue, Jesus went and found him to offer comfort and support.

How many examples do we need before we see a pattern emerging? The miracles recorded in the gospels are not the sum total of all the works Jesus performed—far from it. But the Man of God, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God in the flesh, demonstrated love,

mercy, patience, kindness and joy. Does that sound like a God who is bent only on condemnation and eternal punishment? Or a God who has the desire for most to succeed in a relationship with Him?

God did not send His Son into the world to condemn, but to save.¹

John 3:16 and 17 complement each other, and each one by itself is incomplete.

Matthew 28:18–20 contains Christ's instructions to us to go into the world and represent God. How well are we doing that? By warning people that God is going to seek vengeance through eternal suffering? Or by citing examples from the gospels of how Christ healed the sick, fed the hungry, forgave sinners and suffered a brutal, excruciatingly painful death, in order that you and I might be saved?

The key message from Christianity to a troubled world needs to be one of love and mercy, "Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world."

Taken together, John 3:16 and 17 help to proclaim that message. □

I am Pilate's wife

Matthew 27:11–66

I woke up suddenly, startled and shaken. I stared at the ceiling, momentarily relieved, thinking my nightmare about Jesus was only a dream. But angry voices coming through the windows of our residence brought me back to reality. And my heart sank. I had been deeply disturbed by the news of Jesus' arrest as I retired for the evening. I didn't know why he had been taken and accused of crimes that could cost his life. He had helped so many in need.

From my window, I could see the judgment seat where my husband Pilate, the Roman governor, conducted public hearings. I heard him shout: "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus, who is called Christ?" And I knew this could only mean that events throughout the night had not gone well for Jesus. Pilate may have naively thought the hostile crowd would free him. But the mob had been enraged by wild accusations from the jealous chief priests and elders, so they screamed for Jesus to be crucified. Some of these were the same people who only weeks before had followed him everywhere receiving healing and hope.

Jesus stood there so alone, despised and rejected. He was not a criminal. I knew that, and my husband knew that, but things were out of control. Someone had to intervene. So I grabbed a servant by the arm and told him to go tell Pilate not to have anything to do with those proceedings, and that I had suffered greatly

by
**Joyce
Catherwood**

because of a dream about Jesus. But it was too late. My husband gave into their demands. In a cowardly attempt to rid himself of any responsibility, he washed his hands in front of the crowd, declaring he was innocent of Jesus' blood. I moved from the window and slumped to the floor, weeping. My soul ached for this compassionate, humble man who traveled everywhere healing and delivering the oppressed.

As Jesus hung on the cross, the brilliant afternoon sun gave way to an ominous darkness. Then as Jesus gasped his last breath, the earth shook, splitting rocks and leveling structures. Tombs broke open, releasing dead people who came back to life. All of Jerusalem had been brought to its knees. But not for long. These terrifying events weren't enough to stop the brazen Jewish leaders. They scrambled through the rubble to Pilate and foolishly conspired with him to secure Jesus' grave so his disciples could not steal his body and claim he rose from the dead.

Three days have now passed and Jesus' followers are indeed proclaiming he is alive! They insist they have seen him! Those who came back from their graves now walk the streets of Jerusalem. I am overjoyed! I dare not tell my husband, but I will not rest until I learn more about this amazing man who defied death and promises eternal life. □

A gift hard

Many receive gifts on special occasions such as birthdays, weddings and religious festivals. Some receive gifts (awards) for jobs done well, for example students excelling in their studies, employees contributing significantly to their companies' growth, volunteers spending time and energy unselfishly caring for the needy. Depending on the giver, the gifts can be simple and inexpensive such as certificates or souvenirs or expensive like diamond rings.

God also gives us gifts. He gives us air, rain and sunshine, and flora and fauna for us to live, use and enjoy. He gives us minds to explore and discover or invent things. He gives us families, friends and communities for us to enjoy. To cap it all, He gives us the most precious gift of all—His one and only Son Jesus Christ.¹ There is no gift that can ever match this. Why is it so?

Raises our status and invites us to a relationship

Receiving Jesus Christ into our lives instantly changes our status from mere nobodies to people of great worth. We are raised to the status "children of God."² This applies to all people irrespective of race, colour, age, gender, language, financial or social status. It even includes those who have messed up their lives (who haven't?) such as murderers, thieves, sex offenders and drug abusers.

Receiving Jesus puts us into a relationship with God where we call God our "Abba, Father"³, Jesus Christ as our Elder Brother and Friend⁴ and Holy Spirit as our Comforter and Counsellor.⁵ The status gives us respect, recognition and worth. It should cause us to see God in a totally different perspective—as a God of immense love and goodness.

We cannot enter into any deep, meaningful relationship with physical gifts or objects. But



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

through Jesus we can enter into an intimate, personal relationship with God.⁶ We can pray to God and receive answers. We can share with Him our joys and happiness as well as our trials and sorrows. Only Jesus understands all our weaknesses, temptations and struggles because He has experienced that Himself.⁷ He totally surrendered to God and secured victory for us.⁸

Forgives, reconciles and satisfies our deepest needs

When we receive Jesus as our personal Saviour, God forgives all our sins and reconciles us to Himself.

We are set free, so we don't have to carry the heavy

burden that sin brings⁹—shame, guilt, failure, worry and hopelessness. More than that, Jesus' righteousness is imputed to us so we appear holy before God.¹⁰ This puts us in right standing with God¹¹ and we can freely commune with Him.

Physical gifts can only give us temporary pleasures. They cannot satisfy our deepest human needs such as comfort, contentment, security and friendship. But when we receive Jesus, God gives us His Holy Spirit, who produces spiritual fruits like love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faith and hope. Unlike money and things, these fruits of the Holy Spirit satisfy our deepest spiritual needs.

Giver and Gift is God

In the case of physical gifts, the giver is a person and the gift is an object. But in

the case of God's gift, both the Giver and Gift¹² is God Himself. God the Father is the Giver and God the Son is the Gift. The Gift comes from heaven, not from some man-made production line. That should move us to appreciate God's immense love for us.

Unworthy recipients

We receive physical gifts in recognition of our status, good behaviour or performance. But God gives us



to refuse

gifts not because we are worthy but because of His own kindness, goodness and mercy.¹³ That reflects God's unconditional love for us. He loved us first before we started to love Him.¹⁴ That should move us to reciprocate His love.

Unfading, unique and costly

Physical gifts have a temporary shelf life—they fade with time. But Jesus is eternal—He doesn't fade with time. His power and strength remains undiminished with time because He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.¹⁵

God's gift is unique—Jesus is God's one and only

“The gifts we receive from people usually don't cost that much. But God's gift is very costly. God sacrificed His one and only Son to make this gift possible.”

Son.¹⁶ He has no other son to give. God gives us Jesus so that we might receive forgiveness and eternal life from God. There is no other way by which we human beings can be saved. Jesus is the one and only way to salvation.¹⁷

The gifts we receive from people usually don't cost that much. But God's gift is very costly. God sacrificed His one and only Son to make this gift possible. Jesus emptied Himself of His divine rights and privileges and took the form of a human being. He came as a servant to save us. He shed His blood and died for us so we can have salvation.

To have, to share and to inherit

When we pass physical gifts to others, they are gone forever unless they are returned to us. But when we share Jesus with others, we don't lose Him. The sharing also doesn't diminish His strength, power and wisdom. His full power and strength is available to all who believe.

When we receive Jesus, we not only receive eternal life but also inherit everything that God owns¹⁸ which includes the vast universe. We become co-heirs with Jesus. The scripture tells us that the whole creation is eagerly waiting for the sons of God—us—to be born into His kingdom.¹⁹

Transforms and gives eternal life

Physical gifts have no power to transform our hearts and minds or our attitudes and behaviour. But Jesus promises to give us power that can transform us to become better human beings.²⁰ God's Spirit will motivate us to share, forgive and reconcile. The Spirit will help us to be kind, gentle and patient. Even hardcore criminals, drug abusers, cheats and prostitutes can change. The Spirit can empower us²¹ to bear good fruits of love, joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, goodness, self-control and faithfulness.²² In short, God can transform us to become more and more like Jesus (albeit little by little).

Physical gifts cannot give us eternal or abundant life. But when we accept Jesus we receive them.²³ They are available now. At death, He raises us to immortal life free from pain, suffering, tears, sorrow and death.²⁴

Personal and universal

God's gift is personal²⁵ as well as universal.²⁶ Each of us must receive Jesus personally. We must confess our sins and accept Him as our *personal* Saviour and invite Him into our lives. Others cannot substitute for us. Jesus is also available to *everyone*, not just to a select or privileged group of people. But each person must receive Him personally.

Recap

God is very gracious and generous. He gives us physical blessings such as food and clothing as well as family and friends to enjoy. He also gives us spiritual blessings like forgiveness, reconciliation and adoption as His children so that we can enter into an intimate spiritual relationship with Him. Physical blessings are temporal whereas spiritual blessings are eternal.²⁷ While physical blessings are important, spiritual blessings are far more important. They give us lasting peace, joy, happiness, friendship and fun. God's gift in the Person of Jesus Christ gives us both physical and spiritual blessings. Why not go for it? Surely you don't want to miss such a precious and wonderful gift! □

- ¹ John 3:16
- ² John 1:12–13
- ³ Romans 8:14–16
- ⁴ John 5:15
- ⁵ John 14:25–26
- ⁶ 1 John 3:2, Romans 8:16
- ⁷ Hebrews 2:18
- ⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:57
- ⁹ Romans 6:12–23
- ¹⁰ Philippians 3:7
- ¹¹ Romans 3:21–22
- ¹² John 1:1
- ¹³ Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:1–5, Titus 2:11–15
- ¹⁴ 1 John 4:19
- ¹⁵ Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8
- ¹⁶ John 3:16
- ¹⁷ Acts 4:12
- ¹⁸ Romans 8:17
- ¹⁹ Romans 8:23
- ²⁰ Ezekiel 36:26, Hebrews 8:10
- ²¹ Romans 1:16
- ²² Galatians 5:22–23
- ²³ John 10:10
- ²⁴ Revelation 21:3–4
- ²⁵ Acts 3:19–20
- ²⁶ 2 Peter 3:9
- ²⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:18

Who's afraid of the

Imagine a courtroom scene. It's you who are convicted, facing charges. Problem is, you know you are guilty. But as you walk in, you notice the judge gives you a reassuring nod of recognition, as if he had known you all your life.

He summons you to the bench. "Don't worry about a thing," he tells you with a warm fatherly smile. "I know all about this case. In fact, I'm going to be your defence attorney." The late theologian Shirley C. Guthrie would

by
Neil Earle

compassion and kindness to shape their understanding of God, many Christians gravitate toward what we might call a "forensic" model of salvation. The word "forensic" seems like a penal or legal term, which it is. This forensic model sees God the Father as stern and vengeful, a frightening God from whom we need Jesus to save us. It assumes that the starting place for understanding God is not Jesus Christ, but "the law", by which is meant the Old Testament legal system.



explain that this is the way we should picture what the Bible calls the Judgment. "Must we talk about the wrath of God?" Guthrie asked. "Yes," he answers. "But God's wrath is not like that of the gods. It is the wrath of the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self."^a

Theological strait-jackets

Unfortunately, instead of allowing Jesus' love,

This model sees the law as so important that even God is subject to it. Since God is concerned first about the penalty demands of His law and only secondly about the well-being of humans, He will punish them for lawbreaking in the same way that the State and human courts and legal systems do—through a straightforward proving of guilt followed by a guilty verdict.

Front and center in the forensic model is God's anger against sinning humanity. God is offended, and

schizophrenic God?

someone must pay. Jesus steps forward and takes the full force of God's wrath against human sin. That means we have had our penalty paid for us, but it does nothing for a restored relationship of love and trust. This "offended deity" picture forgets that first and foremost, God is love,¹ that God is joyously working to bring "many sons to glory," and that our salvation was in His mind "before the foundation of the world."²

This forensic model also forgets something even more basic—that Jesus Christ and the Father along with the Holy Spirit are the three Persons of the one God, and that the Son or Word made Incarnate in Jesus was the perfect revelation of the Father in human form. The Father is not some angry, vengeful deity that we need protection from; He is just like Jesus. Jesus, remember, is "the exact representation" of the being of God.³ The Father is full of compassion and mercy, a God who "desires mercy and not sacrifice," just like Jesus. Jesus is the starting place for understanding God; the law is not.

God is not schizophrenic. He does not have a split personality. There is not one "good God", Jesus, and one "bad God", the Father. There is one God—Father, Son and Spirit—who loves us unconditionally and has in Jesus made full provision not only for our sins to be forgiven and removed, but also for our full inclusion in the love relationship that the Son has shared with the Father from eternity.

Adoption

God is not in the business of training obedient valets, but in building a family. The apostle Paul used the word "adoption" in describing the kind of relationship that God has created for humanity in Jesus Christ.⁴ Through the Incarnation of the Son—by Jesus becoming one of us and taking up our cause as His own—God has drawn us into and made us part of the intimate relationship that Jesus has with the Father.

We see the power of this intimate love that God has for humanity in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The repentant son is welcomed home by the Father and restored to full rights of sonship.⁵ This depicts the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.⁶ The death of Christ was not a vindictive act of divine child abuse, as some hostile critics of Christianity have charged. It was a divine rescue springing from God's love for us,⁷ an intervention designed to restore a purpose of which we were oblivious in our ignorance

and darkness.⁸

Set against this majestic purpose, God's wrath can be seen for what it is—His anger—not at the humanity He sent Jesus to save, but at sin, that which destroys the relationship He has always intended for us in Christ. God is not some resentful, selfish parent in an emotional stew because we have not played by His rules. God is Father, Son and Spirit, loving, faithful and unconditionally committed to bringing humanity into the joy of knowing Him for who He really is.

Mercy vs. judgment

God, however, will never be at peace with sin. The great human tragedy is that we have been totally unaware of the pardon and reconciliation the Father has brought about through Jesus Christ. We have loved darkness rather than light and have chosen to ignore what the Father offers us through the Son.

Through Christ, the disconnect between the world and God has been removed once and for all. The great majority of unbelievers are simply those who through weakness or ignorance are resisting the influence of the life-giving Holy Spirit of Christ, the Person of the Godhead who beckons to us to abandon our addiction to darkness and sin—who testifies in our hearts to God's saving, atoning and reconciling work in Jesus on our behalf.⁹

Jesus did not just *bring* good news, He *was* good news. The overwhelming

emphasis of His teaching was mercy, not vengeance. His hallmark sayings reflect the God who is love, in whose mind mercy rejoices against judgment.¹⁰ Thus, what was hinted at in parts of the Old Testament becomes the major theme in the Gospels—"I will have mercy and not sacrifice." Jesus' word pictures show us a forgiving father, a Good Samaritan, seeking shepherds and splendidly generous employers, healings, exorcisms, a Great Physician who pleaded "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."¹¹ □

"God is not schizophrenic. He does not have a split personality. There is not one "good God", Jesus, and one "bad God", the Father."

¹ 1 John 4:16

² Revelation 13:8

³ Hebrews 1:3

⁴ Ephesians 1:4–5

⁵ Luke 15:11–24

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:19

⁷ John 3:16

⁸ John 3:19–20

⁹ John 14:25–27; 15:26

¹⁰ James 2:13

¹¹ Matthew 11:28

Reference

^a Guthrie, Shirley C. (1994) *Christian Doctrine*, Westminster John Knox Press, p.261–262.

Did the Jew

Part of the controversy surrounding the movie *The Passion of the Christ* is whether the film is anti-Semitic. Does it blame the Jews for the death of Jesus? Here's a related question: Whether or not the film blames the Jews, are they to blame?

I can understand why Jews might be concerned about it. Christians have often persecuted Jews for being Christ-killers. This goes far beyond name-calling it has included economic penalties, violence and even murder, in the name of taking revenge for the death of Jesus.

Many Jews were killed in the Crusades, and much more recently, millions were killed in 20th century Europe and the Nazis were not the only ones who persecuted Jews. The Nazis can hardly be called Christian, but the attitude that fuelled their hatred was nurtured by centuries of anti-Jewish teaching in the European churches.

Many Christians have been troubled by the Jews' persistent rejection of the Christian message. Historically, perhaps due to some insecurity in their own beliefs, some have wanted to use force to achieve social conformity. Some people apparently felt that the easiest way to get rid of the problem was to kill the Jews, especially those who refused to accept Christianity (but sometimes even Christian Jews were persecuted).

I am ashamed of what some people have done, supposedly in the name of Christ. But I do not want to let my shame distort my view of what actually happened. So let's talk about it: Is Mel Gibson's movie anti-Semitic, did the Jews kill Jesus, and what attitude should Christians have toward the Jewish people?

Comments on the movie

I was privileged to see an early screening of the movie, when Mission America invited numerous denominational leaders to view a preliminary version in December. So I was able to have my own impression as I saw the controversy aired in the news media. The controversy has certainly given the film a huge amount of free publicity, and this may cause some non-Christians to see it, although the majority of the viewers seem to be committed Christians already.

Mel Gibson met with the Mission America group to answer questions, and he commented on the accusations of anti-Semitism, saying in effect that the problem that people have with the film is not really with the film it is with the Gospels, for the film simply portrays what the Gospels report (there is little controversy about the non-biblical parts that Gibson added to the film, such as the story line for Mary Magdalene, Pilate's wife and Simon of Cyrene).

I must agree with Gibson on that point the film did not create a problem, but simply portrayed (in a visually stunning and memorable way) the story contained in the Gospels. Because of Gibson's



by
Joseph Tkach

theology, it dwells on the scourging longer than the Gospels do, but what it portrays was historically probable. (Catholics tend to focus more on the suffering and crucifixion, and Protestants more on the resurrection, but both are included in the story.)

If anything, I think that the film, as compared to the Gospel accounts, decreased the role of the Jews. Whereas the Gospels repeatedly refer to the Jews, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, etc., the film deleted most of those references as unnecessary. (In the recent film on *The Gospel of John*, these repeated references were retained, since that film was committed to including all the NIV text.)

In Gibson's film, the group of people who arrested Jesus, who interrogated Him and asked Pilate to crucify Him, are barely identified as Jews. (The only person explicitly called a Jew is Simon of Cyrene.) If a person did not know the story already, he or she might even wonder who those people in the elaborate costumes were. The blame must also fall on Pilate, who as governor had the responsibility to prevent such miscarriages of justice but did not have the courage to do so.

Gibson even removed from his film the line from Matthew 27:25, where the crowd of Jewish people said, Let His blood be on us and on our children! This verse in particular has been used numerous times to justify anti-Semitism, so Gibson was willing to remove its English subtitle (it was retained in Aramaic), since it was not necessary for the story line.

What do the Gospels portray?

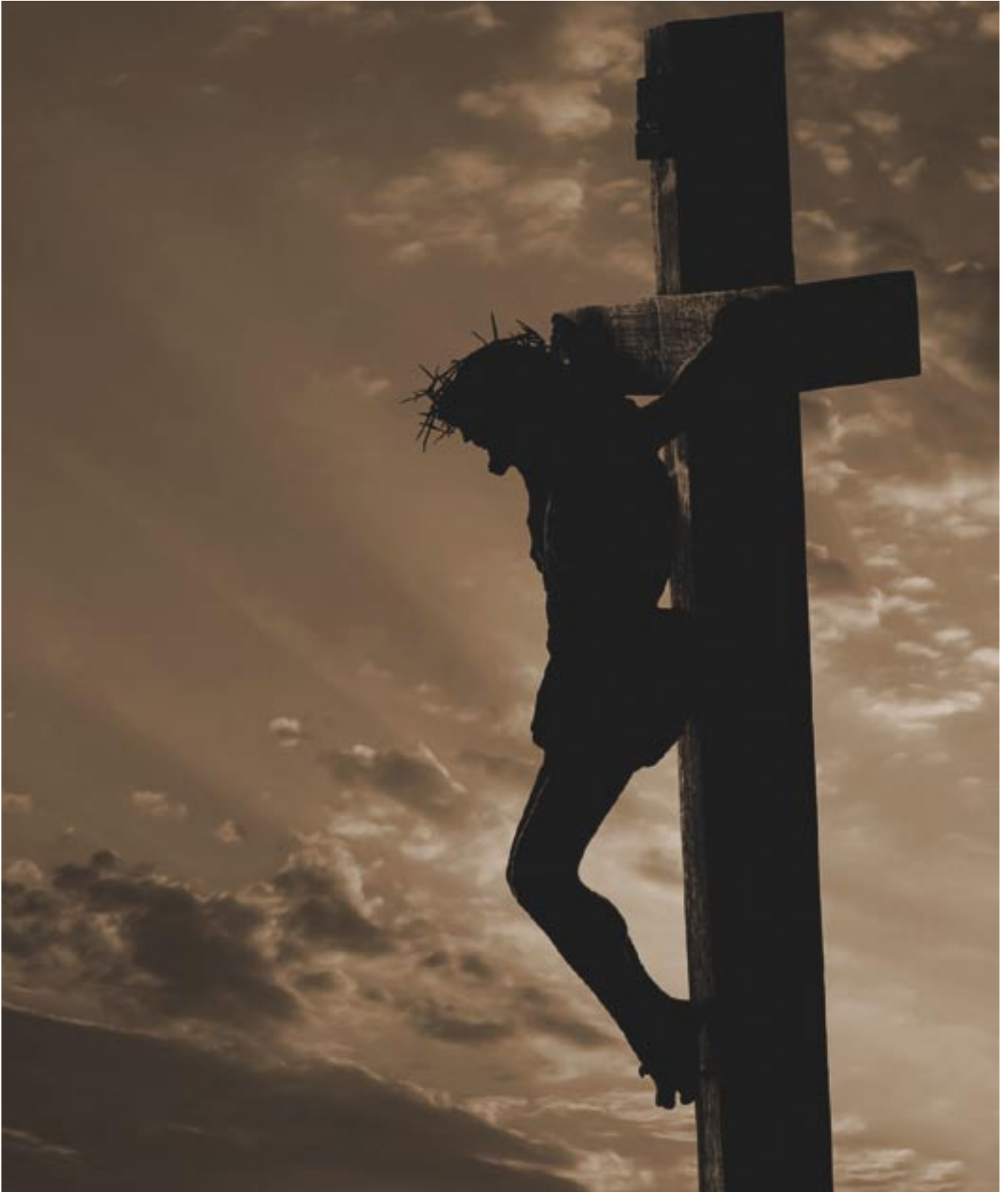
Do the Gospels themselves blame the Jews for the death of Jesus? Yes, and no.

Historically, yes, Jews were there, and they wanted Jesus, Himself a Jew, dead. Jesus was seen as a threat to national security, a popular teacher who might provoke a rebellion against Rome and cause many to be killed. John 11:47-50 gives this reason for the crucifixion, and it makes good historical sense. So certain Jewish leaders arranged for a rigged trial and demanded that Pilate execute Jesus.

John repeatedly calls these people the Jews, but that is simply his shorthand for the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus. They were official representatives of the Jewish people. Josephus uses the word in a similar way to refer to certain powerful leaders, not the entire ethnic group, not all, or even most, Jews. John does not mean to blame all Jews everywhere for what some few of them did in Jerusalem.

John was quite aware that influential supporters of Jesus such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were Jews, that the disciples were Jews, and that many Jews looked on Jesus favourably even without being totally committed to Him. John clearly points out, Salvation is from the Jews.¹ The Gospels are plain that Roman leaders, particularly Pilate, authorised

s kill Jesus?



and carried out the actual crucifixion. They had the responsibility of preventing innocent people from being hurt, and yet they knowingly caused an innocent man to be tortured and killed. They must share the blame. Both religion and state were involved.

Jews and Gentiles alike are guilty indeed, all people are just as guilty. Jesus came for the very purpose of being killed by His own people. Had He not, none of us would have a Saviour. What happened was God's design, according to God's purpose, for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles alike. What sense does it make to blame or hate anyone for doing the very thing that God intended be done so that He might demonstrate once and for all His boundless love for humanity?

If we had been there, if we had been the high priest or his supporters, we would have done the same thing. The Jewish and Roman leaders were acting not just as representatives of two ethnic groups, but as representatives of all humanity. We all needed the death and resurrection of Jesus, and every ethnic group has been involved in equally unjust killings and murder of innocent people. God does not hate the Jews or the Romans He loves them just as He loves all humanity, which is why He came to us humans as our sacrificial Lamb.

The Jewish crowd did accept responsibility for the death of Jesus,² but there is no reason for us to accept the validity of their claim. They never had the authority to condemn their own children, and we must not act as if they did. Let us remember that Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.³ and that statement applies to the Jews just as much as it does to the Romans (in Gibson's film, even the thief on the cross recognises that). The message of Christ is not one of blame or revenge it is one of forgiveness and redemption.

God's attitude toward the Jews

God selected the nation of Israel to be His people. He adopted them as His child (or to use another metaphor, His bride) and promised to be their God (which implies that He would protect, provide for and guide them). He made a covenant with them, solemnising His promises to them. But the people repeatedly broke the covenant, and God even divorced the northern tribes, calling them not my people. They had become like Gentiles to Him. And God knew they would from the beginning.⁴

But God would not change; His love and His faithfulness to His word for them will never diminish.⁵ God continued to love His chosen people even after they were exiled to Babylon. In His love He called a remnant back to Judea. From that remnant would come the Messiah, the Christ, who would redeem His people and the whole world.

When the new covenant came, the old covenant

ended in the fulfilment of the promise of God with His people. But God's love for Israel will never come to an end.⁶ God is faithful even when people are not. In His faithfulness to Israel, God demonstrates His faithfulness to all humanity.⁷

We must make a distinction between the Jewish religion and the Jewish people. The Bible says that the Jewish religion is ineffective so far as salvation is concerned, but God loves the Jewish people. The fact that the old covenant is obsolete does not make the Jews worse than everyone else; rather, they should be treated the same as all people are, sinners saved by God's grace.

Christians should love the Jews and want them to be saved, just as Paul did.⁸ Our desire for the Jewish people is that they become Christians, not that they cease being Jewish. Although the Israeli Supreme Court may see a contradiction between those two terms, we do not. Like all people, Jews are to be won through love, through kindness, not persecution.

Salvation is from the Jews, but it is not from Judaism. Salvation is from Jesus, the Son, a Jew whom God sent

to Jews for the sake of Jews and Gentiles alike. The Jews are not Christ-killers any more than we all are. We have all been enemies of God.

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs.⁹ Religiously, they are off track, but God loves them anyway, and in His unending love He will draw them back to Himself.

The extent of His love

I pray that no one uses Gibson's film to justify anti-Jewish attitudes.

That would be a distortion of the film, a distortion of the Gospels, and an un-Christian thing to do. The film makes it clear that Jesus knew what He was getting into (He had probably seen other people beaten and crucified), and yet He did it anyway, because He loved us. If you see the film, I ask that you remember it not for the graphic blood and violence, for its dealing with evil's attack on God, but for the reminder of Jesus' love for us.

Simon of Cyrene was different he did not know what he was getting into when he walked into Jerusalem that day. Mark 15:21 calls him the father of Alexander and Rufus two men who were known to Mark's readers, probably because they had become Christians. Simon himself is likely to have become a Christian, and thus he carried the cross of Christ in a spiritual sense as well.

Perhaps we are all a little like Simon. Did you know what you were getting into? Are you willing to carry the cross of Christ? That's something worth thinking about. □

*“The Jews are not
Christ-killers any more
than we all are. We
have all been enemies
of God.”*

¹ John 4:22

² Matthew 27:25

³ Luke 23:34

⁴ Deuteronomy
31:20

⁵ Romans 11

⁶ Romans 11:1

⁷ Romans 1:26

⁸ Romans 10:1

⁹ Romans 11:28

God is God and I am not!

My mum and I were waiting for her name to be called, for her appointment with the doctor. My husband walked into the waiting room with a happy smile, telling me that he had parked the car under a big shady tree, at a corner of the hospital parking lot. Wow what luck!

After she had seen the doctor and collected her medication, my mum and I waited at the hospital entrance for my husband. It was an unusually long wait. So I went to the parking lot to find out what had happened.

From a distance, I spotted him standing under the



by
Stefanie Tai

I returned to the hospital entrance and arranged for my mum to go home by taxi. Then I sought the help of the guard to make more announcements. He later followed me back to the parking lot, empathising with me and grumbling about inconsiderate drivers.

By now, the three of us were standing under the shady tree. The guard then walked slowly around, and inspected the two cars. He came back to us and said that one of the cars had its handbrake down. There was a possibility that it could be pushed forward.

Though we were under the shade of the tree, the heat and humidity of the day began to bother me. Soon I



shady tree! When I went nearer, I was horrified to discover that two cars parked illegally were blocking our car. My husband had earlier informed the security guard to make public announcements for the two car owners concerned to drive away their cars. There was nothing we could do but wait.

Now the two of us were standing under the shady tree. I prayed that God would cause the two drivers to hear the announcements and do the necessary. After a few minutes of patient waiting, there was still no sign of the drivers.

was getting thirsty and tired. My initial cool and calm state-of-mind slowly gave way to disturbing thoughts of extreme possibilities. This is a big hospital. The two drivers could be anywhere and may not have heard the announcements. We may have to wait for hours for them to show up. What if only one driver turns up? We still need the second driver. Panic-stricken, I prayed: "Almighty God, I know you have all power and might, for you are the Creator God. You can easily cause the two drivers to hear the messages, come out and drive away their cars. But they have not come out! I can't see

how a miracle can happen without them driving away their cars. You are all mighty and powerful, so please, please, make them come out.”

By now, I have to admit, my faith was faltering, under attack by a divided mind. As my anxious thoughts increased, my belief in God’s help in getting the drivers to respond decreased.

Unexpectedly, I saw four strong-looking young men, from different directions, walking toward us. The guard was waving and calling out to them. He briefly explained the situation and the young men immediately set out to help. Together with the guard, they helped to push the first car some distance to the front.

When they came back for the second car, the guard loudly exclaimed: *“Inilah susah. Ada handbrake.”* (This is going to be difficult. The handbrake is up.) They attempted to push the car anyway. The car moved—very, very slowly but it moved! Finally my husband was able to drive out our car, albeit, with great difficulty because of the limited space taken up by the two extra cars.

By now, the four young men had each gone their separate ways. I rewarded the guard for his help but he flatly refused to accept it. As more cars were coming in to park, we left him to deal with the messy parking woes.

So what lessons did I learn? Chiefly, never again park in that same spot under the shady tree! Apart from that, I humbly learned:

Don’t try to make God do what I want Him to do

In desperation, I was impressing upon God the only solution viable, based on what I could see. I was trying to make Him understand the impossible situation, and that He might want to consider my suggestion. For a moment, I was so preoccupied by my own human ingenuity and idea that I failed to see that God is God and I am not, and that ‘impossibilities’ is God’s specialty¹. Nonetheless, God graciously answered my pleas—but not in the way I had envisioned. He did it His way and in His own time.

God’s faithfulness in my unbelief

Though I believed in God’s mighty power, yet my faith was more in the things I could see—no drivers, no way out. I was filled with faith and doubt at the same time. At just the right moment, God stepped in and proved Himself faithful, during my moment of faithlessness. I soon understood that God was in control of my circumstances, even though at that time, it did not appear that way. The ‘cure’ for my unbelief was, quite literally, to believe.² When all seems impossible or

even when God seems to have gone ‘missing-in-action’, just simply believe, and trust in His character, not in the circumstances.³ In due time, He will reveal His faithfulness.

God answered through unlikely means

I was surprised that the guard went out of his way to help. Our problem became his problem. I was equally surprised by the sudden and simultaneous appearance of the four fit young men on the scene. Just the people the guard needed to help push the cars. It could well have been four who were physically frail (it was a hospital, after all), or even four ladies who themselves may have been damsels-in-distress (like me). Furthermore, the guard seemed to be ‘orchestrating’ the entire way-out without our participation. We had no idea what to do, and what the guard was going to do. We were left standing still and watching in disbelief the *modus operandi* God used in turning the unwelcome incident to my advantage⁴. In my mind, it would have been faster and simpler if God had ‘done it my way’. But it would mean

missing out on the ‘theatrics’ of God’s unlikely means, which put the sparkle back into my faith.

God is indeed God and I am definitely not! ☐

“I was impressing upon God the only solution viable, based on what I could see. I was trying to make Him understand the impossible situation, and that He might want to consider my suggestion.”

¹ Luke 1:37

² Mark 9:20–24

³ 2 Kings 6:15–17

⁴ Exodus 14:14

What *form* are you in today?

Anyone who watched the recent men's badminton final during the Beijing Olympics would agree that China's Lin Dan was in top *form* that night. His opponent, Malaysia's Lee Chong Wei just could not match the level of play displayed by Lin Dan. Apparently, the *form* one is in on the day of the game is very important in winning competitions. At least as far as sports is concerned.

What about our spiritual lives? What *form* are we in? To understand the present, let's go back to the past. The Bible says that God created humankind in His image, His likeness.¹ That is, human beings are made in the *form* of God. Humans, unlike animals, can think, plan and, most importantly, can choose to follow our creator or not. Adam was made in perfect physical *form*, without any sin. God's plan is to extend the joy and happiness enjoyed by the Godhead to humankind for eternity.

But we all know the story. It was not to be. Satan entered the picture and tempted our first parents. They committed the first sin. From then on sin has been part and parcel of human history.² Sin separated Adam and Eve from God. They were driven away from the Garden of Eden.³ Cut off from the source of truth and life, the human mind became *deformed*. Using human intellect alone, human beings started their own civilisations and ways of life. A cursory study of history confirms that most of the time the story of humankind is the story of the *deformed*.

Wars dominated human history. Massacres, genocide, pillage and wanton destruction—these are very apt descriptions of our past and present. Dictators, megalomaniacs and madmen have ruled harshly over those who had the misfortune to be their subjects. Pain, misery and suffering are a constant in life. Even the so called 'pinnacle' of human achievements: the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, were all built through the deaths of thousands for the glory of the few. *Deformed* human beings, without the help of God, do not and cannot give a good account of themselves.

Realising the unhappiness of life in general, human beings took action to improve their lot. In short, they wanted to *reform* the people and the society in which they lived. New philosophies were founded; new concepts of governance were introduced. Different religions were created to bring meaning

by
**Wong
Teck Kong**

to human existence and to justify the continuance of a certain way of life. Radical political ideologies like communism were experimented with, all for the betterment of society and its members. The sincerity and earnest desire to change and improve humankind cannot be doubted. The process of *reforming* continues to this day.

As any manufacturer of a product will tell you, however, a *deformed* product can never be *reformed* back to its original perfect condition. If something is made faulty, whatever improvements one tries to make, it will never be restored. The only solution is to

break up the product and redo it all over again. Throughout history human beings have been *reforming* themselves and hoping to create a utopian society on earth not knowing that the human mind is *deformed*, being cut off from God. No matter how hard we try, based on human efforts alone, real peace and long-term happiness will always be beyond our grasp.

Around 2,000 years ago, God put into motion a vital part of His original plan for humankind. Jesus Christ was sent to earth to die for sinners like you and me so that we can be *transformed*, not just *reformed*.⁴ Christ's shed blood was able to wash away our sins so that a relationship with God can be restored as originally planned. The Holy Spirit can now dwell in us and our minds are *transformed* by God's grace. The good news is that human beings can now finally experience true peace with the mind of Christ, not a *deformed* one.

Transformation is a process, not a one time thing. We have to *transform* our minds daily through Bible study and prayer.⁵ The new mind must be nourished properly so that we can

play our roles as God intended, to be the salt and light of the world. To be *transformed* means that we see the world through totally different standards and values, God's standards and values. It means to be more and more like Christ everyday.

Similarly spiritual transformation does not happen overnight. It takes time. A lifetime, in fact. It can only be fully accomplished when our physical lives end or if Christ returns to earth before our death. Until then, the process must continue.

Coming back to the original question, what *form* are you in today? Hopefully the answer is "transform". □



¹ Genesis 1:26–27

² Romans 5:12

³ Genesis 3:23–24

⁴ 2 Corinthians
5:15

⁵ Romans 12:2

Ancient wonders

In the 2nd century BC, the Greek writer Antipater of Sidon listed the greatest buildings and monuments in existence. He chose the seven best, because that was a magic number in the Hebrew, Greek and Chinese cultures. These seven wonders of the ancient world astounded the ancient Greeks.

The Egyptian pyramids, the hanging gardens of Babylon, the statue of Zeus at Olympia, the temple of Artemis at Ephesus and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, both in Asia Minor, the Colossus at Rhodes and the Pharos of Alexandria made the list. Only the Egyptian pyramids remain to this day.

The Pyramids are still a wonder to us. We can only imagine how the Egyptians accomplished building such structures without today's technology. It's too bad

by
Tammy Tkach

every size in between and in almost every colour. Each one is different, yet each speaks of a gentle, creative, thoughtful mind.

Do we still have the capacity to wonder? Or do we just pass by the flowers and other miracles of creation, taking them and the intelligence behind them for granted? What about the miracle of the Incarnation? Is Christmas just another holiday? A day off from work, an excuse for a party or to overeat? Or are you still filled with wonder at the significance that God came to earth as one of us?

A mentor of Chuck Swindoll told him wonder is involuntary praise. If that is true, each time people stand in wonder at the amazing hand of God, they are praising Him even if they don't recognise or



the other ancient wonders didn't survive. I'm sure they would really draw the tourists.

These man-made wonders excited the ancient Greeks and stir our imaginations today. I don't know about you, but my mind boggles at the engineering, building and technological feats of humankind.

Even more mind-boggling, however, are the wonders of God. The heavens declare the glory of God,¹ as well as everything else created by His hand. On my walks in the morning, it's sometimes difficult to keep walking, because I stop so often to take a closer look at the many flowers along the way.

Some flowers are so small most people don't ever notice them. Some are like the magnolia, so big you need two hands to hold them. There are blossoms in

acknowledge the Creator. How much more for us who believe is the opportunity to praise the Lord every time we contemplate the wonder of creation or the wonder of Emmanuel— God with us?

Those who enter the Kingdom must become as little children.² A child is full of wonder at everything. Have you ever tried taking a walk with a little one? The pace is slow and the questions don't stop because everything is marvellous and just waiting to be discovered!

For us as adults, the world can still be like this. Let's shake off the dust and stuffiness of being grown up, and look at the world through the fresh eyes of a child. What a privilege to join with all nature in praise to our God of wonders! □

¹ Psalm 19:1

² Matthew 18:3

If you want to see what children can do, you must stop giving them things.

Norman Douglas

If you think education is expensive—try ignorance.

Derek Bok

The reward for conformity was that everyone likes you except yourself.

Rita Mae Brown

Level with your child by being honest. Nobody spots a phony quicker than a child.

Mary MacCracken

The only time a woman really succeeds in changing a man is when he's a baby.

Natalie Wood

We're most alive when we're in love.

John Updike

Nothing you do for children is ever wasted. They seem not to notice us, hovering, averting our eyes, and they seldom offer thanks, but what we do for them is never wasted.

Garrison Keillor

My doctor gave me six months to live, but when I couldn't pay the bill he gave me six months more.

Walter Matthau

God is not a cosmic bellboy for whom we can press a button to get things done.

Harry Emerson Fosdick

It is our choices... that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.

J.K. Rowling

Whenever I see an erring man, I say to myself I have also erred;

When I see a lustful man, I say to myself so was I once; and in this way,

There are things I can't force. I must adjust. There are times when the greatest change needed is a change of my viewpoint.

Denis Diderot

When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and

What's in a name? That which we call a rose would smell as sweet.

William Shakespeare

Readers are plentiful; thinkers are rare.

Anthony Burgess

At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, not winning one more verdict or not closing one more deal.

You will regret time not spent with a husband, a friend, a child, or a parent.

Barbara Bush

If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain.

Maya Angelou

Real integrity is doing the right thing, knowing that nobody's going to know whether you did it or not.

Oprah Winfrey

If you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign you're not doing anything very innovative.

Woody Allen

I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess.

Martin Luther



Age is a question of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter.

Satchel Paige

I feel kinship with everyone in the world and feel that I cannot be happy without the humblest of us being happy.

Mahatma Gandhi

It isn't how much we do, but how much love we put into what we do that really counts.

Mother Teresa

could say, "I used everything you gave me."

Erma Bombeck

Marriage is not a noun; it's a verb. It isn't something you get.

It's something you do. It's the way you love your partner every day.

Barbara de Angelis

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.

When will Jesus return?

The man on television predicted the year, the month and the day when Jesus will return. He based his claim primarily on calendars made centuries ago that expire on the date he mentioned. This man is a prestigious Bible scholar who quotes scripture accurately, and is knowledgeable about world events. So, could his prediction be correct?

Other well-meaning people claim the Bible was written in a “secret” code that reveals future events and when they will occur. Could these people be correct?

We would like to know when He will return, wouldn't we? And if you are like me, you would like to be prepared for His coming. After all, His arrival will be the most meaningful event in human history.

But rather than put our confidence in man's speculation about when He will return, let's listen to what Jesus Himself said about when He will return.



by
Paul Hailey

do not believe it.”³ Yes, don't be fooled, even by charismatic, miracle-working, Bible-quoting preachers. They do not have any special insight.

The Apostle Paul gave a similar warning to the congregation in Thessalonica. Apparently some Christians were speculating about Jesus' return, with some misguided people announcing that He had already returned. Paul advised the Thessalonians to not be alarmed or deceived by reports that Christ had already come.⁴

When He comes, we will know it. Everyone will see Him coming.⁵ “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.”⁶ His coming will be accompanied by frightening disturbances in the heavens, and the sound of a mighty trumpet.⁷

What Jesus said

Shortly before Jesus' death, His disciples asked Him when He would return. He told them, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”¹ That statement seems to eliminate human prediction, don't you think? Jesus Himself didn't know the time!

Later, after His resurrection, His disciples asked Him if He was going immediately to set up His kingdom. He responded, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority.”²

That should be clear enough! Nobody knows when He will return. God's timetable is not revealed by ancient calendars or hidden codes in the Bible.

God didn't tell us that it is not for us to know the date, and then reveal the date in mysterious ways to a privileged few.

Don't be fooled

Jesus warned His followers to beware of false Christs and prophets who would mislead people in the latter days. “At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ Or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. So if anyone tells you, ‘There He is, out in the desert!’ do not go out; or, ‘Here He is, in the inner rooms!’

“Jesus said He would come at a time when most people will not be expecting Him, like a thief in the night.”

A warning

I used to be concerned about being “prepared” for His coming. Since there wouldn't be much warning, I wasn't sure how to prepare—perhaps by putting on my best clothes, combing my hair, confessing my recent sins and praying myself into a good attitude. But now I understand that our state of mind during our last moments of life doesn't determine our eternal destiny.

But Jesus did caution against becoming careless and neglectful in our Christian life. “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness

and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”⁸ Jesus said He would come at a time when most people will not be expecting Him, like a thief in the night. He left a warning, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him.”⁹

So here's the key to being prepared for His coming—be careful and keep watch. We do that when we remain careful and watchful to live as He would have us live.

Will you be prepared?



Jesus makes us ready

We need to remember that Jesus is the One who prepares us for eternity. We are *His* workmanship.¹⁰

We don't get ready to meet the Lord by making last-minute personal preparations. Instead, we will always be ready if we entrust our daily lives to His care. "And now, dear children, continue in Him, so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed before Him at His coming."¹¹ The admonitions to "continue in Him" and to "watch" encourage us to maintain our relationship with Jesus and to not let ourselves fall into a sinful lifestyle. He is the One who makes us ready. Our role is to stay close to Him by praying, studying the Bible, meeting other Christians, showing love to all, and yielding to those inner promptings that He puts into our minds.

If we stay close to the Lord we don't have to be

¹ Matthew 24:36

² Acts 1:7

³ Matthew 24:
23–26

⁴ 2 Thessalonians
2:1–2

⁵ Revelation 1:7

⁶ Matthew 24:27

⁷ Matthew 24:
29–31

⁸ Luke 21:34

⁹ Matthew 24:
42–44

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:10

¹¹ 1 John 2:28

¹² Job 19:25–27

concerned about when He will return. Perhaps He will return during our lifetime. Or it may be later when we are tucked away in our graves. Regardless of when He comes He will have made us ready.

Like the patriarch Job we may go through some painful difficulties. But through it all we can remain confident that God is preparing us for eternity. Job expressed it this way, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth, And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see Him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"¹²

May we have that same assurance that no matter when the Lord returns He will have made us ready. And that is more important than knowing exactly when He will return. □

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