

THE Plain Truth

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Dec-Jan 2013

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The unbreakable bond

There is a song with lyrics that goes something like this:

*You'll never let me go
Never ever let me go*

This article tells us how true that is.

God created human beings for loving relationships with him, with one another and with nature (environment). Such relationships would produce satisfying lives. God never intended human beings to live lonely or independent lives.

Relationships gone awry

It was a great plan, but Satan hijacked it, albeit temporarily. God gave Adam (and Eve) some basic instructions. He told them to trust and rely on him for everything. Specifically, He told them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (picturing life apart from God) as that would kill them. But they disobeyed. They listened to Satan (serpent) and ate the forbidden fruit.¹ Their sin led to a relationship breakdown.

Sin alienated their relationship with God. The alienation came from their side, not from God's side. The alienation was in their *minds*.² Their minds became distorted. Before their sin, they saw God as a loving friend, but now they saw him as an unforgiving and revengeful God. So they dared not approach him for fear of rejection and/or punishment.

Sin also strained their relationship with each other. They could no longer trust each other completely. Adam

blamed Eve for causing him to eat the forbidden fruit. Eve probably blamed Adam for not warning her against eating it as he knew it was wrong. She also blamed the devil for lying to her about the consequences of eating that fruit.

Sin not only estranged their relationship with God and with each other, it also dented their relationship with nature. Thorns and thistles grew. The ground was no longer producing the bumper crop that it used to produce before.

That's what sin does to us. It ruins relationships. It distorts our minds and blurs our vision. Instead of seeing reality, we see a make-believe world. Instead of embracing truth, we embrace lies. Instead of embracing true humanity, we embrace a false humanity. Instead of seeking the true God, we seek fake gods.

But God's plan can never be derailed. He knew man would sin. So he planned, long before the foundation of the world, to send his Son to reconcile and restore all relationships.³ How?

by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

Relationships restored

Adam's sin brought a relationship breakdown. But God sent another Adam, Jesus Christ, to heal and reverse the broken relationship.

God knew the first Adam (representing the human race) would sin, given the freedom of choice and the devil's presence. So he sent the second Adam Jesus (also representing the human race) to reverse the process.

Jesus lived our life as a fellow human being. He lived a sinless life for us and in our place and gave it to us as a free gift. He also took our sin upon himself and died on the cross so that death has no claim over us. He rose from the grave and ascended into heaven for us. Seated at the right hand of God, he has received glory, honor, wisdom and riches for us. He has become our perfect humanity. That's how we become perfect. As he dwells in us and we dwell in him, we participate in his risen, glorified life.

Jesus came 2,000 years ago to unite God and Man forever. That union—bond—will not be like the loose human alliances. It will be so tight that it can never ever be broken even if one is hell-bent! There will be no separation whatsoever between God and Man,⁴ or for that matter, between God, Man and Nature. As God-Man and as Creator-Sustainer, He holds the entire creation together.⁵ He dwells in the creation and the creation dwells in him. How?

Incarnation. Jesus came as God-Man to unite God and Man through His incarnate self. As God, he has brought all of God (his love, kindness, goodness, passion, grace, mercy, wisdom, power, glory) to Man, and as Man, he has taken all of humanity (our doubts, fears, failures, weaknesses, helplessness) to God. As the God-Man, Jesus has forged an unbreakable bond between God and Man. And as Creator-Sustainer, he has united all creation to God.

The human marriage, however intimate, can only remotely reflect that unbreakable bond that Jesus has forged for us. This is because Christ will always be in us and we will always be in him.⁶ The triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is for us, with us and in us. As our (Church's) loving husband, he holds us passionately in his arms and sings into our ears "you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh".⁷

This is the true Christmas story. So, let's celebrate Christmas—celebrate this unbreakable bond! □



¹ Genesis 3

² Colossians 1:21

³ Ephesians 1:4–11; Acts 3:21

⁴ Romans 8:35–39

⁵ Colossians 1:17

⁶ John 14:20

⁷ Genesis 2:23

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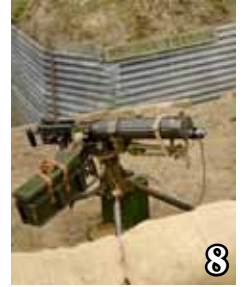
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What our readers say:

I happened to pick up a copy of this magazine while I was at a hair salon in Johor and I was indeed amazed at how informative and educational this magazine turned out to be. I immediately took an instant interest to it and quickly jotted down the email address. I would like to request that my name be included in the next mailing list and if it's not too much trouble, I would also greatly appreciate it if you could send me the back issues of this magazine for this year. Hope to hear from you soon. Thank you and God bless your good work.

Alice Joseph

Ed.: Happy to hear that you like the Plain Truth magazine. Sure, we will put your name on our mailing list. We will also send you back issues if we have stock. You can also access our website www.gci-malaysia.org for back issues.

All these years I never really understood the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation and their implications to our human life. Your articles have explained clearly these two doctrines and why they are central to understanding the gospel. Trinity tells us that God is a relationship God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit enjoy an internal relationship that is so rich, wholesome, vibrant, joyful and satisfying. God created us so that we might participate in this wonderful relationship. That's truly amazing! Incarnation tells that the Son or Word of God became human (without ceasing to be God) so that He (Jesus) could unite Man and God within His incarnate self. As God, Jesus brought all of God to us, and as Man, He took all of humanity to God. He demonstrated God's love to us perfectly and at the same time offered perfect obedience to God in our place and on our behalf. And He has given His perfect humanity to us as a free gift. Your articles have expounded these seldom discussed doctrines so brilliantly. Thank you!

JS

Ed: Thanks. Like you, we too have been growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:8).

Thank you for the bible-based knowledge of the Truth of God that strengthens our lives as your readers. Surely our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ will pour out His

abundant blessings on those who proclaim the Divine Truth and not the distorted gospel as many do today. Attached is the original copy of my banking deposit of RM150 as offering to the mission of THE PLAIN TRUTH.

Anonymous

THE PLAIN TRUTH has got many interesting topics. Enclosed please find a small donation.

**Jagdev Singh
Shah Alam**

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me to understand and increase my bible knowledge. It is very informative even to beginners in Christ. It refreshes my thinking on the Word of God. Keep up the good works.

**Palani Maniam
Klang**

THE PLAIN TRUTH is really interesting and meaningful. It is a very good magazine. It enhances my faith and helps me in my daily life. It also helps me to find answers to life's most important questions. Thanks for the PLAIN TRUTH.

**Chong Khen Kiong
Kota Kinabalu**

THE PLAIN TRUTH discusses topics which are not generally preached over the pulpits, which makes being a child of God and living it out very interesting and relevant.

**R Y F Thong
Seremban**

I love reading THE PLAIN TRUTH as it lifts me up when I am down. So keep on doing the good work and God's blessing will follow you.

**Marina Peter
Klang**

I have been receiving your wonderful magazine for the past 3 years. Even though I am a born again Christian, THE PLAIN TRUTH has increased my bible knowledge greatly.

**David Nadar
Banting**

THE PLAIN TRUTH is good for everyone regardless of age or religion. The topics are interesting. After reading it, my English has improved and my knowledge

has increased. Please continue sending me the magazine for my reading. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated. Thank you.

**See Yok Bee
Kulai**

THE PLAIN TRUTH is very informative, provides eye-opening spiritual knowledge from the Word of God, the Bible. The articles are well written and explained clearly. Keep going without hindrance in your wonderful gospel publication. My best compliments to the Editorial Team who has sacrificed their time and energy to bring forward a beautiful spiritual magazine. May God bless you all.

**Ramachanderan
Klang**

THE PLAIN TRUTH is insightful, inspiring and interesting to read. Keep up the wonderful work! God bless everyone always.

**A Reetharani
Klang**

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

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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.

A sign forever

Signs are important. We could hardly get along without them. We have signs for road safety, for identifying stores, indicating dangers like poison, radiation or high voltage wires, for finding geographic destinations, or merely navigating our way through an airport or sports stadium.

Signs were also important in the ancient world, including the ancient nation of Israel. The God of Israel gave signs to his people and used them for their benefit. One of the most notable was, of course, the rainbow after Noah's flood. Another was the Sabbath rest on the seventh day of the week. This sign was given to Israel "forever".¹

Some have thought the particular sign of the Sabbath rest given to Israel was so important that we are today under the same obligation. After all, some argue, it was given "forever." So why shouldn't this Old Covenant instruction hold for today?

The important thing to recognize here is that what is eternal is called a "sign." Christian pastors and teachers down through history have

given great consideration to signs, as we find them referred to in both the Old and New Testaments. It is widely recognized and important to understand that the purpose of a sign is to point to something else, something greater than itself. For example, when no cat is in sight, the word "cat" spoken or written refers our minds to a particular kind of animal. We think of it, even though it's not there in front of us. Much of our ordinary language involves the use of signs to point to something that exists but might not be currently available for viewing. It could be said that signs point to what they signify, to the things themselves.

We find in the Bible that the signs God first gave to Israel all pointed to something greater to come, often to God's invisible character or to his future actions. So the word of the Lord comes to Israel: "I will be your God and you shall be my people." "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt."

by
Gary Deddo

Many theologians down through the ages have recognized a pattern. The signs God gives are often promises. And what is promised is the thing signified. Israel was given the promise of a land. The promise wasn't the land, but it pointed forward to and anticipated its fulfillment, when Israel would enter the Promised Land. The sign was the promise; entering the land was the fulfillment. Furthermore Christian teachers have recognized again and again that the signs given in the Old Testament (or under the Old Covenant) were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In



fact, Jesus himself was the fulfillment of the sign of the promised Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise of deliverance, of salvation.

Now how does this apply to the eternal sign of the Sabbath? Jesus himself helps us answer. Some of the religious teachers of Judaism in his day accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath. How did Jesus reply? Does he say to them, "Well, you have your interpretation of this sign, and I have mine. The people will have to choose between our two interpretations as best they can." No, that is not what he said. Rather, he pointed out that he is Lord of the Sabbath.² He created the Sabbath. He was there to show them what the Sabbath was really all about. He is the source of our Sabbath rest. In fact, it turns out that Jesus himself fulfills the promise of Sabbath rest.³ He is our Sabbath rest as we are joined to our Eternal Great High Priest. The sign of the Sabbath pointed to its fulfillment in Jesus. He is the

“thing” signified.

The entire Gospel of John is dedicated to help us see the radical difference between the signs God gave and the reality they point to, namely Jesus himself. John the Baptist is the sign, not the promised one himself. So he must “decrease” and Jesus must “increase” in significance. Jesus does not just tell us the truth, show us the way or give us life. Rather he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the light of the world, he is the bread of life, he is the water of life, he is the resurrection. He is “I am.” All the signs given by God were meant to lead us to the Son of God incarnate.

He is, in his own person, the fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus is both the Giver and the Gift.

We have already mentioned that the purpose of a sign in the working of God is to point us to the reality. Think of road signs pointing out the direction to a big city—say Chicago. Some of them are far away and pointing southward. Some are closer and pointing eastward. There’s no limit to the number and position of signs directing you. But if accurate and clear, each one gives direction for locating the city of Chicago. No one confuses the signs with the reality, the city itself. But that does not make them of no importance. If you’ve never been to Chicago and don’t know the way, accurate signs are helpful—for *finding the destination*, not loitering around the signposts.

Now think what happens when you reach the actual city, and perhaps even “city center.” You’re glad for the signs and that they were accurate enough to get you to the city. But once you’re there, say at Millennium Park in Chicago, they are no longer important. The city itself, with its skyscrapers, parks, museums and lakefront, far exceeds anything those signs could possibly indicate about its true grandeur. And consider, of what further use are those signs? Not much, if any at all. Their job was to get you to the city. Once there, they have no further use—even though you remain grateful for them.

Now imagine someone standing smack-dab in city center and demanding that you show him a sign that pointed the way to Chicago. If he didn’t recognize that he was already in the city, would the sign help? Or suppose he protested that he could not possibly be in Chicago, since he saw no signs on the way that were

anything like what surrounded him now. Thinking the city would be much the same as the signs pointing the way, Chicago should be like a huge flat panel, perhaps with huge, fancy letters, and lights illuminating them, spelling out in glorious brilliance the name “CHICAGO.” If that was what he was looking for, how would you answer? Might you be just a little exasperated?

If you actually produced something like he expected, pointing in some direction, would it be of any use? In fact, if he followed the direction of the arrow on even an impressive and imposing sign you produced for him, where would it take him? Toward Chicago? No. When

you have arrived at the city center, an arrow pointing in any direction would lead you away from and eventually out of the city. That sign would actually be misleading! But those other signs still standing outside the city would be of useful service once again. They remain permanently helpful to those who have not yet arrived at City Hall. But they have relatively little meaning once you’ve reached your destination.

The theological signs of the Bible, whether to ancient Israel or those recorded in the New Testament regarding Jesus and the early church, function much like this. The signs pointed to the reality, where the promises God made were fulfilled in person. Those signs stand as permanent, even eternal, pointers to the reality. But once you’ve followed their lead and have met the reality—Jesus himself—they have fulfilled their purpose and are no longer needed. They are superceded by the reality. You could never confuse the sign with the far greater reality of what they pointed to.

Perhaps this is why, when asked, Jesus sometimes refused to give another

sign. He told them they already had plenty of signs. No sign will help them recognise the reality when it’s standing there in front of them face to face.

So when we read that God has given us certain signs forever, this is true. They eternally point to the promised reality. But when you’ve met the Lord of All Signs, all others, having done their work, can now only have relative value—value relative to the Reality of their Lord. □



¹ Exodus 31:17

² Mark 2:28;
Matthew 12:8;
Luke 6:5

³ Hebrews 4:1–11

God wants all to be saved

Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to correct a few doctrinal problems in the church. He also sent Timothy a letter outlining his mission—a letter that was designed to be read to the entire congregation so that everyone would know that Timothy was acting with Paul’s authority.

Prayer for public peace (verses 1-3)

Paul included some instructions for what should be done in the church meetings: “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people.” The meetings would include prayer, and these prayers were to be positive, unlike the curses that became part of some synagogue liturgies.

But this was not just intercession for church members—the prayers were to be for all, including “kings and all those in authority.” Paul did not want the church to be elitist, nor become identified with an underground resistance movement. A parallel may be seen in the way that Judaism dealt with the Roman Empire. Although Jews could not worship the Emperor, they could offer worship to God on behalf of the emperor; they made prayers and sacrifices *for* him.¹

Similarly, Paul wants church members to pray for government leaders. The purpose is “that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” The early Christians were persecuted for the gospel, and for proclaiming allegiance to another Lord. They did not need to provoke officials even more by being anti-government agitators.

This approach has the approval of God himself: “This is good, and pleases God our Saviour.” Although the word “Saviour” usually refers to Jesus, in this case it seems to refer to the Father.

A message of salvation for all (verses 4-7)

Paul then includes an important digression about what God wants: “who wants all people to be saved...” Our prayers should not curse or condemn the rulers, because God does not want the worst for them. His desire for them is salvation—but this begins with an acceptance of the gospel message: “...and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

Does God always get what he wants? Will *everyone* be saved? Paul does not address that question, but it is obvious that God does not always get his wishes,

by
**Dr. Michael
Morrison**

at least not right away. Even now, almost 2000 years later, “all people” have not yet come to a knowledge of the gospel, much less accepted it and experienced salvation. God *wants* his children to love each other, but it doesn’t always happen. His will is that humans have wills of their own.

Paul supports his claim by giving reasons: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.”

There is only one God, who created everything and everyone. His purpose for every person is the same: all were created in God’s image, to be a reflection and a representation of God on earth.² The oneness of God

means that there is unity in his purpose for his creation. All humans are included.

Further, there is one mediator. We all have a relationship with God through Christ Jesus, who became a man and can still be called “man” because he did not abandon his humanity to the grave. Rather, he was resurrected as a glorified human, and he rose to heaven in human form, for he has incorporated humanity as part of who he is. Since humanity was made in God’s image, essential aspects of humanity were in God’s mind from the beginning; it is no surprise that humanity can be given expression within the Godhead by Jesus.

As our mediator, Jesus “gave himself as a ransom for all people.” Some theologians object to the plain meaning of this verse, but it fits well with verse 7, and with what Paul wrote a little later: God “is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those

who believe”.³ He died for the sins of all people, even for those who do not yet know it. He died only once; he did not wait for us to believe before he acted to save us. To use a financial analogy, he paid the debt, even for people who don’t yet realise it.

Now that Jesus has done this, what remains to be done? Now is the time for people to come to the knowledge of what Jesus has done for them, and that is what Paul is trying to do. “This has now been witnessed to at the proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles.” That is what he wants Timothy to be, too. □



¹ Ezra 6:10

² Genesis 1:27

³ 1 Timothy 4:10

Truce on earth, go

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

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

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

Let me set the scene for you.

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

Great Britain had been the unchallenged superpower of the day, but Germany was becoming a serious rival. The German leader, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was the grandson of Queen Victoria of England, and the two nations were not natural enemies. But storm clouds were gathering as political and economic tensions steadily increased across the continent.

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

But it was not to be. A fierce winter set in over the battlefield, and neither side could gain a quick victory. By December 1914, the two huge armies were stalemated, bogged down in a line of trenches that

by
John Halford

stretched from the Belgian coast to the Alps. Losses to both sides were appalling as they fought to gain or regain a few feet of land.

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



"Happy Christmas Tommy"

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

"The Officers became extremely annoyed and called out 'Get back in the trenches.' But we ignored them. We had no particular feelings of animosity towards

Good will toward men

the individuals on the other side. We were soldiers, and soldiers don't hate each other. We put our hands through the rolls of barbed wire and shook hands with the German troops.

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

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

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

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

And from a letter written by Sergeant A. Lovell of the 3rd Rifle Brigade:

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

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

"The next morning a most extraordinary thing happened—I should think one of the most curious things in the war. Some Germans came out and held up their hands and began taking in some of our wounded, and so we ourselves immediately got out of the trenches and began to bring in our wounded also. The Germans then beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us bury our dead. This lasted the whole morning, and I talked with several of them and I must say they seemed extraordinarily fine men. It seemed too ironical for words. There, the night before we had been having a terrific battle and the morning after, there we were, smoking their cigarettes

and they smoking ours."

Sanity prevailed over madness

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

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

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

Jesus changed all that

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

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

References

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

Lerner and Lowe, *Camelot*.

¹ Colossians 3:4

² 2 Corinthians 5:14

³ 1 Corinthians 1:30

⁴ John 12:32

⁵ John 14:20

⁶ Isaiah 2:4

The best Christmas gift

It was billed the wedding of the year. The millionaire father had gone all out to make his first daughter's wedding a memorable event.

The who's who of the town were on the guest list, and the gift registries were sent to all guests with the invitations.

On the big day guests arrived in their hundreds with their gifts. The groom was neither rich, nor from a rich family. Despite the fact that the father of the bride was a rich man, the guests bought some very expensive gifts for the couple, no doubt to impress the father of the bride.

As the couple moved into their small flat, they started opening the gifts to see what they got and from whom. There was hardly enough space to store all the gifts. But there was one package the daughter particularly wanted to see. What did her rich father buy for her? After going through all the big stuff, she realised that none of these were from her father. But among the smaller parcels there was one wrapped in brown paper. On opening it, they realised it was an expensive leather-bound Bible.

They opened the first page. It read:

"To our beloved daughter and son-in-law on your wedding day, From Mom and Dad. Matthew 6:31–33; 7:9–11."

She was deeply disappointed. How could her parents give her a Bible? The resentment remained for years. Eventually her father died. A few years later, on the anniversary of her father's death, she saw the Bible her parents had given her on her wedding day. She took it off the shelf where it had been left unopened all those years. She opened that first page and read those words again: "To our beloved daughter and son-in-law on your wedding day, From Mom and Dad. Matthew 6:31–33; 7:9–11."

by
**Takalani
Musekwa**

She decided to open the Bible to Matthew chapter 6 to read those verses. As she opened the page, there was a piece of paper stuck there. It was a cheque in her name from her father. It read: "Pay Portia Zulu (not her real name) or bearer the sum of One Million Rand only." Her eyes nearly popped out!

She then read the verses quoted: "So don't worry about these things saying 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else and live righteously, and he will give

you everything you need."¹

Then she turned the page to read Matthew 7:9–11: "You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him."

She started crying. How could she have misread her father like this? He loved her so much, yet she thought he didn't. What a tragedy!

A gift too wonderful

In a few days, the world will once again be celebrating Christmas. Many are already worrying about what gifts they should buy for their family and friends. Many are wondering what gifts they will receive from their loved ones. Sadly, few know of the Christmas gift they have already received! The reason they do not know about it is because the gift came as a "baby wrapped in pieces of cloth and lying in a feeding box."² Like Portia who thought brown paper and a Bible couldn't be worth anything, they are tragically ignorant of what God has



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What happens in heaven

My friends have a sign at their lake cabin, “What happens at the cabin, stays at the cabin.” A spin off, I’m sure, of the slogan, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” The implication being the location is a safe place to let your hair down and be yourself, a place of confidentiality and perhaps a place to do things you wouldn’t normally do in public. One’s imagination can run amuck with that thought!

So when I saw an article titled, “What Happens in Heaven,” my mind filled in, “stays in heaven,” and I immediately experienced mental whiplash as I almost said *No!* out loud. The article was about heaven, which was all well and good, but I was totally derailed by the emotional leap I’d already taken.

I suppose much of what happens in heaven does stay in heaven. We really don’t have a clue what it’s like there. On one hand, the apostle John records fantastic

visions of God’s throne room and heavenly hosts. On the other, author Paul Young portrays Father, Son and Spirit sharing the day’s events around the kitchen table eating chicken, rice and greens. I’m wow’d by the first, but I’m warmed by the second.

I believe much of what has happened in heaven has had everything to do with us here on earth. For starters, the Father’s overflowing love prompted our very creation. A heavenly war between good and evil perpetuated an ongoing battle of the same in humanity. The biblical narrative relates numerous earthly encounters with angelic beings on various assignments,

by
Sue Berger



one of which announced God himself coming to dwell with mankind.

Now *that* was just plain crazy talk! Why on earth (or should I say, why in heaven) would God want to come here? Comparatively, the physical limitations, squalor, frustration and pain are mind-boggling. It would be like going out to live in my flower-bed with my pansies, experiencing life sustained by soil and rainfall, while hoping not to get trampled by the neighborhood kids or marked by my own dog. I’m just not that motivated to relate with my flowers! But God was motivated to relate to us.

Heaven didn’t stay in heaven. Emmanuel. God

with us. A heavenly King surrounded by worshiping choirs, came to sit and eat at earthly dinner tables. Yes, ladies, he belched and scratched, but he also laughed and hugged and cried. Heaven was

human, motivated by a depth of love unimaginable to us. Creator, wanting to be personally known by his creation. Who can grasp that? A desire to reveal the Father’s love for us, so deep that Jesus would come here to walk with us, laugh with us, suffer and die for us. And he didn’t stop there. He then went back to heaven and sent the Spirit to work here in us, forever linking us to God.

No, what happens in heaven, doesn’t stay in heaven. Heaven has walked earth and now dwells within us. We are known, we are accepted and we are loved. And that my friends, is *very* Good News! □

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given us in Jesus Christ. The New Living Translation puts it this way: “Thank God for his Son—a gift too wonderful for words!”³

You see, your parents may give you a wonderful gift this Christmas, but sadly, they have also given you sin. Yes, you will die! Before you blame your parents, please realise that they also got that from their parents, who also got it from their parents, who got it from our human ancestor Adam.

However, there is good news! Great News! The news was delivered by an angel to a group of shepherds about 2,000 years ago. He said to them: “I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people. Today your Savior was born in the town of David. He is Christ, the Lord.”⁴ In the gospel of Matthew, we learn that God appeared to Joseph (Jesus’ earthly father) in a dream saying, “She [Mary] will give birth to a son, and

you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”⁵

Like Portia, don’t miss out on the joy of a wonderful gift. In Christ there is life. The birth of Christ was a precursor to his second coming. When he comes again, “He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever.”⁶

Like the Wise Men of the East, be wise this Christmas. Open your Bible and discover the great news of the gift of God. Receive your gift this Christmas. You can also give this magazine as a Christmas gift. You can send for a FREE subscription for a loved one. It may be the greatest Christmas gift you have ever given. They may find Christ through it. Don’t be deceived by the wrapping! Merry Christmas! □

¹ Matthew 6:31–33

² Luke 2:12

³ 2 Corinthians 9:15

⁴ Luke 2:10

⁵ Matthew 1:21

⁶ Revelation 21:4

'God is there and I am here'

Millions believe the myth that 'God is there and I am here'. They believe God dwells in some faraway or holy site or in some chosen or holy people but not in them. So they feel alienated from God and fail to experience intimacy with Him. They are not sure if He loves them or cares for them.

They want a close relationship with God but don't know how to go about it. This article reveals the reality (truth) about your life and shows how you can develop an intimate relationship with God.

The myth and its effects

The myth that 'God is there and I am here' has deadly consequences. Why? Because it leads us to spiritual death.

It implies that God has detached Himself from the human race that He created. It implies that He doesn't care about us. He doesn't care if we are sick, if we are suffering financially, if we have relationship problems with our loved ones. He doesn't care if we are addicted to some bad habits. He doesn't care if we are oppressed or persecuted. He doesn't care if we are sad, fearful, depressed or lonely. He doesn't care if we are trapped in a war zone, flood or earthquake. He doesn't care if we die.

It also implies that to get to God and receive His blessings, we must do something—crawl up to Him, mourn, put ashes on our head, wear sackcloth, do penance, pray, fast and meditate. It assumes that God will draw near to us only if we do these religious works. This salvation by works depends on what we do for God, not on what God has done for us.

This myth makes people believe 'There is no God; God is dead; God doesn't care; God doesn't understand my situation; God is unkind; God is a harsh judge'. When we say 'there is no God or God is dead', we are saying that it is useless to pray to God. When we believe 'God is a harsh judge', we dare not approach Him because of fear of punishment or rejection. When we complain 'God doesn't understand my situation', we are saying that God is not all-knowing or He simply doesn't care. These views only alienate us from God and lead us to live our lives apart from Him—apart from His teaching, guidance, knowledge and wisdom. The result is we become more sinful and depraved. This eventually leads us to spiritual death.

The reality and its effects

The reality (truth) is *God has always been with us and in us*. This may come as a surprise to many. How can you say God is with us when our lives are in shambles—when we are hungry and homeless, when we are trapped in a war, when we are lonely and depressed, when we are unjustly condemned and persecuted, when our loved ones die?

Let's look at a few scriptures to convince ourselves of God's indwelling presence in our lives.



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

"For in Him [Jesus] we live and move and have our being."¹ This covers our entire life from cradle to grave. It tells us that without His indwelling presence, we simply cannot exist.

"The Son [Jesus] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, *sustaining all things by His powerful word*."² This states that we are sustained by His power.

"For in Him [Jesus] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and *in Him all things hold together*."³ This shows that Jesus holds *everybody and everything (visible and invisible) together*.



"On that day you will realise that I [Jesus] am in my Father, and *you are in Me, and I am in you*."⁴ This means that *Jesus is in us and we are in Him, that we are bound up in Him*.

These scriptures assure us that *God is with us and in us every moment of our lives*. He is with us from cradle to grave (and beyond). There is not a single moment when He is not present in our lives. He is with us in all our struggles, fears, confusion, doubts, betrayal, rejection, sickness, pain and suffering. That should be very comforting, especially to those who are going through severe trials.

While God has always been with us and in us, we are not always aware or conscious of His presence. We don't see, hear or experience Him. That's why we suffer

and I am here'

from the “God is there and I am here” syndrome. That’s why we go on pilgrimages to some holy sites or meet some holy people in the hope of finding God while He is actually present in our lives all the time.

Realising this truth—that God is with us and in us—frees us from running here and there or doing this and that. Embracing this truth is the key to knowing and experiencing God’s infinite love, kindness, goodness, mercy and compassion for us.

Jesus is with us in all our afflictions: financial crisis, sickness, doubts, fears, shame, guilt, condemnation, rejection, depression, loneliness or estranged relationship. He knows us through and through. He knows our pain, anguish and confusion. He has plumbed the depths of our hearts and knows exactly



what we go through in life. That’s how He can be our faithful High Priest—one who can sympathise and empathise with us in all our afflictions. The author of the book Hebrews puts it this way:

“For this reason He [Jesus] had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.”⁵

“For we do not have a High Priest [Jesus] who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not sin. Let us then approach

God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”⁶

Dormant to active

Those who are unaware of this truth—that God is with us and in us every moment of our life—is like a dormant volcano. Like the dormant volcano, they have hidden power within them (because Jesus is in them), but that power hasn’t manifested or shown up yet. Something has to happen to unleash that power.

A dormant volcano becomes active when the power within it is stirred and unleashed. When that happens, it produces bright, colourful sparks (like the fireworks we see during New Year celebrations). The eruption produces a spectacular sight, beautiful to behold. It spews out hot molten lava that flows down several miles all around it destroying everything in its path—lives, homes and vegetation. But it also has positive effects. After the lava cools down and settles, the land around it becomes very fertile leading to bumper harvests.

When we don’t believe that God is with us every moment of our life, we do all sorts of sinful things. We lie, we steal and we kill thinking that nobody watches us. We live selfish lives devoid of any spiritual fire beyond accumulating money, power and fame (often at the expense of others). We live dull, unhappy and miserable lives. Not because Jesus is not with us or cannot help us, but because we are oblivious to His abiding presence in us. That’s why we groan ‘God is there and I am here’.

But when we let the Holy Spirit blow into our hearts and awaken us to Jesus’ indwelling presence, we begin to experience something beautiful and ecstatic. We wake up to the real life that God has always intended for us. It has a volcanic effect. It produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It produces a rich spiritual harvest—a spiritual glow bursting with love, joy, peace, passion, excitement, zeal, hope and everything good and delightful. It destroys our false notions about God and about ourselves. It destroys our unbelief, foolishness, selfishness, doubts, fears, anxieties, prejudices, hypocrisies, pride and arrogance. It destroys the old/corrupt man in us. Then we begin to live our new life in Christ—the life that God intended for us all along. Then we experience love, joy, peace, contentment, passion, friendship and communion. That is how we participate in God’s abundant and dynamic life.⁷

So what should we do? We must drop the ‘God is there and I am here’ myth and embrace the truth which is ‘Jesus is always with us and in us every moment of our life’. We can let His words fill our hearts and minds. We can let the Holy Spirit blow into our hearts and awaken us to Jesus’ indwelling presence. Then we will experience the spiritual glow that makes our lives more and more glorious with each passing day.⁸ □

¹ Acts 17:28

² Hebrews 1:3

³ Colossians 1:16–17

⁴ John 14:20

⁵ Hebrews 2:17–18

⁶ Hebrews 4:15–16

⁷ 2 Peter 1:4

⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:18

Journeying through grief

by
**Mak
Chew Yeng**

A heart-broken King Theoden (in *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*) mourned, “No parents should have to bury their child.”

A little over a year ago, my husband and I lost our only son, and our daughter her only brother. Though a self-confessed chess nut, his passion was in flying. He died instantly in a plane crash, apparently due to engine failure. Lawsuit was out of the question. We are just thankful that he could live out his passion for four years. He was 22. No regrets. Though he had gone through some very trying times in those four years, but because “...my heart is in the sky...”, he held his course. Being in God’s company more than ever before sustained him, and matured him a great deal during those tough times. All these had helped us in coping with this sudden loss—it helped a bit.

The sustaining grace of God is our lifeline, our mainstay, throughout this whole year. There’s a saying, “Time flies when you’re having fun.” We find that it applies to grace-sustained grief as well.

Because neither anger, guilt nor regret is present over the accident, our family is thankful we have “only” grief facing us. Only grief. I remember reading somewhere that we don’t get over grief, we go through it. My family and I are about to find out what that means.

Despite offers to take a longer break, work obligations called and my husband and daughter became incredibly resilient soldiers during this time of heart-breaking distress, when pain was still so raw and overwhelming.

They managed to somehow function somewhat normally soon after the accident. I am a housewife, and so had the luxury of delayed normalcy.

Initially, I found grief to be exhausting, numbing and even paralyzing. It was strange: even though I had spiritually and mentally accepted the loss, emotions took a longer time to catch up. This was especially apparent in Church, my highlight of the week. Without any warning, a certain word or phrase in a prayer or song would unlock the floodgates of tears. In spite of silently thanking God for the 22 wonderful years we had had with him, the tears still refused to stop. (I believe God created tears for our healing, so I guess they just have to run their course.) Many times I foolishly wished for that to happen only in a more

convenient time and place (like at home). In hindsight, if it were so, I would miss out on the blessing of God’s extended touch through my spiritual family. Their aching hearts and tears spoke volumes. I felt their unspoken words, “We can’t imagine how you’re hurting and we’re so sorry for your loss. If only we can lighten your pain. We feel so helpless....” Gifts of food, books, a music CD, cards and messages from near and far were thoughtfully given. They respectfully inquired how I was coping, and were ever ready to listen any time I felt like sharing. Their being channels of God’s grace was so evident. I had never felt more loved. It was just what I needed at that time. Because of my low energy level, I wasn’t looking for visits or phone calls. Finding energy to attend Church every week was about all I could

manage. I wasn’t even sure who or what I needed—my thoughts and emotions were so fractured and scattered at that time. But there was one thing I was absolutely sure about: I strictly refuse to entertain thoughts on “Why...”, “If only...”, “What if...” or “How come...”. At times, the pull in that direction was so tempting, but I knew it could only lead to frustration, regret, guilt, anger, resentment or worse, bitterness. Certainly God was nowhere near those places. I dared not go down that road. Instead, seeking refuge in who God is and being in His company carried me through the day, each day. I found quietness soothing; the singing birds and fluttering butterflies in my backyard are God’s gifts to lift my spirits up.

It took about four months before I found pleasure in listening to music again. My energy level had improved, but with it came a feeling of despair. “What’s there to live for anymore?” I was aware that this feeling didn’t make sense: I am still mother to my daughter, and wife to my husband. Although I had no suicidal thoughts, the sense of meaninglessness was very real. That was when I started to devour books—books on who God is and on self-care—to anchor my soul. Eventually some Scriptures began to take on new meaning; slowly a sense of new life began to emerge. At around that time, the scampering squirrels’ antics among my banana trees began again to give delight.

Yes, even though a big part of me was (suddenly) cut



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Remembering God

There are many positive things about aging. Unfortunately I can't remember what they are. That's my problem. I can't remember much of anything. And what I do remember can be inaccurately influenced by time, bias and suggestion. I am not alone.

Police officers experience this all the time. When eyewitnesses are questioned about whom they saw do the robbery, the descriptions indicate the crime was committed by a short, tall, black, Caucasian with short, long, brown, blond hair wearing blue sweatpants or a brown suit.

Most of us do not intend to shade the truth, but it happens sometimes. For example, if we tell an embellished story long enough, we may actually think it is true. If we are having difficulty with people, our minds magnify their imperfections. We even believe our fantasised ideas about how much better things were in years gone by.

Such was the case when the Israelites came out of Egypt. They groaned for deliverance for years because of their unbearable hardships.¹ Then, when God delivered them, they grumbled about how much better off they had been in Egypt.

When they didn't like how God provided for them, they'd recall their distorted view of the good old days. "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt"² and "It would have been better if the Lord had just killed us there! At least there we had plenty to eat."³ Yes, they may have had fish, but they also had oppressive slavery under cruel taskmasters. They were oppressed to the point that even their baby boys were killed at birth.

Later God would tell them to remember when they were slaves in Egypt. Remember that God delivered them to freedom.⁴ Remember what God did to Pharaoh

by
**Barbara
Dahlgren**

¹ Exodus 1:8–22, 2:23, 5:7

² Numbers 11:5

³ Exodus 16:3

⁴ Deuteronomy 5:15

⁵ Deuteronomy 7:18

⁶ Deuteronomy 8:2

⁷ Deuteronomy 4:9

⁸ Isaiah 49:15–16

and to Egypt.⁵ Remember how God led them through the wilderness.⁶

This was more than exhorting them just to remember these things; it was telling them to remember accurately. "Be very careful never to forget what you yourself have seen. Do not let these memories escape from your mind as long as you live!"⁷

Human memory is flawed. Life, even the Christian life, is not easy. When times get rough we might imagine it was better before God revealed himself to us. Not true. We forget how lonely, depressed, angry, hopeless or void of purpose we felt without God. We forget all God has done for us.

When my father had Alzheimer's disease, sometimes he couldn't remember much. When coherent he'd say, "I know you are my daughter, but I can't remember your name." Miraculously, however, he remembered God! He found comfort praying, reading the Bible and singing old gospel songs. We'd sing those songs together and he'd look at me and say, "You know, everything that song says is true. God is good!"

Sadly, I know I forget many of the wonderful things God has done for me. Fortunately my salvation is not tied to my faulty memory. God remembers me even when I forget him.⁸ But I want to remember. So I continually ask, "God, please help me remember your love, mercy, kindness and faithfulness to me and my loved ones, plus all those little prayers you answered immediately and the ones where you wisely did not give me what I wanted because you had a better plan."

God remembers me—and I want to remember God. □

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off, but by God's grace, I could recover over time—with a difference, I would never be the same again. To this came my daughter's gentle probe: Do I need to be the same me again? Should I? Is it even healthy? More importantly, is it glorifying God?

Timely and wise counsel. It was just what I needed. Desiring to get back to the same me that I was a year ago amounted to blotting out what had happened. And no matter how understandably normal to feel that way, it (that one-year-ago me) doesn't exist anymore. I have to give myself permission to let go of that old me—a big part of which is being mother to my son and daughter. For now, my role as mother to my son is over. It has been a wonderful privilege but that purpose is served. Even as we miss him now because we don't have him with us anymore, we have many unforgettable memories of happy, heart-warming and funny incidences of him. And we are grateful for the

many friendships he had, the experiences he had gone through and enjoyed. Our having been a part of his life, and he of ours, has been a great blessing; we are thankful.

Presently, I now see that God's gifts to me still abound: I am the proud mother of a lovely daughter and wife of a loving husband, and surrounded by a large loving spiritual family. Also as a child of God, becoming the person God intends me to be¹ glorifies him. I know as I participate again in his living his life through me, new life emerges.

Just like how I frequently journey from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore by bus, now I am journeying through grief by the grace of God. And when I look back over the past year, one fact stands out. It's just as God promised, "My grace is sufficient for you."² This, I will have to hold on to, in the days ahead. □

¹ Romans 8:29

² 2 Corinthians 12:9

Relationships—broken forever?

Last week my husband and I did something unusual.

We went for a drive out to the towns of Somerset West and Strand, about 50kms from our home. Driving outside of our regular destinations—local friends, supermarkets, doctors, dentists, libraries and the beach—is a rare thing for us. Roadworks, heavy traffic and the price of petrol tend to limit the amount of driving we do—to say nothing of our car which dates back to last century.

But I had a sudden desire to visit the town where my children grew up, and where I lived for 25 years. There were so many memories of friends who lived there, church members who had moved to other places and other fellowships, the primary and high schools my children attended, and the beautiful view across False Bay.

As we drove around the familiar spots, I thought of

by
Hilary Jacobs

have close family members who never speak to each other—not because they're not on speaking terms—but because they have little in common. If they get together at all, it's likely to be at a funeral.

Of course, there are many reasons for this interruption of relationships—the ease of travel, emigration, divorce, and a string of other reasons. In many ways it is a 'wonderful world' as the old song says, but at times I long for the old days when mothers, fathers and children stayed together as a family unit, where cousins, nieces and nephews all saw each other regularly. It seems those days are gone forever, but are they?

We cannot move away

As Christians we already experience a relationship with God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and we can be sure of one thing. This relationship



the people with whom I had lost touch. There was the elderly widow who lived next door, and eventually sold her house and moved into an old age home. I never really got to know her well. We drove past a house which was once a pre-school where my children spent many happy hours. The signboard saying Happy Days Nursery School with a picture of Noddy and a telephone number, had been replaced with a Security Company board, and where once a neat hedge surrounded the house, there was now a high wall with spikes on top. I never knew what happened to the cheerful little teacher who ran the school. I never bothered to keep in touch with her after making use of her services. And what about the two church families I got to know really well? I'm not sure where either of them is now.

But that's life, isn't it? We get to know people, become friends, and somehow we get disconnected and move on. Sadly, this happens in families as well. Even now I



will not 'move on' and disappear. Even if we as weak and imperfect human beings allow our side of the relationship to drop, God will not move away from us. He will never just let us go. Indeed he will actively seek us out and bring us back. So many of Jesus' parables are about searching for lost things—the lost son, the lost coin, the lost sheep.¹ He will always love us, and try as we might, we cannot move away from him.

But even now, with God's love given to us through the Holy Spirit, we can reach out to others who we would otherwise have ignored, or disliked. We can start the reconciliation process where relationships have been awkward or unsatisfactory, and with God's love flowing from us, have a foretaste of what he has promised in the future—complete restoration of all things, relationships included.

But what about those broken relationships, the

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Expressing gratitude

After Jesus healed ten lepers, he commented that only one turned back to praise God and to give Jesus thanks.¹ No doubt all ten were grateful, but only one actually expressed it.

Jesus cleansed the ten lepers of a serious condition that had made them physically “unclean”. We who look to him as our Savior have been cleansed in a much more meaningful way—he has made us *spiritually* clean. As Christians you and I know that *all* blessings, even the air we breathe and the food we eat, flow from God’s goodness.

God is pleased when we are grateful for his many blessings. He is even more pleased when we express



by
Paul Hailey

add to her quality of life. We can do the same. We can also follow Jesus’ example, by thanking our Heavenly Father at meal times for the food He provides.

Scripture encourages us to praise God for his loving and gracious acts: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.”³ Praise goes further than simply saying “thank you” for specific blessings. Praise includes expressions that proclaim his goodness and greatness. Reading one of the Psalms before or during prayer can help us find feelings and words of praise. Psalm 103, written by King David, is a good example of expressions that exalt and praise God for



our gratitude in word or deed. Do *we* remember to be grateful to God for His generosity, and how can we *express* our gratitude?

Expressing gratitude to God

We have the opportunity to thank God in prayer. Paul encourages us in his letter to the Ephesians to *always* give thanks to God the Father for *everything*, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.²

I’m reminded of a lady who mentioned that she glances around her home while praying, thanking God for the items in her house—furniture, windows, clothing, lights, books, and the many other things that

his generosity. The Psalms also remind us of his many benefits, including his everlasting mercy. We can use words of praise like the ones spoken by the heavenly angels as recorded by the Apostle John, “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”⁴

We may express gratitude to God by our actions as well as our words. When we perform acts of service to others, we please him. We don’t need to perform miracles as Jesus did, but we often have opportunities

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Does God give second chances?

It's the classic action movie. There are 10 seconds before the bomb explodes and kills thousands of people for a dozen city blocks, not to mention totally vaporising the hero who is trying to disarm it.

Sweat pours off his or her face as anxious police and others stand by in frozen terror. Which wire to cut—the red one or the yellow one? Four seconds to go. Try the red one. Two seconds to go. No, the yellow one. One second. Snip!

There is only one chance to get it right. Somehow in the movies the hero always manages to cut the right wire, but life is not the movies. Ever feel that you've cut the wrong wire and everything has just gone—BOOM? With a real bomb there is no second chance, but if only

by
**Johannes
Maree**

to. You see, Peter thought he was being very righteous and had come up with an answer that Jesus would really be impressed with. But Jesus wasn't impressed. He basically was saying to Peter that he is missing the point of forgiveness. That forgiving someone was not about keeping score—that is not truly forgiving from the heart. In fact, when Jesus said "Seventy times seven" he did not mean only up to 490 times. He was saying you keep on forgiving. This is the true character and heart of Jesus and God as well, because Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit are one. Not just in being, but in character as well. This is part of the triune nature of the God relationship. That's what he is like, that's who he is!



God would give us a second chance.

I think whether God gives us second chances can be answered to a large extent by looking at the life of Jesus. Jesus was (and is) God and his life and character clearly reflect that of God the Father. So when the disciple Peter comes to Jesus and asks 'How many times must I forgive those that sin against me? Seven times?' Jesus' answer is intriguing. "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven." Quite a lot by anyone's standard.¹ But to really grasp the significance of this encounter a person needs to understand a bit of the culture of the time. In the time of the disciples the religious leaders taught that you should forgive those who wronged you three times. After that you don't have

Blown their chances?

I have actually met people who truly believe they have just sinned too many times for God to forgive them. They feel they've blown their chances with God and of 'being saved'. Once again the life and actions of Jesus speak volumes. Peter, Jesus' trusted friend and companion, publically rejects and denounces Jesus three times.² Yet Jesus simply reaches out to Peter, forgives him and loves him. I believe in many ways that was a significant turning point in Peter's life. He went on to become a powerful and faithful follower of Jesus

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The real God

Christmas! A time of celebration and joy, a time to reflect on the blessings we have received this year and a time to be with our families. Of course it is also the time to remember Jesus Christ and how his birth here on Earth has impacted and brought profound changes in the lives of millions. It may come as a surprise that there are aspects of Christ that many people have never realised.

One of Jesus' disciples named Philip once asked him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us."¹ Jesus then answered, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known me Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'"² That would mean that if we wanted to see God the Father we would only have to look at Christ's life and know the Father because Christ declared that he reflected the Father in every way.

So, let's check out Christ's life when he was here on Earth. There's an account in the gospel of Luke that states that Christ went out and found a tax collector named Levi. He then requested Levi to follow him. Soon afterwards Levi invited Christ and his disciples to an elaborate feast at his home. There were other guests at Levi's home namely tax collectors and individuals that 'good' people would keep far away from. The Pharisees, a group of very religious and pious individuals, declared the people there as sinners.³ What was the Christ who reflected the Father doing among such people? What was God doing eating and drinking with sinners?

On another occasion Jesus accepted an invitation from a Pharisee to dine at his home. While he was there a woman whom the community regarded as a sinner and of ill repute brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, stood behind him weeping; and began to wash his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed his feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.⁴ The Pharisee began to doubt if Jesus



**by
Devaraj
Ramoo**

was holy as he commented that if Jesus was a Prophet, he would know what manner of woman was touching him.⁵ How could someone Holy allow such a woman to touch him? If Jesus was around us today, we may also be making the same statements as these people. He might not fit with our concept of holiness. He was even weeping, overcome with emotion seeing Mary and others crying in grief when Lazarus had died.⁶ Christ, the savior of mankind and God found weeping? That's strange. I thought God was Almighty and All-Powerful and would never be found weeping. It seems that there are a lot of false concepts about God that we assume, not realising his true nature. All the people we avoid and want nothing to do with are the very people he would be associating with or caring for.

You might find him talking to drug addicts, prostitutes, criminals and drunkards. You might find him sitting and eating with those we consider as beneath us. The result of such an attitude was that he had to endure nasty comments from the 'holy segment of society.' He was even called a glutton and drunkard.⁷ We define holiness by keeping away from the very people Christ associated with. In fact if Christ had made it a point to stay far from the 'trash of society' as some call them, many of us may never have had the opportunity to come to know God. It's precisely his attitude to mingle with the most troubled in society that makes him the savior that he is. I'm glad that this Christmas I can celebrate the birth of a savior who knows the pain and suffering that we humans face. None could state it better than Christ himself who said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."⁸ What better way to describe the savior of mankind? ■

¹ John 14:8

² John 14:9

³ Luke 5: 27-30

⁴ Luke 7: 36-38

⁵ Luke 7: 39

⁶ John 11: 32-35

⁷ Luke 7:34

⁸ Luke 5:31

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family fall-outs and disagreements, where one or both parties simply refuse to listen or turn back? Can they ever be restored? I believe that is exactly what God has promised us.

Jesus spoke to his disciples about the renewal of all things (Matthew 19:28). Peter, after the healing of the crippled beggar at the temple gate, took advantage of the situation by witnessing to these onlookers. He pointed to Jesus, the power behind the miracle saying, "He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything..."²

Paul obviously believed in a resurrection of all the dead. To the Corinthians he said, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."³ As he stood

before Felix the governor, he admitted, "I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked."⁴ God wants all to be saved, the righteous, the wicked, and all those in between. Jesus came to seek the lost, the broken and the hopeless.

In Revelation 21:5 we read "I am making everything new. Write this down for these words are trustworthy and true."

Do we need any further convincing? I don't think so. After all, we have his promise in writing. ■

¹ Luke 15

² Acts 3:21

³ 1 Corinthians 15:22

⁴ Acts 24:15

Christmas for sinners

When the Magi finally met Jesus, the King of the Jews, after being led to him by a special star; they did not find him in a king's palace. They found Mary, Joseph, and the babe in a manger.

Who would have expected it—the promised King, the Anointed One—born in a stable? What more unlikely place to look for the prophesied Prince of Peace—in a cattle stall. But Jesus came to real people in the real world. He came to stand in for and represent every person in every age from the first man to the last, from the greatest to the least, the rich, the poor, the middle class, every race and every tribe—and every one of them a sinner.

Jesus came to save sinners, not to bask in the fineries of human royalty.

The Christmas stable reminds us that whatever life throws at us, whatever trials we might face, whatever our lot in life, Jesus is with us. Jesus is there beside us. God knows our plight and stands alongside us in undying love.

At the Messiah's stable the world's pride has no place. In that lowly place he came to dwell with us in our deepest sin, weakness, need, sorrow, and pain. Here in



by
**Dr. Joseph
Tkach**

a corner of a barn is Emmanuel, God with us.

Throughout Jesus' life, in lowliness and humility, he served sinning, broken, and desperate people. He showed even the lowliest and loneliest of men, women, and children that they really matter to God, and that true life does not consist in what people possess, or what their station in society is, or how much the world respects them.

Jesus shows us that God loves us and that we count; he loves us completely even at our very worst, even at our most sinful and our very weakest.

The message of the stable leads us to seek what really matters, the joy of receiving and giving faithful love. It calls us to trust in the One who loves us so much he will never let us go, and to stop wasting our lives on all the empty and meaningless things that cannot bring us real satisfaction, peace, hope, and joy.

In our Savior Jesus Christ—born in the common surroundings of common people—we find our deepest fulfillment in the shared love of God and our relationships with one another that alone make life worth living. □

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to bring comfort, encouragement, or assistance to those around us. Even little gestures of kindness, such as giving a thirsty person a glass of water, are pleasing to God.⁵

We also may show gratitude to God when we participate in His work of telling others the good news of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul, while in house arrest in Rome, relied on financial support from the Christians in Philippi to be able to continue to preach the gospel. The Roman government did not provide food and other necessities for prisoners. The Philippian Christians generously provided for Paul's needs while he was held captive. Paul expressed his gratitude in writing them, "...I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God."⁶

The generosity of the Philippians pleased God like a "fragrant offering" because it allowed Paul to teach and preach effectively to many people, including some in Caesar's palace.⁷ He knew that God would reward the Philippians, just as he will reward us when we assist others in proclaiming the gospel.

We also may express our gratitude to God by personally telling others of God's gift of salvation, and in ways that he has individually blessed us.⁸ Personally, I am grateful for the peace of mind that he has given me, with assurance that all will turn out well, even in the midst of painful difficulties.

We should joyfully express gratitude to God, something ancient Israel failed to do. God had assured them of abundant crops, prosperity, health, and protection from enemies. In return he expected them to respond with joyful gratitude.⁹ But like many people who have lived in prosperous nations they became complacent, apathetic, and failed to acknowledge his kindness. Let's not let that happen to us!

Benefits of expressing gratitude

We may ask why God desires our expressions of gratitude. After all, he is almighty, self-sufficient, needing nothing from us. But just as parents desire love from their children, so our Heavenly Father desires our love and gratitude.

However we express our gratitude—speaking words of thanks and praise, helping other people, or giving support to those who are proclaiming the gospel—we can be assured that we will be pleasing him and that he will reward us, if not in this life, then in the life to come.

It is also interesting that some medical researchers believe that the single most effective way to increase happiness and health is to be grateful for the good things we receive.

Our Heavenly Father is gracious in giving us priceless gifts. Let's show him our gratitude! Thank you Father for your love and generosity! □

¹ Luke 17:11–18

² Ephesians 5:20

³ Hebrews 13:15

⁴ Revelation 7:12

⁵ Mark 9:41

⁶ Philippians 4:18

⁷ Acts 28:30, 31

⁸ Psalm 26:7

⁹ Deuteronomy 28:47

Emmanuel, our Redeemer

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

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

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

By marrying Ruth, who was a gentile daughter-in-law of the wife of one of his relatives—a nobody to him—

by
Tammy Tkach

Boaz restored her honor, dignity, land and inheritance. By extension, Naomi also got back her life and was given a future and hope for more sons.

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

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

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

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and leader of the church.

Another amazing example of the true forgiveness of God is that while in excruciating agony and dying on a cross, Jesus totally forgives those who have done this appalling deed, while they are still standing there mocking him. Think about it for a minute. That is an unbelievable, truly divine, show of love and forgiveness. A type that can only be found in God himself.

Contrary to the popular belief of many non-believers and believers alike, God is not out to get you. He is not this big, angry, unapproachable Being sitting in heaven just waiting to zap you as soon as you step out of line. That is not God. That is in fact actually what we humans are like. That is a part of our character. It is we, not God, who keep score on those that do us wrong. It is we, not God, who stop forgiving and break off relationships.

We can find numerous examples in the Bible where God expresses his love for us and his desire for us to be with him. How often does he not promise that "he will

never leave us nor forsake us."³ God's desire is that not one should be lost, but that all should be saved. The real beauty is that God and Jesus did not just say these nice sounding words, but that they lived out everything they said through the life and example of Jesus.

So, does God give second chances? The answer is 'No'—God will not only give us a second chance, but He will continue to forgive us. Talk freely to God about your sins, failures and hurts. Focus on him—not your shortcomings. God isn't counting or keeping score. He will continue to love us, forgive us, walk with us and hold on to us, no matter what.

It is not every day that you will find someone who will give you a second chance—let alone someone who will give you a second chance every day! But in Jesus, you will find both. □

¹ Matthew 18:21–22

² Matthew 26:34, 56, 69–75

³ Hebrews 13:5

You are supersized!

McDonalds is one of the biggest fast food companies in the world. With 31,000 restaurants serving around 58 million people every day in 119 countries, no wonder they are doing so well.

One of the secrets of the McDonalds success is the fact that you can supersize your meal. For only a couple of dollars extra you can almost double the size of your meal. Wow, what value!

But the “Super Size” concept is not something that is unique to McDonalds. You might be surprised to find that a carpenter less than 2000 years ago performed the ultimate supersized meal.

In John 6:5–14 Jesus performs a spectacular miracle. After preaching the whole day to a crowd of people, Jesus asks his disciples how they are going to feed them all. Philip one of the twelve Apostles does a quick headcount and realizes that it would take at least 8 months wages to feed everyone. Another disciple, Andrew then pipes up and mentions that they found a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish. Clearly there was no way that all the people would be fed with such a small amount of food—let’s face it—even if there was a McDonalds close by and everyone had money. It would still be an impossible task, because just the men alone numbered 5,000. So if we included women and children there would quite likely have been a total of around 10,000.

In true Jesus style and the spirit of the ultimate supersized meal, Jesus prays over the bread and the fishes, breaks them into pieces and starts handing it out. Pretty soon everyone has eaten and there is so much food left that they manage to fill 12 baskets with the leftovers.

This miracle is relevant to our lives in many ways. Firstly, society makes us believe that not being wealthy, or smart or important means that we are worthless. That is of course a lie. You don’t have to have much to be of value to God. In fact the less you have the better it is. Jesus did not come to die for perfect people, but came for people like you and me. Secondly even if you have little faith, God can work with it and do something spectacular with it. The five loaves and two fishes that the boy had, were not impressive. What was impressive was what Jesus did with those 5 loaves and 2 small fishes.

God performs the ultimate supersize

When the disciples asked Jesus why they couldn’t cast out a demon, he answered: “...Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”¹

I don’t know how many of you live close to a mountain. In Cape Town where I live we have Table Mountain. Could you imagine what an incredible amount of power would be necessary to move a

by
Shaun de Greeff

mountain like that? What about the Drakensberg? What would it take to move that mountain range? Well for God, not that much power. After all he did create the universe.

So when Jesus explains that with a little faith great things can be accomplished, it is not because we are so powerful or mighty, but because God is. That is why we can have faith as small as a mustard seed and accomplish great things, because God makes it happen on our behalf.

We tend to look at people at church and think to ourselves, “If only I was as good as that guy,” or “If only I had as much faith as that lady...well then I would be someone that God was interested in.”

I have some good news and some bad news for you. The bad news is that you will never be good enough. There is no human on this planet who can live up to God’s standard. The good news is, you don’t have to be. That’s right, because Jesus was the perfect sacrifice and paid the ultimate ransom for our sins. You are justified (made right with God) through Jesus. You are therefore good enough, because Jesus makes you so and not by your own actions.

If you read the historical events that took place in the Bible, you will meet many people through whom God did amazing things. Often times, these people were not impressive at all.

Take Gideon for example, who was used by God to free his people from the Midianites and Amalakites who were oppressing them.

You would expect God to pick someone like Conan the Barbarian with years of combat training, bristling muscles and an army of ninjas to take on the enemy. You would... but you would be wrong.

Even though the Bible describes the armies of the Amalakites and the Midianites as swarms of locusts, God did not choose the bravest and strongest guy to go and fight the battle. Nope, he chose the guy who was the least in his family, from the weakest clan in Manasseh.

Gideon was that guy. Gideon was so scared to go up against the Amalakites and the Midianites that he asked God to assure him of victory by performing two miracles. Then when he finally got enough courage together to go to battle, God informed him that he had too many warriors.

Can you imagine that? You are scared beyond belief. You have 32,000 reluctant soldiers that are about to face a vastly overpowering army and then God tells you to let those soldiers go who are afraid.

Gideon’s heart must have dropped like stone when he saw 22,000 of his men up and leave. But wait, there’s more! God was not done with Gideon. With only 10,000 men left, God tells Gideon that he still has too many soldiers. If I were in his shoes I would have freaked out

¹ Matthew 17:20

² 2 Corinthians 12:9

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The Triune God (Father, Son and Spirit) exists in a love relationship within his own being. And He wants to share this relationship with us in our marriage, in our family, in our church and in our community life.

Anonymous

Our missions and evangelism should be motivated by faith, hope and love based on who God really is in Jesus Christ not by guilt, fear and anxiety.

Gary Deddo

However much I am at the mercy of the world, I never let myself get lost by brooding over its misery. I hold firmly to the thought that each one of us can do a little to bring some portion of that misery to an end.

Albert Schweitzer

Everybody is following somebody. Everybody has faith in something and somebody. We are all believers.

Rob Bell

He just loved people and poured out grace, grace, and more grace on the most unlikely candidates. It galls the

self-righteous when their own sense of justice is violated, but Jesus never seemed to care about what they thought. He seemed to show such little discernment in how and to whom He gave so much. Even His stories seem to communicate a message that sounds downright wrong to religious ears.

Steve McVey

We can only begin an upright course of life when God, of his good pleasure, adopts us into his family.

John Calvin

Six ethics of life:
Before you pray—believe
Before you spend—earn
Before you write—think
Before you talk—listen
Before you quit—try
Before you die—live

Anonymous

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times.

Martin Luther

With hurricanes, tornados, fires out of control, mud slides, flooding, severe

thunderstorms tearing up the country from one end to another, and with the threat of bird flu and terrorist attacks, are we sure this is a good time to take God out of the Pledge of Allegiance?

Jay Leno

There are a lot of issues that face our community, but the majority of them could be drastically reduced if we would just become a community of good neighbours.

Bob Frie

There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the shadow of the valley of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires.

Nelson Mandela

If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven't spent a night with a mosquito.

African Proverb

If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.

John F. Kennedy

Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.

Abraham Lincoln

All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.

Arthur Schopenhauer

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

Winston Churchill

The pursuit of truth and beauty is a sphere of activity in which we are permitted to remain children all our lives.

Albert Einstein

When we believe that God is Father, we also believe that such a father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear. We may not understand life any better, but we will not resent life any longer.

William Barclay

If there is one stitch in the celestial garment of our righteousness that we must insert ourselves, we are lost; but this is our confidence—what the Lord begins, He completes... Our confidence must not be in what we have done, nor in what we have resolved to do, but entirely in what the Lord will do.

Charles Spurgeon

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.**

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completely. With only 10,000 men left God tells Gideon to take the men to the river and have them drink water. The ones that lap the water get to stay and the ones that go on their knees to drink must go. In one fell swoop Gideon loses another 9,700 soldiers.

Imagine that! You start with 32,000 men and end up with 300. I would not have blamed Gideon if he ran for the hills at that point, but Gideon stuck it out. In the end, 300 men were more than enough. God used them to confuse the enemy to the point where they ended up fighting each other.

The Apostle Paul sums it up nicely, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in

weakness."² Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

To summarise: You don't need to be perfect, or rich or smart for God to love you. He already does. You don't need to be strong or brave for him to use you; he will take you as you are. God is famous for taking something small and doing something spectacular with it. He has done it with countless people since the dawn of humanity and he can do it with you, because in Christ, you are supersized! □

The Plain Truth Magazine



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