

THE Plain Truth

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The real Christmas story

p.5

The power of words

p.19

Next year will be different... or will it?

p.10

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Is God schizophrenic?

by
Dr. P.
Sellappan

Aschizophrenic is one who has a split personality. He exhibits contradictory or antagonistic qualities or attitudes. He is good and evil, forgiving and judging, loving and wrathful at the same time. He exhibits unpredictable temperaments and mood swings.

Whether we realize it or not, each of us has this Jekyll-and-Hyde—good and evil—personality in varying degrees. We can be both nice and nasty depending on our mood swings! We struggle with this all the time.

Is God also like that—whimsical and moody? Does he bless us when we obey him and curse us when we don't? Is he gracious when we repent and wrathful when we don't, merciful when we forgive others and judgemental when we don't, generous when we give and mean when we don't? Is his disposition towards us based on how we behave?

Many, including Christians, think so. They believe God rewards those who obey him and punishes those who don't, accepts those who accept Jesus Christ as their personal saviour and rejects those who don't.

Is God schizophrenic like us?

God is love. That is his essential nature/character. All that he does—his actions and dealings with humans—are simply expressions of his loving nature. He *doesn't* have a split personality—loving and hating, forgiving and condemning, merciful and judgemental, generous and mean, gracious and revengeful/wrathful at the same time.

This skewed view of God is mainly due to wrong interpretation of certain words in the Scripture such as *hate*, *justice/judgement* and *wrath*. So let's clarify (interpret) these words so that we see God as he truly is.

Justice in scripture means living according to God's purpose for us. That is, to live happy, joyful and exciting lives. *Injustice*, on the other hand, means living life that is contrary to God's way—a life of misery, sorrow and anguish. God's justice means putting things right so that we experience his abundant life.¹

Judgement means restoring something that has gone wrong because of sin. It means restoring people from a fallen (sinful) state to their God-ordained state—righteous living. It *doesn't* refer to penal sentence for breaking a law. So when the scripture says God will judge the wicked, it means he will restore them to his desired purpose—to live in communion with him. It's

not about condemning them to hell fire.

Similarly, *wrath* (*retribution*, *vengeance*) in scripture means *intense love* for someone who is hurting because of wrong living. It is like parents snatching their children from a dangerous and deadly situation. God loves us so much that he hates to see us suffer in our sin. So when the scripture says God's wrath is on the wicked,² it means he will step in and put things right.³ That is, he will destroy everything that prevents us from having the good life that he intended for us. It means liberating us from our spiritual bondage.⁴ It's not about casting people to hell.

What about the verse, "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated"?⁵ Doesn't it say God *hated* Esau and *loved* Jacob? No, *God didn't hate Esau as a person, as an individual*. Rather, he hated his attitude of self-

gratification, living for the now.

Esau is a type of our old sinful self—our unbelief and self-dependency. Remember, Jacob too was a crook because he cheated his brother Esau and stole his birthright. Like Esau, he too lived a selfish life. That is why God changed his name to *Israel*, which means *ruling with God*. *Jacob, like Esau, is a type of our old sinful life which Jesus crucified on the cross. Israel pictures our new (recreated) life in Christ*.

Many Christians believe the Cross represents both *mercy and justice (in the legal sense)*. They say God will forgive our sins if we confess them and accept Jesus Christ as our personal saviour, but if we don't confess, he will judge/condemn us. They say *God punished Jesus* for our sins, so rejecting him would result in judgement (punishment). That

teaching, however, is incorrect. *God didn't punish Jesus for our sins. It is our sins that punished him*. There is a difference between the two. Jesus took all our sins into himself (he became sin for us)⁶ and died for us on the cross.

We must interpret the scriptures correctly so that we can see God as he truly is. Seeing him with a faulty lens robs us of the peace and the loving relationship that he wants us to have with him.

Let's summarize: God is not *schizophrenic*. He doesn't have a split personality. He doesn't go into mood swings. He is love and all his actions and dealings with us are simply expressions of his loving nature. □



¹ Isaiah 1:16–18, 10:2, 59:9–15

² Romans 1:18; John 3:36

³ Isaiah 35:1–7

⁴ 1 Thessalonian 5:9

⁵ Malachi 1:2; Romans 9:12–13

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:21

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12



19



2



20



10

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cover story

- 5 The real Christmas story**
Jesus has redeemed humanity completely in his incarnation.

articles

- 7 The virgin will give birth to a son**
Jesus is God's promise come true.
- 8 A commanding call to rest**
Rest fully in Jesus' finished work.
- 10 Next year will be different... or will it?**
Why not begin the new year with a new life.
- 12 Your origin**
Knowing your origin can transform your life.
- 15 Simeon's surprise**
Simeon finally saw the saviour who would deliver people from oppression.
- 16 Accepting the good news**
Jesus lives in and through us as us uniquely.
- 18 Do grace and law conflict?**
Law is not graceless, and grace is not lawless.

regular features

- 2 Editorial**
- 4 What our readers say**
- 19 Another angle**
- 20 Speaking of life...**
- 21 Tammy's turn**
- 23 Hmm...**
Something to think about.

What our readers say:

Dr Sellappan, I read THE PLAIN TRUTH with great interest and joy. Jesus the fulfilled covenant...is wonderful. The bible lists 613 civil and religious laws, rules and regulations. Is it possible to get details on these in any form e.g. in a book chapter? Thank you.

Maria Rajeshwari

Ed: Glad to hear that you liked the articles on Old and New covenants. Some Jewish/ Bible scholars have actually studied and catalogued these laws, rules and regulations. You can read them in the Pentateuch/Torah (the first 5 books in the Bible), especially Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. There are many websites where you can find the complete list such as:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments

<http://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm>

While it is good to know them, keeping them cannot save us. We are saved by grace and by grace alone and that grace is Jesus.

The cover story, "The self-emptying God" (Sep-Nov 2013) by John McLean is an excellent one. It tells how much Jesus loved us that he willingly gave up his divine glory to come as one of us to rescue us from our fallen state. He literally plunged into our hell, redeemed and reinstated us to his glorious image. That is true love—he laid down his life so that we can have eternal life with him.

Jayashree

Damansara Utama

It is informative, spiritual and inspirational. It has broadened my understanding of the Christian faith. I have recommended THE PLAIN TRUTH to many of my Catholic friends.

Rosa Lee

Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH is truly food for the soul because the articles stimulate our conscience and helps us in our spiritual growth. Thanks to the Editorial Team. Please continue the good work in serving the Lord. Please kindly accept my humble donation towards your ministry.

William Gomez

Butterworth

Enclosed is a small token of support for THE PLAIN TRUTH ministry. May the Lord continue to uphold it so that more people may be blessed. God abides.

Rev. Dr Tan Kim Ain

Attached is a cheque for RM100, a small contribution to keep the magazine running. Good luck, merry Christmas and Happy New Year 2014 to all THE PLAIN TRUTH staff for the excellent work. Keep it up.

Alfred

Kota Kinabalu

Enclosed please find my cheque for RM100 to help defray your printing and other expenses. May I take this opportunity to wish you a Happy and Peaceful NewYear.

Alice Ooi

Petaling Jaya

I am greatly amazed at the transformation of the church! I nearly could not recognize it—it's comforting to see familiar names on the website. Attached please find my contribution of RM1,000 towards THE PLAIN TRUTH.

Yong Poo Ling

Klang

Ed: Yes, God's grace has transformed our denomination—worldwide! To reflect this transformation, we have changed our name from Worldwide Church of God to Grace Communion International. We are very thankful to God for this transformation. All glory goes to Him.

Ed: Thank you all for your financial support and prayers for the Plain Truth ministry. We sure need them. It's definitely a team work and we thank God for your participation in Christ's ministry. God loves everyone and he wants us to share this Good News so that they too can know God and fellowship with him.

THE PLAIN TRUTH gives new perspectives of life that is not readily available in current texts. Keep up the good work.

Jamshed Fozdar

Singapore

When I read the articles they give me peace to my mind and soul.

Shobana Chandran

Ipoh

As a non-Christian I find THE PLAIN TRUTH useful as it gives me in-depth knowledge and understanding of Christianity. As a 78-year-old man, I am able to compare the different religions.

N. Mahadevan

Kuala Lumpur

THE PLAIN TRUTH has given me a different perspective towards the Christian faith.

Chin Kok Wei

Subang Jaya

I find THE PLAIN TRUTH useful as it answers a lot of complicated life issues in a simple and informative way.

S. Vangadasalam

Klang

THE PLAIN TRUTH is not only for the Christians but also for people of all other faiths as well.

Goh Teik Kim

Ipoh

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 real Christmas story

by
Paul Kroll

Every Christmas season Christians give thanks to our heavenly Father for his love and grace, showered upon us through the birth of Jesus.

The traditional carols we sing memorialize the meaning of Jesus' birth—Joy to the World, O Holy Night, The First Noel, Silent Night, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, O Little Town of Bethlehem, Away in a Manger, God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen—and many others.

"Silent Night" is one of my favorite carols because it speaks so directly to the inspiring scriptural story. Here are some of the words:

"Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright round yon virgin mother and child...

Shepherds quake at the sight... heavenly hosts sing Alleluia! Christ the Savior is born...

Son of God, love's pure light... with the dawn of redeeming grace,

Jesus, Lord, at thy birth...

With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King."

How beautiful are the thoughts of this carol, as it points us to the joy of our salvation through his life, death, resurrection and future coming in visible glory.

Yet, when you think about it, Jesus' birth was a rather ordinary event. Like the billions of human beings who have experienced the birthing process, he was pushed out of his mother's protective womb, down the birth canal and into our world.

There was nothing special, extraordinary or miraculous about Jesus' development in his mother Mary's womb or his birth. And that is just the point. Jesus' common birth demonstrates that he was not some kind of hybrid ghost or phantom, but a real human being, one of us in every way.

Jesus not a phantom

It may well be that one reason the church began to have an official Christmas celebration, probably first occurring in the congregations at Rome early in the fourth century, was to counter the heresy of Christian Gnostic Docetism. One of the heretical claims of the Docetic movement was that Jesus only appeared to be a real human being, but that he was only a phantom—an illusion. He did not have a real physical existence or a human body, so he was not really born as a baby, did not actually die on the cross and was not resurrected bodily.

Docetists rejected the possibility that Jesus had a body and nature like ours because they refused to believe that God, who is perfect, eternal, and spirit could have anything to do with our fallen temporal existence and matter, which they thought was evil. "Most denied the birth of Jesus, which would have put him under the power of the material world," says historical theologian Justo L. Gonzalez.

Though born a real human being, Jesus is also fully God of true God—the Son of God, Jesus Christ, one of

three Persons of the God who is Three in One and One in Three.

The church had battled against Docetic heresies from its earliest days. The New Testament letter of 1 John reminds believers that Jesus was a real human being, not a mirage: "Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." John called every person denying this truth an "antichrist."¹

When the church finally instituted a special Christmas festival as a memorial of Jesus' birth, it fixed in believers' minds the biblical testimony that he was a real person with a real human body—born as we all are, as flesh and blood, fully human babies. In Christmas, the church was teaching the testimony of the Gospels about Jesus' humanity. That's one reason why it's important for Christians to memorialize Jesus' human birth as we do during each Advent-Christmas season.

Of course, the church did not invent having what amounts to a public announcement of Jesus' birth. It was beaten to the punch, we might say, by God himself, who memorialized the birth of Jesus with great public fanfare.

Two of the Gospels, Luke and Matthew, provide many details about his birth. In these accounts, Jesus' birth is extolled with great pageantry by the announcements of angels, telling the event to common shepherds as well as to individuals of great learning and international religious importance (the "Wise Men"). Singing, giving gifts, visitations and prophetic pronouncements are all part of this joyous public celebration.

Looking beyond Jesus' birth

Yet, the fact of Jesus' human birth is only part of the gospel story of how God has worked out our salvation in him. True enough, Jesus' birth tells us that the One we worship as Savior lived as a fully human individual in all aspects of his creaturely existence, just as we do.

However, by itself, the birth of Jesus is not the miracle and meaning of who he really is in himself and who he is for us—for all of humanity. As we search for the full meaning and miraculous nature of the "Christmas story," we are compelled to look deeper into the question of who Jesus really was.

Matthew 1:18 tells us that Mary "was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit." The angel told Joseph, who was betrothed to her in marriage, that she was pregnant not because she had a sexual affair with someone else, but "because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Luke 1:26–38 records the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her how she, a virgin, would become pregnant: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

While Jesus would be born a real and fully human



person, he would also be “Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us’.”² Though a real human being, Jesus is also fully God of true God—the Son of God, Jesus Christ, one of three Persons of the God who is Three in One and One in Three.

The Creator God is free and able to enter his creation as one of us and yet retain his divine identity.

Who Jesus really was

The Gospel of John concentrates on Jesus’ divine identity. John says nothing specific about Jesus’ birth. His interest is to show the true identity and eternal nature of the One who became the human being, Jesus. John begins his Gospel before time began, we might say, in order to inform us about Jesus’ existence.

He says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”

John next tells us that the divine Word underwent an absolutely radical and unique change. John describes this historical creative act tersely in a single sentence “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

The divine Word (the Son of God or Jesus Christ) became a fertilized egg in Mary’s womb. That cell divided again and again, becoming in time tens of millions of cells, developing into an embryo and then a fetus, and finally resulting in the birth of the infant Jesus, after Mary’s normal, nine-month pregnancy.

Words cannot adequately describe the astonishingly infinite creativity and freedom of God to reach down to us by becoming one of us, bringing us the joyous good news of who he is for us and who he has made us to be in Jesus Christ.

From infinite power to human cell

When we turn to the apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we find a further explanation of this profound occurrence—the Incarnation—the “infleshing” of the divine Son of God as the man Jesus.

Paul writes, speaking of Jesus Christ: “Being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”³

Why would the eternal, all-powerful Son of God put himself through such a profound change, taking on our fallen human nature and mortal body? Paul explains why by telling us that this act of pure love was necessary for our salvation. “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich [in very nature God], yet for your sakes he became poor [human flesh], so that you through his poverty might become rich [receive eternal life].”⁴

What God accomplished in Jesus

There in a nutshell is the greatest story ever told. In this miraculous act of the Word become human flesh, Jesus took on our fallen human nature and recreated it within himself, transforming it into his perfect and righteous human nature. In Jesus’ death on the cross, God wiped away our spiritual fallenness and freed us from the sinfulness that enslaves us. In his bodily

continued on page 7

The virgin will give birth to a son

In his book about Jesus, Matthew frequently says that Jesus fulfilled verses from the Old Testament. One example comes in the story of Jesus' birth.

Miraculous beginnings¹

"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about," Matthew begins. "His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit."

Joseph knew how most girls become pregnant, and he knew that he was not the father. But "because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."

Joseph and Mary were legally obligated to marry, and they were considered husband and wife. If Mary had sex with another man, it would be considered adultery, and Deuteronomy 22:23–24 required death for most such cases. Joseph did not want to humiliate Mary, but he wanted to call off the wedding.

"But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'"

The angel also announced that God had a special role for the child: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The name Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means "God saves." Jesus was a common name in those days, because many Jewish parents gave their children names that expressed faith in God. Many first-century Jews wanted God to save them from the Romans. The angel announced a different kind of Messiah—one who would save the people from their own sins.

by
**Dr. Michael
Morrison**

A fulfillment of Scripture²

Matthew tells us that "all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us.'"

But no one called Mary's child "Immanuel." No one talks about "Immanuel of Nazareth." The angel said his name should be *Jesus*. Immanuel was someone else.

Matthew is quoting Isaiah 7:14. In context, that is *not* a prophecy about the Messiah. Rather, it is the prediction of a child in the days of Ahaz, king of Judah, some 700 years before Jesus. Enemies were threatening to invade Judah, and Isaiah tells Ahaz not to worry. Isaiah gives him a time frame: a woman will conceive, and before her son is weaned, Assyria will take care of the enemies.³

Ahaz presumably knew who the virgin was—perhaps his daughter—and she conceived in the normal way, after marriage. She had a boy and named him Immanuel, meaning "God with us." She did not expect the boy himself to be God; rather, she was expressing belief that God was helping his people.

Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the days of Ahaz, and Matthew says it was fulfilled *again* by the birth of Jesus. Jesus gave the verse a significance far greater than anyone had imagined: It was indeed a virgin who conceived, and her son was indeed God, who had come to be with his people.

Jesus did not have to bear the *name* Immanuel—he fulfilled the scripture in an unexpected way. What the boy Immanuel could signify only in his name, Jesus fulfilled in reality. □

¹ Matthew 1:18–21

² Matthew 1:22–23

³ Isaiah 7:1–17

continued from page 6

resurrection, Jesus was the forerunner of our salvation, drawing us into the new life of his resurrection. And, finally, at his coming in power and glory, Jesus will end the stranglehold of human death by redeeming our mortal bodies with immortality.⁵

All this stems from God's eternal and inexhaustible love for us. Is it any wonder that Christmas celebration is filled with wonder and awe, as we contemplate the Incarnation of Jesus, our Savior and Lord?

Christian believers do not put their faith in a group of doctrines or a set of logical proofs. They have no faith in fake, ersatz "gods." They place no false hopes in themselves and do not rest on any "good works" that they perform.

Believers believe in a living person—Jesus Christ,

who is true God of true God, sent by the Father, and who, with the Father, "lives in" them by the Holy Spirit.⁶ Each Christian believer says with the apostle Paul: "I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed"—Jesus Christ.⁷

That is the story of Christmas—the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. □

¹ 1 John 4:2–3

² Matthew 1:23

³ Philippians
2:5–8

⁴ 2 Corinthians
8:9

⁵ 1 Corinthians
15:50–54

⁶ John 14:15–21

⁷ 2 Timothy 1:12

A commandin

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”¹ When I was younger, this was a very comforting verse to me. When I was struggling with various challenges or anxious and frightened, it was reassuring for me to read these words and to think about the idea that Jesus was gentle and that He was offering some sort of rest for me. This was a passage I liked to copy out to give to others when they were discouraged in some way.

As time went on and I encountered greater and more painful trials, I was drawn back to these words of Jesus. I began to wonder if there was more to them than that they sounded nice and soothing. I found myself at that point challenged by the command I realized Jesus gives here, embedded right in his invitation.

“Come!” He says, “Come and learn from me.” Jesus’ call here is not a suggestion or a friendly piece of advice. He is not speaking just to sound comforting. It is a command. He directs us to do something in relationship to him. Come! Learn!

Who is Jesus issuing his command to? He makes it clear: to “all who are weary and burdened.” Jesus puts no restrictions here on what kinds of burdens or weariness. He calls forth anyone and everyone who is worn down in some way in their lives. Whatever concerns, relationships, circumstances they are carrying that weigh them down. Whoever recognizes in some way or to some degree, that their lives—their plans and their efforts—are producing weariness. These ones Jesus commands: Come to me! Learn from me!

But there is more. He clarifies what it would mean to come and learn from him.

His command is to become yoked with him, and in doing that, to learn from him. Jesus draws a sharp contrast between the burdens we bring when we come to him and the yoke He offers to share with us. The first contrast is seen in his use of the word “yoke.” A yoke is a large wooden bar placed across the necks of a pair of animals—enabling them to pull together and thus share the load. We often carry our own burdens

by
Cathy Deddo

alone. We are yoked together with our own burdens. In contrast, Jesus calls us to be yoked to him and to share his yoke.

Secondly, Jesus describes his yoke as “easy” and his burden as “light.” The word translated “easy” means excellent, useful, pleasant or kind. In other places in the New Testament, that same word is used to describe the kindness and gracious action of God.

Jesus also describes his yoke as a light burden. A light burden is one that is not burdensome. It sounds like an oxymoron, doesn’t it? Isn’t a burden, by definition, burdensome? If not, then how can it be a burden? Jesus doesn’t say there won’t be a load to carry, but that it will be light.

Finally, Jesus tells us that taking his own yoke upon us will give us rest. This point seems to be Jesus’ focus point, because he repeats it twice. The second time, he further describes this rest as “rest for your souls.” In other words, what Jesus wants to give the weary and

burdened is true soul-rest, rest at the very core of their being. Since we receive this rest by taking Jesus’ yoke, then what Jesus offers is a share in his own soul-rest.

But what exactly is this yoke Jesus wants to share with us? What does it consist of? Why is it easy and how



does it provide rest?

Rather than guessing, let’s look to the passage itself. We can see that the nature of the burden has everything to do with whose burden it is. It is because it is Jesus’ yoke and no other that it gives us rest. Notice Jesus says “I will give you rest” and “my yoke” and “my burden.” Also, he tells us that taking on his yoke involves learning from him.

So Jesus’ call here is a call into a relationship with him. We are to walk with him, continually gaining our perspective and cues from him—in whatever situation we are in.

Our relationship and interaction with him involves a learning process. Yoked to him, we learn from him.

Jesus tells us to learn from him “for I am gentle and humble in heart.” Because Jesus is gentle and humble, we should learn from him. As we do, the result will be rest for our souls. What an unexpected statement! Wouldn’t it make more sense for Jesus to say that

g call to rest

He can provide rest and an easy yoke because He is strong? What does being meek and humble have to do with having a light burden?

In order to answer this, we need first to look back at the verse just previous to this passage. This call to us is not given in isolation. In verse 27, Jesus says “All things have been committed to me by my Father and no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Before Jesus calls to the weary and heavy laden, he speaks about his relationship with his Father. He states that his relationship with the Father is one of real giving and receiving and mutual, personal, and intimate knowing. We hear in Jesus’ words that the Father is one who gives freely and fully to His Son. This giving and receiving occurs within an exclusive relationship of knowing between Father and Son.

Does this help us understand Jesus’ description of himself as meek and humble?

Yes, it does. Both these words indicate the idea of being yielded to another. Jesus, the Son, yields to his Father—not just externally bending to his Father’s will, but freely, from his very heart. Jesus knows and lives in the self-giving love of his Father. He securely receives all that his Father shares with him. So, Jesus does not need to grasp for his identity, his status, his security, his purpose and direction in life. He receives all this as he loves and trusts his heavenly Father. He is humble, that is, he is not self-preoccupied—because he continually looks to his Father in all circumstances. So we can say that Jesus, the Son, is humbly yoked to his Father in a relationship that is not burdensome, but gives rest to his soul.

Only after describing his relationship to the Father does he speak of others. “No one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Jesus is given all things by his Father and he opens a way for us to join him in this exclusive relationship he has with his Father. He shares with us his yoke with the Father.

His burden is his wonderful relationship with his Father and this is what he has come to reveal and enable us to participate in. His whole life, death, resurrection, and ascension is what makes it possible for him to open this exclusive relationship to us. His burden is easy or light not because he has a shorter list of things for us to do, but because his yoke links us to the relationship that is at the very heart of the triune God, the relation between the Father and the Son.

Who does Jesus choose to reveal this knowledge of the Father to? We find out in the very next verse, in his call. He shares his knowledge of the Father with “all who are weary and burdened” and who, moved by the Spirit, will come to him and learn from Him who is humble and meek in relationship to his Father.

But it is not enough simply to want lighter burdens.

Jesus’ call for us to share his wonderful yoke includes the challenge of letting go of our burdens and handing them over to him. Jesus doesn’t offer us another burden to add to what we already have. And notice he doesn’t offer advice on how to more effectively carry our current burdens so they seem lighter. He is calling us to exchange our burdens. If we are to take his yoke upon our shoulders, we will need to give up the ones that currently sit there.

Jesus’ challenging invitation is a continuing one, because he knows that we are tempted to pick up our burdens again, even though this might seem crazy because we know they weary us. The invitation that Jesus extends again and again to us, includes the challenge for us to continually take them off, let them go, set them down. Ceasing to be yoked to them.

What are those things they weary us? What are our burdens? We could be weighed down with anxiety or fear about a health issue, our financial security, a decision that needs to be made. We could be harboring the burdens of resentment or unforgiveness. Most likely, at the core of our burdens, is our effort to try to be in control—wanting everything in our lives and relationships in a certain place before we can be peaceful or joyful. And this desire to be in control is rooted in a distrust of our triune God. Walking through life with a false view of God that says he can’t be fully and freely trusted in every situation then both triggers and justifies the temptation to shift that trust exclusively to ourselves. Trusting in ourselves and our own resources apart from God fuels within us a desire and need to maintain control over most important things in our lives. And that makes our lives wearying, full of burdens.

I am both thrilled and challenged by Jesus’ words to receive his soul-rest over and over again. I am easily caught up again in the anxieties and struggles of life lived in this fallen world. But Jesus continues to press in with his call to rest. He knows how we struggle to receive and that is why he calls us to continually learn from him, the ultimate receiver. He calls to us to live under and enjoy his yoke again today. He longs to reveal himself and his Father to us. He longs to give us that deep rest that is his yoke.

When I find anxiety, resentment, fear, etc. creeping back into my life, Jesus leads me to realize that I have taken up the wrong burdens. We are reminded in the Letter to the Hebrews that Jesus has taken a hold of our fallen, broken lives to redeem and heal us from the inside out.² The reason we can give up our burdens is because Jesus knows all about them and has made them his own, so now we can make his yoke ours. I am so grateful that this relationship and this rest is what he gives us—every day! ■

¹ Matthew 11: 28–30

² Hebrews 3–5

Next year will be di

Have you ever wondered if God cares about New Year's Day? God exists in timelessness called eternity. However, when he created humans, he placed them within time, defined by days, weeks, months and years. There are many calendars that people use around the world. I realise that the Hebrew New Year's Day is not the New Year's Day that we celebrate, but the same principles do apply. Whatever calendar you use, there is New Year's Day, that is, the first day of the first month of the calendar year.

God cares about time. Moses prayed for wisdom when it comes to time. This is what he said:

"The days of our lives are seventy years; ... So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom."¹

One thing we have come to know about God as revealed in the Christian Bible is that God keeps time. He does things on time. If something must happen on the first of the month, or on the 20th of the month, it will happen on that day, on the hour, to the minute. It is not a coincidence, and it is not an emergency. It is God-incidence.

The life of Jesus was scripted to the last detail in terms of time and place thousands of years before he was born, and he lived the script. This is one of the things that attest to Jesus' deity. No human could predict how his own life would turn out the way he did, and the way the prophets before him foretold. The birth of Jesus, which we celebrate on Christmas Day, as well as his crucifixion and resurrection, were announced by the prophets many years before they happened.

Let me share with you some of the things God did and said on New Year's Day in biblical history.

Firstly, we note that when Noah was in the ark during the flood, it was months before the waters subsided. It is recorded that it was on New Year's Day when Noah opened the window and saw the waters have subsided. Probably having gotten used to the comforts and safety of the ark from the floodwaters outside, Noah stayed a further two months. In Genesis 8:16, God said to Noah leave the boat, the ground is dry. Sometimes we are flooded by problems in life, and ironically we get trapped in them and become comfortable that we are afraid of leaving them behind. Whatever comfort zone you may be in right now, on this New Year's Day of 2014, God says the same words he said to Noah thousands of years ago—get out!

A fresh start

There is a new world out there waiting for you. You can go out and be fruitful and multiply. The floods of last year may have destroyed all you had, but a new year's day is God's message to you to start afresh and be fruitful and multiply. I know they say once beaten, twice shy. You don't need to be shy. It's a new year—get out. The proverbial waters that were drowning you have

by
**Takalani
Musekwa**

subsided.

Secondly, we find that God gives Moses instructions to construct a Tabernacle (Temple), which was a Tent symbolizing God's dwelling place amongst the people. After it was completed, God says to Moses, "Set up the Tabernacle on the first day of the new year".² According to God, this was a special task, to be done on a special day, New Year's Day!

Hundreds of years later, the Temple was defiled and corrupted by the people. King Hezekiah decided that things must change. The priests went into the sanctuary of the Temple to cleanse it, and they took out of the Temple courtyard all the defiled things they found. They began this work on New Year's Day, that is, the first day of the first month.³

But what does all this mean? Fast forward to the New Testament, where we are told by Paul that we are The Temple. "Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."⁴

So, on this New Year's Day, God gives you and I the same message he gave to Moses thousands of years ago. "Set up the temple on New Year's Day". If you are not a believer already, God is making a call. Set yourself up to be his temple, and he will come and dwell in you. If you are already a believer, he gives you the same message that the Levites were given thousands of years ago to purify the temple, starting on New Year's Day. So, if you have defiled yourself through sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, hostility, quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these, he says to you, "Purify yourself"—starting on New Year's Day. Have you started? This could be the best New Year's Resolution of your life, to become God's dwelling place.

Leave Babylon!

Thirdly, there is another New Year's Day event which is God's message to humans today. This event is recorded in the book of Ezra. Ezra was a Jew who was living in exile in Babylon, together with many other Jews. Jerusalem, the place where the temple was, was falling apart, together with the temple. Remember we are the temple, and we are the church. So the temple was a symbol of us, the believers, and Jerusalem a symbol of the church.

We read in Revelation 21:2: "And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." Elsewhere, we are told several times that the church is the bride of Christ.⁵ What does this have to do with you?

Well, after Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt, Ezra, who was a scribe decided to travel to Jerusalem to learn more about the scriptures and teach his

fferent... or will it?



people. He decided to leave Babylon on “New Year’s Day”!⁶

This New Year’s Day, just like Ezra did thousands of years ago, you too can decide to start your journey back to church (Jerusalem). You may have been stuck in the Babylon of your lifestyle, your job, and your sins. There are many believers stuck in Babylon, when Jerusalem, the church, needs them. But like Ezra, you can decide to start the journey back home—to church. The church needs you. Will you be like Ezra this New Year’s Day and go back to church? Ezra started his journey on New Year’s Day. It may be a tough journey when you start, but the journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step, on the first day of the first month. It took Ezra four months to get there. But you can start today!

May you look back next New Year’s Eve and say, “I am glad I was like Noah, who stepped out of the comfort zone of the ark into a new world God had for him, or like Moses, who set up the temple on New Year’s Day, or like Ezra, who decided to leave the trappings of Babylon behind, and learn more about his God!”

Happy New Year! Happy 2014! ☐

¹ Psalms 90:10–12

² Exodus 40:2

³ 2 Chronicles 29:15–17

⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:16

⁵ Ephesians 5:27; Revelation 19:7, 21:9

⁶ Ezra 7:9

Your c

Where did you begin? It's a simple question, but has huge implications. If you cannot answer this question, you don't have any clue as to who you are and what your life is all about. So it's time that you got the correct answer, not just from anybody, but from God himself.

You began in God's thought

You know you came from your parents. And you also know that your parents came from their parents...and their parents came from their parents—Adam and Eve. Where did Adam and Eve come from? They came from God. That means you came from God. It's simple logic.

You were in God's thoughts before the beginning of time, before the universe was created. That's where you began—in God's thought.

Many Bible verses tell about your origin such as:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the kind intention of his will.*"¹

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared *beforehand [before time]* that we should walk in them."²

"He has saved [past action] us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus *before the beginning of time.*"³

"...God's elect...*in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began*, but has in due time manifested his word..."⁴

"...we declare God's wisdom, *a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.*"⁵

Yes, you began in God's thought, before time began, before there was any creation.

God knew you before you were born

You were no surprise to God. He knew you before you were born. The word *know* in the Bible refers to intimate relationship. That means he knew you intimately as the following verses reveal:

"...You [God] formed my inward parts; you wove me in my mother's womb...I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are your works, and my soul knows it very well."⁶

"*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you*, before you were born I set you apart..."⁷

"*Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.*"⁸

You didn't simply drop from your mother's womb. God designed you in his mind long before you were born.



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**



origin



You bear God's image

You look like God. He created you in his image as the following verses tell:

*"Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*⁹

*"...God created man, in the likeness of God made he him."*¹⁰

*"...I will be vindicated and will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness."*¹¹

*"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters."*¹²

That means you are a little *god* in the sense that you bear God's image.

The Psalmist expressed this truth this way: "They do not know nor do they understand; *they walk about in darkness [not knowing who they are]*; all the foundations of the earth are shaken [*our illusion about who we are*]. *I said, you are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High.*"¹³

The Pharisees accused Jesus for blasphemy because he claimed that he was God. Jesus responded by quoting the above scripture, "Is it not written in your Law, *I have said you are gods?*"¹⁴ He reminded them that they too are God's children as they carry his image.

On another occasion, the rulers tried to trap Jesus in his words. So they asked him a sensitive question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" Jesus asked them for a coin and they gave him one...He said to them, "Whose *image* and inscription is this?" They said to him, Caesar's. Jesus answered and said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."¹⁵

Jesus advised them to pay their taxes to Caesar (the government), but he also asked them to acknowledge God's image in Caesar (and in them). We all bear God's image, so we need to acknowledge his authority over us.

As God's image bearers, we have a special relationship with him unlike any other creature that he created.

You live, move and have your being in God

YHWH (Yahweh) is one of God's names. The Jews considered it so sacred that they dared not pronounce it. It's actually our *breathing sound*. When God created Adam, he breathed into his nostril the breath of life and he became a living soul.¹⁶ Whether we realize it or not, we are breathing God every moment of our life! He is present in our life from cradle to grave (and beyond). Our breath acknowledges him.

Paul declared, "For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions 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*.¹⁷ That is, he holds us together. We exist only in him.

He also told pagan worshippers in Athens, “*We live, move and have our being in him... We are his offspring*.”¹⁸

That means we live only in him. We are *inseparably* connected to him. *Jesus lives in us and we live in him*.¹⁹ *He is our life. He is expressing himself in and through us. He lives his life in and through us as us, as Emmanuel, as God with us.*

You are precious to God

Because you are precious to God he will do *anything* to set you free and give you a good life. That's precisely what Jesus did for you. He gave up everything—power, glory, reputation, comfort—to redeem you and give you a place of highest honor at the right hand of God. The two parables below tell you of your immense worth.

“The kingdom of heaven is like *treasure* hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for *fine pearls*. When he found *one of great value*, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”²⁰

You are the hidden treasure and pearl. Jesus purchased you at a huge price—with his own life. Why? Because *he saw a great treasure hidden in you. He saw a god-like person—his own image—reflected in you. The full deity of Jesus is in you.* That's why Paul exclaimed, “*Christ in you is the hope of glory*.”²¹ He continued, “... we have this *treasure [Jesus' image]* in jars of clay [in our frail bodies] to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”²²

Jesus is not Plan B

Jesus' coming as man has a bigger context than just dealing with our sin. He wasn't reacting to our sin. It's not that we have sinned; therefore he had to come and deal with it. He was not Plan B. God has only *one* plan: to share his love, life and light with us. *He became man because he had wanted to, not because he had to. His original plan was to come and dwell in us and express himself in and through us uniquely as us.* Sin came much later. *Jesus would still come even if we had not sinned. He didn't just come to deal with sin. He came to unite God and man through his incarnate (God-man) life.* He created us so that he could live in us. We are his temple (tabernacle)—the Holy of holies—his abiding place.

From eternity, the Triune God wanted to share life with beings like him. That's why he created us in his likeness. He wanted to live and express his life in and through us as us. This was his original purpose. And he never deviated from his original purpose whether we sinned or not.

Jesus was [and is] *fully God and fully man*. As God, his

original purpose was: “*I don't want to be God by myself, for myself and with myself. I want to be God only with man, for man and as man.*” As man, his original intent was: “*I don't want to be man by myself, for myself and with myself. I want to be man only in union with God—with God and for God.*” (quote by Andre Rabe)

This is the bigger context. This is the reason why he came as God-man. He didn't come just to sort out our mess.

Our destiny

God through the prophet Jeremiah declared his plan for us: “...I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, *plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*”²³

God created us so that he could express his life in and through us as us. He wants to live in us! We are the Holy of holies. That does not mean we are absorbed into his life. Rather, it means *we participate in his divine nature [life], in his perfect humanity*.²⁴

We may be confused about our identity, but God is not confused about us. He knows us before he formed us, and he knows us intimately. He knows our origin—in his thought. We came from his belly/womb. So we have always been his children,

and we will always be. That's our true identity.

Our parents don't define our identity. Our jobs don't define our identity. Our sins don't define our identity. The devil doesn't define our identity. *Jesus defines our identity. He is our identity. He is our life. In him we live, move and have our being. We are his offspring.*

*We are created for fellowship with God—to participate in his abundant life. We bear Jesus' image. We are bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. We have his blueprint, his DNA. He lives in us and we live in him. He has become man (without ceasing to be God) to freely express himself in and through us as us. So let's dismiss all lies and illusions about us. Let's not be forgetful hearers who look into the mirror and then forget how they look like [their true image]. Let's look into God's mirror intently and discover the perfect image of Jesus hidden in us.*²⁵

Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.²⁶ He knows the end from the beginning. He didn't begin with something beautiful [himself] and end with something terrible [our fall]. He moves from glory to glory. He created us to implant his own image in us. True, sin tainted our image, but Jesus restored it to its original state. Whether we sinned or not, he would still come as God-man and unite God and man. This is because he desires to dwell in us and express his life in and through us as us. May you see this wonderful truth and be blessed immensely. □

Reference

Andre Rabe, *Free to be me*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym_ycrI9Mx4

“Our parents don't define
our identity. Our jobs
don't define our identity.
Our sins don't define our
identity.”

¹ Ephesians 1:3–5

² Ephesians 2:10

³ 2 Timothy 1:9

⁴ Titus 1:1–3

⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:7

⁶ Psalms 139:
13–14

⁷ Jeremiah 1:5

⁸ Isaiah 49:1

⁹ Genesis 1:26–27

¹⁰ Genesis 5:1

¹¹ Psalms 17:15

¹² Romans 8:29

¹³ Psalms 82:5–6

¹⁴ John 10: 34–35

¹⁵ Mark 12:17

¹⁶ Genesis 2:7

¹⁷ Colossians 1:16

¹⁸ Acts 17:28

¹⁹ John 14:20,
17:21

²⁰ Matthew
13:44–46

²¹ Colossians 1:27

²² 2 Corinthians
4:7

²³ Jeremiah 29:11

²⁴ 2 Peter 1:4;
1 Corinthians
10:16–17

²⁵ James 1:23–25

²⁶ Revelation 22:13

Simeon's surprise

by
John McLean

The old man's face reflected the local landscape—weathered, lined and creased. He was a good man, prayerful and devout. He lived “in prayerful expectancy of help for Israel.”¹ He remembered the promises made to Abraham. He remembered God's costly redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt. He remembered the promises made to the nation then. He remembered the exciting promises made to David. He remembered with profound longing the promises made through the prophets. He remembered the sad tragedy of captivity and exile, and the promises of the subsequent prophets for redemption and complete restoration.

But for four hundred years the prophets had been silent. Troops from the current reigning military powers had used the national territory as a regular route for their marches or their battles. As a buffer state, Israel suffered the ongoing misery, destitution and destruction from the brutal fallout of war—either indirectly from the battles between the current powers, or directly through invasion such as those by Antiochus Epiphanes and Pompey.

Some people had given up hope. Some joined resistance movements. Some tried to be more religious, more worthy of God's blessing, believing that if everyone kept the law perfectly, Messiah would come.

As Simeon looked around him, he saw the oppression of Israel under the heel of the mighty Roman Empire. Politically and militarily his people were subjected to the rule of Rome and her appointed authorities. And while the temple dominated his nation religiously and economically, he saw the strange cooperation of the Sadducees with the occupying forces, the resistance of the Pharisees, and the various extreme versions of Messianic fervour that regularly burst forth from the depth of hope that burned brightly in the hearts of many religious people. Where was God? Why didn't he do something?

In his mercy, God had convicted Simeon through the Spirit that he would see “the Messiah of God”—God's anointed One—before he died. Simeon then lived daily in eager expectation of that hope. Then, one day, “led by the Spirit”, Simeon entered the Temple. He saw Mary and Joseph bringing in the child Jesus. He took the child in his arms and blessed God: “With my own eyes I've seen your salvation; it's now out in the open for everyone to see”. What a surprising moment; what an unlikely source of help for Israel—and indeed as Simeon points out, help for the whole world to see.

What an unlikely Messiah. A helpless baby. What a surprising source of salvation and hope for all mankind. Yet even so, Simeon's expectations were about to be exceeded in spectacular ways he could never have anticipated. In the midst of the current strife, mess, confusion, discouragement and stress, in the midst of war and occupation, God focused the hope of his entire, eternal plan in his Son, Jesus. He wasn't what was expected—even by those who knew the Scriptures best.

In place of a glorious military warrior, he was presented as a dependent child. Instead of a conquering king, he came as a servant.

In Jesus Christ all the promises of the Old Covenant would find their complete and ultimate fulfilment. Jesus was the Father's beloved Son. He called God “Abba”, Father. He was nothing less than the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe,² entering into the life of his creation. He came from the inner life of God to reveal God to us—to show us who God was, what he was doing. And it wasn't what most people thought God was like!

This God was not some lonely, judgmental, angry, disapproving being. This God was not someone who was out to punish every mistake and failing. This God was a God of love. A God who in himself, in his Triune communion of Father, Son and Spirit, is and always was love. A God whose love was so great that, from the very beginning, he wanted to share his life of beauty and joy with others, to include his creation within the circle of his life and love as his beloved children.³

In Jesus, we have “redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”⁴ And so very much more. In Christ, we have fellowship, communion with God. We are included in the very life of the Triune God. He came “in the flesh”, to take on our nature, and in doing so unites the human and the divine in himself. And he takes our humanity back to the Father through the resurrection and ascension—redeemed, cleansed, reconciled. As Paul describes him to Timothy, he is quite simply “Christ Jesus our hope”. And the gospel is that message of hope, of reconciliation and salvation, for all mankind. Simeon would have been more astonished than anything he could have hoped or imagined when he held that tiny baby in his arms, had he known the full extent of what he was privileged to witness.

This is the amazing, astounding good news Christians celebrate at Advent season. Why get distracted with dates, commercialism, and a pseudo-celebration of “Xmas” when this is the greatest event, the greatest truth, anyone anywhere can celebrate? It's news that is so good it's hard to believe. An inner voice often tells us it's too good to be true. But the advent of Christ into our world tells us it is so. And that's something that we can't help but celebrate and share.

It's why the traditional Christian worship calendar includes Christmas in the Advent season. It's a central celebration of Christ-centred theology, of living and sharing the good news of the gospel. It's a time to focus on giving as the theme of our lives, as it is expressed in the other-centred, lavish outpouring of love expressed by the Father in the Son. It's a time to share afresh Simeon's joy at holding that tiny baby in his hands—amazed and surprised at who that baby was, and all that he is and has done. It's a time to join with the angels⁵ singing “glory to God in the highest” for the greatest good news the world has ever heard. □

¹ Luke 2:25–32

² John 1:1–4;
Colossians 1:15

³ Ephesians 1:5

⁴ Colossians 1:14

⁵ Luke 2:13–15

Accepting t

All Christians know that Jesus Christ died for them. But often we don't focus enough on the fact that Jesus lives for us.

The cross, resurrection and ascension are inseparable. Together they constitute the good news of the gospel. Yes, Jesus died for us—but he was resurrected for us, and ascended to the Father for us, too. He has so taken our lives into his that his death has become our death, and his life our life. In this sense, Paul can say we are alive (have been resurrected) in Christ and seated in the heavenly realms of the Father with him.¹

Yet this Easter season, many Christians will sincerely worry if they really are “right with God”. They will spend a lot of energy and emotion anxiously wondering, “Is my faith strong enough, have I been obedient enough, have I prayed well enough?” The list goes on. And on. They may even wonder if they are “worthy” enough to be accepted by God, or even to take the bread and wine of communion. And this is nothing short of an evangelical tragedy.

With only a modicum of intelligence and honesty, we all know deep down we are human, fallible, messy, frail. It's easy to feel a failure, inadequate that we don't “measure up”. Sadly, ironically, often religious people can feel this pain the keenest of all.

After all, the thinking goes, God is perfect—surely he doesn't mess around with imperfection and frailty. And so religion often tries to tell us what we have to do to get right with God. What knowledge we must possess, what behaviour we must do, so God will no longer be against us, but can accept us. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it puts the responsibility and the critical step in the process, firmly upon our shoulders—what we need to do to have God love and accept us. And deep down we know that if any link in the chain depends on us, the whole chain is suspect. And that's always going to end up being bad news.

Ultimately and finally, this all comes down to our view of God. And that's the real question here—is it our view of God that determines our attitudes, feelings and behaviour, or is it the view of God that Jesus came to reveal to humanity? The good news that the New Testament writers were so excited to share with the whole world?

Not what we do but what God has done

The good news is that Jesus came not to tell us what we needed to do to get right with God, but what God has already done to make us right with him. He came to show us not what we need to do for God, but what God has already done for us in him. Our response is to repent (from *metanoia*, to change our thinking) and believe. That is, we need to change our thinking about God to that revealed by Jesus.

Jesus is the human face of God. He shows us the Father.² There is no other God than the God revealed to

by
John McLean

us in Jesus. In his love, according to the plan the Father, Son and Spirit take such delight in, he has adopted us in Christ as his children “before the creation of the world.”³ That is, the Father has loved and accepted us in his grace before one star, one atom, one quark, was created, before he said, “Let there be light”. Before birds and bees, fish and fins, flowers and fruit, man and woman. He has always loved you, and always will; he has determined not to be without you. He wants to share himself with you.

Once we accept the truth of what Paul has written to the Ephesians, and as we stop projecting our own ideas about God (our own theologies) onto the Father, we can believe in the unconditional and unfailing love the Father has for us. We can be freed from the anxiety and pain of self-centredness, worry and fear. In believing, we can experience the freedom of the Son.

Sons of God

Just think for a moment. How does the Father love the Son? Is the Son worried, anxious, concerned whether he is accepted, loved, delighted in? Or does the Son see nothing but overwhelming grace, joy and love in the Father's presence? How does the Son love the Father? Is there hidden agendas, envy, malice? Does the Father for one second doubt the total faithfulness and overwhelming affection of the Son? Of course not! Here there is the ultimate self-sacrificial service, mutual indwelling and love.

That's the relationship he graciously desires for us to enter. That's why Paul can say “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁴ Being “in Christ” is being in spiritual fellowship with him and the Father through the Spirit. All our lives are now lived “in Christ”—in him and out of a relationship with him. There's nothing about us that is outside of Christ.

This Spirit, who is the “Spirit of adoption” enables us to cry out from our innermost being “Abba, Father”—to call the Father by the same intimate term Jesus used.⁵ It's not just a matter of mental assent, a quick nod in the direction of theological thought, and then back to life as “normal” without anything being different. It's not something we have to achieve; it's something he has already prepared for us, and included us in. And it changes everything.

Accepting our acceptance

Jesus wants us to share the same relationship with the Father that he enjoys. This Spirit, who is also called “the Spirit of his Son”, is the spirit of fellowship, relationship—joy in communion with the Father, Son and one another. The Father, Son and Spirit are not boring old religious types. They're certainly not a Committee of Cosmic Grumps, just waiting to zap you if you make a mistake, step out of line, don't measure up. No harsh, judgmental, flinty-eyed disapproval here—

he good news

just life, love, joy, creativity, happiness, contentment, rest, delight, friendship, accomplishment, peace and fun. We experience this freedom, this acceptance, mercy and love, through believing. It's a fact whether we believe it or not—unbelieving simply prevents us from experiencing this relationship personally and

subjectively.

Put another way, it's not so much our acceptance of an otherwise absent Jesus into our lives; it's Jesus' acceptance of us into his life, into his eternal relationship with the Father in the Spirit. It's not our hold on Christ that counts; it's Christ's hold on us. In

the Spirit, we are more and more able to accept our acceptance, and live in and out of it. It's not something we have to work hard at to achieve; it's something we have already been included in.

In Christ, this finds expression in our daily lives. Paul writes, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me; and the life I live in the flesh I live by faith, the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20, translation by Thomas F. Torrance). As Torrance says, this "*I, yet not I but Christ*" describes and informs all our human responses to God. Our repentance, belief, faith, prayer, service, devotion, our whole lives, are all "not I but Christ in me".

Our faith is not in the quality of our own faith, or belief, or obedience, but in Christ's faith, belief and obedience in our place. Our salvation lies in Christ, not in us.

Being "in Christ" means we are so intimately united with his life that every aspect of our living is laid hold of, sanctified, and redeemed by him. Our prayer is participation in his prayer within and for us; our faith is his faith on our behalf; our living is participating in his living in complete love and harmony with the Father. In this way our lives share with his the mutual indwelling with the Father, experiencing the Father's unconditional love lavished on us in his grace through the Spirit.

The Father has always loved you, and always will. The Son wants you to share the same "Abba, Father" relationship he has; he wants to share with us his communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit, and for us to share that communion with one another. As the beauty and love of that relationship finds expression in our own lives, we are living and sharing the life of God. Jesus died for us, yes. This Easter, we celebrate that he lives for us too. And that's always good news. ▣

¹ Ephesians 2:4–10

² John 14:9; Matthew 11:27

³ Ephesians 1:4

⁴ Romans 8:1

⁵ Romans 8:15–17

Do grace and law conflict?

God has provided a wonderful plan of salvation, based not on human merit but on his grace.¹ This word “grace” has become shorthand for Christians. Some understand its meaning well, while others seem to view it as being in conflict with the idea of law. “Now that we are under grace, do we have to keep the law?” is a question Christians have asked for nearly 2,000 years. Paul addressed this question in his letter to the churches in Rome:

So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we’ve left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn’t you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!²

According to Paul, this “new life” in a “new land” is not lawless. It is not “law” or “grace” as though the two are opposed. Instead, the word “grace” should be understood as representing the many parts or aspects of God’s whole plan of redemption. God’s grace has always included within it a call for the response of an obedience that trusts in (has faith in) God’s grace.

It is often stated that the old covenant is “law” while the new covenant is “grace.” Though this shorthand way of thinking is not totally inaccurate, it can lead to the unfortunate idea that law and grace are totally at odds. But what we see in Scripture is that the old covenant was not graceless and the new covenant is certainly not lawless. Instead, what we find are two forms of God’s one gracious covenant with the Old Testament presenting the promise and the New Testament presenting its fulfillment in Christ. Each of these has its particular form of obedience corresponding to its particular form of covenantal grace.

Under the new covenant form of grace, we live by the law of Christ that is written on our hearts. Paul refers to that law as “the law of the Spirit”³ and “the law of Christ.”⁴ These new covenant references equate the law with the will and heart of God, which is shared with us as his children by the Spirit of Christ. As we submit to God’s will and are moved by his heart, we experience the freedom that we have been given from the condemning effect of sin. Note this related comment



by
**Dr. Joseph
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“...some think grace means living any way we want. Some, objecting to that conclusion, insist that we obey all 613 laws of the Torah.”

from Trinitarian theologian Andrew Purves concerning the covenanted way of response to God’s grace found in both the old and new covenants:

God knew that Israel would not be able to be faithful as God required. Thus, God, within the [old] covenant established and maintained unilaterally by God, freely and graciously gave a covenanted way of responding so that the covenant might be fulfilled on their behalf.

Israel was given ordinances of worship designed to testify that God alone can expiate guilt, forgive sin and establish communion. This was not just a formal rite to guarantee propitiation between God and Israel, however. By its very nature, the covenanted way of response was to be worked into the flesh and blood of Israel’s existence in such a way that Israel was called to pattern her whole life after it.

Later, in the prophecies of the Isaiah tradition especially, the notions of guilt-bearer and sacrifice for sin were conflated to give the interpretative clue for the vicarious role of the servant of the Lord. It would take the incarnation actually to bring that to pass, however, for Jesus Christ was recognized and presented in the New Testament both as the Servant of the Lord and as the divine Redeemer, not now only of Israel, but of all people. Jesus Christ has fulfilled the covenant from both sides, from God’s side, and from our side.

Purves’ insights help us appreciate the age-old Christian axiom: “Jesus did it all,” while also answering Francis Schaeffer’s famous

question: “How should we then live?” Unfortunately, some think grace means living any way we want. Some, objecting to that conclusion, insist that we obey all 613 laws of the Torah. But neither of these responses to grace is God’s will for us as followers of Jesus. As Paul explained, we are called to die daily, letting Christ live in us through the Holy Spirit. As we yield to Christ, we experience his kingdom reign and share in his obedience to the Father’s will including what he is doing to fulfill the Father’s mission to the world. As noted by Thomas F. Torrance, we live out the obedience of faith in Christ’s fulfillment of the heart and good will of God for us:

It is only through union with Christ that we partake of the blessings of Christ, that is through union with him in his holy and obedient life... Through union with him we share in his faith, in his obedience, in his trust and his appropriation of the Father’s blessing. □

¹ Ephesians 2:8–9

² Romans 6:1–4

³ Romans 8:2

⁴ Galatians 6:2

The power of words

A man had a fierce argument with his wife. There was a heated exchange of words that evolved into a shouting match. Then suddenly the man left the house. He came back a little while later with a container of petrol, doused himself with it and set himself alight in front of his wife. He's now being treated in the hospital for serious burns. The story sounds ridiculous, but that is what a newspaper report stated recently. Imagine what an exchange of words between a husband and wife had resulted in. On a different perspective, twelve years ago, when I heard the doctor's words, "You have a daughter", my whole life took on a new positive outlook. Words have immense power to inspire, motivate and encourage or they may harm and destroy. Rudyard Kipling the English short-story writer, poet, and novelist said "Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind"

Young minds can be influenced by the words they hear from parents and friends. As a teacher I know how wrong words used by parents and teachers have caused teenagers to become distressed, angry and rebellious. When parents use words full of kindness and love towards their children, it brings about feelings of joy, comfort and peace in the young minds. If you take time to observe the people that you come into contact with, you will discover

that there are so many who need words of comfort and encouragement. Sometimes not saying anything to a person who needs help can be just as bad as saying the wrong things. History records that words uttered by leaders have lifted entire nations out of the clutches of anguish to the heights of total victory. Winston Churchill's speech 'we shall fight them on the beaches' is one of the defining speeches during the second world war. His speech heard by an entire nation brought courage, hope and strength to a country facing the Nazi onslaught.

If the words spoken by men can have such powerful effects, then what would the words spoken by God do for us? Jesus Christ came as the very word of God in the flesh. When he taught the people about his purpose here on earth, some were unable to accept his teachings. He therefore proclaimed, "The words



by
**Devaraj
Ramoo**

that I speak to you are spirit, and they are *life*."¹ Jesus directly preached that God the Father had sent him and that those who receive and "feed" on him will live because of him.² Jesus Christ, the Word of God, brings eternal life to mankind. What then is the Word of God? God the Father has communicated with mankind through his Son who has always existed with Him. He is the personal Word who is with God and is also God himself. It is he who came down as Jesus Christ to reveal what God truly is like.³ When Christ was here on earth he faced temptation and trials just like any human. However he taught us a precept to live by when facing the uncertainties of life. He said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'⁴

Today we also have the written word of God, the Bible. What God has spoken through his Son, his

prophets, his apostles and his servants has been recorded for us. These writings are not the imaginations of men. They are the words of the living God given to guide us to come to Him and worship him in spirit and in truth. In whatever form it may take, the Word of God carries with it His truth, His power and authority. God's words are power, life-giving energy. There are so many nations and peoples today that are living in fear and anxiety through wars, religious strife

and poverty. It is shocking how much evil envelopes the earth. Where can we find peace and answers to our problems? You can find it through the Word of God, Jesus Christ. Sadly many search for answers everywhere but refuse to listen to the words spoken by God. God himself says, "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."⁵

Take time to read and listen to the words spoken by God especially through his Son. It will make a real difference in your life. ■

¹ John 6:63

² John 6:57

³ John 1:18

⁴ Matthew 4:4

⁵ Isaiah 55:10-11

The birth of Jesus: A story of shame

Jesus' birth involves more *humiliation* than glory. The Son of God *was* in glory, but he saw us living in the slimepit of sin, and he loved us so much that he came into this slimepit to save us. He gave up his glory and he lived in humble circumstances. When Jesus was born, there was no pageantry. There was no glory in putting a baby in an animal's feed trough.

Jesus didn't deserve any shame, but he was willing to live in it, until we killed him. That is the example God has given us. It shows us what love is. It shows us what God is like. Jesus told Philip, If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.¹ He wasn't talking about appearance, but about love and humility.

When Christ became flesh, it was not some strange deviation in his character. No, it shows what God is like all the time. God is always so loving that he is willing to come to our slimepit to rescue us. He is always willing to put his own comfort and glory aside so he can rescue us.

This is true greatness. Glory is not about power and bright lights. True greatness is not in strength or money. True greatness is humility and service, and that is just as true of God as it is for us. God's greatness is seen in his love, in his willingness to serve. The birth of Jesus shows that.

To put it in human terms, it would be like Pharaoh decided to give up the throne, give away his wealth and join the Hebrew slaves in the claypits, trying to make bricks without straw. If any Pharaoh actually did this, we would think he was insane, but God did this on an even greater scale. He gave up more, and he descended even more—and this is what God is like all the time. His glory and greatness is seen in how much he is willing to give up, not in how much he has now.

A birth in shame

Think about the circumstances of Jesus' birth. He did not come when the Jewish people were a strong nation. Rather, he came when they were despised and ruled by a pagan empire. He did not come to the most important city—he grew up in a backwoods region called "Galilee of the Gentiles."

Jesus was born in embarrassing circumstances, less than nine months after Mary and Joseph married. God could have easily caused the conception after Mary and Joseph were married. It would have been just as easy for the Holy Spirit to create a baby in a married woman as in an unmarried woman. It would have been easy to avoid the appearance of evil, but God did not. Even before Jesus was born, Jesus was in a compromised situation.

Luke tells us that Joseph went to Bethlehem because everyone was supposed to go to their family's city to be counted for the census.² I don't know, of course, but it seems that Joseph would have had at least a few brothers or cousins in the family of David who would have gone to Bethlehem, too. But we hear nothing of



by
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them, about they might have helped Joseph and Mary. They were on their own.

God loved the world so much that he gave them his only Son—and the world didn't want him. They knew God only as a God of power and wealth; they had forgotten about the God who walked in the garden of Eden calling for his wayward children. They had forgotten about the God who had a still, soft voice.

The world didn't want God, but God still loved the world. Even when we were sinners, even when we were ungodly, God loved us and sent his Son to die for us.³ That is what God is always like. The birth of Jesus should remind us of that. Christmas should remind us of his great humility.

A touch of glory

The angels were a touch of glory in the nativity story. Here were the bright shining lights, the heavenly choir singing praises to God. But where did they appear? Outside of town, with shepherds, the lowest level of society. Shepherds were so despised that they couldn't even testify in court. No one trusted them because they moved from one town to another. But God sent his angels to shepherds, not to priests and kings.

The wise men of Jerusalem knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem,⁴ but they didn't bother to make the five-mile trip. God was drawing the far-off, but the ones who were close, couldn't even see the star. The glory of Christmas was so hidden that only a few people from the east could take the hint.

Not long after this, an angel warned: "Flee for your life. The king is out to kill you." The Christ child was taken to Egypt, becoming a refugee in the land the Jews had left—the land of slavery, the land of outcasts. This is the glory of being poor, persecuted, rejected by the people you have come to save. This is not the way we usually think of glory, but it is God's kind of glory—the glory of love and self-sacrifice. Whoever wants to be great, Jesus said, let him become a servant. This is true greatness because this is the way God is.

Just like Jesus

God is like a king who steps into the mud to help us make bricks without straw. He is like a king who sends his Son to his people even though he knows they will kill him. God is like someone who sacrifices himself to keep his enemies from being punished. God is like Jesus—all the time. He is like a man who loves children, touches lepers and socializes with tax collectors and prostitutes. God is like someone who was hated without a cause, beaten without mercy and crucified without committing a crime.

God lets people hate him and beat up on him—not because he is a fool, but because he knows the best way for us to come to our senses is to see what

continued on page 22

Lopsided grace

It's been said there are only about seven stories in the whole world, and the storyline of every book or movie is simply a variation of one of them. The most common storyline is the battle between good and evil and usually features a savior figure.

One familiar story is that of King Arthur, Guinevere and Camelot. It's a utopian setting until a bit of evil enters the scene in the form of temptation. The queen is seduced by Lancelot, the king's best knight. When the king discovers their infidelity, he is faced with a painful choice: abandoning the law or the death of his beloved Guinevere. But he knows her death is the only action that will satisfy the law and serve justice.

The tale of Arthur and his queen comes in many versions, but parts of it remain constant: just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden, Guinevere gave in to temptation, messed up and needed to be saved.

But here's where Camelot diverges from the original story and the truth. While Arthur agonized over the decision to let the love of his life die and serve justice or let her go and negate the law, God's decision and plan were clear from the beginning. Unlike Arthur, God is not subject to the law, rather he created it. He in no way agonized over balancing the scales of justice because he himself is justice. His plan to die in our place wasn't about fulfilling any requirements of the law.

Some look at grace and see a great balancing act, with mercy on one side and God's holiness on the other, as if he has set limits on how much he can forgive. What Jesus did is sometimes called the Great Exchange, which makes it sound like a business transaction instead of the greatest act of love ever performed.

Humanly speaking, we think everything has to work out evenly and be fair. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard who began at dawn? They received the same pay as those who showed up at the end of the workday. To us, this seems quite unfair and even a bit extravagant. But God doesn't use scales of justice like humanity does. God's love and grace are outrageously unfair. When Jesus went to the cross, everyone was forgiven. Everyone was invited to the eternal banquet with the Father, Son and Spirit. No sin is too great to be wiped out. No one is beyond help. No one is out of his reach and no one must be punished as a way of balancing grace and justice.

If God were to use scales, one side would be up in the air and the other resting on the table. How can grace be so lopsided? His love and grace far outweigh even his own laws to the point of seeming like the ultimate lack of balance. Lucky for us and unlike King Arthur, God is more powerful than the law. He uses a different scale, a scale of mercy balanced only with more love and grace. ▣

by
Tammy Tkach



continued from page 20

selfishness really leads to. He knows that the best way to overcome evil is not by force, but by persistent love.

Thankfully, God has the power to pull it off. He is not hurt by our failings. He does not get depressed when we reject him. He does not get vindictive when we insult him. He is bigger than that, so much bigger that he can be patient with us. He can be a helpless baby,

he can be a crucified criminal, he can stoop that low because he loves us.

In this way, Christmas shows us what God is like. It shows us how much he loves us. It shows us the extreme that he went to in order to save us. God is so glorious that he left his glory and came down into the slimepit to save us. He was willing to be a baby

conceived before marriage. He was willing to be born in a stable, to be rejected, to flee to Egypt. He was willing to give it all up, even his life, for us.


A lesson for us

God wants us to be like he is, to be like Jesus was. Not in appearance, not in power, but in love and humility. He set the example for us, and Christmas, or the birth of Jesus, has a message for us in how we behave toward one another.

Jesus said that a servant is not greater than the master. If he, our lord and teacher, has served us, we should also serve one another.⁵ Whoever wants to be great should become a servant. Jesus wants us to go out of our way to help others. We are to use our time and our resources to help others. Jesus also said, If you want to follow me, take up your cross. Be willing to lose, even your life, and you will be great.

This is the way we are to follow Jesus' example. We don't follow his example in keeping Hanukkah, in cleansing the temple, or in going to synagogues on the Sabbath. But he specifically says that we are to follow his example in serving others. That's the message of Christmas and the path of true glory.

We need to identify with that baby in the manger, to be like he is. We need to identify with the woman who had to give birth in a stable, and with the family who were refugees in another nation. Our role model is someone who loved his enemies, who was rejected time and again, and yet loved them. He was taken advantage of, ridiculed, despised and convicted of a crime, all because he wanted to help us. That is truly praiseworthy, truly worth celebrating! ▣

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- ¹ John 14:9
² Luke 2:3-4
³ Romans 5:6-10
⁴ Matthew 2:4-6
⁵ Matthew 20:26-28

God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy. God demands joy. God demands that we be satisfied. God demands that we be fat and complacent on the very thing that He is fat and complacent upon.

Jeremy Taylor

I want the whole Christ for my Savior, the whole Bible for my book, the whole Church for my fellowship, and the whole world for my mission field.

John Wesley

I am always content with what happens, for what God chooses is better than what I choose.

Epictetus

The Christian Life is about relationships, not performance.

Neil Franks

Putting our trust in God and depending on His intrinsic goodness frees us from the need to find explanations for everything.

Frank Retief

If we do not die to ourselves, we cannot live to God, and he that does not live to God, is dead.

George MacDonald

Raised voices lower esteem. Hot tempers cool friendships. Loose tongues stretch truth. Swelled heads shrink influence. Sharp words dull respect.

William Arthur Ward

God is the God of promise. He keeps His word, even when that seems impossible; even when the circumstances

seem to point to the opposite.

Colin Urquhart

Because our understanding is earthbound... human to the core... limited... finite... we operate in a dimension totally unlike our Lord... who knows no such limitations. We see now. He sees forever.

Charles R. Swindoll

We do not segment our lives, giving some time to God, some to our business or schooling, while keeping parts to ourselves. The idea is to live all of our lives in the presence of God, under the authority of God, and for the honour and glory of God. That is what the Christian life is all about.

R.G. Sproul

We Christians must simplify our lives or lose untold treasures on earth and in eternity. Modern civilisation is so complex as to make the devotional life but impossible. The need for solitude and quietness was never greater than it is today.

A.W. Tozer

As a physician, I have seen men, after all other therapy had failed, lifted out of disease and melancholy by the serene effort of prayer.

Alexis Carrel

The world is God's nursery for his upper rooms.

George Macdonald

A Christian should always remember that the value of his good works is not based

on their number and excellence, but on the love of God which prompts him to do these things.

Saint John of the Cross

The human soul is God's treasury, out of which he coins unspeakable riches. Thoughts and feelings, desires and yearnings, faith and hope—these are the most precious things which God finds in us.

Henry Ward Beecher

You can't do anything about the length of your life, but you can do something about its width and depth.

Evan Esar

A vision without a task is a dream; a task without a vision is drudgery; a vision and a task is the hope of the world.

Anonymous

Christians are supposed not merely to endure change, nor even to profit by it, but to cause it.

Harry Emerson Fosdick

A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.

Henry Gardiner Adams

Flee for a little while thy occupations; hide thyself for a time from thy disturbing thoughts. Cast aside now thy burdensome cares, and put away thy toilsome business. Yield room for some little time to God, and rest for a little time in him. Enter the inner chamber of thy mind; shut out all thoughts save that of God and such as can aid thee in

seeking him. Speak now, my whole heart! Speak now to God, saying, "I seek thy face; thy face, Lord, will I seek."

Saint Anselm

The church's core mission never changes, but how it's accomplished is up for revision.

Wayne Pohl

God proved his love on the cross. When Christ hung, and bled, and died, it was God saying to the world, "I love you."

Billy Graham

It's the nature of God to make something out of nothing; therefore, when anyone is nothing, God may yet make something of him.

Martin Luther

It's not that we don't believe in God, we just have too many other things on our minds.

Robert Harold Schuller

Since teenagers are too old to do the things kids do and not old enough to do things adults do, they do things nobody else does.

Anonymous

No man should desire to be happy who is not at the same time holy. He should spend his efforts in seeking to know and do the will of God, leaving to Christ the matter of how happy he shall be.

A. W. Tozer

No man ever sank under the burden of the day. It is when tomorrow's burden is added to the burden of today that the weight is more than a man can bear. Never

load yourself so. If you find yourself so loaded, at least remember this: it is your own doing, not God's. He begs you to leave the future to him, and mind the present.

George Macdonald

The Christian is called upon to be the partner of God in the work of the conversion of men.

William Barclay

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know one from the other.

Reinhold Niebuhr

Do not weigh highly who may be for you or against you. But take thought and care that God be with you in everything you do. Have a good conscience, and God will defend you well.

Thomas a Kempis

An Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him with the words: "And this, too, shall pass away." How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!

Abraham Lincoln

I see not a step before me as I tread on another year; but I've left the past in God's keeping—the future his mercy shall clear; and what looks dark in the distance may brighten as I draw near.

Mary Gardiner Brainard

The Plain Truth Magazine



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