

THE Plain Truth

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

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THE PLAIN TRUTH

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God became Man

This event—God becoming man—is undoubtedly one of the greatest events in history. It happened some 2,000 years ago when the Son of God, the second Person in the Godhead, became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ.

Why is this event so significant? Does it change anything? This article explains its significance.

Incarnate Jesus

Before Jesus became a human being, He was called the Son or Word of God. He was God and shared life with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Like the Father and Spirit, He was all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, and was full of grace and truth.

When the Holy Spirit begot Jesus in the womb of Virgin Mary, He became flesh, but without ceasing to be God. In assuming flesh He *voluntarily* laid aside His divine powers, rights and privileges. He had to be like us (but without sin) in order to represent/substitute for us. The Greek word *kenosis* is used to describe this *self-emptying* act of God. Whatever miracles He did, He did only as the Father had commanded Him and as the Holy Spirit led Him. On His own, He could do nothing.

Jesus was God incarnate—fully God and fully man. He dwelt among us, as one of us. He entered into our sinful world and experienced its effects. He bore our sin and died on the cross so we could live. He rose from the grave and ascended to God the Father. And He *continues* to live as the God-Man in glorified state, not subject to our physical limitations.

God's adoption plan

Before the beginning of time, God planned to create human beings and include them in the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He created us in love, for love and for *adoption* as His own beloved children. Not because He was incomplete or needed anything from us. He created us so that we could participate in His abundant life. That was God's original plan for us and nothing would stop Him from accomplishing it.

God sent Jesus to reveal who He is and who we are in Christ [children of God]. He came to *unite* us with Him. He didn't come to just deal with sin. *Adoption was His primary goal; removing sin was His secondary goal.* So our focus should be on His love and adoption plan, not on sin. Of course we still need to repent of our sin [unbelief] and turn to God so that we might experience God's grace.

Sin complicated matters

Sin complicated the adoption process. Jesus had to

by
Dr. P.
Sellappan

bear our sin, suffer its effects, and die so that we might be set free to participate in His abundant life. Thank God, He did that *willingly* for us.

For many, God is distant and detached. He doesn't seem to be involved in their lives. They often see Him as a divine judge waiting to mete out punishment for their sins. So they dare not approach Him—they prefer to keep a safe distance from Him!

That's the problem. By hiding in their religious cloaks (laws, rituals, penance) they remain ignorant of God's love for them. Instead of trusting Him, they trust in all sorts of man-made gods which are totally powerless to help them. So they don't get to experience God's grace and peace.

Significance

This event—Jesus becoming man—has tremendous significance. It has radically changed human history. How? Below is a short list.

- God has come to us personally in Jesus, so we don't have to go and find Him. He dwells in our midst in the person of the Holy Spirit, in the Church. We can freely enter into a love relationship with Him.
- In Christ, God has forgiven all our sins (past, present and future) and has *reconciled* us to Himself. So there is no more sin, condemnation, shame or rejection.
- God has accepted and adopted us as His own beloved children. He has recreated us in the image of God—holy and

blameless—and our lives are secure and *hidden* in Christ. We can freely participate in His joyful life.

- God has given us everything including the vast universe. So we are heirs with Jesus.
- God has *united* all people to Himself. There is no separation and all human beings are brothers and sisters in Christ.
- All are equal; no one is superior/inferior to another. Everyone is given respect, honour and dignity and given opportunity to attain their full God-given potential.
- God has *redeemed* the entire cosmos—the barren planets, damaged environment, and all humanity. He has abolished sin, death, sorrows and pain forever.
- There will only be one God—the God of us all.

All these may sound radical and idealistic, but this is the *true reality* that our Lord Jesus has worked out for us. May you have the faith to believe the truth. □

*“Instead of trusting Him,
they trust in all sorts of man-
made gods which are totally
powerless to help them.”*

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What our readers say:

Thank you very much for sending me THE PLAIN TRUTH magazine. It has always been unique—the only magazine wherein the articles make for good reading and they really fill my spiritual needs. They also help strengthen my intimate time with God and help me grow in spiritual wisdom. I am really grateful for all the blessings which I have received. God bless all of you who are instrumental in changing the lives of many.

Phyllis Lee Lee Leng
Singapore

I have learned so many good things from THE PLAIN TRUTH. My good friends are also reading the magazine and they too have discovered many new things. Keep up your good news for the new generation.

Thangaloo
Sandakan

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me search for the good in the bad. It inspires me to always see the silver lining in the clouds of darkness and it pulls me through when the going gets tough. It opens my eyes to the God-given beauty of our world.

Hee Park Chee
Ipoh

The articles *The God revealed in Jesus Christ (Parts 1–3)* by Grace Communion International is an excellent summary of the Christian faith. It has liberated me from the many wrong teachings that I had held for so long and has given me a deeper understanding of what the gospel is and how great God is.

Jaya
Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH is truly an inspiration of God's love and good news made known to everyone who reads it, so that they may know His abundant love and mercy—including His continuing saving power through Jesus Christ for all mankind on this blessed earth.

Jeffrey W. Disto
Kota Kinabalu

When my life problems seem unbearable, I come to realise that God is using your magazine to strengthen me. Some of your articles are very inspiring, and if only I had subscribed earlier I would not have

resigned from my previous job. Please continue the good work. Enclosed is a small contribution as a token of my appreciation.

Looi Lai Foong
Lahat

THE PLAIN TRUTH is relevant in today's challenging world. It highlights the message of hope that comes from God to human beings.

Lim Siew Leng
Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH reminds me that I am a Christian. No matter how busy I am, I must read it even if it is only for 5-10 minutes daily. I am deeply sorry for not responding or making any contributions. May the good Lord bless all of you. I thank the Lord for all of you.

Patsy Chong Li Don
Kota Kinabalu

Some of the topics help me in teaching engaged couples who are about to take the big step towards marriage.

Lucien Wijesuria
Kuala Lumpur

Every issue widens my understanding and knowledge about people and God.

Loo Kin Leong
Kuala Lumpur

It provides information that broadens my horizon. This magazine has been the favourite reading material for my family and we eagerly await each issue. Thanks for the great job.

Edditha Samuel
Kota Marudu

The articles are interesting and I am able to share them with both my Christian and non-Christian friends.

Bun Pui Yoke
Singapore

I find the real Lord through THE PLAIN TRUTH magazine. Besides, it has taught me many lessons. It equips me with a positive mindset and helps me to love our Lord more deeply. I love it so much and I wish to keep on receiving it. Thank you.

Leong Sim Yee
Butterworth

THE PLAIN TRUTH is informative, thought-provoking and spiritually inspiring. Yes, I will be very grateful if you can renew my subscription.

F B Soo
Sitiawan

I get to live like a child of God by His strength. I find this magazine simple, easy to read and understand and it's very good! The articles are enjoyable.

Debbie Gan
Klang

THE PLAIN TRUTH deals with practical issues pertaining to Christianity today and it's a welcome change from all other commercial magazines. Thank you for the great work.

Rosie Ching
Singapore

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Christmas light

“In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.”¹

Brilliant displays of light and colour are part and parcel with the Advent season. For some people, such displays may be little more than another advertising gimmick of modern retailers. But for believers, they can be another reminder of the glory of the One and Only Son of God, the light of the world, who brings the peace and rest for which the whole world aches and pines.

In the days when Jesus was born in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, there was a devout old man called Simeon living in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had



by
Dr. Michael Fezell

Light to the Gentiles

Simeon praised God for what the scribes, the Pharisees, the chief priests and the teachers of the law could not comprehend: Israel’s Messiah was not for the salvation of Israel only, but also for the salvation of all peoples of the world.

Isaiah had prophesied it long before: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”³



revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.

One day the Spirit led Simeon into the temple courts—the very day that Jesus’ parents brought in the infant Jesus to fulfil the requirements of Torah.

When Simeon saw the baby, he took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”²

Jesus: the new Israel

The Israelites were the people of God. God had called them out from among the nations and set them apart through a covenant as His own special people. And He did it not merely for them, but for the eventual salvation of all nations.⁴

Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles, but their light had gone out. They had failed to keep the covenant. But God is faithful to His covenant regardless of the faithlessness of His covenant people.⁵

So, in the fullness of times, God sent His own Son to be the light of the world. He was the perfect Israelite,

who perfectly kept the covenant as the new Israel.⁶ As the prophesied Messiah, the perfect representative of the covenant people and the true light to the Gentiles, Jesus delivered both Israel and the nations from sin and reconciled them to God.

Through faith in Christ, giving our allegiance to Him and becoming identified with Him, we become members of the faithful covenant community, the people of God.⁷

Righteous in Christ

We cannot muster righteousness on our own. Only as we are identified with Christ the Saviour are we counted as righteous.

We are sinners, no more righteous in ourselves than Israel was. Only when we see our sinfulness and put our faith in the One through whom God justifies the wicked can we be counted as righteous for His sake.⁸

The church needs the grace of God as much as Israel does. All who put their faith in Christ, Gentile and Jew alike, are saved only because *God* is faithful and good, not because we have been faithful, or because we have found some secret formula, some “right” doctrine or the “right” church.

“He has rescued us,” Paul wrote in Colossians 1:13, “from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

Trust in Jesus

As easy as it might sound, it is hard to trust in Jesus. Trusting in Jesus means putting your life in His hands, and that means giving up control over your life.

That is not easy to do. We like to be in control of our own lives. We like to call the shots, make our own decisions and do things our own way.

King Ahaz of Judah was no exception. Ahaz rejected the sign God gave him for deliverance, for salvation, for peace. He had his own plans about how to best save the nation.⁹

God has a long-range plan for our deliverance and security, and he has a short-range plan. But, like Ahaz, we cannot receive the fruit of His plans if we do not stand firm in faith.

Some people, like King Ahaz, stand firm in military might. Others stand firm in financial security, in their personal integrity or their personal reputation. Some stand firm in their skill or their strength, their ingenuity, deal-making or intelligence.

None of these things is bad or sinful in themselves, of course. But as humans we are inclined to put our confidence, energy and devotion into them instead of

in the real source of security and safety and peace.

Walking humbly

When we commit to God our problems, along with the positive action we take in dealing with them, and trust in His care, provision and deliverance, He promises to be with us.

James wrote, “Humble yourselves before the Lord.”¹⁰ God calls us to put aside our lifelong crusade to defend ourselves, promote ourselves, preserve our possessions, protect our reputations and prolong our lives. God is our provider, our defender, our hope and our destiny.

The illusion that we can get our own lives under control must be exposed to the light, to Jesus, “the light of the world.”¹¹ Then we can rise in Him, becoming who we really are—God’s own precious children whom He saves and helps, whose battles He fights,

whose fears He calms, whose pain He shares, whose future He secures and whose reputation He preserves.

“If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.”¹²

In giving up all, we gain everything. In kneeling, we rise. In setting aside our illusion of personal control, we are clothed with all the glory and splendour and riches of the heavenly eternal realm.

“Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you,”¹³ Peter wrote. What oppresses you? Your sins? An enemy? A financial disaster? A crushing disease? An inconceivable loss? An impossible situation that you are utterly

helpless to do anything about? A disastrous and painful relationship? A blackening of your name? False accusations?

God has sent His Son, and through His Son, He takes our hands and lifts us up and shines the light of His glory into the dark and painful crisis we are enduring. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not afraid, because He is with us.

God has given us the sign that His rescue is certain: “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.”¹⁴

Everywhere we look during this season, it seems, there is decorative lighting—white lights and coloured lights and lit candles. In these physical lights we can enjoy a dim reflection of “the true light that gives light to every man.”¹⁵ □

*“God has sent His Son,
and through His Son,
He takes our hands and
lifts us up and shines the
light of His glory into the
dark and painful crisis
we are enduring.”*

¹ John 1:4

² Luke 2:29–32

³ Isaiah 49:6

⁴ Isaiah 49:6

⁵ Romans 3:3–4

⁶ Romans 5:18–21

⁷ Romans 3:27–30

⁸ Romans 4:16,
22–25

⁹ Isaiah 7:1–17

¹⁰ James 4:10

¹¹ John 8:12

¹² 1 John 1:7

¹³ 1 Peter 5:7

¹⁴ Luke 2:11

¹⁵ John 1:9

Living water—the answer to emptiness

by
Owen Visagie

Rita, a middle-aged single woman, came home after a stressful day at work. She lived alone in her tiny, modest flat. She sat down on the threadbare couch. Every day was the same. “Life is so empty,” she thought despondently. “I’m all alone.”

In an upmarket suburb, Gary, a successful businessman, sat on his patio. Everything seemed right on the outside. Yet something was missing. There was emptiness in his life.

Different people. Different circumstances. Same problem. People cannot find true satisfaction from people, possessions, pastimes or pleasure. To them life is like the centre of a doughnut—empty.

What is God’s answer to emptiness? The answer can be found in the book of John chapter 4:1–16.

Jesus had left Jerusalem because of opposition from the Pharisees.

Returning to the province of Galilee, He had to pass through Samaria, a no-go area for the Jews. In the past, the Assyrians had conquered Jerusalem, the Israelites had been deported to Assyria and foreigners had been brought in to keep the peace. Inter-marriage occurred, resulting in a mixed race, despised by the “pure” Jews.

Jesus was physically thirsty, the midday heat having taken its toll.

He came to a well outside the city which was not a spring-fed well. Water had to be drawn from it. Jesus met a woman at the well and asked her to give Him some water to drink, initiating a conversation which was taboo.¹ This was because

- she was a despised Samaritan of mixed race,
- she was a woman,
- she was shunned because she had a bad reputation,
- she had had five husbands and was living with a man,
- she was alone in a public place, and
- unrelated men and women did not speak to each other in public places.

These were the cultural restrictions which Jesus ignored. He sensed that she was incomplete. She had

looked for security in human relationships, but could not find it. Something was missing but she didn’t know what it was. She had not found completeness in the arms of six different men, and had probably been abused and humiliated by some of them. Divorce laws allowed a man to “put away” a wife for trivial reasons. She had been rejected, but Jesus promised to quench her spiritual thirst. He told her He was the expected Messiah. Completeness was found when she met Jesus. God is the “fountain of life”.² He is the “spring of living water”.³

She then enthusiastically told the people in her town about her experience, and many came to believe in Jesus as Saviour of the world. She began to understand and experience this new life—that she was complete in Christ.

Drinking from the world’s well could not fill the emptiness in Rita’s or Gary’s lives any more than the Samaritan woman.

However, even believers can experience that emptiness.

- Do you feel empty or lonely?
- Do you attempt to fill your emptiness with anything or anybody in your life?
- Is joy and peace lacking in your life?

God’s answer to these feelings of emptiness is to fill the void in our lives

with His presence. We were created for a relationship with God. We were created to enjoy a sense of belonging, acceptance and being valued by Him. We will continue to feel incomplete if we try to fill this void with anything but His presence. Through an on-going close relationship with Jesus, you find the answer to every one of life’s challenges. He will not disappoint you. Your name is on every one of His many promises. Jesus is a person, and like any friendship we have with others, a relationship takes time to develop. This means spending time together, and sharing, listening and talking about anything and everything that is on your mind. It means being real with Him about your struggles and worries.

Drink of the Living Waters and you will have a new perspective. You will never be alone. Never again will you experience that spiritual thirst. □

¹ John 4:7–10

² Psalm 36:9

³ Jeremiah.2:13



Pursued

It was 1970 and I was undergoing my military training in Pretoria. After three months of basic training we were allowed to go home every second weekend.

Home for me was 600 kilometres away in Durban. I remember so clearly standing on the side of the busy road on Friday afternoons with “ND” (the car registration letters indicating Durban) painted on my suitcase, desperately waiting, and hoping for a kind person to give me a lift. On rare occasions I received

**by
Gordon Green**

Sounds silly, doesn't it? Why didn't I just settle for a stress-free weekend and remain in the camp? I could have slept in late, relaxed and spent time with friends. Well you see, it all had to do with my heart.

My heart was not in a military camp in Pretoria. It was 600 kilometres away and nothing would stop me from getting on that road again!

It was all because of a very special lady by the name of Marilyns—my future wife. And so with her picture



a lift directly to Durban but often I would be dropped off in the middle of nowhere and left standing alone for hours in the freezing darkness. Sometimes, because it was so dark that motorists couldn't see me, I resorted to sleeping in mealie fields until daylight. On one occasion I only arrived in Durban on Saturday evening. A journey that should have taken less than 8 hours actually took a night and a day! By Sunday lunchtime I was back on the road again for the long return trip. Two weeks later I would endure the same ordeal again.

in my wallet, a pocketful of dreams and a heart full of love I prevailed, persisted and pursued her along those highways and byways again and again. I was determined to conquer every obstacle in my way, to spend time with her and capture her heart — and to ensure no one else would.

As I recently reflected back on those days, I caught a glimpse of what God is like—and definitely not like. Many think God is far off and not too concerned about their daily living. Some describe God as angry or just a

by love

spiritual power. Others feel that everything depends on us. If we go to Him in prayer He may or may not answer, but if we just do our own thing He will sit passively and watch.

He is just the opposite. He is not an angry God. He is not a passive God. He is a God who initiates in love—a furious love. He is a God who is far more active in our lives than we realise.

God is proactive

Think of the first four words in the Bible: “In the beginning God...” Immediately they provide us with the key, which begins to open our understanding of who God is and what He is like. These words reveal that God is proactive. He is always there “in the beginning”—before anyone or anything else. I John 4:19 teaches us that God loved us first and it is because He took action that we can now love. He didn’t wait for us to be faithful, obedient, good enough, holy or blameless. Nor did He wait for us to decide. It was first His decision. Furthermore, you don’t have to try and win His love. You already have it.

Psalms 23 is a well-known and much loved Psalm. Most people are familiar with verse 6 (the ending): “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” But there is something in these words that is easily missed. The word ‘follow’ doesn’t quite capture the Hebrew word *radaph*. It should be rendered more forcefully. It is more like “to pursue, harass, chase after, to hunt”¹ It is the same word used to describe the Egyptians in their aggressive effort to stop the fleeing Israelites in Exodus 14:8–9. It can also be used to describe an animal in pursuit. C.S. Lewis once said that he could not give advice on pursuing God, but, he wrote: “It was the other way round; God was the hunter (or so it seemed to me) and I was the deer.”² This word ‘follow’ is not a picture of God trailing along behind us like a faithful dog but it is a breath-taking image of God’s immeasurable love and unbending commitment towards us. The Message

Bible translates verse 6 in this way: “your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.”

God is the initiator

This is what God is really like. He is “the divine Lover, who desires to have and to hold us, who wants to breathe into us His life, and to embrace us in His love.”³ He is so passionate for us that He wants us to experience all He is and has to give. He pursues us to share His awesome love with us! He is active in His faithful pursuing of you and me even when we are unfaithful in pursuing Him! We see this in the much loved parable of the prodigal son.⁴ However, the parable is not really about the son but it is the passion of the father that drives it. He saw his son coming down the road and with “his heart pounding, he ran out,

embraced him, and kissed him.”⁵

The wayward son had done nothing to earn this gracious response from his father. In fact, the father didn’t even wait to listen to his excuses but called for a party to celebrate the finding of his lost son. What a beautiful and stirring picture of what our Father God is really like!

We can never say: “I was searching for God and then I found Him.” No. Before we began searching for God

“We can never say: “I was searching for God and then I found Him.” No. Before we began searching for God, He was chasing after us. He was the initiator.”

He was chasing after us. He was the initiator. Although we may think that the Christian life is all about what we do, it is not. Yes, we have many things to do but it is first of all about God and His great plan.⁶ It originated in Him. He is more involved in our salvation than we are ourselves.

But most of all this reveals God’s heart. He loves you with a reckless, unquenchable love. He never gives up, never stops loving, never stops dreaming. He pursues. He persists. Like me, a young soldier, hitchhiking across the country to spend a few hours with the one I loved.

And if He had a wallet your picture would be in it. □

¹ Strong’s Concordance and biblos.com

² C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*.

³ Michael Jinkins, *Invitation to Theology*.

⁴ Luke 15:11–32

⁵ Luke 15:20, The Message Bible

⁶ Ephesians 1:4–5

Understanding Gene

I've always, ever since a child, been interested in nature. There's something about the living environment that is beautiful and interesting and attractive, and it just draws me in. So I went to university and I eventually majored in zoology, and then I focused narrowly again on marine zoology. I did my doctorate looking at the anatomy and aging process in a marine fouling invertebrate.

Faith and evolution

We can't study fossils for very long without having to consider the very hard questions. We don't have the luxury of ignoring the difficult questions. So I had to confront the issue, what is the fossil record telling me? I began gradually to see that the evidence for evolution was really quite compelling and indisputable. It didn't affect my faith at all. My faith has grown over the years because in the end my faith is in Jesus Christ, and one's faith and commitment to Jesus is a consequence of the action of the Holy Spirit in one's life.

Genesis 1

In approaching Genesis, one has to ask the question, is there more than one way of reading the book? There's nothing new about that concept—it's at least as old as Augustine, who said that we should be careful how we read the Bible lest we read into it, in fact, what is not there.

The Bible is a remarkable book written over more than a period of 1000 years by 40 different authors, and it constitutes many different

forms of literature as well. We tend to read Genesis 1 superficially, unaware of the structure that's actually in the chapter. It really comes down to the whole issue of exegesis—the art of biblical interpretation.

Exegesis asks certain questions concerning the Bible. We want to know, for example, why a particular passage was written. What was the historical or cultural context? What were the issues? Who was the writer? Who was the audience? Why was it written?

by
**Dr. Dennis
Gordon**

Right context

If we really want to understand Genesis 1 or indeed the whole book of Genesis, we have to read it in the light of the Exodus. That's the context. We take Moses as the traditional author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. He is writing this at the time when a people who were formerly in bondage to slavery are now in the process of being redeemed and on their way to salvation and the promised land.

God, through Moses, is giving them a future in relation to their present.

He's also giving them a past. How do they come to be where they are? Moses is connecting Israel with a past as well as giving them a future. So what is the context of Genesis in relation to their past?

Genesis is divided into two major parts. The first 11 chapters deal with what we might call primeval history, largely based on oral traditions and things that Moses may have learned when he was taught in Egypt in an academic way, traditions that may have been communicated through the patriarchs.

So Moses connects Israel with the ultimate origins—that the God whom they worship, the God of the Hebrews, is the God who is the Creator.

In Egypt, there were gods of the sun and gods of darkness and gods for animals and vegetation and rivers and so on. Well, the God of the Hebrews is the God who created all the things that the pagans worship. The chief point of Genesis 1 is to show that there is one God, not many.



Carefully crafted

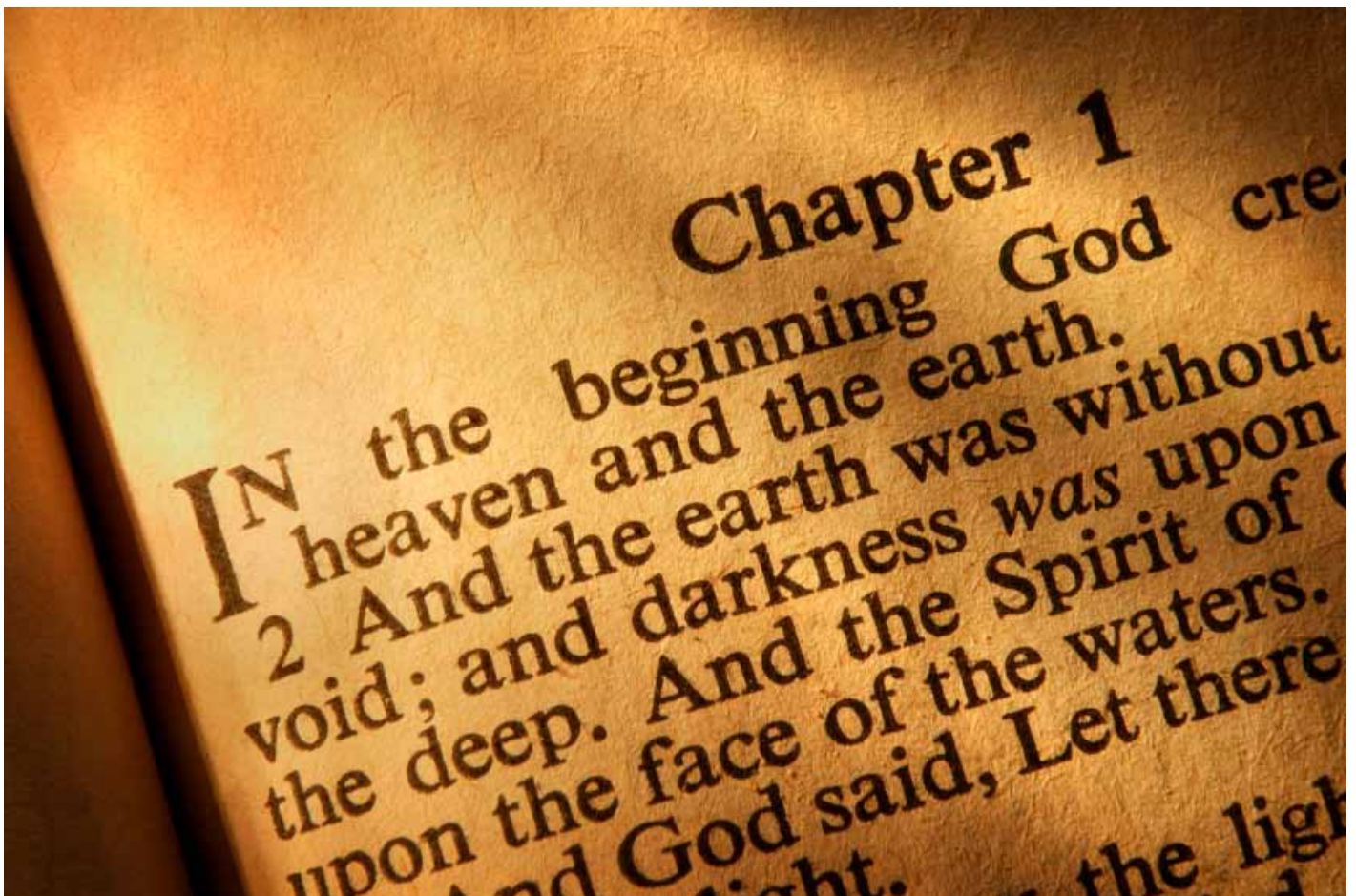
Genesis 1 is a superb piece of literature. It is very carefully crafted. The pagan creation stories are very complex and convoluted. Genesis 1 uses some of the language of the pagan cosmogonies, drawing upon a common tale that people were familiar with, but recasting it to tell a proper theology about the God of Israel.

sis for all its worth

What was created on days one through six was the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:2 is very interesting, because it says, “And the earth was without form and void,” and this is in the old King James Version of the Bible. Formless and empty—that’s the starting condition. It says, “And darkness was on the face of the deep.” Even before you have the creation of the six days, you have something that already exists, maybe a watery surface, and the Spirit of God is brooding over that. That’s your starting point.

It says specifically that it was “formless and empty”.

What God does in the second set of three days is to solve the second problem of emptiness—God populates each of the realms that He structured on the first three days. So on the first day we have the separation of day from night, and what did God populate that realm with, if not the sun and the moon and the stars? Then on day two God separated the waters above from the waters below, and what do we see populating those realms, but the birds in the upper atmosphere and the fish in the sea? Then on day six, we see the land animals and human beings populating



Why is Moses writing that? He’s writing that because Moses wants to show that the God of the Hebrews, God of Israel, is able to structure [to solve the problem of being formless] the cosmos and then populate [to solve the problem of being empty] the cosmos. The first three days have to do with structuring.

On day one, God separates the light from the dark. On day two, He separates the waters above from the waters below, and on day three He separates the land from the waters. So we have the structuring. So what was formless (in Hebrew, *tohu vav bohu*, void and empty) is now formed.

the realm that was formed on day three, and that solves the problem of emptiness.

The one true God

Moses is taking elements that the pagans *worship* and showing that things that the pagans worship were, in fact, *creations* of the one true God. There’s a definite structure in there. A scientific description is not at all the point of it. The issue is polytheism, many gods, versus monotheism or one God. □

God's justice, wrath

The words *justice*, *wrath* and *judgment* appear many times in the Bible. People interpret these words to mean different things. So how do we interpret them? What does God say? This article explains these terms in a manner *consistent with God's loving nature* towards His creation.

God's love

God is love. Love is the DNA of the Father, Son and Spirit. They exist in a dynamic and intimate love relationship where they give to each other totally and unreservedly, withholding nothing. Their love is *other-centred* where the focus is on others, not on self. This is the kind of love that produces joy, peace, unity, freedom, friendship and passion. This is the love that God is extending to humanity. This is the reason why we are created and why we are here on planet earth. God is now inviting us to participate in His love relationship as His own beloved children.

God loves us dearly. After all, we are His children. And we will always be His children no matter what situations we are in or what happens to us. God doesn't want anyone to miss out on His abundant life. He wants everyone in His kingdom [family]. And He will go to the ends of the earth—even to hell—to seek the lost, like the shepherd who went out to find the one lost sheep.¹ Everyone—irrespective of colour, race, religion, age, sex, social status—is precious to Him.

But God will not force His love on anyone since *love must be freely given and freely received*. Love involves personal choice. The Father loves the Son freely in the Spirit and the Son loves the Father freely in the Spirit. There is a dynamic, free-flowing love where there is no compulsion or coercion whatsoever. That is how they are “wired” and that is how they operate. That is the love that He extends to you and me. That means God will not force His salvation on us. We must desire and want it. That's why we *don't* preach universal salvation as a few may choose to reject God's offer. That will be their choice, not God's.

In the light of His loving nature towards all His creation, let's now look at God's justice, wrath and judgment.

God's justice

God's justice is *different* from human justice. Human justice is based on a set of man-made rules, whether they are actually just or not. Judges administer justice by interpreting and applying these rules.

God's *justice*, however, is related to His good purposes for us,² not to a set of rules. God created us so that we might participate in His abundant life as His own beloved children. He created us to share life with Him. He created us for love, joy, peace, freedom, creativity, friendship and passion. This is God's purpose for us. *Anything that opposes His good purposes for us is injustice to God*. That means sin is injustice as



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**



Wrath and judgment



it robs us of the good life that He intended for us. Injustice causes negative attitudes and emotions such as fear, anxiety, loneliness, confusion, depression, guilt, shame, self-condemnation and rejection. It embodies oppressive systems, rules, beliefs and practices. Oppressive systems encompass dictatorial regimes, unfair economic and social policies, oppression of women and children. Oppressive rules result in lack of freedom of expression and freedom of worship. Oppressive religious beliefs involve intimidating followers to perform burdensome rules, rituals and sacrifices.

God hates injustice as it enslaves people and robs them of the abundant life that He intended for them. He has already intervened and will intervene fully to abolish injustice and set people free so that they can experience joyful and satisfying lives.³

God's wrath

God's *wrath* [or vengeance], unlike ours, is another aspect of His *love*. God's wrath is not opposed or contrary to His loving nature. God is not a schizophrenic. He doesn't have a split personality. He is not 90 per cent love and 10 per cent wrath. He is 100 per cent love. *His wrath is an intense form of love with strong feelings and emotions for His creation.*⁴ It is *righteous anger*, similar to parents' anger when someone abuses their children. He is a *jealous* [possessive] God. He hates to see His children suffer.

God's wrath is on all forces of evil that oppose His good purposes for humanity. That means Satan, sin and death are enemies of God because they rob humanity of the abundant life that He intended for them. Evil forces include oppressive regimes, economic and social systems, religious beliefs and practices. These enslave and rob them of the peace that God offers them.

God will intervene decisively and destroy all the evil forces that work against His good plan for humanity. Only then can there be true justice.

God's judgment

God's *judgment*, like His justice, is related to His *good purposes* for humanity. The Greek word for judgment is *krisis*. It means arriving at the truth and then deciding whether to accept it or not. It means giving people the opportunity to respond to God's truth revealed in Christ. It is about knowing who God is, and who they are in Christ [children of God], and giving them the opportunity (perhaps for the first time) to repent of their unbelief and embrace the truth.

In judgment, God gives people the opportunity to turn from error to truth, from darkness to light. He gives them the opportunity to choose life—one filled with love, joy, peace, freedom and friendship. It is restoring them to all that is good and wholesome.⁵

God wants us to be happy and joyful. He wants us

to live satisfying lives. He wants us to have respect, honour and dignity. He wants us to live in loving union and communion with Him and with one another.

Scripture tells us that God will judge all nations and tribes. He will judge the believers and the unbelievers. He will judge the living and the dead.⁶ (He will obviously have to raise the dead to judge them.) He now judges His Church [believers], and at His second coming He will judge the rest.⁷ He judges both groups the same way.

How does God judge His church? *He judges them by convicting them of their sin, forgiving their sin, and giving them Christ's righteousness. And He gives them the Holy Spirit so that they can be united to God. This is how God restores them to union and communion with Himself.* The Holy Spirit empowers them to live their new lives in Christ.

At Christ's second coming, God will judge the rest who had not known Jesus or His good plan for them. He will open their minds to the truth so that they too would repent of their unbelief. He will forgive their sins and give them Christ's righteousness and His Spirit so that they too can live their new lives. Those who reject the gospel and deny the truth [Jesus] will continue to live in their own *self-imposed* hell until they come to their senses.

Jesus took it all

The good news is: Jesus has already fulfilled God's justice, wrath and judgment. He took *our* injustice, wrath and judgment and died on the cross so that we could be set free from sin and death. His body was beaten and broken for our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing, and His blood was shed for our forgiveness. In His agony, Jesus cried out "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"⁸ He was crying *our* cry. Isn't that how we feel when our loved ones die? We cry, "My God, my God, why have you taken away my beloved?"

Some Christians *mistakenly* believe that God the Father forsook Jesus when He died on the cross. *That is not true at all.* The Father never forsook Jesus. And the Holy Spirit never forsook Jesus. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are *one* and they will *never* forsake each other. If that was so, there would be no God. The bond of love that exists between the Father, Son and Spirit *can never be broken* (even for a moment). No, the Father and the Spirit never forsook Jesus when He was dying—pouring out His life—on the cross. The Father

and Spirit were *in* Jesus, suffering alongside with Him. *All of God was suffering for us and with us (in the flesh).* Jesus' cry on the cross was our cry. He was vicariously echoing our hopeless plight when death strikes us or our loved ones. Jesus overcame and defeated sin and abolished all pain, suffering and death on the cross.⁹

Jesus' *incarnation*—His life, death, resurrection and ascension—was *for us* and on *our* behalf. He took our injustice, wrath and judgment upon Himself and nailed them to the cross. That was how God executed justice, wrath and judgment. He did that *for us* so that we could be justified, made right with God, and enter into a loving relationship with Him.

What about justice for Jesus? He never sinned, so death had no claim over Him. As justice demands, He rose from the grave and ascended to heaven as a *perfect* human being and exchanged that life with us. He assumed a *glorified* body, the type you and I will

receive, when we are resurrected. *Jesus is our new humanity.* That is how we become holy, perfect and righteous.

Salvation offered freely

In Jesus, God has already dealt with all our sin, injustice, wrath and judgment once and for all. So there is no condemnation whatsoever for those who are in Christ.¹⁰ Jesus has given us His perfect humanity. Not only has He made us holy and perfect, He also shares with us His power, riches and glory which He has received from His

Father. Thus God shares with us *everything—His life and everything that He has.*

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples and commanded them to go and preach the Gospel [Good News] to all nations. Why? So that people everywhere can know the gospel, repent of their unbelief, and be set free from their sin and bondage. As they come to know who God is and who they are in Christ [children of God], they will experience God's grace—love, forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance, adoption and eternal life through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will empower them to live their new life in Christ and experience God's love, joy, peace and freedom. That is really good news for us. □

“Jesus’ incarnation—His life, death, resurrection and ascension—was for us and on our behalf. He took our injustice, wrath and judgment upon Himself and nailed them to the cross.”

¹ Luke 15

² Isaiah, 59:14–16; Ephesians 1:9–11

³ Isaiah 59:14–17

⁴ Hosea 11:8–9

⁵ Acts 3:21

⁶ Acts 17:31;

2 Timothy 4:1

⁷ 1 Peter 4:17–18

⁸ Matthew 27:46

⁹ Revelation 21:4

¹⁰ Romans 8:1

Real heroes—could you be among them?

Superhero movies have become so common that we can expect some blockbusters to come our way on a regular basis. Such movies are greatly entertaining especially when we witness extraordinary feats of bravery and heroism which leaves us feeling elated. Such heroes are mostly found in movies but on rare occasions there are real heroes who accomplish the impossible by going against insurmountable odds to accomplish feats that no one else could or are willing to do.

One such man was Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat who served as Vice-Consul for the Japanese Empire in Lithuania during World War II. Sugihara helped thousands of Jews escape slaughter at the hands of the Nazis by issuing travel visas to Japan for those trapped in Lithuania and German occupied Poland. The Japanese authorities required all those who applied for visas to come to Japan to have another visa available to exit to a third country. Most of the Jews who were desperate to escape had no such privilege. Sugihara seeing the plight of these Jews, decided to issue visas to them by directly ignoring the instructions of his superiors. He also convinced Soviet officials who agreed to let the Jews travel through the country via the Trans-Siberian Railway. This extraordinary man spent almost 18 to 20 hours each day writing and approving visas to the Jews who crowded his consulate. When his consulate was closed and he had to leave, Sugihara continued to write visas from his hotel, then at the railway station and continued issuing them from his train as it was leaving, tossing the visas out from his compartment window to the crowds of desperate refugees rushing to grab them. This humble man even asked forgiveness from the crowd as he was departing, anguished that he could do no more. All this he did at great personal risk. The Simon Wiesenthal Centre has estimated that Chiune Sugihara issued transit visas for about 6,000 Jews and because of that 40,000 descendants of the Jewish refugees are alive today because of his actions. Sugihara himself was relieved of his duties when he got home and later even had to survive by doing menial jobs. It was only when a large Jewish delegation from around the world, including the Israeli ambassador to Japan, showed up at his funeral did his neighbours find out what he had done.

Another extraordinary individual was John Rabe, a German businessman who saved the lives of thousands of Chinese civilians from the Japanese army during the Nanking occupation. He established the Nanking



by
**Devaraj
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Safety Zone that sheltered 200,000 Chinese civilians from being slaughtered by the occupying Japanese army. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese were killed during the Nanking massacre and the only refuge was at the compound of John Rabe's residence and the Safety Zone that he established. What was unique was that Rabe was also a member of the Nazi Party. Rabe showed films and photographs of Japanese atrocities in lecture presentations in Berlin. He even wrote to Hitler to use his influence to persuade the Japanese to stop their murderous campaign. As a result, Rabe was arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo and his letter was never delivered to Hitler. After the war Rabe and his family ended up in abject poverty to the extent that his family had to live on dry bread and wild seeds with soup. In 1948 the people of Nanking heard of his plight and immediately went to his aid by raising money and sending food to his family. In 1950 Rabe died of a stroke and in 1997 his tombstone was moved

from Berlin to Nanjing where it received a place of honour at the Nanking massacre memorial site. At perilous times rare individuals like Chiune Sugihara and John Rabe have saved the lives of thousands when others stood by doing nothing. But there is one hero that no one can match. His sacrifice has saved the lives of the whole of humanity. That hero is none other than Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind.

In a world where humanity received the death penalty for sin, no individual could be saved from eternal death. But God

Almighty's love for humanity was so infinite that He sent His only begotten Son who existed eternally as the Word to pay the price of sin on our behalf.¹ Jesus took upon Himself the penalty that we received and paid the price by sacrificing Himself, enduring humiliation and a very horrifying death by crucifixion. Then through His resurrection from death, humanity received eternal life whereby everyone has the sure hope to exist eternally with God.² Just as few realised how much Sugihara and Rabe had done, few also realise and understand how much God has done for humanity. We are so divided in beliefs, traditions, religions, politics and self-interests that we do not know that God has sheltered us under His wings through Jesus Christ. Through Christ, death cannot take humanity permanently as we are in His safety zone. What a magnificent gift that is available for every human being who is willing to receive Christ. Would you be a real hero and help others to come to the shelter of Christ? Tell them that the sanctuary of Christ is never shut. □



¹ John 3:16

² John 11:25-26

Walking with God

In her well-known book entitled “Springs in the Valley”, Lettie Cowman writes about a traveller making a long journey deep into the jungles of Africa. African men carried their load and travelled far with them on the first day.

The travellers were hopeful of a speedy journey. But the Africans refused to move on the second day. They simply sat and rested. When the Africans were asked about this strange behaviour, the travellers were informed that they had gone too fast the first day, and they were now waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies.

To what extent do we allow the constant swirl of the rat race to smother our souls to the point where we become spiritually empty? As author Richard Innes noted: “Beware of the barrenness of a busy life.”

The secular world view tends to separate the spiritual

by
**Bob
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and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine....I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing.”

The Greek word for remain is *meno*, which means ‘to take up permanent residence’. Branches don’t tap into the vine occasionally but are firmly attached to their source of life. We have been called to take up permanent residence in Christ, remaining attached to Him at all times as the source of our lives.

Spiritual contemplators, Brothers Lawrence and de Caussade, encourage us to aspire towards making our entire lives a sustained conversation with God. It’s all about living with God in the now and bringing Christ into the centre of everything we do, moment by moment. Authentic followers of Christ do not separate



from ordinary daily experiences. This invariably plunges our thinking and activities into secular mode as we find ourselves chasing after the approval of others and falling into the trap of self-centred behaviour patterns.

It is essential that we become attuned to the surrounding presence of God as we go about our daily activities. God is described in the Scriptures as being omnipresent—in all places.¹ Theologian C. H. Spurgeon wrote: “God does really look at you as if you were the only being His hands had ever made.” Remaining aware of God’s constant indwelling presence is the vital key to enjoying a vibrant relationship with Him. We read in Acts 17:28: “...in Him we live and move and have our being...”

John 15:4–5 takes it a step further: “Remain in me,

the sacred from the secular. Their entire lives become sacred. Brother Lawrence adds: “Stop and agree with the Lord to live the rest of your days in His sacred presence.”

The more we practise the presence of God, moment by moment, the more we will discover an entirely different kind of motivation for doing things. Our real worth becomes rooted in the Triune God as we express the fullness of His divine love in every facet of our lives and relationships.

Cultivate the practice of opening your life to God in the first waking moments of each new day and invite Him to be your constant companion as He walks with you in all your activities throughout the day. Herein lies the essence of spiritual transformation. □

¹ Psalm 139:1–10

Believe in Him

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, was curious about who Jesus was, so he initiated a conversation with Him. Jesus said this about Himself, “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.” This verse, John 3:16, is often quoted, but it sounds too simple and too easy. Just “believe” in Jesus and receive eternal life? Is that all God requires for us to be given the priceless gift of eternal life?

Let’s examine what Jesus meant. It is important!

Belief implies understanding

Another Bible verse tells us that we must “believe in His name”.¹ Here is an aspect of “believe” that we could easily overlook. In scripture we see that God often gave people names that indicated their character or their God-given mission in life. For example, when Jacob’s character changed for the better, God changed his name from “Jacob” which means “supplanter” to “Israel” or “ruling with God”.²

In the case of Jesus we see that God named Him before He was born. An angel appeared to Joseph, telling him to “name Him ‘Jesus’ because He will save His people from their sins.”³ “Jesus” means “Saviour”. His God-given name identifies Him as the Saviour of humanity. To “believe in His name” implies belief that He is *the* Saviour, not merely a good man or a knowledgeable teacher, but *the* Saviour of the world.

Now, if you are starting to be concerned because you are not yet sure that He is the Saviour, that is OK. God advises us to test and prove all things, and to cling to that which is valid.⁴ Proving that He is the Saviour often takes time and effort in personal study and prayer.

We should never be embarrassed to express our questions and doubts directly to God, and ask Him to guide us into accurate and full understanding. We can follow the example of the man with wavering belief who was face to face with Jesus and cried out, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”⁵ Perhaps you are like me when I was first introduced to Christianity—my belief was weak, uncertain, and wavering. But after studying, praying, attending church services and listening to sermons, I became assured that He is indeed the Saviour.

Belief will lead to commitment

The word “believe” in John 3:16 comes from the Greek word *pisteuo* that means to receive information, accept it as true, and having enough confidence in it to act on it. That’s commitment—much more than intellectual knowledge! When we come to fully believe that Jesus is our Saviour who guides our lives in unseen ways for our good we will trust Him, strive to obey Him, worship Him, and rely on Him to guide our lives. Some people respond quickly, others take longer, but eventually God will lead us to willingly commit our lives to Him.

Jesus told His disciples, “...surely I am with you



by
Paul Hailey

always, to the very end of the age.”⁶ When we recognise His commitment and love for us, in spite of our flaws, and the fact that He willingly paid the penalty for all of our sins and flaws, we can’t help but humbly respond as King David did when he prayed, “Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me.”⁷

Belief will lead to a changed life

In many Bible verses Jesus is called by the name or title “Lord”, and He did acknowledge that He indeed is our Lord, or Master. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.”⁸

Our natural human desire is to be free and independent, not subservient to anyone. But when we realise that Jesus is a loving Master who wants the best for us, and who teaches and leads us to do those things that are good for us we will willingly accept Him as our Lord. Then He, through the Holy Spirit, will work inside us, improving our character. We will find ourselves becoming more patient, more loving of other people. His teachings may seem numerous, but they boil down to two things—love for God and love for other people.

Jesus said that those who are wise and put His teachings into action will be building their lives on a secure foundation that will never crumble.⁹

It may seem like we give up our own lives and our own desires to submit to Jesus’ teachings. After all, it does take time to serve Him. But I have learned that the more fully we live as Jesus would have us live, the more fulfilled our lives become.

Jesus said He came to give us life to the full, to make our lives complete and satisfying.¹⁰ That has been my experience. I have had far more pleasant experiences and opportunities, and peace of mind during difficulties, than I could have imagined.

We actually become freer when our belief in Him reaches the point when we truly understand who He is and yield to Him as He works in our lives. As we do so, our burdens become lighter, and we gain assurance that He will bring everything, including difficulties to a good conclusion.

Truly it is a joy to serve our Saviour, and to be assured of everlasting life.

So, just *believe* in Him? Yes, but let’s strive to make that belief complete, by proving that He is our Saviour, committing to act upon His teachings, and asking Him to lead us into a life of actively serving Him and our fellow man. In doing this, we will reap an eternal reward. □

¹ John 1:12

² Genesis 32:28

³ Matthew 1:21

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:21

⁵ Mark 9:24

⁶ Matthew 28:20

⁷ Psalm 31:3

⁸ John 13:13

⁹ Matthew 7:24–27

¹⁰ John 10:10

Mom, I'm so proud of you!

When my mother, Mary, was 5, her mother told her to clean up her plate and not waste one bit because “there are children in Africa who are starving”. With the simple logic and honesty of a 5-year old, Mom instantly responded, “Well, let’s give this food to them!”

Time passed. Mom grew up, married and had a family of her own. It was not an easy life. She had years of struggle and hardship, personal pain and little financial security. In the midst of her trials, Mom discovered the love of Christ, and a new journey began.

For a time, her faith in what God had done for her was enough. She enjoyed the blessings and she was able to stay calm in the storms of life, confident in the Lord’s ever presence. But the time came when Mom felt the calling for more.

One day, when Mom was 46 years old, her husband, Cliff, asked her, “If time and money were of no importance, what would you do?” Without hesitation,

Mom replied, “Go to Africa and adopt twelve children.” The answer surprised her as much as those who heard it. Although she was living in the mountains of Colorado, Africa was close to her heart, but she didn’t know why. She trusted that God would reveal it to her when it was time.

One day soon after, Cliff came across a book about the plight of AIDS orphans in Ethiopia and gave it to her. The story broke her heart. For two years, Mom and Cliff planned and saved for the trip of a lifetime.

They joined a trip organised by a small non-profit group that arranged for Ethiopian orphans to be adopted.

Their tour took them to orphanages in the capital, Addis Ababa, and several surrounding cities. One day they came to an orphanage that was not sponsored by American adoption agencies. Mom remembers, “My heart sank as the little children were herded into a large tent. I noticed that the teenagers were left around the edges of the compound. I could feel Jesus pushing me toward these older orphans, as if He were saying, “They are why you are here.”

Mom resisted for a moment, and then jumped in with both feet. She walked up to a young man, stuck out her hand and said, “My name is Mary, what is your name?”

“Assefa,” he replied.

“What are you going to study when you go to college?” she asked. Assefa’s head dropped as he replied, “Lady, we don’t go to college. We are orphans.”

She asked again, “Assefa, what are you going to study

by
Julie Frantz

in college?”

“Lady, you don’t understand, orphans don’t go to college,” he replied adamantly. Mom persisted, “Assefa, what are you going to study when you go to college?”

This time he raised his head, smiled and answered, “I want to be a doctor. My father and mother died of AIDS, and then I cared for my brother and sister while they were dying of AIDS. I want to be a doctor and cure AIDS.”

At that moment Mom knew that God had sent her to the orphanage for a specific reason, and that reason was standing in front of her. God was asking her to be His feet, His hands and His love for these older teens that no one wanted to adopt.

Today, six years later, Mom is co-founder of the non-profit organisation, HE4EO (Higher Education 4 Ethiopian’s Orphans). This organisation provides financial scholarships for older orphans to attend college. Each year she travels to Ethiopia to enrol

older students into college and provide them with clothing and other needs. When Mom said she wanted to adopt twelve kids, she greatly underestimated the number.

Mom and Cliff continue to visit Ethiopia, taking with them sewing machines, looms and woodworking tools, so they can offer vocational training for orphans not qualified to go to college. Even more important, they bring their love.

These young people have a strong desire

to give someone the great love they have in their hearts. “I never knew love like that until I went to the orphanages,” Mom told me. “We spent countless hours just talking to the orphans; listening to their stories, their hope and their dreams as well as praying with them. These young people crave time and attention. Twenty-three hours on a plane, sleeping in a not-so-clean guest house, eating food I really don’t like much, breathing polluted air, bathing in dirty water, sometimes wearing my clothes for days and hardly ever getting a good night’s sleep is a small price to pay for the difference we make in each life that we are so blessed to touch.”

Mom’s life has taught me that the gospel is not just good news about salvation. It is an invitation to join God in what He is already doing, building His kingdom of love and doing His will “on earth as it is in heaven”. She gives God the glory.

Mom, I am so very proud of you! □



What grace teaches

The greatest difference between the Christian faith and all the other religions of the world can be summed up in a single word: grace. Christ died for us while we were still sinners, the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 5, verse 8. God did not wait for us to become good or righteous before He acted to save us from our sins. God loves us, and His forgiveness, His grace, comes before our ever believing the gospel.

Our faith is in something that was already true before we even knew about it—before we ever believed.

That's what grace is: forgiveness that is undeserved, unearned.

When I was a boy, I learned a lesson about grace that I've never forgotten. I was about 11-years-old, and I was playing with a baseball behind our house in Chicago. One thing led to another, and before long the baseball found its way through one of our windows.

Now my dad was the kind of old country disciplinarian who believed firmly in the proverb, "spare the rod and spoil the child". I'm sure I was pale with fear when he called me into the house to face the consequences of my carelessness.

But then something amazing happened. When I walked in and looked up at him, towering over me as he did at that time, I saw something different in his face. He didn't look furious—as I fully expected him to look. Instead, he looked deep in thought, like he was studying me. After what seemed like forever, he finally said, "You deserve a spanking, but I'm going to give you grace instead. You know what that means? It means don't be so careless next time."

I like to call that "the spanking I didn't get". I remember it more clearly, and it had a greater impact on me than any punishment I ever got. It not only taught me to be more careful where I threw balls around, it taught me the joy of extending grace to others.

And in time it also made it plain to me what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote in Titus 2:11-14, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good."

No, God didn't wait for us to become righteous before He acted in love, mercy and grace to save us.

Experience is indeed a great teacher, but grace is an even better one. □



by
**Dr. Joseph
Tkach**



Responding to God

by
Tammy Tkach

When I began taking medication for a minor skin condition, I was told that three out of 10 people don't see results. It hadn't occurred to me that a medication might not work, and I left hoping I'd be one of the lucky seven. I kind of wished the doctor hadn't told me, because it bothered me that I might be wasting my time and money, besides risking unpleasant side effects.

At the end of my second month of treatment, the doctor said with a smile, "You're a responder!" It was working and I was relieved and happy. I kept thinking about how she called me a responder. In this case, my body responded to the medication, but my thoughts soon turned to how I am doing as another kind of responder.

To respond is to do one or more things as a result of an event or action of another. We first notice or hear, then we act. In the case of God's interaction with humanity, He revealed Himself in the Old Testament in various ways and the people responded, sometimes with fear and sometimes with obedience—or lack of it. In the New Testament, God revealed Himself in the person of Jesus and the response of the religious leaders was to have Him killed, because He was a threat to the status quo.

God formed His plan of salvation before the foundation of the world. He loved us while we were still His enemies. He reaches out to us even when we don't want to be reached. He never gives up; His love is never-ending.

How does He want us to respond? "Follow God's example, therefore," the apostle Paul wrote, "as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."¹ Jesus said, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."² He wants us to respond in kind, to love Him and to love others.

We have a choice as to how we'll respond—or not—to the Holy Spirit each day. The trouble is, sometimes we respond well, and sometimes we don't. But when it comes to our relationship with God, there's something we should never forget—Jesus is the perfect Responder. He responds for us even when our responses are weak. That's why Paul wrote, "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"³

We can trust Jesus to be our all in all, and knowing that He is, we don't have to wonder if we're one of the three out of seven who don't respond. In Him, we're all responders. □

¹ Ephesians 5:1-2

² John 15:12

³ Romans 1:17

No teacher should strive to make men think as he thinks, but to lead them to the living Truth, to the Master Himself, of whom alone they can learn anything.

George MacDonald

Revelation is a divine activity; not, therefore, a human achievement.

Revelation is not the same thing as discovery or the dawning of insight, or the emerging of a bright idea.

Revelation does not mean man finding God, but God finding man, God sharing His secrets with us, God showing us Himself.

J. I. Packer

Make it clear. Make it simple. Emphasise the essentials. Forget about impressing. Leave some things unsaid. Let the thing be simplified.

Charles R. Swindoll

A Christian should always remember that the value of his good works is not based on their number and excellence, but on the love of God which prompts him to do these things.

St. John of the Cross

If you keep watch over your hearts, and listen for the voice of God and learn of Him, in one short hour you can learn more from Him than you could learn from man in a thousand years.

Johann Tauler

Whosoever would be great in this world, Jesus was always telling them, is small; and whoever, through

Sayings of Rob Bell

If the gospel isn't good news for everybody, then it isn't good news for anybody. And this is because the most powerful things happen when the church surrenders its desire to convert people and convince them to join. It is when the church gives itself away in radical acts of service and compassion, expecting nothing in return, that the way of Jesus is most vividly put on display. To do this, the church must stop thinking about everybody primarily in categories of in or out, saved or not, believer or nonbeliever. Besides the fact that these terms are offensive to those who are the "un" and "non", they work against Jesus' teachings about how we are to treat each other. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbour, and our neighbour can be anybody. We are all created in the image of God, and we are all sacred, valuable creations of God. Everybody matters. To treat people differently based on who believes what is to fail to respect the image of God in everyone. As the book of James says, "God shows no favouritism." So we don't either.

Why blame the dark for being dark? It is far more helpful to ask why the light isn't as bright as it could be.

With every action, comment, conversation, we have the choice to invite Heaven or Hell to Earth.

Freedom is not having everything we crave, it's being able to go without the things we crave and being OK with it.

Our tendency in the midst of suffering is to turn on God. To get angry and bitter and shake our fist at the sky and say, "God, you don't know what it's like! You don't understand! You have no idea what I'm going through. You don't have a clue how much this hurts." The cross is God's way of taking away all of our accusations, excuses, and arguments. The cross is God taking on flesh and blood and saying, "Me too."

God has spoken, and everything else is commentary.

Your job is the relentless pursuit of who God made you to be. And anything else you do is sin and you need to repent of it.

Salvation is the entire universe being brought back into harmony with its maker.

his sense of God's greatness, realises his own smallness, becomes spiritually great.

Malcolm Muggeridge

Sit down before a fact as a little child, be prepared to give up every preconceived notion.

Thomas Huxley

A true Christian is a man who never for a moment forgets what

God has done for him in Christ, and whose whole attitude and whole activity have their root in the sentiment of gratitude.

John Baillie

Live your life as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as though you were to live forever.

Mahatma Gandhi

For one man who can introduce another to Jesus Christ by the way he lives and by the atmosphere of his life, there are a thousand who can only talk jargon about Him.

Oswald Chambers

The grace of God is infinite and eternal. As it had no beginning, so it can have no end, and being an attribute of God, it is as boundless as infinitude.

A. W. Tozer

Millions of evangelicals, thinking they are honouring the Scriptures, are interpreting the Scriptures on questions of science and world affairs in ways that fundamentally contradict the deeper, broader, and historically well-established meanings of the Bible itself.

Mark A. Noll

Your life is short, your duties many, your assistance great, and your reward sure; therefore faint not, hold on and hold up, in ways of well-doing, and heaven shall make amends for all.

Thomas Brooks

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,
P.O. Box 2043,
Pusat Bisnes Bukit Raja,
Pos Malaysia Bhd.,
40800 Shah Alam,
Selangor, Malaysia.

Whose hope?

They call it “going viral”. Almost overnight a video, a news item, or perhaps a piece of music rockets from relative obscurity to universal recognition. It happened with Pachelbel’s *Canon in D Major*. He wrote it about 1680, but it lay forgotten for three centuries. Then, in about 1980, it began appearing everywhere—advertisements, background music to movies and TV series, and as an entrance march at weddings.

Scriptures can be like that, too. Like this one: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

You’ll find it buried in the writings of the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah. In chapter 29, verse 11, to be precise. I probably have read that verse many times since I began studying the Bible. But it never really stuck out. Then I began to see it everywhere. Christian ministries that focused on “health and wealth” loved it. It seemed to say exactly what they were offering—a gospel that promised the good life now. Never mind that it was from the Old Testament; it delivered the good news that God wanted to bless us and prosper us, and it was His plan to do so. No wonder the verse has become so popular.

The problem is, health and wealth now is not what this verse is about. To read that into it is to wrench it out of context. I am not suggesting that it is not God’s ultimate will to prosper us and give us a bright future—that is a topic well worth exploring. But to use this verse to buttress that argument is to miss its real point, the one that really needs to be made today. Especially as our traditional Christianity is in decline, and many of our congregations are made up mainly of older people, clinging desperately to keep the faith alive.

So let’s let Jeremiah make his point. To do that, we first need to get the context.

The context

This verse is part of a letter that Jeremiah wrote about 2,500 years ago. Jeremiah, you remember, was a prophet that God sent to the people of ancient Judah to urge them to mend their ways and turn back to Him to avoid national ruin.

It was a thankless task. Jeremiah was ignored, ridiculed and put in prison. Then the wheels came off. The Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah, executed most of the royal family and took the elite of the nation—its priests, nobility, scholars and other leaders—into exile in Babylon.

The nation was stripped of talent and leadership.

Jeremiah, because he had foretold the Babylonian victory, was well treated by the invaders and allowed to stay in Jerusalem. He continued to minister to his people—not by crowing “I told you so” but with messages of comfort and compassion.

Meanwhile, the exiles in Babylon were restless. After the initial shock of deportation, it seems they lived in



by
John Halford

relative freedom. But like all exiles, they yearned to return to their homeland. Some of the exiled priests took advantage of the situation and began preaching that the exile would soon be over and the captives would soon be repatriated.

However, a quick return to the homeland was not what God had in mind. He inspired Jeremiah to write to the exiles and explain to them the reality of their situation. That letter is preserved in the Bible: “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’

“Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,’ declares the Lord.”¹

This was not what the exiles wanted to hear. God was telling them, through this prophet they had repudiated, but whose warnings had been validated, that they should not expect an early return home.

How long would this state of affairs last? “This is what the Lord says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place.’”²

And then comes the oft-misapplied verse: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.”

God was not abandoning His people. Everything He had promised would eventually happen.

“I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”³

But not just yet. The generation that had been taken captive was not going home any time soon. It would not happen until their grandchildren were mature adults. So they needed to face facts, settle down, make Babylon their home, re-establish their families, start businesses and work for—not against—the best interests of their captors.

It seems as though the captives listened to Jeremiah this time. Some, such as Daniel and his three famous friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, rose to positions of great influence in the Babylonian government and became trusted advisors

What future?

to Nebuchadnezzar. And when the 70 years were fulfilled, some leading Jews were allowed to return to re-establish their nation—the nation to which the Messiah would eventually come.

With that as a background, let's look at this verse again.

Hope deferred

God was not promising the exiles in Babylon immediate relief from their circumstances. He was telling them that He had not forgotten them. They were still the “chosen people”, and their nation did indeed have a hope and a future. And even though the vast majority of them would not see that hope fulfilled in their lifetimes, they had a responsibility toward it.

Many people reading this article are older. Perhaps we have been Christians for decades, working, praying and contributing to the life of the church. We have lived with the expectation that our work would be crowned with success. Our congregations would thrive and our influence would grow. Many of us have lived with the very real hope that we were the “end time” generation who would see the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. That expectation provided an impetus that motivated us to make extraordinary sacrifices. We wanted to be ready. But as the years have gone by and our understanding has grown, we have accepted the strong likelihood that we are not that generation. So what do we do now?

We are a people not used to delaying gratification. We buy now and pay later. Advertising tell us “we deserve” it and “owe it to ourselves” to get what we want, do what we want and be what we want, when we want it. So when we read that God wants us to have “hope and a future”, we want it now. And if it looks like that won't happen, it is tempting to lose interest and let the world

and its needs pass us by.

Yes, the economy is in trouble, the environment needs attention, the spiritual state of our nations is decaying, our congregations are dwindling and religion, as we have known it, is on the ropes. Well, all that will probably not change in your lifetime. Maybe you should just sit it out.

It is just as well the captives in Babylon did not think like that. They did as Jeremiah instructed. Those captives had no mandate to give up and drop out. The dream was not over—they had work to do. A foundation had to be laid on which the future generations of chosen people could be established. They listened, and out of what seemed like a hopeless

situation, the nation was eventually restored. Then, “when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son.”⁴

Jeremiah's letter, put in its proper context, should resonate with us. Things have not worked out quite as we expected, but God still has expectations of us, just as He did those ancient captives in Babylon. They were a part of the story—the epic saga of how God was redeeming the world in His Son, Jesus Christ.

We are a part of that same story. As Jesus explained to His disciples, “others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.”⁵ There are times when the activity is intense and “the harvest is plentiful.”⁶ At other times it may look as if not much is happening, and we must remember “how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.”⁷

“So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit.”⁸ □



¹ Jeremiah 29:4–9

² Jeremiah 29:10

³ Jeremiah 29:14

⁴ Galatians 4:4

⁵ John 4:38

⁶ Matthew 9:37

⁷ James 5:7

⁸ Galatians 6:9

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