

Plain Truth



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A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Jul-Sep 2015

**I messed up big time.
Now what?**

p.5

**Thank God it doesn't
depend on us!**

p.9

Who do we reflect?

p.12

THE PLAIN TRUTH

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You are free!

Slavery is evil. Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” Because slavery is inhumane and oppressive, most (if not all) countries have abolished it. America abolished it in 1865. Britain abolished it throughout its colonies in 1833. Although it was abolished officially, it still exists in some parts of the world. It usually takes the form of child labour, sex slaves, and exploitation of migrant workers.

This article is about another type of slavery which is less obvious. It is slavery due to sin, which is not trusting God—what he tells about himself and us. *Sin is denying or rejecting his truth.* This is the root cause of human suffering. It leads to selfishness, greed, strife, jealousy, hatred, lying, stealing and murder. It also leads to confusion, anxiety, fear, depression and unfulfilled lives.

Sin enslaves us

Jesus told his disciples, “You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” But the Pharisees who heard him protested saying, “... we are descendants of Abraham, we have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean, ‘You will be set free’?” Jesus responded, “I tell you the truth, *everyone who sins is a slave of sin.*”¹

Sin enslaves and blinds us. It keeps us in bondage. It reduces us to a mundane, boring existence. It deceives us into believing that our chief goal in life is amassing wealth, gaining power and fame, and pleasing the physical senses. Not that all these are wrong in and by themselves. However, if our focus is only on acquiring these, we will continue to live unfulfilled lives.

We are called to freedom

God is a relationship God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit enjoy intimate relationship with each other. Theirs is a life of joy, peace, contentment, freedom, adventure and creativity. That is the life he created us for. He created us so we could participate in his abundant life. He is now inviting us to come and experience his life as his children with full rights and privileges.

Jesus came to set us free from bondage—to free us

by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

from sin that oppresses us. Apostle Paul writes, “*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*”² Again, he tells us, “*You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*”³ He came to free us so that we could live God’s abundant life, as he intended for us. Through his life, death, resurrection and ascension, he dealt with our sin once and for all. He wiped away all our sins—past, present and future—forever. Not only did he remove our sin, he has also given us his righteousness and holiness. That makes us holy and righteous (not our feeble efforts). That’s how God sees us, whether we know it or not, believe it or not, feel it or not. God tells us we are righteous and holy now, so let’s believe and live as such.

The eagle story

Here is a true story that illustrates the point. The National Kruger Park Zoo, South Africa, had many

attractions, one of which was an eagle. She lived in the zoo for more than 10 years and got accustomed to the caged life there.

One day, the authorities decided to release her so she could fly to her freedom. So they took her to a scenic spot and loosened the chain that held her. They eagerly waited for her to take off. But, lo and behold, she refused to fly even though she was now free. She got used to the caged life so much that in her mind she was still in the cage. She didn’t take off even after repeated prodding. The

authorities were quite disappointed.

Just then, another eagle flew high up in the sky, as though beckoning her (the grounded eagle) to come and fly with her. Lo and behold, upon identifying with her own kind, she flew to her freedom, never to return again!

This is a very moving story that we can all learn from. Like the caged eagle, sin held us captive for too long. It held us in bondage and we were powerless and helpless to change our situation. But Jesus came and delivered us from our sin. He also gave us his holiness and righteousness. So now we can identify with Christ, because as he is, so are we.⁴ Like the free eagle, we can now soar with the risen Christ and live the life of our design. □



¹ John 8:31–34

² Galatians 5:1

³ Romans 6:18

⁴ 1 John 4:17

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cover story

- 5 I messed up big time. Now what?**
Jesus came into our deepest pit and rescued us.

articles

- 7 When did you last see your father?**
Love your children as God loves you.
- 8 Toxic talk**
Toxic talk destroys relationships.
- 9 Thank God it doesn't depend on us!**
Trust Jesus, not in our feeble efforts.
- 10 Nurturing friends**
Friends are a great asset?
- 11 Mission**
Not as difficult as you think.
- 12 Who do we reflect?**
Reflect Jesus and be transformed.
- 15 The enigma of grace**
Grace is free because of Jesus' finished work on the cross.
- 16 What will you have me do?**
Let the Holy Spirit lead and guide you.
- 17 From admonition to mission**
Mission is telling people what God has done for them in Christ, not what they must do to be saved.
- 22 Living in community with God**
See Christ in others and interact accordingly.

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:

The article by Johannes Maree, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Apr–Jun 2015 issue) seems to suggest that God never forsook Jesus Christ when he was dying on the cross. But several verses such as Psalms 22:1, Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 suggest otherwise. How do you explain that?

Jaya

Petaling Jaya

Ed: It is a good question! Many Christians believe that God forsook Jesus when he was dying on the cross. There are two ways of looking at this scripture:

- 1. Jesus, as our human representative, was echoing our deepest feelings of forsakenness. In our tragedies, we ask God, “Why did you let my son die from that sickness, why didn’t you protect my daughter from that fatal accident, why didn’t you save my spouse?” We ask God these questions in times of sorrow, pain and grief. Jesus, as human, standing in our place, was echoing our feelings of forsakenness. An important point to note here is: Jesus always called his Father ‘Father’, not ‘God’. He always had intimate relationship with his Father. But on this occasion, he called God ‘God’, not ‘Father’. This is because he was acting for us, echoing our feelings of abandonment.*
- 2. God the Father never really forsook Jesus when he was dying on the cross. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one and inseparable. They cannot be fragmented into three beings. If that was the case, there would be no God because God is one! The truth is: The Father (and the Holy Spirit) was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). The Father didn’t abandon Jesus when he was dying on the cross. Nor does he abandon or forsake us today. (Psalms 22:24).*

Dear editor, in the past several issues, you seem to be persuading us to believe in a Gospel that appears preposterous, especially when you witness the terrible sufferings all around us. You are asking us to believe in a very high calling—that God created us so we could participate in his abundant life as his children for all eternity. That seems to be too good to be true. Can we really believe that?

Reader

Ed: That’s right. Our unbelief doesn’t change the truth. Truth is what God tells us. Jesus is the truth about our lives. He came to announce the Good News for all people. If it is only Good News for some people, it is still bad news. The truth is God through his son Jesus Christ is offering humanity a fantastic life, his kind of life. But unless one believes and starts to participate, he will not experience that life. Believing and participating makes all the difference. It is like God telling us, “I have deposited one billion dollars into your bank account, go draw it and spend it and experience a rich life”. If you trust and do what he tells you, you get to enjoy a rich life. If not, you will continue to live as a pauper even though you have the money. The Gospel needs to be experienced by living it. As they say, the proof of the pudding is in eating it.

I thank the Almighty God for this wonderful gift of THE PLAIN TRUTH which I have been receiving and reading for the past many years. Every single issue has been a constant source of inspiration and has moulded me to be the person I am today. I am truly grateful for this lifelong journey with God. Thank you and God bless.

**Ann Dominic
Ipoh, Perak**

I saw your magazine THE PLAIN TRUTH in one of the clinics at the Old Klang Road. I liked it so much that I would like to contribute towards it. I have banked into the account RM200. Thank you and God bless.

**Denise
Kuala Lumpur**

Ed: Thanks for participating in this ministry. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

THE PLAIN TRUTH is a wonderful magazine. It helps us to understand the different topics more clearly. It gives food for thought under the section Hmm...something to think about.

**N Muthusamy
Petaling Jaya**

Thank you for sending THE PLAIN TRUTH Magazine. I find it interesting. There is one point in the Jan–Mar 2015 issue that I would like to have some clarification. I was

told that the word “Christ” is a title and not Jesus’ name. I therefore feel that the word “Jesus” would be more appropriate on pages 8 and 9. Also, on page 11, I feel “Jesus” would be more appropriate than “Christ Jesus”, “Jesus Christ” or “Christ”.

Datuk Samuel

Ed: The term “Christ” is translated from the Greek “Christos” which means Anointed, and is the equivalent of the Hebrew term Messiah. It is used throughout the New Testament in reference to the name Jesus, as a title or designation. Jesus himself acknowledged the term (see Matthew 16:16–17; Mark 14:61–62; John 4:25–26). So “Christ” has been used and accepted by all Christians for 2000 years.

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles are very relevant to our modern day living. They provide interesting spiritual and mystical knowledge.

**Wong Kim Fook
Bukit Mertajam**

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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I messed up. Now what?

Enamoured by the beauty of Bathsheba bathing on the roof top, David was drawn into temptation's lethal clutches and invited her into his bed chamber.

Little did he realise that a moment of weakness was about to change his life forever.

The alarming news of her pregnancy prompted David to set in motion a nasty web of deceit and treachery, culminating in the death of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite. Ironically, Uriah was one of the most valiant warriors in the Israelite army. And he was fiercely loyal to David. Yet, David conspired to have him sent to the frontline, knowing there was a great chance of him being killed in action. Why?

David realised that the consequences of his actions were huge. He faced the stark reality of a brewing scandal, waiting to bubble over and rock the nation. It would not only shatter his reputation and integrity as a statesman, but bring untold pain and suffering upon his family. Perhaps lurking in his subconscious was the troubling thought of the Law of Moses, stipulating that adultery meant death by stoning.

David moved swiftly to rectify his disgraceful deed. But, it was a case of taking desperate measures of the wrong kind. So much so that in his mind the only way he could save the day was through a massive covert operation. And he almost succeeded...until about a year later when the prophet Nathan, snapped David out of denial mode, and brought him face to face with his scandalous actions.

No way out

Reality then struck a heavy blow, piercing the very heart and core of David's being as he became acutely aware of how he had messed up...big time! Psalm 51 gives a stirring account of his emotional outpouring of anguish and despair; "Have mercy on me O God according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion...wash away my iniquity...against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

What do you do when, like David, your life goes belly up and there seems to be no way out? Perhaps you are caught in the vice of an affair or addiction of some sort. What about the stuff that may be currently happening to you because of a terrible mistake you made in a moment of weakness? And let's not forget the bad decision that went horribly wrong and changed your life forever, whether you suffered severe financial losses as a result or other frightening consequences?

Talk to someone you can trust

Psalm 51 continues to provide us with remarkable insight on how David began to piece his life together at a time when his future was looking very bleak. A wonderful testimony of how we can move forward when paralysed by hopelessness.

by
**Bob
Klynsmith**

Firstly, we need to appreciate the help of a close advisor in Nathan, who challenged David to come to terms with the severity of his transgression. Talking to a trusted advisor or friend during a deep crisis of this nature can make all the difference in helping one rise above near impossible circumstances. David only fully grasped that his worst nightmare was not just a bad dream when Nathan courageously confronted him. He then came to terms with the reality of what he had done and accepted full responsibility for his own actions. He became very aware of how he had let God down, and disappointed his family as well as the people of Israel. Taking personal ownership of the harm caused by one's destructive deeds is a vital first step in the right direction.

Soul searching in the presence of the Triune God is also an essential key in making a life changing breakthrough. David highlights this in Psalm 139:23-24, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." It is interesting to note how God, who is familiar with all our ways, brought David's blind spots to the surface through Nathan.

Behaviour patterns

Soul searching often helps us identify certain ongoing destructive lifestyle patterns that may be hurting us and others. Recognising and accepting these behaviour patterns offers a unique opportunity to break the cycle of pain through Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. It appears, on examination of David's behavioural lifestyle, that he had a weakness for women.

We read earlier in the opening passages of Psalm 51 about how David, without hesitation, plunged into the loving embrace of a merciful God who is full of compassion. Drawing close to God and surrendering completely to his unfailing love strengthens us spiritually and inspires hope that God will make a way. He exclaimed, "Wash me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow...let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from me and blot out all my iniquity."

David desperately wanted to restore the intimate relationship he once enjoyed with God. This undoubtedly suffered during his affair with Bathsheba and all the deceptive machinations that followed. He was mindful of God's unconditional love and knew that the Lord was ready to forgive and help him move forward, even though he had committed a heinous deed.

In his grief-stricken condition David cried out; "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me..."

my sacrifice O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.” Here is the pinnacle of a beautiful story about how God’s amazing grace heals the broken hearted and transforms our lives in Christ.

Today, we are bombarded by an endless stream of ‘bathing on the rooftop’ scenarios. Temptation beckons around every corner; far more alluring than was ever imaginable during David’s era. Instantly available at the click of a button! Families are being torn apart by adultery and the Christian community is no exception.

A repentant pastor testifies; “My addiction and adultery all took place while serving as a pastor. A 20 year addiction to pornography, chat rooms and illicit phone calls...my wife had had enough...her despair over our marriage and the 8 years of hurt I put her through left her clinically depressed, filled with anxiety and faithless.

I cried out to God and Jesus has done far more abundantly than I could think or imagine. I know today that I am free, redeemed, delivered, unchained...By God’s grace, what I thought was impossible is now my testimony. The chains that bound me for decades are gone. The blood of Jesus has washed me clean! God has even seen fit to restore my dead marriage.”

We are all flawed members of the human race and vulnerable to making mistakes, sometimes of the worst kind.

Consider the comforting words of Hebrews 4:14–16 “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Jesus abides in our humanity and relates to our weaknesses. His grace is always ready to touch our lives...healing our brokenness in every way, personally, emotionally and psychologically. Proverbs 24:16 says, “For though the righteous fall seven times they rise again” and Micah 7:8 adds, “Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.”

To quote US Judge and Senator, Hugh White (1773–1840) “When you make a mistake, don’t look back at it long. Take the reason of the thing into your mind and then look forward. Mistakes are lessons of wisdom. The past cannot be changed. The future is yet in your power.”

Yes! When we mess up big time, Christ’s unfailing love and forgiveness will bestow upon us a peace of mind that surpasses all understanding.¹ Jesus has given us the freedom to walk in the melody of his grace, as he empowers us through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to make a fresh new beginning, no matter what we have done in the past. □



¹ Philippians 4:7

When did you last see your father?

This is the title of a movie I watched a couple of weeks ago.

With good actors and a nomination for an academy award, it looked like a promising evening's entertainment. What it turned out to be however, was both entertaining and thought provoking.

The story was about a man and his relationship with his father, with flashbacks to his youth and teen years. The father was a jolly, sociable type, the life and soul of the party, and what most of his friends and neighbours would describe as a nice guy. However, he had a nasty habit of putting his son down in company. He would make a joke of it, and could never understand why the boy lapsed into bitter silence. After all, it was just a casual joke, wasn't it? "Don't be so over sensitive—you'll have to face a cruel, competitive world one day. Better get used to it now."

The boy's mother was gentle but vulnerable.

Predictably, she would act as a shield between father and son, while at the same time making outrageous excuses for her husband's behavior. "He doesn't really mean it," she would say over and over again.

This may be a fictional story, but it plays out far too often in reality, in every suburb in every town and every country. I have seen it many times, especially in the lives of some of my friends when I was young. Personally I

was blessed with kind, caring, but fairly strict parents. But quite a few of my friends and acquaintances suffered real emotional and psychological abuse from their fathers. And most of these, as I remember were supposed to be Christian families. Does the Bible have any specific advice for Christian fathers?

How not to do it

"Fathers, do not embitter your children or they will become discouraged," we read in Colossians 3:21.

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."¹ Did Paul perhaps see traces of this kind of behavior even in his own dearly beloved congregations?

Do some parents, even today try to prop up their own egos by putting down their children who are dependent on them and helpless to defend themselves? By the

by
Hilary Jacobs

time the man in the movie grew to adulthood, he had very little time or respect for his father. Often during the running I wanted to say something like, "No, listen to your son. Give him a hug and share a joke with him, not at his expense."

Strangely, there was a kind of reconciliation at the end of the story. The son, by now middle aged, began to see his father in a different light. He came to realize he had weaknesses, that he was often selfish but not without some redeeming features. He focused on the good times when they had some rapport and some memorable experiences. He remembered the time his father hugged him and said "I will miss you, son," when he went off to university. These were the times when he really 'saw' his father.

And what does our Father in heaven have in store for us? Something much better than just a patched up reconciliation between fathers and sons. God says:

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers..."²

And how will God do this? He has already done it through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, allowing his Holy Spirit to work through our minds and hearts. Today Christian fathers can be the greatest blessing any child could wish for. Like

their Father in heaven, they give their children the good gifts of patience, understanding, encouragement and sometimes, when necessary, tough love.

The Bible seems to be silent on specific advice for mothers. In fact, God compares his own perfect love to that of a mother. "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you."³

Of course, human mothers are not perfect either. Perhaps they can be too soft, but that's another subject.

But we all have a perfect heavenly Father who does not change "like shifting shadows," and from whom we receive every good and perfect gift.⁴ □



¹ Ephesians 6:4

² Malachi 4:5–6

³ Isaiah 49:15

⁴ James 1:17

Toxic talk

by
Gordon Green

Look in a mirror and stick out your tongue. Do you realise that on that tongue is the power to destroy or to give life? Am I exaggerating? Think about this: Can you remember a specific criticism you received that deeply hurt you? It may have been from your parents, a teacher or a friend. It may have been as recently as last week, or sixty or seventy years ago. Crushing words. Embarrassing words. I can almost guarantee that you still feel the emotional pain or the anger or the guilt as you recall them. Words can do that. Words are powerful. Their imprint on one's mind may never be erased.

King Solomon had much to say about the power of words—in fact there is more in Proverbs concerning the tongue than any other book of the Bible. He wrote; “Reckless words pierce like a sword.”¹ Picture a soldier

pulling his sword out of his scabbard, stabbing his enemy, wiping the blood off the blade and sliding the sword back into its place. In just one swift movement his enemy lies dead. In just one short sentence cutting words can wound or kill—“You’re stupid” “You’re fat” “You’re the reason why your child has problems.” A pastor who

worked in the New York ghettos said; “In all my years there I saw very few people who had been hurt or destroyed by gun-shot or knives. But people destroyed by words were brought into my church daily.”

You’ve heard the childish retort to cruel words, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That’s not true. Words do hurt! Words can kill your spirit. Words can kill your dreams. Words can handicap and scar you—for years—forever.

Many churches place an emphasis on sins such as adultery and stealing and even expel members for being involved in them. These types of sins should not be condoned but God places an emphasis on sins where the church often doesn’t: “Kick out the troublemakers and things will quiet down; you need a break from bickering and griping!”² There are some people who you just cannot afford to associate with: “A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks

too much. Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered...”³ Words can rip families, business ventures, political parties and churches apart.

Constructive power of the tongue

There is a better way. Proverbs 10:20 informs us that “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver.” The right word is like silver—valuable, beautiful—and scarce. Words should edify: “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life.”⁴ This is a beautiful image of the constructive power of the tongue. Trees are not only alive but they also provide life to others as well as a place of refuge from the scorching sun and shelter on a rainy day. The same is true when we communicate with healing words. You can turn around a person’s whole

day and outlook on life with an encouraging word.⁵ But a word of caution: It’s easy to smugly say; “Thankfully I don’t lose my temper” or “If I can’t say something good about someone I don’t say anything” or “I keep confidential things confidential”. That’s admirable. But just because we don’t speak like the fool doesn’t

necessarily make us wise. Don’t miss the stress of many of these proverbs—be proactive! Encourage. Comfort. Praise. Support. Do your words make a difference in other people’s lives?

But let’s be realistic. Most of us contribute some hurtful words, at least occasionally. Thankfully, Solomon gives us many practical workings of wisdom that steer us towards being effective communicators. For example, Proverbs 18:13 teaches us that the fool answers before listening. He just lets his words pour out like water gushing out of a gutter spout during heavy rains.⁶ Talk, talk, talk! He is so bound up in himself and therefore has to share his thoughts and prove he knows more than anyone else. The wise person is different. She knows the awesome power of the tongue and so takes responsibility for her words and chooses not to



continued on page 9

Thank God it doesn't depend on us!

This past December, my son turned 34. How did that happen? Where did the years go? He is now a “grownup,” as he puts it. He seems to be as surprised by this as I am. And last September, he got married. Yeah! Finally!

My son had not dated much and when he casually dropped the bombshell two years ago that he was “headed to his girlfriend’s house for dinner,” I was shocked. “Girlfriend! I didn’t know you had a girlfriend!” Well, he did have a girlfriend and she cooks! We are delighted with this young woman who is now his wife. She adores my son and tells me often what a wonderful partner he is and how lucky she feels to have found him. He is equally effusive about his delight in her.

I have agonized for years over the negative effects my failed marriage and the breakup of our family would have on my children. My heart has broken over and over again as I relived the devastation my son exhibited when he realized his father and I were getting a divorce. I remember telling him, “I’m sorry, son. I can’t fix this.”

Eight years after my divorce, God redeemed my failed marriage by providing me with an amazing partner, a man whom I have been happily married to for more than 20 years. He is a joy to me, and my children have come to love and enjoy him as well. We have a life filled with love, laughter, God and goodness, a real partnership with each other and with God. We’ve had some dark days. Life is not without its challenges. But God has faithfully seen us through them all.

Even so, I was often wracked by guilt and regret about the pain I had inflicted on my children and all the ways I had failed them. How could I ever make it up to them? How could God possibly make things right with them? Would they ever be able to have successful relationships and happy marriages? So I beat myself up,

**by
Karon Smith**

cried a lot and pleaded with God for forgiveness and help.

Why do we torture ourselves? Why do we doubt God when he has proven over and over again his goodness and love? I couldn’t fix things for my son so I thought he was doomed. What crooked thinking Satan can use to ensnare us and rob us of joy! This scripture has been a lifeline over the years to rescue me from my negative thinking: Philippians 4:6–8: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Now my son is happily married. He and his wife are partnering together and planning for their future. Again God has proven he is the Great Redeemer. I couldn’t fix things for my son, but that certainly didn’t mean God wasn’t on the job.

I can’t begin to tell you how reassuring and comforting this turn of events in my son’s life has been for me. I feel my heavenly father has pulled me into his lap, hugged me close and whispered in my ear, “See, I had this one in hand the whole time. There was no need for your anxiety. Why do you doubt? Relax! You can trust me.”

All that angst, anxiety, guilt and despair about our mistakes and failures is not required by God; it is suffering we choose to bring on ourselves. God is our all-powerful Father who can use any circumstance for good if we let go and let him. We can’t fix things but God can. Thank God it doesn’t depend on us! ❑

continued from page 8

say hurtful things, even when she has jealous, envious and proud thoughts. “A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.”⁷

But there’s more. Being an effective communicator means more than applying a collection of wise sayings. It means shining the spotlight into the place where our words originate. The key to wise communication is found in Proverbs 4:23 where we learn that our lives—which include our words—are shaped by what we allow our minds to focus on. Jesus made it even clearer; “What you say flows from what is in your heart.”⁸ The way we use our tongue is a powerful indicator of what is really going on deep down inside of us.

The truth is that Jesus lives in you. Focus your

thoughts on him and allow him to be the source of your words. Surrender your tongue daily to Jesus and his words will begin to pour forth from your lips; “From a wise mind comes wise speech.”⁹

Don’t poison your children’s memories with harsh words that will stick to them 20 years from now. Don’t continually trouble your marriage or friendships by hurtful words. Be different. Make a difference. ❑

¹ Proverbs 12:18

² Proverbs 22:10

³ Proverbs 20:19;
22:24

⁴ Proverbs 15:4

⁵ Proverbs 12:25

⁶ Proverbs 15:2

⁷ Proverbs 29:11;
21:23

⁸ Luke 6:45

⁹ Proverbs 16:23

Nurturing friends

I couldn't believe my eyes. I was browsing through the obituary section when I saw his name. It couldn't be. But it was. A dear school friend had died.

The memories came flooding back—the sports, the music, the girl friends.... As I cast my mind back to the good times we shared together I couldn't help thinking about how precious friendships are—and how easily we take them for granted.

How do we live wisely in our friendships? What are some building blocks we can forge in our relationships?

When Proverbs speaks of friends, loyalty seems to be the strongest feature emphasized. "A friend is always loyal¹ and "A real friend will be more loyal than a brother."² A true friend is reliable. A true friend is there for you in good times and bad. A true friend will not let you go to ruin. Are you that kind of friend? Do you have a friend like that? If so, cherish that friend. But how can we do that?

by
Gordon Green

better gift to give. Who could have deserved it?"

If it hadn't been for the friendship between Tolkien and Lewis, the world would likely never have seen The 'Narnia Chronicles', 'The Lord of the Rings', 'The Hobbit' and much else.

Don't underestimate the value of spending time with friends. Solomon wrote "As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend."³ When iron blades are rubbed together, each becomes sharper and thus more effective. When we spend time with our friends relaxing, laughing, listening and encouraging one another we sharpen one another. Through his close friendship with Tolkien, Lewis became a Christian. Lewis in turn provided a matchless gift that Tolkien later described: "The unpayable debt that I owe him was not 'influence' as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that



No better gift

Recently I read the life story of C.S. Lewis. I discovered that he considered friends to be amongst the greatest joys and blessings of his life. His strong friendship with J R R Tolkien was legendary. But this strong friendship didn't just happen. It was deepened, forged and nurtured by time spent together. Lewis called those special times "the golden sessions." That was when "four or five of us after a hard day's walking have come to our inn; when our slippers are on, our feet spread out towards the blaze and our drinks at our elbows; when the whole world, and something beyond the world, opens itself to our minds as we talk; and no one has any claim on or any responsibility for another, but all are freemen and equals as if we had first met an hour ago, while at the same time an affection mellowed by the years enfolds us. Life—natural life—has no

my 'stuff' could be more than a private hobby. But for his interest and unceasing eagerness for more, I should never have brought 'The Lord of the Rings' to a conclusion." Interestingly, a powerful theme in the book is the beauty of friendship.

Bringing out the best

But time with friends can be more than laughing, encouraging and sharing a meal together. It's also about being vulnerable, transparent and challenging one another. A good friend is not someone who necessarily agrees with everything you do and say—it's somebody who lovingly challenges you and brings out the best of you. Proverbs 27:6 tells us that "Wounds from a friend can be trusted". We all need a friend

continued on page 11

Mission

People who have a purpose in life live healthier and longer lives, concluded neuropsychologist, Patricia Boyle.

Dr. Boyle was quoted in a Wall Street Journal article by Diane Cole entitled “Why You Need to Find a Mission” (January 14, 2013). Having a purpose, Boyle pointed out, slows cognitive decline. When asked to define purpose in life, Boyle replied, “It’s the sense that your life has meaning. You’re engaged in things that you think are important on a broader level, beyond just yourself.” She goes on to say, “Being purposeful is not something that just happens without your being active and intentional.” I found this article thought-provoking, especially from a Christian perspective.

To be honest, I’m not big on “missions” and “mission statements.” To me the word “mission” sounds task-oriented. Being a bit lazy, I tend to shy away from anything remotely resembling more work I might have to do. But I do like the word “purpose.” To me purpose indicates my life makes a difference and reminds me what I do every day matters to God and those around me.

I’ll never be a Mother Teresa, and you’ll never be a Dr. Albert Schweitzer or a Billy Graham. But I suggest that’s not what God specifically called you or me to do. Maybe God called us to live ordinary lives intentionally trying to do what he would have us do in any given circumstance.

While I admire great mission leaders who do extraordinary things, I think God is just as pleased

by
**Barbara
Dahlgren**

with the Christ-centered grandmother who raises her grandchildren with godly principles because her drugged-out daughter is in jail. The aged spouse who cheerfully cares for a mate with Alzheimer’s touches my heart. The policeman with a devotional in his pocket who puts himself in harm’s way to protect others paints a picture of what Christianity is about.

I think about the soldier who fights for my freedom counseling with a chaplain and praise God that the chaplain is there. The housebound prayer warrior who sends out cards and letters of encouragement is on mission with God. The single mother grocery clerk, working two jobs to keep her family fed, who smiles at me and tells me to have a blessed day is on mission. The dedicated teacher, trying to teach morality to her students in spite of low pay, overcrowded classrooms, and under-funded programs has God’s heart and understands her mission.

Mission is done by ordinary people who rely on our extraordinary God; people who see their purpose as simply trying to live a Christian life. By living in mission, they bring glory to God and positively affect those around them.

For some of us I believe our mission—our purpose in life—is as simple as sharing the love of God by how we live our lives. We are God’s workmanship, created to live our lives according to his will.¹ If we stay God-centered, he will give our lives meaning, keep us focused and motivated—and provide the strength that can keep us going.² ■

¹ Ephesians 2:10

² Philippians 4:13

continued from page 10

who is not afraid to give us positive criticism—even if it hurts. When we respond correctly to the criticisms, they will ultimately build us up, making us better equipped to handle anything life throws at us. Of course, criticize in the right way at the right time and make sure you are a true friend too.⁴

“Tolkien needed a ‘critical friend’, a mentor who would encourage and criticise, affirm and improve, his writing—above all, someone who would force him to bring it to completion.... Tolkien was a niggling perfectionist.... Someone had to help him conquer his perfectionism. And what Tolkien needed he found in Lewis.... Lewis would become the chief midwife to one of the great works of twentieth-century literature—Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings.” Making friends and keeping friendships alive takes time. Make time.

Do you have strong friendships? If so nurture them. If you don’t have good friends, perhaps the reason is you are not being a good friend. If you don’t have a true friend ask God for one. Lewis wrote: “In friendship...we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years’

difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another...the accident of a topic being raised or not raised at a first meeting—any of these chances might have kept us apart.

But for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, ‘You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,’ can truly say to every group of Christian friends, ‘You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another.’ The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others.”

As Lewis saw it, friendship was as close to heaven as we can get in this world. Forging and nurturing friendships is not only important—it is more spiritual than we may realise! ■

¹ Proverbs 17:17

² Proverbs 18:24

³ Proverbs 27:17

⁴ Proverbs 27:9

Who do w

Studies have shown that man is a reflective being, not only in actions but also in intent or desire. We tend to reflect others in one way or another.

Reflecting can be good or bad depending on whom we reflect—God, man, or someone else. This article explores the constructive and destructive ways of reflection.

For variety, we will use the words *reflect*, *mimic*, *copy*, *imitate*, *mirror* and *model* synonymously.

Man is a reflective being

Scientists have discovered recently what are called *mirror neurons* in the brain cells of monkeys and humans. They conducted a battery of tests to see if they indeed reflected other monkeys and humans. Their tests confirmed that they do, but not always in identical ways.

The saying, “Monkey see, monkey do” seems to be true! Monkeys copy the actions of other monkeys. For example, if you put a peanut in a jar and let one monkey eat and another watch, the second monkey will most likely copy the actions of the first if given a similar opportunity. Some monkeys even copy the actions of humans!

Humans also copy the actions of others. Infants, for example, tend to mimic the eye, mouth and finger movements of their parents as they watch them. Adults also copy their peers when deciding which iPhone or car to buy. They do this because they want to be seen as smart as their peers.

The reflective dynamics works something like this. When one person observes another person doing something, the mirror neurons in the first trigger (fire) causes him to copy the actions of the other.

Note that *mimicking doesn't mean that we become clones of those we mimic*. No, mimicking doesn't take away our unique or individual personality. We will continue to be ourselves (just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit mirror each other perfectly yet they retain their *distinct personality*).

God created man to reflect him

What is God like? God is other-centred and self-giving. He is gracious, loving, forgiving, patient, kind, generous, creative and passionate. He desires that we reflect him and experience his kind of life. That's why he created us in his image and likeness. *But that kind of life is only possible if we reflect him because he is the source of that life.*

Many are not convinced that they resemble God, especially when they see man's cruelty to one another. But Scripture declares that we resemble God in more ways than we realize. *There is something in us (call it DNA, blueprint) that is God-like.*

God created us not because he needed someone to serve and worship him (even though we do). *No, he created us because he desired us. He desires that we*



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

experience his kind of life.

After creating Adam and Eve, God blessed them. The Hebrew word for *blessed* is *barak*, which means *to adore* (as on bended knees) like parents adoring their new-born baby.

God adores us because we are his beloved children,



'bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.' He loves us so much that he desires to share his life (and everything that he has) with us. But no matter how good his life is, he will not coerce or force it upon us, as love can only be given and received freely. That means we must each

ve reflect?

individually desire his life. It requires our volition, our free will.

Man chose to reflect the devil

Sadly, Adam and Eve, representing humanity, chose to reflect the devil (serpent), instead of the God who

Tree of knowledge of good and evil (*evil here means annoyances, frustration, hard labour*). Sin marred God's image and likeness in them to such an extent that they no longer saw God as he really was. They now saw a different god, a god of their imagination, a god who was waiting to punish them for their disobedience.

Fear drove them into the bushes.

Their story is also our story. Because of the many sins we have committed, we dare not approach God. *We hide behind our religious works, material success, accomplishment, money, fame and power thinking that with these we will gain God's approval and acceptance.*

That's what religion teaches. It presents false gods and asks people to worship them with their money, time and energy even though such gods don't exist, except in their fallen minds. It warns them that they lack godly virtues and therefore God would not accept them until they atone for their sins by performing certain rituals like praying, fasting, donating money or doing penance. Society likewise urges them to work hard and achieve success so that they could convince god (and the world) that they are worthy of acceptance. Religion and society thus points them to imaginary gods that have no power whatsoever to bless them. The Bible, however, reveals to us a very different God—a God who loves us,

forgives us, blesses us, and who is for us.

God has given us every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.¹ He tells us that we are complete in him and lack nothing.² But many are not convinced. They feel they don't have enough. So they lie, steal, kill, oppress,

created them. Whether they knew it or not, they made that decision for all humanity.

They fell (sinned) because they *believed a lie about themselves and God*. They believed they were *not* like God. So, *to become like God*, they ate the fruit from the



control and manipulate to get what they want.³

After getting what they want, their lives are still empty because they are not seeking God's desires for them. They are not seeking the true source of their happiness.

Sin is pervasive. It has infiltrated every aspect of our life—culture, tradition, business, entertainment, politics and religion. We see its effects all around us.

God warned Ancient Israel not to adopt the pagan customs and practices of the nations around them. Today, he is also asking us to reject the false lifestyle of this world.⁴ Instead, he is asking us to desire him,⁵ to reflect him.

Jesus reflected God and rescued us from the devil

God loves us beyond measure because we are his prized possession, his own children. So he will do whatever it takes (including sacrificing his one and only beloved son Jesus) to rescue and restore us to our original state of blameless innocence which was lost because of Adam's sin.

That's what Jesus came to do. *He assumed our fallen nature and defeated the devil (and his systems) and rescued us from our hopeless, pathetic condition. How did he defeat the devil? He did it by reflecting his Father's desire for him. He chose to do his Father's will even in the face of severe temptations and contradictions. He did it so successfully that he told his disciples, "...whatever the Father does, the Son also does"*⁶ and *"...anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."*⁷

The gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke describe how Jesus defeated the devil's temptations.⁸ The devil taunted Jesus, saying:

1. "You say you are Saviour, but you are dying of starvation! Why don't you turn this stone to bread and eat it? After you have saved yourself, you can save the world." Jesus replied, "I live by every word of God, not physical food alone. He appointed me Saviour and his word is altogether sufficient. I don't have to prove anything."
2. "You say you are a Rabbi, a great religious leader, but where are your credentials? Why don't you perform some religious stunts like jumping from the temple top and calling angels to save you so that people will acknowledge your religious superiority and believe you?" Jesus replied, "I will not test my Lord. His approval is sufficient."
3. "You have nothing to show that God is on your side—you have no money, power, or fame. Who will believe you? Why don't you worship me and my systems (competition, strife, corruption, revenge, back stabbing, oppression, manipulation and control) and I will give you all these things?" Jesus replied, "I will worship my Lord, and him alone."

We too face similar temptations. The first temptation deals with our 'bread and butter' issues, like food, clothing and shelter. The second temptation deals with our spiritual standing, our longing for God's (and man's) acceptance and approval. The third deals with our craving for material riches, power and fame.

The devil instigates us to lust after material things, spirituality, power, riches and fame. He lures us to amass as much money and physical goods as possible (so we appear successful), engage in endless religious

activities (so we appear holy), seek power and fame (so others will look up to us).

*Apostle John warns us against lusting after these earthly things: "For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world."*⁹

God offers us so much more than what the devil offers us. He has *already blessed* us with every spiritual blessing in *Christ Jesus* (we just need to wake up to this spiritual reality). He has *already* given us his life, righteousness, power, wisdom, riches, freedom and the whole universe. We lack *absolutely* nothing!

Remember, almost immediately after the temptation, Jesus fed thousands with just two fish and five loaves (not once but twice). He healed many who were sick and demon-possessed. He raised the dead on several occasions. He calmed the storms. He walked on water. He turned water to wine. He spoke with such power, grace, truth and wisdom that multitudes were drawn to him. God declared him Prophet, Priest, King, Saviour and God. God bestowed upon him *everything*.

That applies to us too. Jesus represents us vicariously. All the blessings he received from God are also ours because he is in us and we are in him.¹⁰ Yes, the same God who blessed him has also blessed us. He has given us everything because we are his precious jewels and treasures. We are his princes and princesses, kings and priests, saints and bride.

Jesus defeated the devil and his systems by simply reflecting his heavenly Father, by doing his Father's will. *And he did it for us, as us. And to help us experience that victorious life, he is ready and eager to work in and through us, as us.*

Thus Jesus removed every obstacle that stood between us and God.¹¹ He united us with God forever. Any separation is only in our minds. May we wake up to this reality and bask in his glory.

God calls us to reflect him

God designed us to reflect him¹²—love one another (as he loved us), value one another, forgive one another, desire good things for one another. *He asks us to see Christ in everyone.*¹³ And to help us reflect him, he has given us his Spirit, and has written his law of love in our hearts. Indeed, he has given us everything that we need to live the divine life.¹⁴

Apostle James beckons us to *see our true self (the life of our design) in the spiritual mirror, the Holy Bible. He asks us to look intently at the mirror until we discover our true self, which is Christ in us.*¹⁵ Apostle Paul, likewise, asks us to *see the risen Christ living inside us*¹⁶ and *reflect him, and be fully transformed into his image and likeness.*¹⁷

Man's failure to reflect Jesus is the root cause of our suffering. It has produced all sorts of negative results—fear, shame, guilt, depression, hopelessness, and lack of purpose in life. We need not succumb to this tragic existence, this low quality life. Jesus is offering us an alternative lifestyle—a life of abundance, fulfilment, freedom, adventure, passion and creativity.

To summarize: God loves us infinitely. He invites us to participate in his glorious life, and he has given us everything that is needed to live that life. This life is only possible when we reflect him. So, let's reflect the risen Christ in us, for he truly is our fullness of life, joy, peace, glory, riches, health and all. □

¹ Ephesians 1:3

² Colossians 2:10

³ John 10:10

⁴ 1 John 2:16

⁵ Haggai 2:7

⁶ John 5:19

⁷ John 14:9

⁸ Matthew 4, Luke 4

⁹ 1 John 2:16

¹⁰ John 14:20

¹¹ Colossians 2:14–16

¹² Ephesians 5:1

¹³ Matthew 25:40,47

¹⁴ 2 Peter 1:3

¹⁵ James 1:23–25

¹⁶ Colossians 1:27

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:17–18

The enigma of grace

When asked what belief was unique to the Christian faith, C.S. Lewis answered, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace” (Yancey, *What’s So Amazing about Grace?*). Grace—indeed, how sweet the sound! Yet, there seems to be an unease when we talk about it, especially among the Christian circles. In fact, some Christian preachers are even afraid to preach about it. They believe that preaching grace will encourage people to go out and sin. They fear that grace will be turned to “cheap grace” or worse still, “hyper-grace”—whatever that might mean, because the Bible does not use terms such as those! They almost seem to believe that if we talk about grace people will turn it into a license to sin, as though a “...lack of license has ever stopped anybody from sinning.”

Sadly, a poor focus on the grace of God may have actually led people to have a faulty image of God. In my experience as a Christian counsellor I have come across many who struggle to experience God as a loving Father, just because of a mistake they might have made or a sinful habit that they may be battling with. I remember a single male who came in to the office where I volunteer as a counsellor. He shared how he felt that God was constantly against him by not giving him success in his ministry. He concluded that this was so because he was falling short on righteous behaviour. When I reminded him that God is not vengeful, but gracious,¹ even though it was refreshing for him to hear that, he found it hard to believe.

Many tend to be “afraid” of God because they are made to feel that God, like a cranky, irritable, perpetually ill-tempered old man, is constantly disappointed with them. They don’t feel they can ever please God. They have this foreboding feeling that God is constantly against them because of not meeting his standards. They might think of God as an eternal bookkeeper who is forever measuring our behaviour against his standards.

On the other hand, they find it hard to actually believe that God understands our weaknesses and empathizes with us in our struggles.² Far from being angry he is willing to help us, strengthen us, comfort us³ and work with us as we surrender to him and bring good out of every and any adversity.⁴ God’s main focus is to save us, not condemn us!⁵

Cheap grace, hyper grace—these phrases may actually confuse the pure message of grace. It almost seems that those who use these phrases want to make grace “expensive”—not because of the great sacrifice of Jesus that has taken away the sins of the world and this cannot ever be cheapened—but because they want to add their efforts to it and feel they need to “earn” grace. They almost feel that they need to “deserve” it. Many want to make grace “transactional” because they just can’t believe that it is a free gift of a gracious God who is essentially love. Humans have a tendency to believe that nothing, after all, is free in this world. So they make

by
**Dan
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God into a transactional businessman instead of a relational God who loves his children as a father would his own. Some find it so hard to believe that “...God loves people because of who God is, not because of who we are.” (Yancey, pg. 67).

Regrettably, according to Yancy, even our churches have become places of “ungrace.” Instead of helping redeem the sinner, they are made to feel guiltier, rejected and excluded. They are more often reminded of their sins and how abysmally far they fall short of God’s standards instead of also showing them how much God loves them in spite of their sins.⁶ Sadly, even the gospel is preached in a way to make people be petrified of a wrathful God, instead of giving them hope in a merciful, loving God who is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.”⁷ Charles Spurgeon says, “... the substance and essence of the true gospel is the doctrine of God’s grace—that, in fact, if you take away the grace of God from the gospel you have extracted from it its very life-blood, and there is nothing left worth preaching, worth believing, or worth contending for. Grace is the soul of the gospel: without it the gospel is dead. Grace is the music of the gospel: without it the gospel is silent as to all comfort.”

Does the preaching of grace promote sin? All we need is to note what the Apostle Paul states in his letter to Titus: “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...”⁸

It is grace that tells us to say no to sin—perhaps, much more than the law does. The law inspires fearfulness because the penalty is death. But grace inspires love for God because we have been unconditionally accepted, which in turn motivates us to do good works. Just because we struggle with sin does not mean we have rejected grace or made it “cheap.” In fact, our only hope is the grace of God, because “There is no one righteous, not even one ...”,⁹ or in the words of Solomon, “Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.”¹⁰ None of us are perfect, or ever will be in this lifetime in terms of our every thought and action—if “cheap” grace is true, then we are all guilty of making grace cheap. Every last human being needs the grace of God. That is our only hope.

The opposite of grace is not “cheap” grace. It is licentiousness and the denial of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As Jude says, “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”¹¹ The deliberate continuing in sin because of having denied Jesus Christ

¹ Psalms 103:10

² Hebrews 4:15

³ 2 Corinthians 1:4

⁴ Romans 8:28

⁵ John 3:17

⁶ Romans 5:8

⁷ Psalms 103:8

⁸ Titus 2:11–12

⁹ Romans 3:10

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 7:20

¹¹ Jude 4

¹² Ephesians 2:8–9

continued on page 20

What would you have me do?

When we first become Christians we typically feel compelled to do something in response to God's graciousness. Should we go somewhere? Change jobs? Do something great? Perhaps stand on a street corner and preach to people who walk by? I struggled with that question. Perhaps you have too.

Here are some considerations when we try to discern God's will for our lives:

Ordinary living

First, God wants us to live a good life. Scripture gives many tips on how to please God in our daily lives. The Apostle Paul gave a simple summary in his letter to the



by
Paul Hailey

lives by living as he did. Paul's simple guidelines do not require drastic life-changing actions such as changing jobs, or moving to a new location. An exception would be changing jobs if our current job required dishonest activity.

But as we mature as Christians God will probably prompt us to do even more.

Special callings

All Christians are given spiritual gifts to be used to serve others. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."² All of us are gifted in unique



Thessalonian congregation by noting some aspects of everyday living—avoid immorality, love others, live quietly, work hard, and mind your own business.¹ By living this way they would earn respect of friends and neighbors. This is how Jesus lived for the first 30 years of His life. Until he began his ministry he was known simply as the carpenter from Nazareth—probably well-liked and respected in his community as a hard-working man who showed love to others in ordinary ways.

As his followers, we can emulate him in our daily

ways.

"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let

continued on page 18

From admonition to mission

Living and sharing the gospel.” That’s our church mission statement. And it’s a good one, capturing both the content and the approach to mission. The method and the message. And the method is vitally important. In fact not only should the method match the message, in many ways the method is the message.

Earlier this year, I was privileged to attend a national conference entitled *“Re: Thinking A Public Faith”*. The key speaker was Yale Professor Miroslav Volf. Volf is a prolific author, teacher (he has had former British PM Tony Blair in his class), conference presenter and something of an acknowledged expert on international reconciliation. Other presenters included Tim Costello from World Vision Australia and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Dr Michael Spence.

Re-thinking mission

Leaders from churches, charities, parachurch organisations and Christian Schools were included to “rethink” approaches to sharing the gospel—to mission—in our pluralistic societies. It was an incredibly stimulating and encouraging experience. I want to tell you how exciting it was to hear others from different streams of Christianity very much sharing similar perspectives that our journey, in the grace of God, has led us to when it comes to mission.

There was a time when the Christian church automatically had a say in the public debate. When, by and large, the churches were heard with respect and some degree of honour. Not anymore! That horse has long gone. Now, as Dr Keith Farmer put it at our national conference, we have gone from a post-Christian culture to an anti-Christian culture. Christians are often dismissed as “boring, judgmental and hypocritical”. Or, as Richard Dawkins famously put it, “mad, bad and dangerous.”

We can spend a great deal of energy considering how things have got to this state. (And there should be some serious reflection and soul searching.) Yet the challenge remains, what do we do now?

The good news is that the answer is really quite simple. As individuals, and together as a fellowship, we need to keep doing what we are already doing. We

by
John Mclean

need to continue to “live and share” the gospel. We can’t share it if we are not living it, and we can’t live it if we are not sharing it. We start with an incredible gratitude for who God is—who he has revealed himself to be in Christ. And this is entirely good news. God is *for* us, not *against* us. He sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it.¹

Our fundamental response to this is gratitude. And this thankfulness overflows into every aspect of life, into all we do and say. It underpins our approach to mission.

The Golden Rule

Now, we can talk about this—and we should. More vitally, we can live this. We can take seriously Jesus words to “do to others what you would have them do to you.”² This is not a matter of compromising our beliefs. Indeed, it is just the opposite. This “Golden Rule” isn’t

a peripheral part of Christianity—it’s the centre, the substance of the revelation of God in Christ. As C. S. Lewis noted, it crosses all cultures, belief systems and philosophical frameworks. And you don’t need a degree or complex explanations to understand it. Paul, the ex-Pharisee, put it this way, “For everything about God’s word is summed up in a single sentence: love others as you

“It’s the operation of Golden Rule—the substance, not the peripherals of the Christian faith—to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

love yourself.”³ And it’s about what we do as much (or more) than what we say.

We are not Old Testament prophets, calling people back to a national covenant with God. (Although justice and mercy for the oppressed and marginalised remain important as expressions of this love of God). Nor are we frustrated pastors, demanding back-sliding, lapsed Christians stop being slack and get serious about religion. (Although we invite people to share our communion with God and one another.) We are sent into the world as the Father sent the Son in the Spirit, to demonstrate the love of God in the world. Right here, right now. To whomever we come in contact with.

It’s not so much about admonishing people to believe this or that, to do more, to try harder, so much as it is about *being* Christ to others. This isn’t a matter of grand strategy, expensive programs, guilt-fuelled exhortations. It’s a matter of sharing kindness, compassion and care

with every human being we meet. A smile, a word of encouragement. Not condemnation, but grace. Not judgment, but acceptance and love. Asking questions more than having all the answers; listening more than talking.

It's about always speaking graciously.⁴ By all means, be prepared to give an answer—but always with kindness and patience, gentleness, respect and grace. (And notice Peter's observation that the questions are about the "hope" that you have, the "good news" of the gospel—not doctrinal minutiae.) It's about treating everyone we come in contact with as a child of God, of value and significance. It is doing unto *all* others what you would have them do to you. And remembering that it's the Holy Spirit who converts, not us.

From Admonition to Mission

Moving from admonition to mission involves understanding that "mission" is not just a part of life, it is all of life. Mission is not a sub-set of Christianity, it is living the good news every day in every circumstance. Sometimes an emphasis on missional terminology can actually be unhelpful if it makes out that mission is something complex or different from every day Christianity.

Tim Costello finished the conference by saying it is very much a matter of tone. How do we go about everything we do or say? With harsh judgement, hectoring others, or with grace and sensitivity? Guided by the Golden Rule, or the desire to win the argument? It's sharing by living, connecting, contributing—not just

¹ John 3:17
² Matthew 7:12
³ Galatians 5:13
⁴ Colossians 4:6; Ephesians 4:29; 1 Peter 3:15
⁵ John 13:34–35

telling (and much less shouting).

I really want to thank all our office staff, pastors and congregations for the marvellous way we have all moved into this space from admonition (a message of telling others what they should be doing, and offering judgment and correction) to active mission. This mission is personal, local, congregational, national and international. It starts with the person in front of us (often our family) and extends to everyone we meet, or God provides connections with.

This is the trend we needed to see in the Christian community in Australia (and others). It's a trend already well underway in our fellowship as God in his mercy and grace has guided and led us.

It's a trend reflecting the words of God's revelation to us in Jesus: "By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."⁵ All others. It's the operation of Golden Rule—the substance, not the peripherals of the Christian faith—to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. As we participate in the love of the Father, Son and Spirit, we learn to love as Christ loves us. And as we do, we also participate in the Son's mission from the Father to the world—to live and share the good news, to create and build communion. □

continued from page 16

him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."³ Scripture mentions other gifts such as knowledge, mercy, hospitality, music, and faith. All of these gifts and natural talents can be used to benefit others. Praying for others is something we all can and should do.

Our proper response

It may take a while for us to recognize our personal God-given spiritual gifting. We may wonder what the Lord would like us to do. Our own inclinations often lead us in the right direction. We also can ask friends or family members their thoughts about our most fruitful areas of service.

Or, and perhaps most importantly, we can follow Paul's example by simply asking, "Lord, what will you have me do?"⁴

Sometimes we may see two or more options and wish that God would show us the best option. Sometimes He does—a word from a friend, or perhaps a newspaper article that bears on the matter. But, God does not always show us His will in ways we clearly understand. He may be letting us grow and mature as Christians before guiding us into a particular type of Christian service.

However, we can be assured He will guide our lives in the direction He wants us to go when we ask Him to. If we simply trust Him, He will lead us into the area

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:11
² Ephesians 2:10
³ Romans 12:6–8
⁴ Acts 9:6
⁵ Proverbs 3:6
⁶ Jeremiah 1:4–8
⁷ Philippians 4:13

of service where we will be most fruitful. "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."⁵

Sometimes our Lord may challenge us to go beyond our comfort zones. It has happened to me several times. When I was asked to give a short message in church I was terrified—"Who, me?" Many of the Old Testament prophets reacted the same way. When the Lord told Jeremiah He had appointed him to be a prophet, he responded, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, 'I said I do not know how to speak; I am only a child. But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord."⁶ With the Lord's guidance, Jeremiah became a fearless prophet.

We, too, can be assured if God invites us to do something, He will see us through. Like Paul said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."⁷ From the context of his statement it is clear he trusted God to enable him to accomplish those tasks He led him to do. It is reassuring to know He will do the same for us.

It is a blessing to serve our Lord, even in little ways. May your Christian life be fruitful! □

Is God faithful?

Today we live in a world that is filled with violence and evil. There are those who at this time are fleeing from wars and brutal acts of terrorism. Even in peaceful nations troubles and trials plague people at every turn. Earning a living can be an extremely difficult task for many. Poverty grips a huge section of the world population. Millions are languishing in refugee camps, living on donated food. Some question where God is when people who believe in him are subject to all the evils that plague this world. Where is the promise of protection for those who trust in God? Has God abandoned those who trust in him? Perhaps God only gives the impression of being faithful and doesn't really care when trouble begins. What are we to say if horrific violence and troubles come our way?

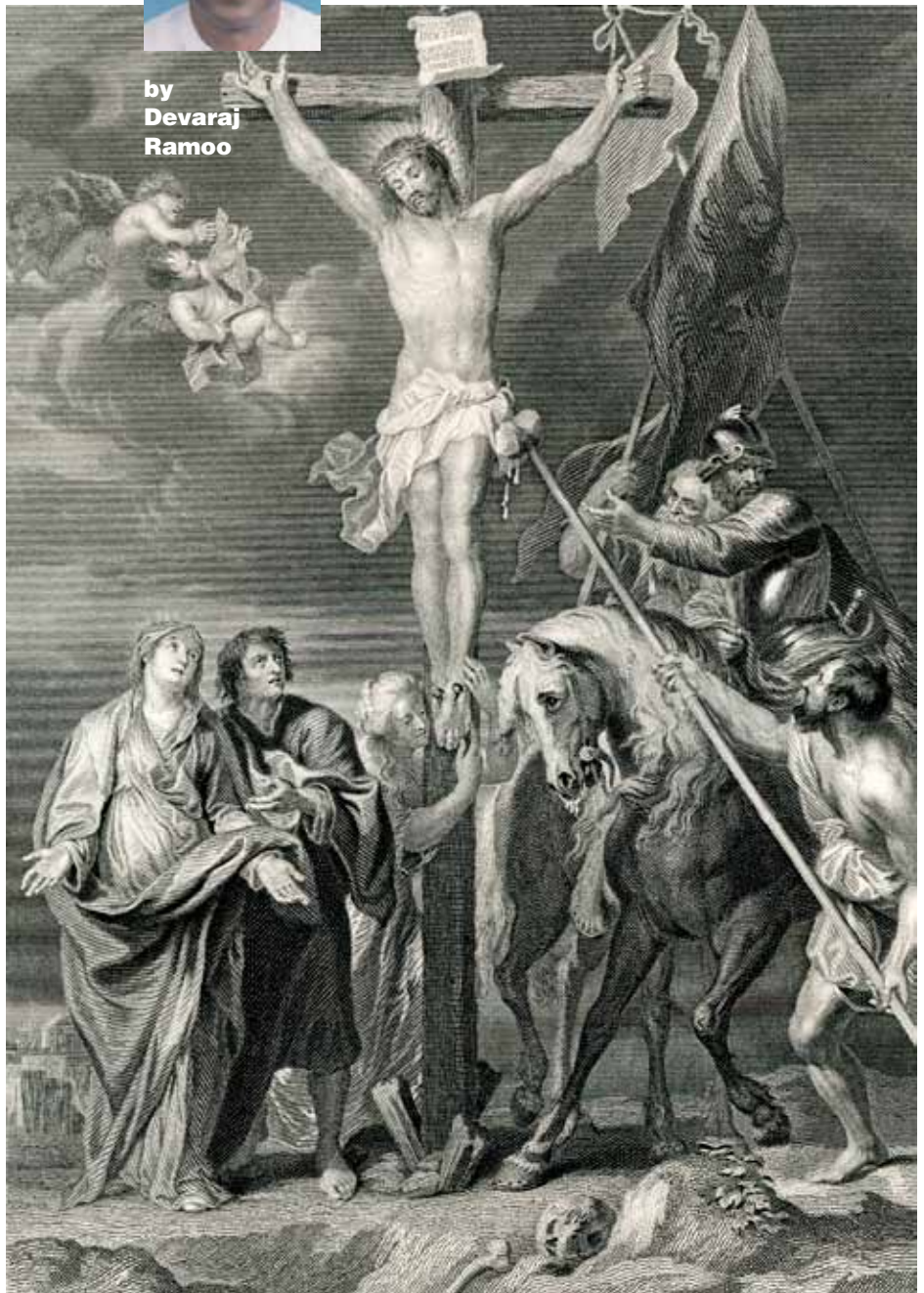
The Bible teaches that God's works are perfect and all his ways are just. It says that he is a faithful God who does no wrong.¹ The book of Psalms is full of praises to God for his faithfulness.² To say that God is faithful goes to the very core of who He really is. If He didn't keep His Word, He wouldn't be God. The preacher and author A.W.Tozer states that "All of God's acts are consistent with all of His attributes. No attribute contradicts any other, but all harmonize and blend into each other in the infinite abyss of the Godhead." In the New Testament the Apostle Paul also declares that God is faithful in seeing us through our life here on Earth by helping us be strong and blameless in our spirit, soul and body until the day Christ returns.³ However throughout the history of the Christian faith, many people of God have suffered great pain and sorrow for the faith they have in Christ. Many have been mocked, ridiculed, hated and threatened for trusting and professing Christ. The question that arises is how is God faithful when the people who trust in him can feel so abandoned?

The Bible declares that God is indeed faithful. Joshua who led the ancient Israelites into the Promised Land declared that God had fulfilled all the promises made to them.⁴ Not one promise was left unfulfilled.⁵ In numerous other instances the Bible tells us that God is always trustworthy. However the faithfulness of God does not immunize us from sufferings. During times of suffering people cry out to God for help and deliverance from troubles. Sometimes God answers in miraculous ways to deliver us while at other times the suffering may be prolonged indefinitely. Does this



by
**Devaraj
Ramoo**

mean that at times God is faithful to deliver us while at other times he may not care? The very real answer to this question is the way God reveals his faithfulness when we are in need. The Eternal always stands beside us and upholds us in the midst of our trials. His faithfulness is his presence with us in strengthening us



as we go through the difficulties we face.⁶
That is what God does for his people. He sticks

continued on page 21

East from west

God tells us that, through Jesus, he has removed the penalty of sin. But we find this hard to accept at face value. We hear that our sins are forgiven, but we feel the need to add a conditional “if.” We also understand that God’s love for us is unconditional, and yet we still think there is a “but.” For some reason, unconditional love and forgiveness seem “too good to be true.”



travelled far from home. They thought of the heavens as an inverted bowl in which the sun, moon and stars somehow moved. Within their limited grasp of the cosmos, far East and West could have been just over the horizon, and “as high as heaven” was somewhere above the clouds.

Nowadays, when we can fly far above the clouds to travel long distances, David’s analogy may seem less impressive, but it shouldn’t. Recently, we had a reminder of how far beyond our human grasp the cosmos really is.

Voyager 1, the unmanned spacecraft originally launched September 1977, has been back in the news. It was launched on a trajectory that took it past Jupiter and Saturn. *Voyager* fulfilled its mission brilliantly, sending back stunning pictures of these two giant planets. But then, it kept on going—and it is still going, still beaming back information after 35 years.

Voyager has travelled farther “from East to West” than any other manmade object. It is now over 11 billion miles away, close to the point where it will leave our solar system altogether and head off into interstellar space. It will eventually come under the influence of another star, but not for another 40,000 years!

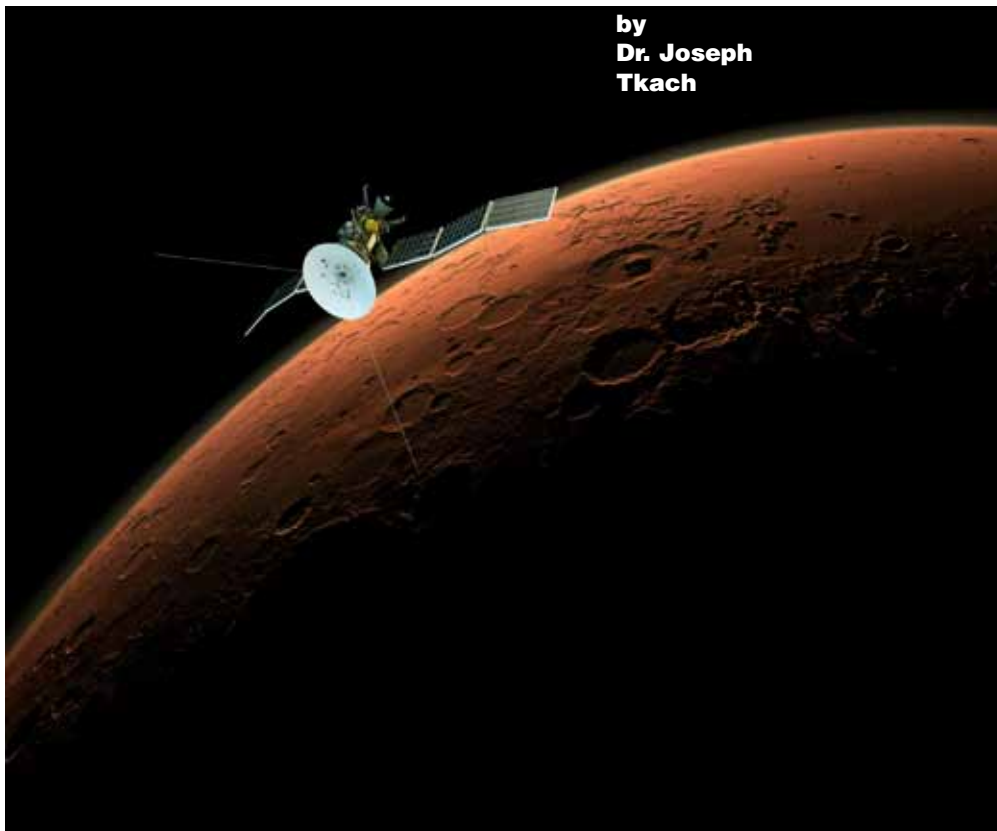
Perhaps if David was writing Psalm 103 today, he might say something like this:

“For as far as interstellar space reaches away from earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as

far as the *Voyager* spacecraft has travelled from east to west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

The point is, God’s love for us, and his desire to remove the guilt and stain of our sins, is still greater than anything we humans can imagine, and it always will be. □

by
**Dr. Joseph
Tkach**



Even in Old Testament times, some were able to glimpse into the fullness of God’s desire to forgive and forget. In Psalm 103, verses 11 and 12, David wrote:

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

At the time David wrote this, most people never

continued from page 15

is a rejection of grace.

Grace is completely underserved—almost scandalous—and God offers it to all humanity, gratis: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not

by works, so that no one can boast.”¹²

Let us boldly proclaim the grace of God—for that, ultimately, is what the world needs. □

Finding our muse

In Greek mythology, muses were the goddesses who inspired people in literature, arts and sciences. Because of the stories of these nine muses, people looked to them for help in their creative endeavors. In modern times, British author Robert Graves wrote novels about mythology and re-popularized the concept of muses. Writers, singers and dancers began calling upon them again for help and inspiration. It's doubtful any of them believe in the Greek goddesses but many artists consider lovers, celebrities or other artists their muses.

Where does inspiration come from? The original meaning of the word *inspire* is to breathe or blow into, particularly from a divine or supernatural being, in the sense of imparting a truth or idea to someone. When Christians talk of being inspired, we usually mean we received an idea or thought from God. I like to think my writing and speaking are inspired by God and I give him the credit for my ideas and abilities.

Because creativity comes from God, we could think of him as our Muse! The Holy Spirit is the one who leads, guides and inspires us. He takes us from a state of being deceived into the truth of Jesus who is the Life, the Truth and the Way. Without him breathing into us the life of the Father, we would in a sense be lifeless. He animates us with his energy and fills us with the sparkle of his imagination.

The act of creating is a part of himself God has given us to help us through life and to enhance our lives, part of the abundant life he promised in John 10:10. Our creativity allows us to do many activities that are not only necessary, like build houses and machines, but also provides us arts and entertainment. The urge,

by
Tammy Tkach

possibly even the need to create, is deep within us and drives most of our activities.

How do we let God be our muse, giving us the guidance and inspiration we need and desire? We can start by practicing listening prayer. Most people are familiar with the usual way of praying, which is to talk to God, telling him our needs, thanking and praising him, interceding for others and simply sharing our thoughts. Listening prayer requires a little more discipline as it requires silence! It's difficult to be quiet during prayer as we usually feel the need to say something. Silence can be uncomfortable—our minds wander, we get distracted and because we can't audibly hear God's voice, we decide he's not communicating.

Learning to be quiet before God during prayer takes time and practice. A starting place is to read a passage from the Bible or a devotional and then focus on God, asking him to guide your thoughts. If you get the urge to speak, remind yourself you came to listen, not talk. Dallas Willard wrote an inspiring and articulate book titled *Hearing God*, which explains in detail how to listen.

Of course, God is much more than a muse and we can and should look to him for inspiration and guidance in all areas of life. He's more than willing to do this and constantly speaks love and wisdom to us. May we all learn to listen more intently to his loving voice. □

continued from page 19

close to them. When we go through our darkest hours he won't leave us alone! Even when we know that the suffering had not passed we will realize his presence with us every step of the way. His presence is perceived in the innermost recesses of our spirit. God's faithfulness doesn't mean you won't suffer. It doesn't mean he will always prevent bad things from coming your way. But it does mean that he stays close to you to give you the strength and means to endure the trials. The finest example of this is the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Just before he was to be arrested and later crucified, Jesus gathered in the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples. He knew that the time had come when he would be arrested and put through humiliation, torture and crucifixion. He was filled with agony at the horror of facing this. Christ was no superman who could go through the ordeal painlessly. Instead he was just

like as any man would be when facing the ordeal. He prayed that if it was possible God could prevent the suffering. He accepted the fact that he had to suffer but his prayer was so intense that he broke into a sweat of blood, with great drops falling to the ground as he prayed more and more earnestly. Then God the Father demonstrated his faithfulness by sending an angel to Christ to strengthen him.⁷ Did the Father abandon him? Definitely not! The Father reminded Christ that he was with him by sending an angel to strengthen him. Both the Father and the Holy Spirit were with Christ throughout the ordeal. Even the Son of the Most High was not spared from suffering but God was with him and strengthened him all the way.

It is the same for us also. We are not always spared from suffering but we can surely know that God's faithfulness will see us through in this world and on to his kingdom. □

¹ Deuteronomy 32:4

² Psalm 89:8

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

⁴ Joshua 21:45

⁵ Joshua 23:14

⁶ Isaiah 41:10

⁷ Luke 22:39–44

Living in communion with God

In the second century, a Christian leader named Marcion suggested we get rid of the Old Testament. He created his own version of the New Testament in which he had only Luke's Gospel and several of Paul's letters, but he removed all the quotes from the Old Testament, saying that the Old Testament God was inferior, simply the tribal god of the Jews.

Marcion was excommunicated for spreading this idea, and the early Christian church started to form its own canon of Scripture, including four Gospels and all the letters of Paul, including the quotes from the Old Testament. The Christian church still keeps the Old Testament as part of the Bible, believing the Old Testament gives us a context that helps us understand who Jesus was and what he did for our salvation.

Still, the Old Testament is confusing to many—so different from the New Testament. All that history and all those wars don't seem to have much to do with Jesus or with Christian life today. There are laws and regulations on one hand, and on the other, there are Jesus and Paul, who seem to be talking about something quite different. We have ancient Judaism on one hand and Christianity on the other.

Some Christians emphasize the Old Testament more than others, keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, the dietary laws of the Israelites and even some Jewish annual festivals.

Other Christians are more like Marcion—they never read the Old Testament. A few are even anti-Jewish. In Nazi Germany, prejudice against Jews was unfortunately supported by the church and went along with a dislike for the Old Testament.

Yet the Old Testament Scriptures speak of Jesus Christ,¹ and it is good for us to hear what they have to say. Further, they share God's larger purpose with humanity, the reason that Jesus came to save us. The Old Testament, as well as the New, tells us that God wants to live with us. From the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem, God's goal is that we will live with him in harmony.

In the garden

Genesis 1 describes the creation of the universe by a stupendously powerful God, who simply speaks everything into existence. God said, let this happen, and it did. He gave the command, and it happened. In contrast, Genesis 2 describes a God who gets his hands dirty. He enters the creation, forms a human being from dirt, plants trees in the garden, talks with the man, and

by
**Michael
Morrison**

fashions a companion for him.

Neither story gives us the full picture, but together they reveal different aspects of the same God. Even though God has the power to create by command, he chose to be personally involved in the creation of humanity. He spoke to the man, brought animals to him, and orchestrated events so the man would take delight in his new companion.

The God who has stupendously divine powers is also a God who is a lot like a human—a being who is both human and divine; from the very beginning that is the way that this God revealed himself to be.

Although Genesis 3 reports a tragic turn of events, it also reveals more about God's desire for humanity. After the first humans sinned, God was walking in the garden just like normal. The all-powerful God had become like a human, making noise as he walked in the garden. Though he could appear instantly if he wished, he chose instead to meet the man and woman on their level, at their speed. This did not seem to surprise them; God may have walked and talked with them for many days.

“The Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. That is a promise for us today, too.”

They had no fear before this, but now they were afraid, and they hid. Although they were shrinking away from the relationship, God did not. He could have easily left in a huff, but he did not abandon what he had made. There were no lightning bolts or displays of

divine anger.

God asked the man and woman what they had done, and they answered. He then told them the consequences they would experience as a result of what they had done. He then lovingly provided clothes for them and took steps to ensure that the humans would not live forever in their state of alienation and shame.

Throughout Genesis we see God interacting with Cain, Noah, Abram, Hagar, Abimelek, and others. Of special importance for us is the promise he made to Abraham: “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant... to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”² He promised an ongoing relationship with his people.

Calling a people

Many of us know the basic story of Exodus: God called Moses, brought plagues upon Egypt, brought

continued on page 23

The measure of a Christian is not in the height of his grasp but in the depth of his love.

Clarence Jordan

Jesus himself did not try to convert the two thieves on the cross; he waited until one of them turned to him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

I have one desire now—to live a life of reckless abandon for the Lord, putting all my energy and strength into it.

Elisabeth Elliot

Through salvation our past has been forgiven, our present is given meaning, and our future is secured.

Rick Warren

Because God has made us for Himself,

our hearts are restless until they rest in Him.

Augustine of Hippo

Sayings of C.S. Lewis

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us.

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum

because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

In darkness God's truth shines most clear.

Corrie ten Boom

I am fallen, flawed and imperfect. Yet drenched in the grace and mercy that is found in Jesus Christ, there is strength.

Adam Young

Sayings of Andrew Murray

Beware in your prayers, above everything else, of limiting God, not only by unbelief, but by fancying that you know what He can do.

A true revival means nothing less than a

revolution, casting out the spirit of worldliness and selfishness, and making God and His love triumph in the heart and life.

Let us thank God heartily as often as we pray that we have His Spirit in us to teach us to pray. Thanksgiving will draw our hearts out to God and keep us engaged with Him; it will take our attention from ourselves and give the Spirit room in our hearts.

Sayings of Elisabeth Elliot

The world looks for happiness through self-assertion. The Christian knows that joy is found in self-abandonment. 'If a man will let himself be lost for My sake,'

Jesus said, 'he will find his true self.'

If my life is surrendered to God, all is well. Let me not grab it back, as though it were in peril in His hand but would be safer in mine!

Where does your security lie? Is God your refuge, your hiding place, your stronghold, your shepherd, your counselor, your friend, your redeemer, your saviour, your guide? If He is, you don't need to search any further for security.

Religion is doing things for God; relationship is being in Christ. One produces death; the other, life.

Anonymous

continued from page 22

Israel through the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai, where he gave them the Ten Commandments. But we often overlook why God did these things. Talking to Moses, God said: "I will take you [plural] as my own people, and I will be your God."³ God was seeking a personal relationship. In the personal covenants made in that culture, marriages were formalized with the words, "You will be my wife and I will be your husband." Adoptions (done usually for inheritance purposes) were made with the words, "You will be my son and I will be your father." When Moses talked to Pharaoh he quoted God saying, "Israel is my firstborn son... Let my son go, so he may worship me."⁴ They were his children—his family—with inheritance rights. God offered a covenant that would give the people direct access to him⁵—but the people told Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."⁶ Like Adam and Eve, they were afraid. Moses went up the mountain for more instructions from God.⁷ Then come several chapters about the tabernacle, its furniture and the worship. But

¹ John 5:39; Luke 24:27
² Genesis 17:1–8
³ Exodus 6:7
⁴ Exodus 4:22–23
⁵ Exodus 19:5–6
⁶ Exodus 20:19
⁷ Exodus 24:18
⁸ Exodus 25:8
⁹ Exodus 29:45–46
¹⁰ Deuteronomy 31:6–8
¹¹ Hebrews 13:5

amidst all this detail, we should not overlook the purpose: "Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them."⁸ From the Garden of Eden, through the promises to Abraham, through the calling of a people out of slavery, and even into eternity, God wants to live with his people. The tabernacle was a place for God to live with his people, to be accessible to them. God told Moses, "I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God... I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them."⁹ When God passed the baton of leadership to Joshua, he told Moses what to tell him: "The Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."¹⁰ That is a promise for us today, too.¹¹ That is why God created humanity from the very beginning and why he sent Jesus to save us: We are his people. He wants to live with us. □

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