

THE Plain Truth

PP 12578/3/2008

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Feb-Mar 2008

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Stirred—but not shaken

Unlike James Bond's famous cocktails, our faith should be stirred—but not shaken.

These are stirring times to be a Christian. Critics are having a field day—questioning, undermining and ridiculing every aspect of our beliefs. Nothing, it seems is sacred.

That is because, if you are to believe some popular authors, nothing is sacred. The whole idea of God is a delusion, argues the enthusiastic atheist, Professor Richard Dawkins. Others suggest that religion has had a negative impact on human society, and should be banned, and that those who insist on teaching religious concepts to children be considered guilty of child abuse. Recent published books ask us to believe that non-biblical 'Gospels' may give us a more reliable source of understanding of Jesus than the New Testament.

Meanwhile scientists probing deeper into the nature of physical reality seem to be casting further doubts on the relevancy of the Bible. Did you realise that many leading Christian scientists now admit that Darwin may have been right in his explanation of the development of species?

What is the poor ordinary Christian to make of all this? We seem to be outnumbered and outgunned. Unable to really understand—let alone respond to these sophisticated attacks on all that we hold dear—perhaps the safest course of action is to retreat behind the barricades of tradition.

We must not do that. Jesus made it clear that He did not light our lamps only to have us hide them. So before we allow ourselves to be spooked by the opposition, let's remember something else He said: *'Can you imagine a king going into battle against another king without first deciding whether it is possible with his ten thousand troops to face the twenty thousand troops of the other? And if he decides he can't, won't he send an emissary and work out a truce?'*¹

Ah, but what if he decides he can

win? And we can.

Outnumbered but not outwitted

You see, the opposition is not as overwhelming as it sometimes seems. And you can be sure that there are capable men and women out there who are more than able to defend the Christian turf. They have education and experience, and they are not intimidated by clever arguments. When given the opportunity, they can more than hold their own, and show that the opposition has not really done its homework.

Many believing scientists



assure us that the ever increasing understanding of life's processes has deepened, rather than shattered, their faith. Truth has nothing to fear from more truth, and you can be sure that 'our side' is holding the line.

So don't let the anti-religious, anti-Christian propaganda destabilise you. This is not a time to cower and bury our Christian heads in the sand. Most of us are not trained to challenge complex arguments or indulge in sophisticated debate. But all of us are more than able to make a significant contribution in a way that really does count.

By example—not debate

In a series of fascinating studies,

Baylor University Professor Rodney Stark has thrown new light on how the Christian faith spread throughout the Roman Empire. Using the skills of a sociologist, Stark has analysed the data to show that Christianity gained influence and credibility, not by winning clever debates, but by the influence of its follower's way of life. In times of plague and famine, it was the Christians who cared for the sick and destitute. In an age when slaves and women were without power, it was the Christian way of life that gave them a voice and self-respect.

As the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah said:

'Don't let the wise brag of their wisdom.

Don't let heroes brag of their exploits.

Don't let the rich brag of their riches.

If you brag, brag of this and this only:

That you understand and know me.

I'm God, and I act in loyal love.

I do what's right and set things right and fair,

and delight in those who do the same things.

*These are my trademarks.'*²

That is not a put down of genuine scholarship. Neither is it a flip slogan for self-righteous triumphalism. It is a challenge for us to live up to what we say we believe.

Yes, these are indeed faith-stirring times. In this magazine, we do our best to bring you information and understanding. We believe that bigotry and ignorance from the Christian community are far more damaging to the cause of the gospel than all the cleverly constructed attacks from outside.

There is much that is happening in this complex modern world to stir your faith. But nothing that need shake it. □

¹ Luke 14:31–32
(Message Bible)

² Jeremiah 9:23–24 (Message Bible)

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Issue No. 5

February–March 2008

Volume No. 6

PP 12578/3/2008

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The Plain Truth is published five times a year as funds allow, and is sponsored by the Worldwide Church of God Malaysia, which is a member of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship of Malaysia. It follows a non-denominational editorial policy and provides a message of practical help, hope and encouragement from a Christian perspective.

- For Non-Muslims Only -

DONATIONS: Although we do not put any subscription price for THE PLAIN TRUTH, we gratefully welcome donations from readers who support our desire to bring spiritual knowledge and understanding to our increasingly secular society. Cheques should be made payable to 'The Plain Truth' and mailed to the postal address listed above.

Printed in Malaysia by:
Hin Press & Trading Sdn Bhd (71078-D)
No. PT 45855, Batu 2, Jalan Kapar,
41400 Klang, Selangor, Malaysia

ISSN 1675-3100. Copyright Worldwide Church of God, 2008.

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What our readers say:

The Plain Truth helps me to be more knowledgeable about many different topics. Some articles are thought-provoking, helpful and relevant. Other articles are very encouraging and helpful in my Christian walk.

Lim Liang Meng
Singapore

The Plain Truth articles are inspiring and strengthen my faith. I have benefited from your magazine and have been sharing the truth with my friends and colleagues. Thank you and God bless.

Jeraem River Ho
Singapore

The Plain Truth is a source of inspiration to read most of the articles, giving a different perspective of the world around us. Well done and keep up the good work.

Leong Yew Weng
Singapore

The Plain Truth discusses current issues faced by our societies. More importantly it offers biblical solution and advice. God bless the team behind The Plain Truth publication.

Bernard Low
Kuala Lumpur

The Plain Truth covers a wide range of topics besides religion. I find the articles beneficial to both young and old. Well done and keep it up!

Serena Goh
Singapore

The Plain Truth has many interesting articles and offers biblical insights on secular issues. Thank you for your dedication.

Jaime Chia
Singapore

The Plain Truth enriches my knowledge and widens my horizon. It is a wonderful magazine in itself. I would certainly love to renew my subscription.

Ah Peow Lee
Singapore

Most of the The Plain Truth articles



concern me and the Bible. They help me reflect on myself and to be righteous with God. I find the articles invaluable without which it will make my Bible reading a chore. The articles elaborate on God's truth and His commands which help me greatly in the appreciation of God and what He has done for me. In fact it is a guide. Verses which are difficult to understand may come to light after reading the magazine. I think the magazine is God's gift and has helped me tremendously as a lay person to fully grasp the Bible. Thank you for a wonderful magazine.

Michael Lee
Singapore

We know God better and draw closer to Him as a result of applying the truths of God's words which are explained in The Plain Truth magazine.

Peggy Lee
Subang Jaya

It is always a pleasure to participate in the ministry of God. The work you are doing is very meaningful and it definitely helps to change the lives of many people. We are a food manufacturer and we supply the very popular "Ipoh white coffee". We used to supply food products for idol worshipping, but by God's mercy, we've given up making those food products and all the members in our family have become Christians. Even the "Ipoh white coffee" we are selling is a blessing from God. We've built a new factory to produce this product and we are currently exporting to several countries overseas. May God continue to bless your work and guide you in every way.

Tan Huang Kew
Ipoh

To begin with, I wish to salute the staff of this wonderful magazine for doing a good job. I have been a regular reader of The Plain

Truth for sometime now and it has changed my life for the better. The stories and articles are thought-provoking and give us an insight into what God expects of us. Thank you God for giving us good people who are willing to go all the way in spreading the Good News. I am happy to contribute a small donation for the running of this ministry.

William Gomez
Bagan Ajam

Ed: Yes, we are thankful to be God's instrument in sharing the Good News through The Plain Truth magazine. And we are grateful that He has provided kind supporters like you in this ministry.

My family and I thank you and your co-partners for supplying us with this wonderful magazine which inspires me in many ways. May the blessed hands of God be with you all daily in all your daily undertakings.

Subramaniam Paul
Seremban

I've read The Plain Truth borrowed from my neighbour and I like its contents. Besides that I want to improve my understanding of Christianity. I would like to receive The Plain Truth magazine regularly.

Ruzita Sudiah
Kota Marudu

Ed: We are delighted to include you in our mailing list.

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.

A satisfied soul

When most people travel, they usually remember famous landmarks as the highlights of their trip. They take pictures, make scrapbooks and regale their friends and relatives with stories of what they saw and did. My son is different. The highlights of trips for him are the meals. He can describe each course of each dinner with pinpoint accuracy. He really enjoys fine food.

You can probably recall some

Psalm 63: “My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.”¹

David was in the desert when he wrote this, and I’m sure he would have loved a feast of real food. But apparently his mind wasn’t on food, but on something—someone—better. To him, the presence and love of God was just as satisfying as a sumptuous banquet. Charles Spurgeon in *The Treasury of David* wrote: “There

by
Tammy Tkach

much. Except for those who have no food, most people know the satisfied feeling of eating a good meal.

Food is central to all the celebrations of life—births, graduations, weddings and anything else we can find to celebrate. We even eat at funerals. The occasion of Jesus’ first miracle was a three-day wedding feast. When the Prodigal son returned home, his father ordered a lavish meal. Revelation 19:9 says: “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”



of your more memorable meals. Perhaps you enjoyed a particularly fine steak or fresh fish. It might have been an ethnic dish, filled with unusual flavours and exotic ingredients. Or perhaps your most memorable meal was because of its simplicity, like the homemade soup and bread we once enjoyed in a Scottish pub.

Can you recall how you felt after that wonderful meal—the feeling of being full, satisfied, content and thankful? Hold that thought as you read the following verse from

is in the love of God a richness, a sumptuousness, a fullness of soul filling joy, comparable to the richest food with which the body can be nourished.”

As I pondered why David used the analogy of a meal to picture how satisfied God makes us feel, I realised food is the one thing everyone on earth needs and can relate to. If one has clothing, but is hungry, one is not content. If one has shelter, cars, money, friends—anything one can desire—but is hungry, none of them means

God wants us to think of Him when we have enjoyed “the richest of foods”. Our stomachs stay full for only a short time, and then we are hungry again. But if we fill up with God and His goodness, our souls will be satisfied forever. Feast on His word, dine at His table, enjoy the riches of His kindness and mercy and praise Him for His bounty. Then with singing lips, let your mouth praise God who satisfies us as with the richest of foods! □

¹ Psalm 63:5

Two Adams, t

Recently one of my Christian friends told me that a few of his colleagues at work were perplexed at the condition of the world—natural disasters, diseases, terrorism, corruption, murder, rape, and ethnic and religious violence. Christians, on the other hand, are going around proclaiming a different world—a wonderful world free of these problems. Why this dichotomy?

We can explain this by studying the story of two persons—the first

Adam and the second/last Adam, Jesus Christ—who represent different kingdoms and different values.

First Adam¹

Let's begin the story at the Garden of Eden. God had just recreated the earth from a state of decay. He made day and night, land and sea, flora and fauna, and Adam and Eve. God pronounced everything He made 'very good.' Adam and Eve were naked but they were not ashamed. After all they were husband and wife. They were also not afraid of God. After all, God was their Father. They enjoyed good fellowship with God until something happened.

In the Garden, God planted all sorts of trees for food. He also planted two special trees called the Tree of life and the Tree of knowledge of good and evil. He told them to freely eat the fruits from all these trees including the Tree of life but with one exception, the Tree of knowledge of good and evil. God was



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

testing if they would believe and obey Him.

Satan, also called the Devil, appeared to Eve in the form of a serpent and questioned Eve if God really meant what He said. Eve said, yes. Satan told her that God was lying and hiding something good from her. He assured her that she wouldn't die (meaning, she would live forever) if she ate the forbidden fruit. He also told her that eating it would make her wise

like God and she would know what was good and evil without God telling her.

Eve believed Satan's lie and ate the fruit. Adam was fully aware but gave in all the same. Thus they both rebelled—sinned—against God. It was a fatal decision because God had decreed death sentence for sin. They would not only die the first or physical death but also the second or eternal death.



Satan proclaimed a false or twisted gospel to Adam and Eve. He told them that they could have wisdom and eternal life without obeying or seeking God's revealed truth. In effect, he was telling them that they could live any way they like and still enjoy a good life.

After their sin, they became ashamed of their nakedness and were afraid of God. They sewed fig leaves and covered their bodies and hid themselves in the bushes. Sin brought shame and fear.

Because of sin, God put a curse on Adam and Eve and the entire human race descended from them. You can see the effects of that curse all around us today.

But the curse was *temporary*. God was going to provide a way out of that curse. He was going to provide a sacrifice to atone for their (and our) sin. To picture this, He slaughtered an

two destinies

animal (probably a lamb), shed its blood, and took its skin to cover their nakedness. This pictured the true Lamb of God—Jesus Christ—who would come four thousand years later to atone for our sin and clothe us with His holiness.

Some might accuse God for imposing such a harsh penalty for sin, which is death. They might say “it’s unfair!” But let’s look at it from God’s point of view. God is very merciful and He doesn’t want humanity to suffer in pain and anguish *forever* because that’s what sin produces. It is like letting a terminally ill patient live forever in suffering. That’s why He prevented Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the Tree of life because eating it would mean that they could live forever in sin and suffering.

Adam’s sin set the course of human history—it was going to be filled with toil and hardship, greed and deception, and violence and anguish. That, briefly, is the answer to the question raised by my friend’s colleagues—why the world is as it is.

Second Adam²

The Devil who tempted the first Adam also tempted the second Adam, Jesus. This time the temptation took place in a wilderness filled with thorns, thistles, scorpions and vipers. Yes, God did not spare His own son. Like the first Adam, Jesus too was

tested to see if He would obey God. That’s why the Holy Spirit led Him into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Jesus had fasted for 40 days, so He was very hungry.

The Devil threw three temptations at Jesus. First, he told Jesus that if He really was the Son of God He could turn the stone

temple and asked Him to jump from there. Quoting a scripture, the Devil assured Jesus that God would send His angels and deliver Him from all harm. He told Jesus to trust the scriptures. Again, Jesus refused. He replied: “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

Finally, the Devil took Jesus to a high mountain and from there he showed Him all the kingdoms of this world. He said all these kingdoms (which include power, fame and riches) belonged to him and he would give them to Jesus provided He would bow down and worship him. Again, Jesus refused. He replied: “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.”

Jesus overcame the Devil as *the Son of Man*. Unlike the first Adam, Jesus chose to trust God and refused to partake of the

Tree of knowledge of good and evil. Thus He defeated Satan. Henceforth the Good News or salvation would be preached and all humanity could have access to the Tree of life—the life-giving Holy Spirit, who is the third Person in the Godhead. All who believe in Jesus would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and they will live with God forever in love, joy, peace, contentment and fun. There won’t be anymore weeping, pain, sadness or death. That’s what the Tree of life or the Gospel is all about.

That, briefly, answers why Christians are going around preaching a different world—a

“All who believe in Jesus would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and they will live with God forever in love, joy, peace, contentment and fun.”

into bread and eat it so He could live to save humanity. But Jesus refused. He responded by quoting a scripture: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God...” Although He was the *Son of God* (divine), He voluntarily emptied Himself of His divine prerogative and came as the *Son of Man* (human) to die for our sin and secure salvation for us. He had to be like us in order to save us. He could not have secured salvation for us if He had used His divine power to cast out the Devil.

In the second temptation, the Devil lifted Jesus to the top of the

wonderful world free of problems.

Comparing Adams

Let's briefly look at some scriptures to contrast the two Adams and then decide who we want to follow because they will lead to two diametrically opposite results.

- The first Adam was a created being³ while the last Adam was the Creator of all things.⁴
- The first Adam wanted to become like God⁵ while the last Adam became a Man⁶.
- The first Adam believed Satan's lie⁷ while the last Adam believed God's truth—He was the truth⁸.
- The first Adam disobeyed God⁹ while the last Adam obeyed God.¹⁰
- The first Adam brought death to the living¹¹ while the last Adam brought life to the dying.¹²
- The first Adam was sent away from the Tree of life¹³ while the last Adam was sent to pay man's sin and bring back the Tree of life.¹⁴

The above are some of the comparisons of the two Adams. Who do you want to follow—the first Adam or the last Adam?

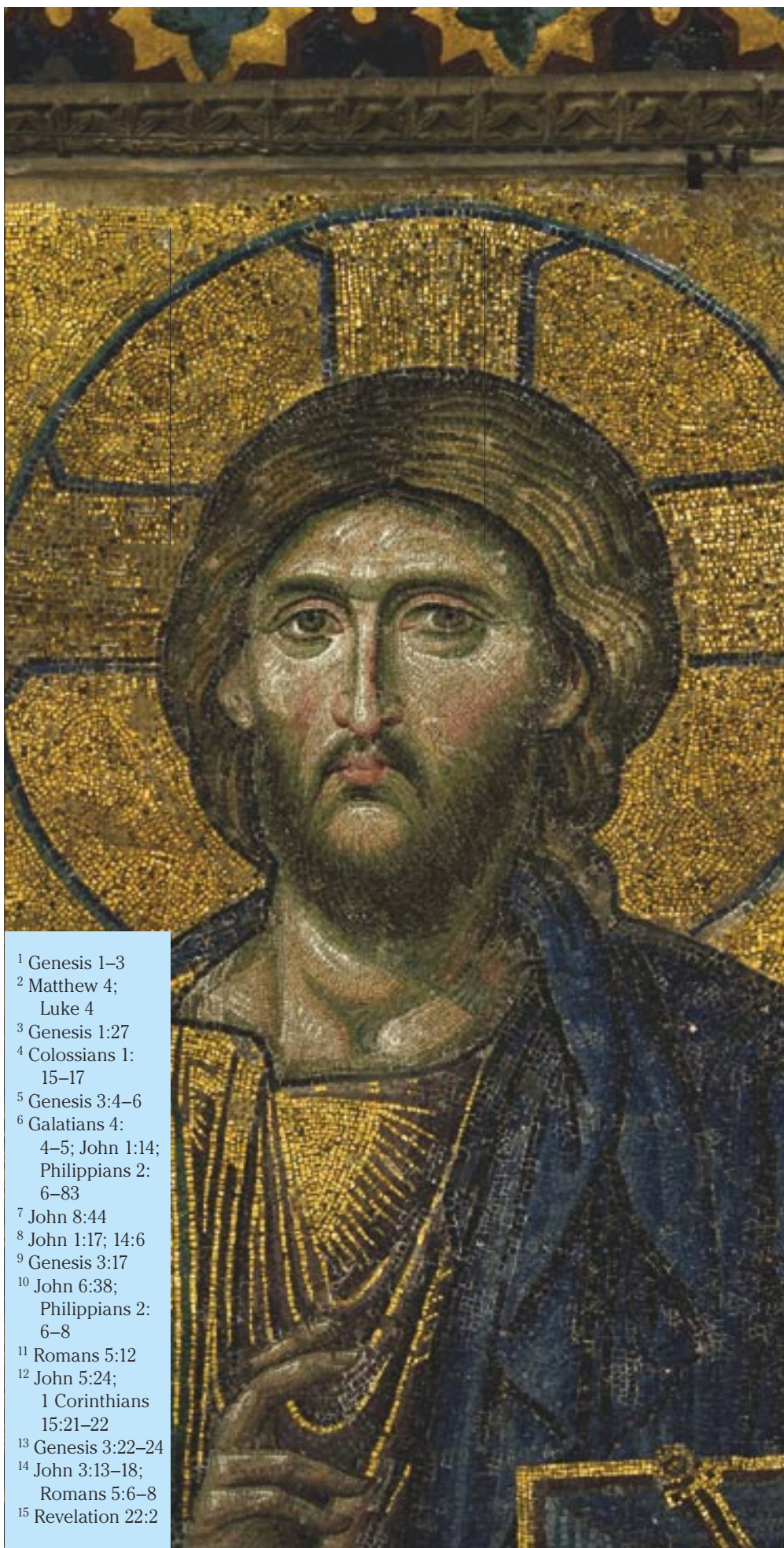
Two destinies

Salvation is too precious to be left to human beings—be it first Adam, prophets, apostles or anyone. That's why God sent His own son Jesus to save us. Thank God salvation doesn't depend on our human effort. If it does, we will all be doomed.

There are only two destinies for human beings. If we follow Jesus, we will live with Him forever, but if we reject Him, we will die forever. All who follow Jesus will have access to the Tree of life¹⁵—they will have eternal life.

This briefly explains the dichotomy mentioned at the beginning—why the world is bad now and why Christians are going around proclaiming a utopian world without any of the pains and sorrow that we experience now.

To summarise: All who follow the first Adam who was from the dust will die and return to the dust while all who follow the second Adam who was from heaven will ascend to heaven and live with Him forever. These are the two destinies set before us. God asks us to choose our destiny wisely so we might live with Him eternally. May God help you make the right choice! □



¹ Genesis 1–3

² Matthew 4;
Luke 4

³ Genesis 1:27

⁴ Colossians 1:
15–17

⁵ Genesis 3:4–6

⁶ Galatians 4:
4–5; John 1:14;
Philippians 2:
6–83

⁷ John 8:44

⁸ John 1:17; 14:6

⁹ Genesis 3:17

¹⁰ John 6:38;
Philippians 2:
6–8

¹¹ Romans 5:12

¹² John 5:24;
1 Corinthians
15:21–22

¹³ Genesis 3:22–24

¹⁴ John 3:13–18;
Romans 5:6–8

¹⁵ Revelation 22:2

Four-point plan for spiritual growth

We are now in a new calendar year, and it's a reminder for many of us to take a look at where we've been the past year, and where we wish to go in the coming year.

What is the goal of our Christian lives? It is to become like Jesus Christ.

Robert Mulholland Jr. puts it this way: "being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others" (*Invitation to a Journey*, InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Many have observed that Christians are to be conformed to the measure of Jesus Christ, but few have so explicitly said that our goal is for the sake of others.

Jesus was always concerned about other people. He came to earth and became a human being for the sake of others. He came to seek and to save people who were His enemies, even the people who caused Him pain and suffering. He did it for others—for us.

In the same way, Jesus wants us to live to help others—to become less self-centered, more loving. The greatest commandments in the Bible are to love—to live for the sake of others, to help others. That is our calling.

In the past year, have we become less concerned about our own comfort, our own security, our own feelings, our own rights?

Have we become more interested in helping others, in their comfort, in their rights, in their feelings? Are we allowing Jesus Christ to live within us, to change our hearts so that we become more like Him?

Perhaps you know whether you have grown spiritually in the past year. I certainly hope that you have. But whether you have or not, or whether you just don't know, I suggest a simple four-point plan for spiritual growth:

1) Pray.

Improve your relationship with God by setting aside time for Him, time to discuss life with Him. Express your

thoughts and feelings. Give Him your requests. Thank Him and praise Him for His greatness.

Question Him when life doesn't make sense; complain when you are perturbed. Adore Him. Love Him with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Confess your sins, seek forgiveness and rejoice in His grace.

Consciously involve Him in all aspects of life. As a

**by
Michael
Morrison**



child to a father, as a fiancée to her betrothed, build a relationship.

2) Study.

As part of the relationship, let God speak to you. It takes time, so make time for God to enter your life. Don't let the cares of this life choke the word and make your life unfruitful.

Do not harden your hearts, it says in Hebrews, but pay careful attention. Fix your thoughts on Jesus. Be diligent and go on to maturity.

Have you ever read Scripture for a while and soon forgotten what you had read? Sometimes the solution is to think about what we are reading. We need to slow down. We need to give God more time. We need to meditate about what we read;

we need to pray about it. As we do this, our study of God's word merges into our prayer life for greater effectiveness.

But the most important key of all is simply to spend time at it. If you love God, make more time for Him in your life. This is how we can all grow more in the coming year.

3) Meet together.

We do not grow spiritually when we are isolated from each other. Not only do we grow for the sake of others, we grow when we are in community with one another. Let us encourage one another, Hebrews exhorts us, let us consider how we may spur one another on to good deeds. Do not forsake meeting together, but encourage one another.

Help one another. Use the blessings God has given you for others. Not only does that help others, it helps us grow spiritually. Jesus, our role model, set an example of close-knit community. The early church set an example of frequent fellowship and mutual service.

4) Worship.

The greatest commandment—and our greatest need—is to worship God, to fall before Him in complete submission, willing to do whatever He says. We praise Him for all that He is. We proclaim His worth above all else. The better we realise His greatness, and our weakness, the better we will depend on Him for growth. Without God, life has no meaning. Without God, good is an arbitrary idea. But we are not without God—He is with us, and we are His children, destined to live forever with Him. Praise Him, and praise Jesus, who makes it possible for us!

Worship, fellowship, study and prayer. We need to do these four points not just for our own good, but for the sake of others. □

Experiencing the f

There are times in our lives when trials and difficulties become particularly challenging, testing us to the limits of our physical and spiritual endurance. These are the times when we are so spiritually stressed and physically worn out that we begin to doubt and the element of fear creeps into us. People would try to encourage us by quoting the oft-used phrase 'Trust in God' and 'We're praying for you' but quite often we end up feeling even more depressed and lonely in our troubles.

Some assume that people who have faith in God should automatically be strong emotionally and being full of faith, be able to withstand any onslaught against them. However this is not necessarily the case. We may have faith in God, we may know the scriptures very well, we may even have witnessed and performed miracles in the name of God, but there are times when God allows us to face troubles that can really shake our faith and throw us off balance spiritually. These are the times that we moan and groan and wonder where God is if He really loves us.

About a year ago I came down with severe pain in my lower abdominal area and had to see a doctor to ascertain the cause of the problem. Strangely, the pain subsided by the time I reached the doctor's clinic. After multiple tests the specialist doctor could not pinpoint the cause of my problem and referred me to the hospital for further diagnosis. I spent three days at the surgical clinic where again a battery of tests was conducted but still they could not determine my problem. A high fever had set in and I couldn't keep any food down. My condition worsened and I was referred now to the medical ward where again a



by
**Devaraj
Ramoo**

whole battery of tests was done. Still, nothing significant could be done for me as my high fever persisted and I was extremely weak since I hadn't eaten for more than a week. The doctors assumed that I had come down with some kind of infection but still they weren't sure. One thing was for sure, my condition continued to worsen.

Finally a CT scan was performed where the problem was diagnosed. I had suffered a ruptured appendix but strangely I did not exhibit the normal symptoms associated with appendicitis earlier. Now, the problem had worsened and I had developed a large appendicular

simple perforated appendix cause the situation to deteriorate?

My mind was a blank. I couldn't remember any scriptures of encouragement; I couldn't express my situation properly to God. In fact, I couldn't apply any of my knowledge or my faith at that time. All that I could pray was "God, Lord Jesus, I don't know how I got into this mess, just get me out of it." I didn't realise it at that time but that was all that I needed to do. The Eternal God knows when our strength will fizzle out and He also knows when our faith in Him will lose ground. It is then that the faith of Jesus Christ takes over.

Many of us are mistaken that showing our own faith in God or being spiritual can somehow save us or rescue us from every situation or trial. The Saviour of mankind Jesus Christ prayed a special prayer for those who would receive Him into their lives. He knew that life would not be easy as trials would surely come to those who trusted Him. However, Jesus prayed that the Father would always watch over those who had

believed and received the saving grace of Jesus Christ.¹ Jesus prayed that the same love that the Father showed Him would be with those who received Him and that He (Christ) Himself would *be in them*. What does this mean?

It simply means that Christ would carry us through as we would by ourselves be incapable of moving further in faith during severe trials. In my case I did not hear any supernatural voice of encouragement. I did not see any signs and wonders. Neither did any angel appear before me to encourage me. But deep

*“God, Lord Jesus,
I don't know how I
got into this mess,
just get me out of it.”*

abscess that was life threatening. If the abscess burst I could die due to septicaemia or blood poisoning. In fact the abscess could burst at any time and immediate surgery had to be done. As I was being prepped up for surgery, the doctors mentioned that they also had to examine my intestines to see if the abscess had spread there, and if so they would have to remove the damaged portions of the intestines. My heart sank. In fact I was so stunned that I just nodded and didn't know what to say. Worse still, I didn't know what to pray. How could this happen? How could a

faith of Jesus Christ



Indeed, His desire was to see me through the operation and my steady recovery, making sure that no damage occurred to the other organs in my body and restoring me by complete healing. I thereby learned of His mercy in my life. A year later now, I took part in a half Marathon race and even won a medal, all for His glory. Through the most difficult period of the trial, when I could no longer move, the Lord carried me. He could have allowed the situation to end my life, but even then it would still be Him who decided the outcome. Allowing God to carry us through the most difficult part of the suffering is what the faith of Jesus Christ is all about. In fact this faith is shown in many instances in the Bible. The apostle Paul while preaching the gospel claimed that he accepted the loss of all things just to gain Christ and be found not having his own righteousness or faith but the righteousness which is from God by faith.² He was talking about a faith that he did not produce by himself but a faith that was *from* God. Through this faith from God he went on to preach the gospel remarkably. The entire book of Acts in the Bible shows how God led the apostles in the preaching of the gospel through the faith of Jesus Christ.

Even in the Old Testament, men and women of God accomplished great things through faith that was not produced by their own efforts but was placed in them through the Holy Spirit. Moses led the children of Israel through the Red Sea when Pharaoh was sure that he could wipe them all out.³ Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were cast into a fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar but came out unscathed through faith that saw God Himself accompanying them in the midst of the furnace.⁴

There are situations that can arise in our lives that we by our own knowledge and faith in God cannot overcome or manage. It is then that the faith of Jesus Christ lifts us up. I have experienced it and so can you. ■

within my soul I *'realised'* that there was a voice that I could only describe as saying "Be still". That was all I needed on my part. The rest would be taken care of by God. And so I proceeded

into the operating theatre totally surrendering everything to God. Everything and everyone related to my situation was in His hands. What the outcome would be was as He desired.

¹ John 17:6–26

² Philippians 3: 8–9

³ Exodus 14:10–14

⁴ Daniel 3:1–29

Do Christians go to he

Do Christians go to heaven when they die? Paul said that when he died he would go to be with the Lord.¹ Since the Lord is in heaven, Paul must be there, too. Some people say he's enjoying the presence of God. Others say he is unconscious. Either way, he is in heaven with Christ.

What is this place called heaven—or is it a place? Solomon recognised that heaven cannot contain God, and yet paradoxically it is His dwelling place.² Although God is omnipresent, He is not present everywhere in the same way. He lives in believers, for example, in a way that He does not live in unbelievers. We “come into His presence” by becoming more aware of His presence.

Scripture shows that God, although He is everywhere, has chosen to dwell especially in heaven—or perhaps we should say that humans have used the word *heaven* to refer to the divine realm. Humans knew that God did not dwell on earth, nor in the underworld. They could not see God in the sky, either, but they used the word for sky to refer to the location of God.

Many people had a rather simplistic understanding of God's location, and others would have been more sophisticated. Despite the misunderstandings and the limitations of human words, God inspired the writers of the Bible to use the word in Hebrew and Greek that is translated into English as *heaven* for the divine realm. Sometimes heaven is simply a way of referring to God Himself, sometimes it refers to His glory, or His power, or His holiness. He is bigger than heaven, but heaven refers to His full presence.

Limits of language

Of course, since God is spirit, words that suggest distance and space can be used only metaphorically. Heaven is neither up nor down, neither east nor west. It cannot be located on a three-dimensional map of the galaxies. So when people are worried about place, about whether



by
Joseph Tkach

Christians “go” to heaven when they die, they are struggling with terminology that isn't adequate to the task.

Our words can't do justice to spiritual realities. Take the trio of love, joy and peace, for example. The love of Christ surpasses knowledge.³ God gives us an inexpressible joy.⁴ And His peace transcends all understanding.⁵ Words fail us when it comes to discussing these spiritual realities. If we can't even discuss love, joy and peace completely, how much more will we be limited when it comes to discussing the presence of God?

The Greek philosopher Plato once created a parable that illustrates our limitations: There was a race of people who lived their entire lives in a cave. Their only contact with the outside world would be shadows on the wall. They had only a monochrome, two-dimensional understanding of reality. Now suppose that one of the cave dwellers was brave enough to venture out of the cave to discover the world of color, texture, smell, depth and density. How could the explorer explain these concepts to a people who had no experience with them? It would be impossible to describe the aroma of coffee, the concept of iridescence, or the warmth of sunshine. The sun would sound like bizarre fiction. An ocean tidepool would be weird beyond belief.

In the same way, we live in a limited world. We see only a fraction of reality. Though we may hear that a spiritual world exists, we cannot see it or investigate it. Those who leave this world to explore the afterlife never come



back. Only Jesus has crossed the divide.

Only a few people have seen the glories of God. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him—but God has revealed it to us by His

heaven when they die?

Spirit.”⁶ So we must acknowledge our inabilities when it comes to discussing our eternal future with God.

Spiritual reality

Heaven is in the realm of the

in heavenly realms⁸, he is not talking about a place. He is talking about spiritual realities: that our life and existence is now with Christ.

With Christ, we are able to enter heaven even before we die. “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus”.⁹ We enter His presence not through physical transport, but in the innermost person, in heart and soul. It is a movement of the spirit, not of the body. It is a change in attitude, not in altitude.

Our citizenship is now in heaven.¹⁰ We really belong in the spiritual world. God is calling us heavenward, toward this reality.¹¹ Since that is where we belong, we need to focus on heavenly realities. It is our future, and it is our calling even today. We share in a heavenly calling; we have tasted a heavenly gift.¹² We have already come to a heavenly Jerusalem.¹³ These are spiritual realities.

A wonderful future

But there is much more to come. Although we have tasted the good things of God, we long for much more. Though we have glimpsed the goodness of God, we want to see it more clearly and more abundantly. We want to be saturated with His love and glory. Like

Abraham, we long for a heavenly homeland.¹⁴

We yearn to be with God, for Him to satisfy our deepest desires. And in 10,000 years, we will have only begun to learn His infinite wisdom and compassion. We have an eternity of joy in front of us. “You

will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”¹⁵ Words cannot describe how good it is. It is everlasting joy, blessed peace, and the righteousness of God.¹⁶

Our inheritance is being kept for us in heaven.¹⁷ There are spiritual rewards waiting for us. There is an eternal “house” reserved for us in heaven.¹⁸ This will be our home, and that is why the word *heaven* is used for the eternal destiny of all God’s redeemed children. To be in heaven is to remain in Christ in the presence of God. No matter where in all of existence that is, it is heaven, and we will be there.

“Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling”¹⁹ We are tired of the pains and sorrows and sufferings of this world. We “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”²⁰ Even so, we wait patiently²¹, knowing that soon enough, there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain.²²

In the resurrection, we will have a spiritual body.²³ In some way we will be like Christ in His resurrection.²⁴ It will be heavenly, in every sense of the word. “Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.”²⁵ We will be people “of heaven”.²⁶

The rewards of heaven will be ours to enjoy forever. Exactly when we start experiencing that glory is not very important. Our exact location is not very important. The important thing is that we will be with the Lord forever.²⁷ And even more important, it is through the Lord, and only through the Lord, that we can be there at all. It is only by grace that we can enter the kingdom of heaven.

But thanks be to God, for He has given us the victory. With Christ, our future is secure: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”²⁸ □

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23

² 1 Kings 8:27–30

³ Ephesians 3:19

⁴ 1 Peter 1:8

⁵ Philippians 4:7

⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:9–10

⁷ Ephesians 1:3

⁸ Ephesians 2:6

⁹ Hebrews 10:19

¹⁰ Philippians 3:20

¹¹ Philippians 3:14

¹² Hebrews 3:1; 6:4

¹³ Hebrews 12:22

¹⁴ Hebrews 11:16

¹⁵ Psalm 16:11

¹⁶ 2 Peter 3:13

¹⁷ 1 Peter 1:4

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:1; John 14:2–3

¹⁹ John 14:2

²⁰ Romans 8:23

²¹ Romans 8:25

²² Revelation 21:3–4; 22:1–5

²³ 1 Corinthians 15:44

²⁴ 1 John 3:2

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:49

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:48

²⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:17

²⁸ 2 Timothy 4:18

spirit. When Paul says that God “has blessed us in the heavenly realms”⁷, he is not talking about a place, nor about the future. He is talking about a spiritual reality—spiritual blessings right here and right now (same verse). When he says that we are seated with Christ



What Christ's sacrifice

The most important event in a Christian calendar occurs every year during the month of March or April. It is celebrated by Christians worldwide and in terms of religious significance, it is even more important than Christmas. We are of course referring to the Easter season, especially the Good Friday-Easter Sunday weekend. Although celebrated differently in different churches, this period of the year is always used to commemorate Christ's death and resurrection as the salvation for humanity.

Whether Christians call it the Lord's

and His resurrection, there can be no Christianity or Christians. This momentous time for a Christian can be summarised in the four Fs: forgiveness, freedom, fulfilment and future hope.

Forgiveness

If we look into the Bible, it says that all of us have sinned.¹ Nobody in this world can claim to be perfect, never having committed any sin. No matter how holy a life we try to live, it cannot be faultless and it cannot erase our earlier mistakes. God further declares that the

by
**Wong
Teck Kong**

2,000 years ago. For Christians, the sacrifice that their personal saviour voluntarily underwent represents the depth of the love God has for them. It shows the nature of the God that they worship, all merciful and all forgiving.

Freedom

As a direct result of the forgiveness of their sins, Christians can now experience true freedom. They are free from the bondage of unforgiven sins. They are free from the baggage of the past. They are finally free from the

“For Christians, the sacrifice that their personal saviour voluntarily underwent represents the depth of the love God has for them. It shows the nature of the God that they worship, all merciful and all forgiving.”

Supper, Passover or the Good Friday church service, the main emphasis is on Christ's death and His sacrifice for all the people of the world. It is a time for Christians to reflect on the past year and to review their spiritual lives. It is indeed a meaningful experience as one meditates on this most important occasion in the history of mankind.

So, what does Christ's sacrifice mean to a Christian? It can mean so many things. It represents redemption from the past, help for the present and hope for the future. Without Christ's death on the cross

consequence of sin is death.²

However, Christ had come to die for us. His death makes it possible for our sins to be forgiven and the penalty of death to be removed.³ Not only that, by letting Christ blood wash away our sins, we who were once cut off from God can now have a loving relationship with our creator.

Christ's sacrifice makes it all possible. People can be at one with Christ. Christians are redeemed from their past sins. This is the crux of the good news or gospel that Christ brought to earth

‘demons’ that used to plague their lives; depression, addiction, hatred, fears, unhappiness, broken relationships, just to name a few.

Jesus told His disciples that they would know the truth and the truth would make them free.⁴ Not free to do what they like, not free to sin. But real freedom from the clutches of wrong choices and wrong behaviour. Freedom from a life lived without knowing the presence of a loving God. A freedom that no amount of money or time or talent or anything else in this world can redeem. Only

means to a Christian

the shed blood of Christ could purchase it.

The Holy Scriptures reveal that the human race has been enslaved from the time when Adam committed the first sin in the Garden of Eden. Human beings ever since have lost their way and their freedom by worshipping the gods that they themselves have created. Living apart from God, human beings arrogantly think that they are free and liberated

Fulfilment

As a person accepts Christ, the individual for the first time discovers joy in his or her everyday life. Relieved from the burdens of unforgiven sins and experiencing true freedom, Christians find fulfilment and contentment. They now know what things are permanent and valuable and what things are temporary and useless. With Godly values in mind, a Christian pursues only the right

joy, patience, tolerance and other attributes of the Holy Spirit that come from God.⁶ All these are possible because Christ said that He would dwell in His believers.⁷ Christ's sacrifice makes that possible. The Christian mind over time becomes more and more like Christ's mind.

So much of the unhappiness and sorrow that we see around us today is the by-product of climbing up the wrong ladder of success. Success is often defined as being rich, famous, powerful and beautiful. Society as a whole embraces these goals as the ultimate purpose of living. In the process emptiness, frustration and depression filled the lives of those who subscribe to such false values. Even for the so-called successful, happiness may still be elusive.

Christ's death is the starting point. As God gives us repentance and Christ becomes our Lord and Master, His Spirit lives within us. Our conditions may not improve; in some cases it may become worse. There is no guarantee that our financial standing will become better or our health problems will disappear. However Christ promised us that if we allow the spirit to change our mind⁸, we would find contentment and fulfilment even in the worst circumstances. This is because Christians would know how to differentiate between things that are eternal and those that are temporary.



when in fact they are enslaved and imprisoned by their own ways of life and value systems. What an irony. He who is behind the prison bars considers those outside as locked in.

To Christians, Christ's sacrifice is therefore so meaningful. Not only have they been shown mercy, they have also been given freedom. No longer held captive by the Devil or wrong goals or their human weaknesses, Christians with the help of the Holy Spirit can taste true freedom under God.

goals and objectives. The less important targets are put at the bottom of the priority list. As a consequence, there is less 'chasing after the wind', the pursuit of vanity and other happiness-robbing activities. The final result is a happier and more fulfilled person.

Jesus said that one of the reasons for His first coming was to make it possible for His followers to have more abundant and happy lives.⁵ Such abundance is not necessarily in terms of physical possessions but in terms of spiritual blessings—to be abundant in peace of mind,

Future hope

Christ not only died but He was also resurrected.⁹ His resurrection makes it possible for the rest of humanity not only to be forgiven but also to be saved. There is still a future hope for Christians—the resurrection to eternal life. It is this hope that gives meaning to the trials and difficulties faced by Christians everywhere throughout history. It is the final objective of all disciples of Christ, to be with Christ for all eternity.

The hope of the future gives motivation to the present. Compared to the future rewards, the current problems do not seem to be so bad after all. There is incentive not to



give up the Christian fight halfway. We continue to endure to the end for indeed great is the reward. Christ reminded us that salvation would only come to those who stay faithful to the end.¹⁰

Christians were once without hope.¹¹ Condemned by our past sins, the only future that awaited us was death and eternal separation from God. There was no hope in tomorrow. Now Christians look to the future with great anticipation

and excitement, not because the material conditions will become more conducive to living but because every day brings them one step nearer to the final goal of serving Christ forever. No one knows what tomorrow with its ups and downs will bring. However all Christians are certain about this point: no one can take away their eternal inheritance from Christ.¹²

The four Fs described above not only explain what Christ's sacrifice

¹ Romans 3:23

² Romans 6:23

³ 1 Peter 3:18

⁴ John 8:32

⁵ John 10:10

⁶ Galatians 5:22

⁷ John 6:56

⁸ Romans 12:2

⁹ Romans 1:4

¹⁰ Revelation 2:10

¹¹ Ephesians 2:12

¹² Colossians 3:24

means to a Christian but also what will happen to a person who responds to God's calling. So much significance has been given to Easter, like bunny's eggs and buns, that the real meaning of this time is ignored. Easter will go the way of Christmas with its emphasis on holidays and commercial activities if Christians allow it. It is time for Christians worldwide to restore the true meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. □

Little steps in the right direction

About the time Cho Cheung-Hui was beginning his deadly rampage at Virginia Tech, I was in our local drug store replenishing my prescription. It is an old style business, offering personal service and fair prices. It is always a happy, friendly place. The people who work there seem to remember everyone by name, and treat their customers with a genuine courtesy.

On that April morning, we were as yet unaware of the drama that was unfolding a few hundred miles to the east. But I was very much aware of a tragic-comedy happening in front of me. A rather bedraggled man, who did not seem to be our most prosperous citizen, was laboriously counting out coins to pay for his prescription. Quarters, dimes, nickels and a few pennies littered the counter as he fumbled in his pockets for more. A few dollar bills were piled up untidily on one side.

Tanya, who was serving him, waited patiently. I wasn't in a hurry, so I—uncharacteristically—waited patiently, too. After a while the man realised he didn't have enough, and went off to find his wife. She arrived with a few more crumpled dollar bills, but they were still \$2.00 short.

"That's all we have," she said. "We had to buy gas to get here."

They were very embarrassed, but Tanya quickly put them at ease.

"Don't worry. I'll cover it," she



by
John Halford

said. She went to get her purse and came back with two dollars, put the money in the till and gave them their medicine.

"I'll pay you next time we are in town," promised the lady.

"Forget it. Just pass it on," said Tanya.

After the couple had left, I said, "That was a very kind thing to do."

"Well, I do it when I can," she replied. "I don't always have extra, but when I do, why not help?"

It was just a very simple,

had made her part of the world a better place. But surely, such a small incident would be swamped by the great evil.

But that is not so. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that He feels it personally, and will remember it whenever we help those less fortunate than ourselves: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."¹

At the end of the book of Revelation, Jesus promises that there will be a time when "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."²

As I write this, the massacre at Virginia Tech is dominating the news, and will for several more days. The evil consequences of that one terrible act of cruelty, for now, far outweigh on any scale some simple and tiny acts

of goodness done in a corner. But in the eternal scheme of things—from the point of view of our eternal life in God's kingdom of love and joy—it is the acts of kindness, not cruelty that will be remembered.

When all is said and done, I think that acts of goodness, such as Tanya did, will have made the bigger and lasting impact. □



spontaneous act of kindness, but suddenly the day seemed brighter. Even if we are not affected personally, doing good has that effect.

I drove home, to the news of the massacre at Virginia Tech. A disturbed young man had cut off the lives of more than 30 people, and had cast a pall of grief over the entire nation. Even if we are not affected personally, an act of violence and anger of this magnitude leaves us disturbed and depressed.

Meanwhile, in a little town in rural Indiana, a kind shop assistant

¹ Matthew 25:40

² Revelation 21:4

Mary Magdalene

I probably have more reasons than anyone to respond with fierce loyalty to our Lord. He lifted me out of wretched conditions, conditions so desperate they are hard to describe. I lived in terrifying darkness, plagued with despair and depression. Often I didn't know who I was, where I was—I had lost complete control over my life. My family was ashamed and embarrassed.

In our culture, those suffering from madness are social outcasts. People would move aside and look disgusted or scared whenever I came near them. I became accustomed to the degrading name-calling and finger-pointing, believing it was all I deserved.

But one glorious day, a man named Jesus saw me and took pity. He walked right over to me, not at all put off by my wretchedness. I backed away terrified, stumbling to the ground. He knelt down and spoke calmly to me. He smoothed my dirty hair off my face with His big carpenter hands. I had no memory of the last time anyone had shown me any compassion. Then, in one split second, He healed my mind and filled my heart and soul with light and wonder and blessed peace!

So it shouldn't be difficult to understand why I began to follow Him everywhere. I supported Him financially out of my own means. I became a part of His traveling team, sharing countless miles and meals. I knew Him so well. I knew what made Him laugh, what made Him exasperated, what made His heart heavy.

And at the end, no matter how frightening or gruesome things got, I could not leave Him. I was there when they nailed Him to the cross. I was there when He cried out "It is finished!" and died. I watched as they took Him down from the cross

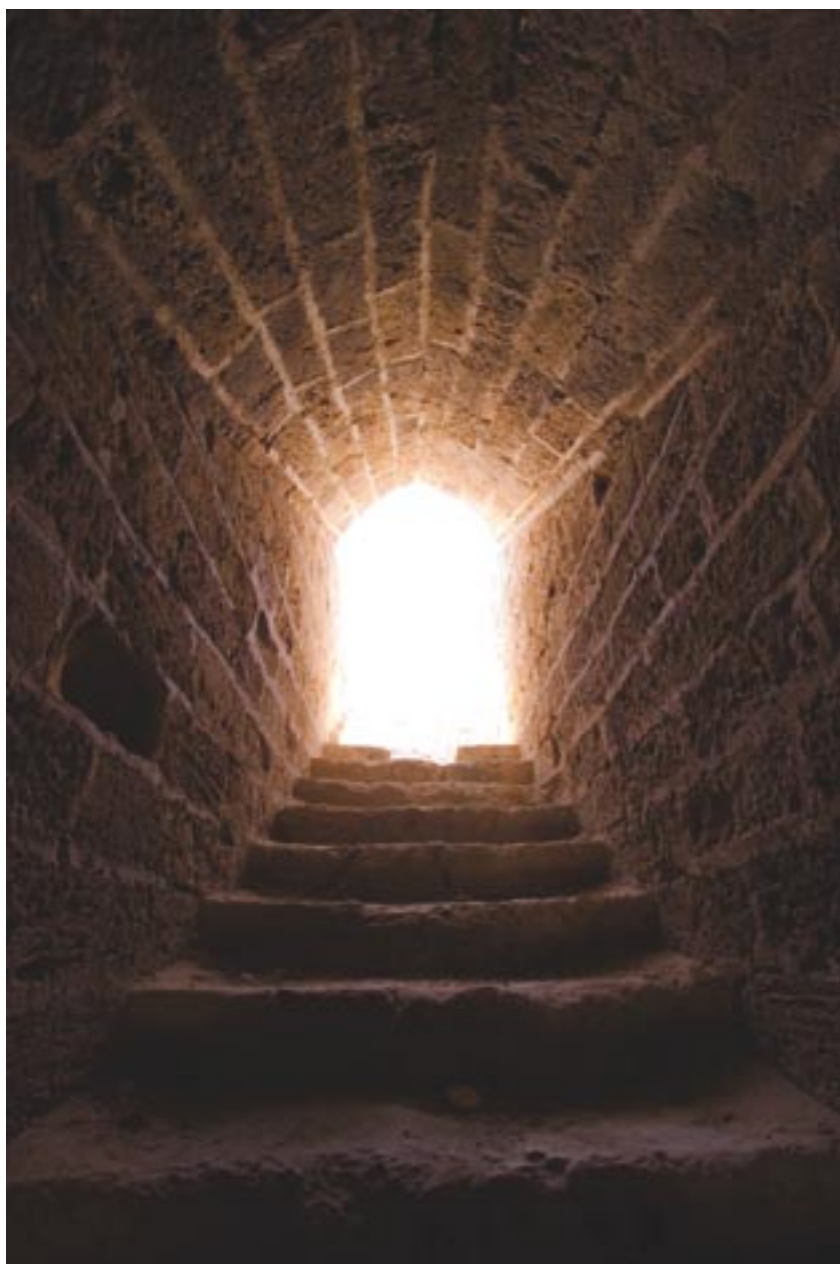
by
**Joyce
Catherwood**

I returned as soon as I could, while it was still dark. I was astonished to find the tomb empty. It angered me that anyone would steal His body after all that had already been done to Him. I ran to get help. Peter and John rushed back with me, then left, confused.

Desolate and miserable, I began to sob uncontrollably. I looked into the tomb again and saw two angels, who spoke to me. Bewildered, I turned around and someone standing behind me said, "Why are you weeping?" It was still twilight and my eyes were flooded with tears, so I didn't recognise who it was at first. But when He spoke my name, I knew it was Jesus! I fell at His feet and hung onto Him with all my might. We were laughing and crying at the same time. My master was alive!

Jesus finally had to tell me to let go because He hadn't yet ascended to His Father. He had delayed his ascent to heaven so He could comfort a weeping woman—amazing, yet so typical of my Lord.

The sun popped up over the horizon and cast a brilliant glow over everything. What a contrast to the darkness of the last few days. I don't think my feet even touched the ground as I ran to tell everyone the good news! I had seen the risen Lord!¹ □



and followed as they carried Him to the tomb. Only then did I go home, determined to come back and properly prepare His body for burial.

¹ John 19:25–30;
20:1–18

What Does Love Mean?

A group of professional people posed this question to a group of 4 to 8 year-olds: "What does love mean?" The answers they got were broader and deeper than many people could have imagined. See what you think:

"When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love."
Rebecca—age 8

"When people love you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth."
Billy—age 4

"Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other."
Karl—age 5

"Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs."
Chrissy—age 6

"Love is what makes you smile when you're tired."
Terri—age 4

"Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is OK."
Danny—age 7

"Love is when you kiss all the time. Then when you get tired of kissing, you still want to be together and you talk more. My Mommy and Daddy are like that. They look gross when they kiss."
Emily—age 8

"If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend whom you hate."
Nikka—age 6

"Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it everyday."
Noelle—age 7

"Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well."
Tommy—age 6

"During my piano recital, I was on a stage and I was scared. I looked at all the people watching me and saw my daddy waving and smiling. He was the only one doing that. I wasn't scared anymore."
Cindy—age 8

"My mommy loves me more than anybody else. You don't see anyone else kissing me to sleep at night."
Clare—age 6

"Love is when Mommy gives Daddy the best piece of chicken."
Elaine—age 5

"Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is more handsome than Robert Redford."
Chris—age 7

"Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day."
Mary Ann—age 4

"I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones."
Lauren—age 4

"Love is when Mommy sees Daddy on the toilet and she doesn't think it's gross."
Mark—age 6

"You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget."
Jessica—age 8

Author and lecturer Leo Buscaglia once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four-year-old child whose next-door neighbour was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked what he had said to the neighbour, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."

When we are reading, we often find something that attracts our interest. It's not earth-shattering, or life-changing. But it's worth cutting out and keeping, or sticking on the refrigerator door; or maybe sending to us for this page!

We invite all our readers to contribute news items, quotes, or poems, that make you say 'Hmm'. It could be in today's paper, or in a book hundreds of years old. Try to send the original clipping, or a copy of the page to:

*Hmm... The Plain Truth,
Locked Bag 2002,
41990 Klang,
Selangor,
Malaysia.*

God speaks

The Bible is a window. Have you opened it lately?

Almost all Christian households have one or more Bibles. Yet many of the adults in these households do not read their Bibles during an average week, and even less do so daily.

“Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don’t read it,” pollster George Gallup Jr. once observed. This seems to be borne out by what Americans know about the Bible. In one survey, only 42 percent of those interviewed could name five of the Ten Commandments. Only 46 per cent correctly named the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is likely that the statistics have gone down since those surveys were taken. And it is also no better in other parts of the world.

Of course, simple numbers are not important. What is important to know is how the Bible speaks to our lives. “Until people see the Bible as a practical guidebook for their everyday existence, it will probably continue to remain on the shelf,” says Christian trend-watcher George Barna.

So why should we read and study an ancient and (in the minds of many) hard-to-understand book? What could the Bible possibly say that is essential to daily life in the modern world?

For our time

Jack Kuhatschek, in his book *Taking the Guesswork out of Applying the Bible*, is quite frank about the Bible’s bad image—referring to its “age problem”. He writes: “People wonder what benefit we can possibly derive from a two-thousand-year-old book written in an obscure corner of the Middle East. In a sense I can’t blame them. After all, much of the Bible does seem irrelevant today.”

To be sure, chapter after Bible chapter does seem outdated and irrelevant to our needs. For one thing, the Bible is a story of faraway people living in dim antiquity. It narrates the experiences of people

like Noah, Moses and Paul, who lived many centuries ago. They faced problems and questions that don’t always seem directly related to our own.

Not only are the human experiences discussed in the Bible ancient, but the cultures, vocabulary and thought patterns are also dated. For example, the book of Revelation is written in what is called “apocalyptic” style. That is not a literary genre familiar to us modern folks, and it seems strange and confusing. This makes it difficult to understand the message of the book—and easy to misinterpret it.

But during the first century, apocalyptic writing was a well-known literary genre or type. The original Christian readers knew perfectly well this style of writing. They knew how to understand the message Revelation wanted to convey.

What’s our view?

We need to see the Bible’s books and literary styles on their terms. If we are to grasp the message of any biblical book, we need to hear the word of God coming from its pages in the same way the first readers heard it. We also need to understand the meaning of the story of the lives of Noah, Moses or Paul, even as the first Christians did. After all, though our culture may be different, we have the same human concerns, needs and problems as they did.

God showed His nearness, His saving grace, and His purpose by confronting these individuals and involving Himself in their lives. Their past encounters with God—when written down in what became the Christian Bible—make clear how God deals with us now.

More than reading required

You’ve probably heard statements like the following: “Simply read the Bible for yourself and do what it says,” or “Just read, believe, and obey the Bible.” While this

by
Paul Kroll

approach to Bible reading sounds simple, it’s not quite the way that effective study of the Bible proceeds.

We need to learn how to correctly interpret what the Bible says on a particular matter before we apply it to our lives. That’s because we don’t come to the Bible with a clean slate, free of previous opinions. We are not only readers of Scripture, we are, for better or worse, also interpreters.

Our view of what the Bible says on a given matter may be adversely conditioned by what we think it says. It’s easy to fall into the trap of seeing in the Bible something we already believe, but which it doesn’t teach. “We invariably bring to the text all that we are, with all of our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas, write biblical scholars Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart in their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

That can be dangerous. The authors explain, “Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text.” To rightly understand the Bible, we also need to understand the kind of book it is. It was written by and for people who lived centuries ago in cultures far different from our own.

Of course, the Bible is relevant to all ages. But we must first understand the context or original situation in which a particular portion of Scripture was written. Then comes the need for right interpretation, understanding how a particular passage of Scripture reflects a broad principle applicable to life situations we face. This requires more than a casual reading of the Scriptures.

After rightly interpreting the original intent of the biblical writings, we need to apply them intelligently to our contemporary situation. When we read the Bible, we need to listen to the voice of

ks to us!

God coming through His Word, not our own. We should avoid reading into the Bible ideas it doesn't espouse.

Help is available to us as we move along our journey of study. Here are two useful books that tell us how to study the Bible:

- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart.
- *Understanding Scripture: How to*

theology in the New?

Or do we see the Bible as a book that puts us in touch with God on a personal level? As a book that reveals God's loving and gracious purpose for us?

In an important way, our view of the Bible depends on how we perceived our relationship with God. Do we see Him as a distant God uninvolved with human affairs? Or do we see Him as a

faithfully and accurately wrote down their revelations from God—and that their writings have been preserved in the book we call the Bible?

In his book *Understanding the Bible*, Christian teacher John R. W. Stott asks us: "Do we really believe that God has spoken, that God's words are recorded in Scripture, and that as we read it we may hear *God's* voice addressing us?" Do we really believe? That, of course, is the crux of the question. The apostle Paul, speaking of those books that form the Christian Old Testament, said they could make one "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."¹

God's word to us

Paul told his young associate Timothy: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the people of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."²

Peter insisted he had not followed "cleverly invented stories" when he told the church about God's plan of salvation.³ He had been an eyewitness of Jesus' work (as had the other original apostles) and had seen and talked with the resurrected Christ.

Peter promised he would make every effort to provide for the preservation of those truths after his death. These would keep the church within the realm of faith and God's grace.⁴ Peter also spoke of Paul's letters as Scripture. He said they were authoritative writings that conveyed the words of God about things vital to our salvation.⁵

Do we agree that the Bible contains God's word *to us*? If so, surely the Bible must matter a great deal as a book that can help us come to know God more intimately. How, then, could the Bible not be a book we would want to read and study on a regular basis? Have *you* read the Good Book lately? ☐



Read and Study the Bible, by A. Berkeley Mickelson and Alvera M. Mickelson.

This is the key to becoming motivated to study the Bible. We need to understand it as the book that reveals God and His way. So we should honestly and frankly ask ourselves about our view of the Bible. Do we see it as an oppressive rule book? An out-of-date and irrelevant ancient writing? Impossible to understand? Filled with boring history in the Old Testament and imponderable

living Being who has something important to tell us personally about Himself and His purpose for us—and our future with Him?

Here are three questions to ponder in our relationship to God and to the Bible:

- Do we believe God is interested in communicating Himself and His message to human beings?
- Do we believe God revealed His purpose over many centuries through prophets (Old Testament) and apostles (New Testament)?
- Do we believe that they

¹ 2 Timothy 3:15

² 2 Timothy 3:16–17

³ 2 Peter 1:16

⁴ 2 Peter 1:15

⁵ 2 Peter 3:15–16

A lesson about

On the list of frustrating things, heavy traffic ranks pretty high. And drivers who don't signal, don't look, won't move over, cut people off, speed, tailgate, go too slow, or drive incredibly noisy or incredibly large vehicles rank among the world's most frustrating people.

I find it surprisingly easy to condemn drivers—other drivers, that is. I find it just as surprising how easy it is to forgive my own

far easier to forgive myself for just about anything than to forgive the same mistakes in others.

Jesus casts the spotlight on this all too human tendency when He says, "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more."³ At first glance, this might seem to be a simple matter of cause and effect: you forgive and then your act of forgiveness will merit forgiveness for you. But



by
**Michael
Feazell**

Jesus makes a similar point in Matthew 18:35, when He says, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." It might be easy to assume from this statement that God forgives us on the basis of our forgiveness of others. But that would be a false assumption. God forgives us on the basis of Jesus' perfect sacrifice on our behalf and in our place.

He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."¹

"Consider carefully what you hear," He continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."²

driving mistakes. I wish I could say this phenomenon only pertained to driving. But the truth is, I find it

to understand Jesus' statement on those legalistic terms would be a mistake.

In these statements, Jesus is not prescribing a new form of legalism; He is describing the nature of

measurement

hearts that trust in Him. For example, when we trust in Christ, we no longer have anything to hide. The day will come, of course, when nothing remains hidden⁴, and that is true whether we trust in Christ or not. But for those who do trust Him, that day is in effect already here—they have nothing to hide from Him.

But the reason they have nothing to hide from Jesus is not that they are suddenly sinless. It is that they trust Him to love them unconditionally and to forgive their sins, sins that they are no longer afraid to show Him.

In the same way, those who trust Christ are free from the craving to measure others with the stern rod of selfishness. Because they trust Christ, they can commit their fears and anxieties to Him, which frees them from the need to get even or get back at others. In other words, they know they are measured by Christ's rod of grace, which takes the starch out of their natural tendency to condemn others.

Whether it's in traffic, at the courthouse or around the dinner table, we're no longer slaves to our raw impulses—we are free to forgive others as God, for Christ's sake, forgave us, and as Christ lives in us, we do.

What Jesus says in Mark 4:25 is a condemnation only to those who don't trust Him—their selfish measuring rod is the only standard they know and the only one they understand. But for those who trust the Redeemer, there is only one measure—the ever-unfolding heights and depths of the love of Christ.

I'm learning not to listen to my knee-jerk reactions to miserable drivers. I'm learning to mutter, "God bless him" instead of ... something else. It's not only a good reminder of who I am in Christ, it's a hazy reflection of the heart of Christ which, by His grace, dwells in me. □



¹ Mark 4:21–23

² Mark 4:24–25

³ Mark 4:24

⁴ Mark 4:21–23

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