

AUTHENTIC

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MEN'S MAGAZINE

WISE WORDS FROM

Charles Price

Sitting down with Strahan

Using music to point people to Jesus

**Unashamed of
the Gospel**

LUKE COLLIS' HEART
FOR THE LOST

Wynton Rufer

Former All White talks faith

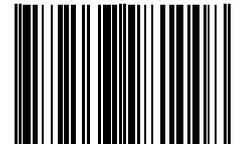
COMPLIMENTING GOD?

Alan Stanley explains

PLUS

- Going... Going... Gone
- What if I feel God has let me down?
- You're teaching my child what?

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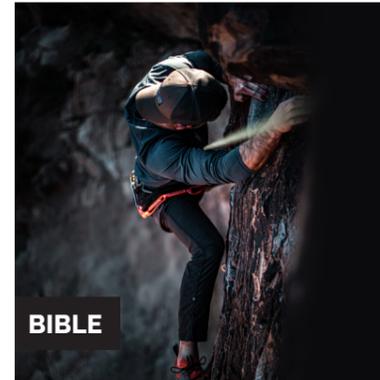
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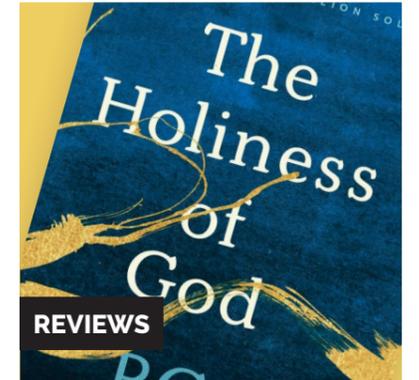
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WELCOME TO THE THIRTEENTH EDITION OF

AUTHENTIC

MEN'S MAGAZINE

Unlucky for some, eh? (nah, we're not superstitious!)

So here we are in 2021 and already we're talking about Easter! It's probably true to say that most people around the world were hoping 2020 would clear off and things would settle down now, but it could be some time before things like tourism, travel and large events are back on the menu for everyone.

But, of course, it shouldn't really matter to us as believers. Our hope isn't in a government, a mandate or a vaccine – it's in the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul writes to the Colossians about the 'Great Mystery' which he says is 'Christ in You, the Hope of Glory' (Col 1:27).

And it really is a mystery. Christ – God in the man – dwelling in us, making us blameless, perfect and holy. Yep, that definitely confuses me. But that doesn't mean it's not true.

There's actually plenty of things in the Bible I struggle with and I have come across several things I don't understand, but it doesn't make me doubt that they are true. The writer to the Hebrews writes that 'Faith is being

sure of what we hope for, certain of what we do not see.'

That means we can be absolutely sure of what we hope for, because our hope is in Christ! So, let's not let fear grip us. Trust in Him and His Word and leave the worries to Jesus. Well, our Authentic staff had a decent break over the Christmas period. For me personally it was my second year as a church pastor so, as I'm learning, the Christmas period can be a pretty busy time!

But we were all back at work in time for Festival One at the end of January. It was great to continue on from last year meeting people, giving out magazines, plus we managed to squeeze in a couple of interviews too!

I guess I'm not a huge music fan (don't tell Graham Burt) but I was really encouraged by the sense of community I observed at the event. Lots of people are keen to 'be Church' rather than just attend a concert. And there were lots of speakers and seminars to attend. We also had some precious time

catching up with other ministry people too. Hearing what God is doing in their organisation and what He is teaching them personally. I love that stuff. I've been challenged a lot lately about the topic of purpose. Working in ministry, it's not unusual to ask, "What's it all for?", "Am I doing what I want and convincing myself it's a calling?"

And we must ask those questions, in prayer to Our Father, and let Him answer us in whichever way He chooses. As for me, I certainly don't want to keep doing something if it's not God's will. But am I listening to the Lord when He leads me, guides me, calls me? As I've said many times, Authentic is not our ministry. We are simply stewards, caretakers even.

With every new issue I feel I should pause to consider if we should continue. Sometimes I've wondered if we were even supposed to go past the original plan of eight issues (I could have had the last year off!) So I keep listening. But as Abraham discovered, listening isn't an event, it's a process.

We have to keep listening. If he hadn't continued to listen to God, he would have slain his son on that mountain. Pray, yes. Ask, yes. But listen, listen and listen some more. I'm not naturally good at that. Most people who know me would say I don't struggle to talk. And people that talk a lot are often pretty bad at listening. I know I need to listen more and talk less, especially when I'm spending time with my Lord. It's no coincidence that listening is mentioned over 400 times in Scripture!

One of the joys of pastoring a Church is the need to regularly prepare messages, so I've enjoyed some great times of studying the Word of God. It amazes me how easily my flesh will prioritize other things to keep busy, rather than studying my Bible, so when I sit down to prepare a message I often find myself saying, "Why don't I do this more often?"

I say this simply to encourage you. We can ALL have times when we struggle to walk upright. When we get lazy and flick on the TV (or Netflix). Watch out for that! Temptation isn't a sin but giving in to it is. So, the Authentic journey continues. We have a great team, working well, still absolutely committed to the message but trusting the Lord to guide our plans and direct our energy.

In February we recruited Tania - our new designer to work with the 'Authentic

Media' team. (maybe you didn't know but we run a full-service marketing and design agency for churches, ministries and Christian led businesses too).

It is such a privilege for us to be able to support these organisations with our talents and giftings. I love watching the team come up with creative solutions to brand events, design logos or build websites.

Authentic Media work actually contributes significantly to our running costs but we still need other support to keep going. When I get asked about this I answer this way:

You can do three things to help, but we only want to ask you to do the first one. Pray, Help, Give. Pray for us – and ask God how you can help. He will lead you. If it's committing to pray for us, great. Do it. If it's practically with something, great. Do it. If it's financially, great. Do it.

We love Proverbs 3:5-6 (it's not just a pretty bookmark) so we really do Trust our Lord. We will keep trusting and keep listening. Will you?



Dave Firth is the Editor of Authentic Magazine, a Bible teacher, speaker, husband, father and follower of Jesus Christ.



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The Place of Peace

BY NATHAN JOHNSON

“Shalom, shalom.” Those words always bring a smile to my face. Every time I lead a trip to Israel to study the Bible on location, I can’t help but smile at the friendly greeting our Hebrew guide, and my friend Dan, pronounces on the bus each morning. As we make our way through the Holy Land and I open my Bible to teach, the underlying desire is for every person on the trip to experience the shalom of God. Shalom. Peace.

While it is the standard greeting of Israelites past and present, this word means far more than what we typically think of as “peace.” I hear “peace” and think of sitting on a beach under a warm sun, holding a cup of cold sweet tea, enjoying the sound of crashing waves with a good book in hand.

Webster defines peace as: “freedom from disturbance; tranquility; a state in which there is no war.”

That is all true but fails to get at the Hebrew understanding. Shalom contains the idea of removing hostility (a rest from war), but the word can also mean well-being, health, prosperity, security, soundness, goodness, friendship, salvation, and completeness or wholeness.

When I greet an Israeli and we say “shalom” to each other, it declares there is no hostility between us, and it is also a blessing that we would each experience good health, well-being, and an incredible day in the Lord. “Shalom, shalom,” then, would be a double blessing of such.

FINDING PEACE

Used over 200 times in the Old Testament and 95 times in the New, true peace is not found in the circumstances surrounding us but in the One who is our peace, Jesus Christ.

Paul boldly declares, “He [Jesus] is our peace ...” (Ephesians 2:14).

One of the significant shifts in my spiritual life came when I realized that when God wants to give us something, He doesn’t give us the thing, He gives us Jesus. In one of my favorite passages, 2 Peter 1:3, Peter reminds us that everything we need for life and godliness is found in one single place: Jesus.

When I ask God for joy, He doesn’t give me a pill called “joy,” nor does He change the circumstances I’m in, He gives me Himself - “in [His] presence there is fullness of joy; at [His] right hand are pleasures forevermore,” (Psalm 16:11). Jesus becomes my joy. When I plead for God’s love to showcase itself in my life, I don’t get a bottle of love to drink; I get the One who is love itself, (see 1 John 4:8, 16).

When we look at the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, they are all fruit of ... the Spirit. These are the natural attributes that will come out of our lives when the Spirit resides within us. They are simply the characteristics of Jesus that the Spirit wants to produce in and through us. So if you need love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, don’t try to grit your teeth and self-produce them. Sure, you might be able to generate a little patience or kindness, but the actual life of Christ can only be produced by the Spirit of Christ living within you.

Everything you need for life and godliness is found in Jesus Christ. We desperately need Jesus. Which brings us back to peace. Shalom.

You won’t find peace in your circumstances; you experience it in Christ. Hostility and hardship may bully us from the outside; however, we can still experience inner peace and freedom from that hostility when we find our refuge in Him, (see Psalm 17:7; 18:2; 18:30; 28:8 and 31:2).

Jesus encourages us, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid,” (John 14:27). What is the peace He is leaving? It is not something; it is Someone - His Holy Spirit, the Spirit of peace (see John 14:26). Where is peace found? In Christ alone.

If we seek peace in our circumstances, we may find momentary relief during good times, but will be sadly disappointed during difficulty. True peace is a person named Jesus — who is constant during good times and bad (see Hebrews 13:8). Peace isn’t a feeling as much as it is a position of living.

Even amidst the bomb blasts of life, you can experience peace because, as Christians, our position is in Christ and He is our peace. Perhaps you could say that peace is a by-product of being in Jesus. I don’t go to Jesus to obtain peace (to get something from Him); instead, I pursue Jesus for the sake of intimacy and relationship with Him, and I quickly discover that peace becomes evident in my life.

So don’t seek after the peace; seek after the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

JEHOVAH SHALOM

One time in Scripture God is given the name Jehovah Shalom (The Lord is Peace).

After calling Gideon to rescue the Israelites from the hands of Midian, Gideon offers a sacrifice to God and cries out, “Alas, O LORD God! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.” Judges 6:23-24 goes on to say: “Then the LORD said to him, ‘Peace be with you. Do not be afraid. You will not die.’”

Then Gideon built an altar for the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace [Jehovah Shalom].” Gideon recognised that the peace God promised wasn’t found in the circumstances, but in God alone. Taking God’s declaration of “Peace be to you. Do not fear,” Gideon turned it around and called the place The LORD is Peace!

What if we did that in our lives? We’ve been given more than a promise of peace; we’ve received the Prince of Peace Himself. If Jesus is indeed our peace, and He lives within us via the Holy Spirit, shouldn’t our lives, words, and actions declare that God continues to be Jehovah Shalom? When the world looks at our lives, shouldn’t they see the evidence of shalom within us because He indwells us?

2. Several times in Scripture, when an individual encounters God, the location is renamed for the event or the character of God (see Genesis 16:13-14; 33:20; 35:7 and Exodus 17:15). Consider this in light of the fact that when we encounter God and place our faith in Him, we are given the new name “Christian,” we become a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2), and now we are to bear His life and character.

3. Read this quote by Warren Wiersbe and ask God to speak to you through it. “There is always “joy and peace in believing” (Rom. 15:13), but unbelief brings fear and worry. God had to give Gideon a message of peace to prepare him for fighting a war. Unless we’re at peace with God, we can’t face the enemy with confidence and fight the Lord’s battles. Gideon now believed

“Even amidst the bomb blasts of life, you can experience peace because, as Christians, our position is in Christ and He is our peace. Perhaps you could say that peace is a byproduct of being in Jesus.”

As Christians, we are called to be the most peace-laden, joy-filled and hopeful people in the world – which means we are not to be fearful, fretting, anxious or live with worry.

This isn’t wishful thinking but the reality of the Christian life, in Christ Jesus. No matter what turbulent seas surround us, no matter the pressure or craziness pressing in upon us, no matter the difficulty that lies before us, we can experience the peace of God which surpasses all understanding and will guard and protect our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (see Philippians 4:4-7).

May we live in this day and age declaring with our lives and lips that Jesus doesn’t merely give us peace, He is our peace.

GO DEEPER

Here are some thoughts and questions to consider:

1. Scholar Joshua M. Greever states, “In the Old Testament, the term ‘peace’ is often used to describe a relationship characterized by friendship, care, loyalty, and love.” How does this give you further insight into the truth of what it means for Jesus to be our peace?

the Lord was able to use him, not because of who he was but because of who God was.

Whenever God calls us to a task that we think is beyond us, we must be careful to look to God and not to ourselves. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” God asked Abraham (Gen. 18:14); and the answer comes, “For with God nothing shall be impossible,” (Luke 1:37).

Job discovered that God could do everything (Job 42:2), and Jeremiah admitted that there was nothing too hard for God (Jer. 32:17). Jesus told His disciples, “With God all things are possible,” (Matt. 19:26); and Paul testified, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” (Phil 4:13, NKJV).” Taken from: Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Available, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994), 51.

4. Examine your prayer life. How often do you ask for things from Jesus rather than asking for more of Him? If He indeed is all you need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), how should that affect your praying, speaking, and living? Spend time with Him today and delight in the fact He Himself is your peace (Ephesians 2:14; Malachi 2:5; Romans 15:33 and Isaiah 9:6). |  | 

■ Nathan Johnson is program director and an instructor at Ellerslie Mission Society in Windsor, Colorado. Learn and see more at deeperChristian.com. Used by permission.



WHAT IS MY ENDURING LEGACY?

BY PAUL MONAHAN

I am amazed at how God can use seemingly unrelated situations to get my attention. Bev and I have been starting to think about downsizing our house as we begin to approach “Third Age”. What, when and where will our forever home be? This thinking must come from hanging around with my mate Peter Goulter too much! One of the things I have begun to look at is that if I am going to downsize, what things do I need to get rid of? Now, I describe myself as a collector - Bev on the other hand has been known to describe me as hoarder. So, interesting times ahead!

This got me thinking about the concept of legacy. What do I want to leave behind when I am gone? Recently I have been doing a study of the biblical character David. It started me thinking about my legacy beyond material things. So, what could the life of David teach me about legacy?

If you spoke to an unchurched person and asked, “What do you know about King David?”, if they know anything at all, they are likely to come back with two names - Goliath or Bathsheba. These are the two sides of David’s legacy most remembered, even to this day.

David and Goliath represents David as a “Man after God’s own heart”. David was a king beloved, an audacious leader of men and a man who was indeed a worshipper. He had deep spiritual insight, courage and audacity. These qualities were passed to his sons in some measure. Absalom was indeed a warrior and strong military leader, even though he chose to rebel against his father. Solomon

had deep spiritual insight and was an extremely successful king in terms of conquest and military prowess - with the nation of Israel growing to its greatest size geographically.

So what of David and Bathsheba? What does this show us? It appears that David had a strong undisciplined sexual appetite, as represented by Bathsheba. This however did not begin with Bathsheba; it had been a lifelong practice and sadly it did not end with Bathsheba. This was unfortunately passed on to his sons as well. This was strongly represented in the sad life of his son Amnon, who raped his half-sister Tamar. Furthermore, David had seven wives and multiple concubines - a pattern repeated one hundred fold by Solomon, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

This ultimately led to Solomon losing his way spiritually.

This may seem like a harsh word, but I think that we need to face the facts that a legacy can go two ways - both positive and negative. I have counselled enough guys to know the reality that sexual and pornography addiction can be significantly generational. If you suspect you have a problem you owe it to yourself firstly to do something about it. By attending to your own pornography issues, you may not only change your life, but change your legacy for your family, sons and daughters. It is said that our children follow the footsteps we try the hardest to cover up. Is it time to step into the light?

For help with this issue, please get in touch with Paul by emailing paulm@promisekeepers.org.nz - he’d be happy to help. |  | 

■ Paul Monahan is the national director of Promise Keepers, having also held a number of different roles in church leadership over more than two decades. He has studied at Lifeway Bible College and been a Christian school principal for 14 years.





Going... Going... Gone...

BY MURRAY SMITH

In a day when many Christians are re-evaluating church attendance, are there values that might anchor us in holding fast to regular gathering together?

Recently I was talking with a church leader who described a dilemma they had just faced in their local church with a reasonably senior office bearer. It was the end of the year and this staff person, who held a significant level of responsibility, matter of factly announced that they would not be continuing in the role they had fulfilled over a lengthy period of time.

That was enough of a surprise in itself to the leadership team, but the real kicker was that in addition, this person revealed their decision to leave church altogether to pursue a lifestyle incongruent with the expressed values of that church.

The point is that this instance isn't exactly an isolated occurrence. People who have had a long history of faithful church attendance are - for a variety of reasons - re-evaluating their commitment, with numbers pulling the pin on being a connected part of any corporate church gathering. How should we view this and what might be some factors that lie behind this pattern of Christians moving away from doing church together?

Attempting to answer this question must take into account that the range of reasons for people withdrawing from church attendance will be as diverse as the people and church situations themselves. I've heard them all probably... 'I don't get much out of it,' 'I don't like this or that,' even 'the colour of the carpet annoys me...' Seriously?

Addressing all the issues promoting departures is impossible. Reasons commonly cited for leaving a church include 'no longer meets our needs,' 'we felt over the institution of church,' 'became less relevant in our lives,' 'bored with predictability,' 'a parting of ways theologically and doctrinally,' 'style and culture did not appeal,' 'discouragement with over-projected goals that under delivered,' 'didn't find satisfying relationships,' 'was hurt or offended in some way,' 'found other interests,' plus many other variants on the theme.

As difficult as it might be for leadership to accept, they don't 'own' anyone and people are always going to leave their churches for any manner of reasons - often this will be done well with good grace and for perfectly valid reasons, other times it will happen due to perceptions along the lines of the ones above that fuel festering disenchantment on a variety of levels. So... given that you will never find a perfect church, here's a few compelling reasons why Christians should never throw in the towel and feel 'done' with seeking out and

maintaining ongoing relationship in a local church setting with other believers.

Meeting together is more than a suggestion

Jesus is our model and example in everything. In Luke Chapter 4 it describes Jesus returning "in the power of the Spirit" from forty days testing in the wilderness. "And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read." (verse 16). It's interesting to note that the word 'custom' is translated from the original Greek word 'ethos' - we use this word meaning 'value' or 'guiding belief'. So Jesus had a 'guiding belief' or value that He exhibited in gathering week by week in the context of that day.

The author of Hebrews writes to encourage Christian believers towards practices which will produce spiritual strength in their lives. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on

toward love and good deeds - do not neglect the gathering of yourselves together...as is the manner of some ." (Chapter 10, verses 24 and 25) ... the exact same word 'ethos' appears for the word 'manner' or 'habit'. Put simply - Christians should never 'lose the value or habit of meeting together.'

Why? Because there's a dynamic of spiritual life that can only be imparted in being 'together'. Jesus said when even a handful of people gather in His Name, that He is there in their midst.

In Acts 2, the early disciples' passion for community and gathering together continually is clearly modelled as the church grew in both numbers and impact. There is the safety of connection and accountability in an environment of worship, sharing from the scriptures, remembering the Lord's atoning death on the cross by taking communion together. Even the word communion itself implicitly expresses the sharing of a 'common union'.

Isaiah 65:8 presents the thought of avoiding isolation that separation engenders, "the new wine being found in the cluster, do not destroy it, for it has benefit..."

We are members of one another, reliant on each other for spiritual life

It's contrary to scripture to believe we can exist apart and be healthy. Grow alone and we'll grow weird... We need the shared contribution that others bring - that's what fellowship is. Our common union in Christ joins us and even in diversity, a unity of the faith binds believers together. Paul's goal for the church

“It's contrary to scripture to believe we can exist apart and be healthy. Grow alone and we'll grow weird. We need the shared contribution that others bring - that's what fellowship is.”

(Ephesians 4 :13) is that we will all come together into maturity and unity of faith...note it doesn't necessarily call us to unity around doctrine!

This passage details the ministry gifts given by Jesus Himself to the church for the purpose of perfecting the saints (that's all the Lord's people) for the work of ministry. The ministries described are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers - they are appointed by Jesus for building up His church. Those who abandon church life forsake important exposure to these ministry gifts, turning their backs on something that Jesus determined every church should have access to.

It goes without saying that church buildings are just 'bricks and mortar.' They are not supposed to ever be our vision, but they can be a useful tool that the Spirit of God uses in putting legs on our vision. So church is not at all somewhere we go to, but something that we are! Christians are the real building, God's temple. We are a spiritual house, "living stones", being fitted together as a dwelling place for God. (1 Peter 2:5)

We are the Body of Christ - He is the head and we are all members with particular functions. What is the common theme in these two metaphors? A building does not exist as long as it remains as piles of disconnected scattered stones.

That's not a building, that's just rubble. Similarly imagine your body with a leg over there, an arm somewhere else, a heart detached from the lungs, eyes not joined to the brain...You get the picture - a body with all its parts disconnected from its other members cannot functionally survive, never mind be healthy! Everyone doing their part is needed in the Body of Christ.

Church attendance is one of the ways that a Christian shows a practical outward expression of their faith

Like giving church attendance is meant to be a joy - a means of grace in our lives not a religious duty to be imposed. The phrase 'churchless faith' was popular a while back among people falsely advocating that church attendance was unnecessary. It was claimed that meetings of any sort do nothing to enhance our salvation, nor does it commend us to God in any way at all.

And that is perfectly true, as there is only one thing that does that - faith alone in Jesus and His finished work upon the cross. Yet John wrote in his first letter (the third chapter) some stunning words that test the authenticity of anyone claiming to be saved, or to be a born again disciple of Jesus. "We know

that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers and sisters. The one who does not love remains in death." So, John is stating a reason for knowing that we have eternal life is to a large degree confirmed by the love we will have for the church...God's redeemed people. To me, 'churchless faith' is something of an oxymoron.

It is of course possible to have a faith and not go to church, since attending church is not always practically possible in certain settings. However, if we love God's people (His church) we will not purposefully withdraw from them or deliberately exist unattached from any fellowship.

I've heard a surprising claim that people have made, stating "God told us to take a break from church". My issue with this is that God never argues against his own counsel. His word is FULL of injunctions to stay in fellowship - not to abandon gathering together.

Church was God's idea and He has big plans for a great future

Finally, I believe the local church gathering ought to hold a place in a Christian's life and experience because in spite of its imperfections, it is still the primary vehicle through which God has chosen to reveal Himself and shine His glory into local communities and, ultimately, to the world.

"So that the multifaceted wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places." - Ephesians 3:10 The Church of Jesus has a profound calling. Remember Jesus told His followers, "You are the light of the world".

He also conferred on His church the same authority that the Father had given Him! God gave everything to secure the church unto Himself. The sacrifice of Jesus was costly beyond comprehension and to trivialise the church and its place, is to trivialise that sacrifice.

This mystical union of believers purchased by the blood of Jesus from every nation, kindred, tribe and tongue is what makes up the church - the 'ecclesia' or called out ones. One day, Jesus will return for these ones - His glorious Bride. He is faithful to all His promises and will complete the work He has begun of preparation. He will never give up on this task. Neither should we. Jesus declared that He will build His Church and that the gates of hell will never prevail against it.

I for one am putting up my hand to be a part of that and trusting Him to keep me from ever bailing out under any pretext or distraction. |A

■ Murray Smith is a husband, a father to six children and the senior leader at Bridges Church Cambridge in the Waikato.



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WYNTON
RUFER

STILL HAVING A BALL!

BY JEREMY SMITH

Before Wynton Rufer was even 10 years old, he had a goal - to juggle a football 500 times without dropping it. When he achieved that, he simply doubled the aspiration to 1000 times.

By 14, the former All White striker - with 23 full international appearances to his name - had come up with a creative way to fill his daily two kilometre morning walk from his home in Miramar, Wellington to school at Rongotai College. He wanted to juggle the ball non-stop for the entirety of the journey.

"Every time I dropped the ball, I obviously had to wait until after school or even the next day before I could try it again. There were three or four roads I had to cross, so I would juggle the ball up and catch it on my neck, look left and right and then cross the road.

"There was a tunnel under Wellington International Airport and I had to do the same thing there - because half the lights were broken and there were patches where I couldn't see. "It took me about three months to achieve the goal and I was so determined to do it that the possibility of failing to do so didn't even exist for me." It's a glimpse into the psyche and dedication of New Zealand's most successful professional footballer. His now storied career - with overall stats of 224

goals in 539 games and eight trophies - has its roots at least in part in those disciplines.

They helped set the Oceania Footballer of the Century on a more than two decade footballing journey which included being part of the All Whites' inaugural 1982 World Cup campaign in Spain, playing European club football in Switzerland and Germany and a stint in Japan before following God's leading to return home to New Zealand. Wynton's career brought with it a multitude of awards. On home shores, he was inducted into the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame in 2005 and the Māori Sports Hall of Fame two years later.

Ultimately though - and he says most importantly - his love of the beautiful game set him on a path to finding faith in Jesus.

Wynton, who is of Ngāti Porou descent, was last month named the third most influential Māori sportsperson of the last 30 years on the Māori Sports Awards' 30 in 30 list. He spoke to Jeremy Smith.



Wynton takes a class of youngster through their paces at his academy, WYNRS

Can you remember how you were first introduced to football?

My dad - Arthur - was Swiss and he was interested in soccer, as it was called then. Dad was a perfectionist, you know, nothing was ever good enough and he would always be onto us about being the best we could be. I remember a childhood full of Saturday morning sports. Both he and my mum, Anne, who was Māori, were really supportive of our love of sports actually, because they ultimately knew it was keeping us occupied in a positive way.

Team sport is just fantastic in the sense that it teaches you life skills that you can then use later on in life. It has to be said that both my siblings - my older brother Shane and my older sister Donna - were really talented. Shane was an incredible athlete, and not just in football. He played for the All Whites as well, but also represented New Zealand in softball and volleyball. Donna was a fantastic squash player. I think growing up in that sort of family environment was a big factor in me discovering my love of football early on.

In the early days, what football players were you most influenced by?

I was totally inspired by Brazilian footballer Pelé - I dreamt of being just like him. As I developed in my career - at Rongotai College, and then after school at Wellington Diamond United, Stop Out and the Miramar Rangers - I started trying to play my football like him. There's a famous photo of Pelé when he scored in the 1970 FIFA World Cup in Mexico. He jumped up and punched the air. So, when I scored goals I started doing

the Pelé jumps too! Actually, if we can, let's fast forward to about 20 years ago and the time I got to meet Pelé in person, because that's a funny story. At the World Cup in Spain - when I was there with the All Whites - he came into the changing room before our game against Brazil. I was out on the pitch taking photos like a tourist because I was so excited about the game against my heroes that I missed out on meeting my idol!

When I did finally meet him, I was in Zurich at a FIFA committee meeting in 1997 or 98. He was the last one to come into our meeting room and was such a gentleman - going around to every single person to say hello. When he finally came to me, he looked at me and said "It's nice to see you again." It was his polite manner, because obviously he can't remember everyone he has ever met. "I haven't met you before" was my pathetic reply, "well, now we know each other," he said with a big smile. No wonder he's the greatest!

It didn't take long for football-related opportunities to present themselves did it? I read that you were the first Kiwi to be offered a contract with Norwich City Football Club - while at the same time attracting the attention of the All Whites?

That's right. In 1981, my brother Shane and I both trialled at Norwich City in England and I did get offered a professional contract but I wasn't able to sign because of passport and work permit dramas. It was disappointing, but at the same time other doors were opening for me and I got called up to the All Whites. New Zealand was in the midst of trying to qualify for the 1982 football World Cup and I entered the campaign for the last few games - they were crucial must win fixtures. The

first World Cup qualifier I played in was against Kuwait in late 1981, I was 18. We drew that game 2 all and I scored. I ended up scoring four goals in the three games I played - against Kuwait, Saudi Arabia the People's Republic of China.

I was just glad that I could help the team with our overall goal of qualifying for Spain. While I was on that qualifying journey with the All Whites, I attracted the attention of international clubs. Switzerland wasn't in the 1982 World Cup, but clubs over there had obviously heard about the boy from New Zealand who had a Swiss connection.

I signed my first professional contract with FC Zürich while in New Zealand, just before the 1982 World Cup started.

Only a select few New Zealand footballers can say they're lucky enough to have played on football's largest stage. How do you even begin to describe your experience?

Oh, it was unbelievable, but being so young I think perhaps I didn't fully understand it all. But wow was I living the dream. We got drawn in what they called the 'Group of Death' and played Scotland, the USSR and Brazil. You know, even just the opportunity to play a team like Brazil, who were the heavy weights of world football, was just a real buzz for me.

That 1982 Brazilian side was one of the greatest teams in the history of the game which didn't win a World Cup. With players like their captain Sócrates, Zico, Éder, Falcão, Junior and so many others, it was just a phenomenal team. It was a dream come true for me just to be on the field.

On the note of World Cups, Ricki Herbert, who was one of your All Whites team mates at the 1982 cup, was coach when the national team made its only other World Cup appearance - in South Africa in 2010. It must have been so special watching that unfold?

For sure, it was. As you know, players like Chris Wood were there and I'd coached him as a kid, so to see him go to the World Cup in South Africa was just brilliant.



Wynton playing in the Swiss military



Wynton with Maradona

After the '82 cup campaign, you headed to Switzerland. It was there you became a Christian, some would say right as your international club career took off. How did you come to faith in Jesus?

In Switzerland I started at FC Zürich and I was required to complete a period of time of service in the Swiss military because I was playing on a Swiss passport. I met another soldier in the military who was from the Salvation Army and he led me to Jesus. It was just incredible. Up to that point in my football career, I had rubbed shoulders with and even played alongside a few other Christians before.

But thanks to Beat Rieder, who is still serving the Lord today in the Ukraine, I began the greatest journey of my life and started to follow Jesus. I began reading the Bible and telling others how much they needed Jesus.

When I became a Christian in 1986 and was born again, I began to notice a whole lot of changes in myself and who I was as a person. Galatians 5:22 is a scripture which comes straight to mind - and the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control. As I began to walk with Jesus I knew I was finally on the true path of life. A month later I got married to my wife Lisa. One one occasion, we were in a Pentecostal church in Perth, Western Australia, where she is from. As part of the service they asked if anybody wanted to give their heart to Jesus and she went forward and gave her life to the Lord. That was so special. We have two sons - Caleb and Joshua - and both of them were born overseas - in Bremen, Germany and Tokyo, Japan during the course of my playing career.

Once you became a Christian what did you do to ensure you kept close to Jesus? Was it hard being a Christian in a competitive sporting environment?

Not really. But I do think it's vitally important that you find a good church home and get involved with things like a weekly Bible study or make friends with other Christians. When I was playing, I was quite fortunate to be able to go to Bible study with a group of other Christians. It was always challenging

to get to church because we played games on Sundays and there was lots of travel involved. But even in regards to our individual walk with the Lord, I think it's important to have other Christian friends around who can encourage and support us, because this automatically builds accountability. I've been blessed to be surrounded by such people.

Let's jump to your shift to Germany and playing for Werder Bremen in the Bundesliga - the top tier of German football. That was a stunning time of success on the playing front for you wasn't it?

From a personal point of view, signing with a top German side was a dream come true. The big five leagues in European football were in France, Germany, England, Spain, and Italy. That hasn't changed today.

The team I played for at Werder Bremen won six major titles during my time there. We were German champions, Cup winners twice, and the crowning glory was European success in the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup final against AS Monaco in Lisbon, Portugal in May 1992. I assisted with the first goal and scored the second in our 2-0 win. I was also the UEFA Champions League top scorer in the 1993/94 season.

My coach at Werder Bremen - Otto Rehhagel - became a world famous coach and I just connected with him like a father son relationship and we just had the most incredible success in the club's history during my time there - which was from 1989-1995. I have other amazing stories, like when I scored in both games against Diego Maradona's Napoli club team to knock them out of the European Cup. All told, I have to say, it was just an unbelievable time.

On that note, did you ever get nervous before such big games?

That's a really interesting question because for me, when I think back on some of the big occasions, I didn't feel pressure. For example even during the 1992 European Cup Winners' Cup final against Monaco that I mentioned, I wasn't nervous - just excited. I was like a little kid in the candy shop.

I paid for my dad to come to the game. I already told him before the game we were going to lose so he wouldn't give me a hard time afterwards. I was so happy to play in a European Cup final and I just couldn't believe my dream was coming true.

There I am playing in one of the biggest games of my life in a massive stadium in front of thousands of people and millions on tv - but yet I was just so excited to get out there on the

field and kick the ball around. I was just living the dream. In my 10 games in the UEFA Champions League, I achieved the fourth highest goal scoring ratio of all time.

When I look at awards and trophies, or successes I had, I can honestly say I was just following my passion. The achievements are really satisfying and I suppose somehow in the big games I just rose to the occasion.

After Germany, you spent a two-year stint playing in Japan before returning to New Zealand. You then founded your academy Wynton Rufer Soccer School of Excellence - or WYNRS (appropriately pronounced winners) - with help from your brother Shane. Can you tell us a little bit about the academy?

Can I just say, my wife and I loved Japan and we still do - it was also the most money I'd ever made in my career! But in 1997, after Japan, I believe God called me to come back to New Zealand. I've got a lot of former teammates who have big jobs and massive salaries overseas and when I catch up with them they sometimes ask, "what are you doing in New Zealand!?". But, I believe the Lord has clearly sent me here, so

I simply followed His leading. Over the years, football has taken me to more than 90 countries all over the world. I've just been so blessed to have had some amazing experiences. Now I use the talents God has given me to help the next generation. Perhaps I don't get as many chances to overtly share the Gospel with academy players and mention Jesus. But Proverbs 3: 5-6 comes to

mind, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will guide your path..."

The academy's football philosophy is individual player development. To me that means players need to be able to kick the ball brilliantly with both feet - and juggling is also a big part of my coaching program. What juggling does is it helps you with your first touch, and all the world-class players have an amazing first touch.

Overall, we aim to build world class footballers and community role models in a positive environment that encourages teamwork, commitment and excellence. The depth is slowly growing in New Zealand football and it's really exciting seeing a number of really gifted young players come through. My nephew Alex Rufer - who is currently at the Wellington Phoenix - was at the Wynrs academy between 2002-2008. Sarpreet Singh was at the academy between 2008-2016 and he's now in Germany, under contract to Bayern Munich. Marco Rojas, who plays for the Melbourne Victory in the A-League in Australia,

was at the academy between 2002-2006. And that's just to name a few. The thing is, with football being such a skilful game and so competitive worldwide, I believe you have to be really good at the basic techniques to succeed at International level. There's probably 150 countries in the world where football is the number one sport.

Both my sons, Caleb and Joshua, have enjoyed playing the game too - Caleb played professionally for about three years - a stint which, like me, included a spell in Germany - and he's now shifted over into real estate and is doing really well. I'm very proud of both of my sons.

You mention the A-League in Australia, and while you never got to play in that competition per se - you did have involvement in the league that preceded that competition across the Tasman. Can you tell us about your involvement with the game once you came back to New Zealand?

In 1999, I was involved in the start up of New Zealand's first professional football team called the Football Kingz, which was based in Auckland. It's probably fair to say here in New Zealand we initially had no idea what we were up for in terms of the level of competition across the Tasman, as well as everything else involved with a professional club - but we did okay in those first two years. The Kingz finished in eighth and seventh position in the league in that time. I left at the start of the third year.

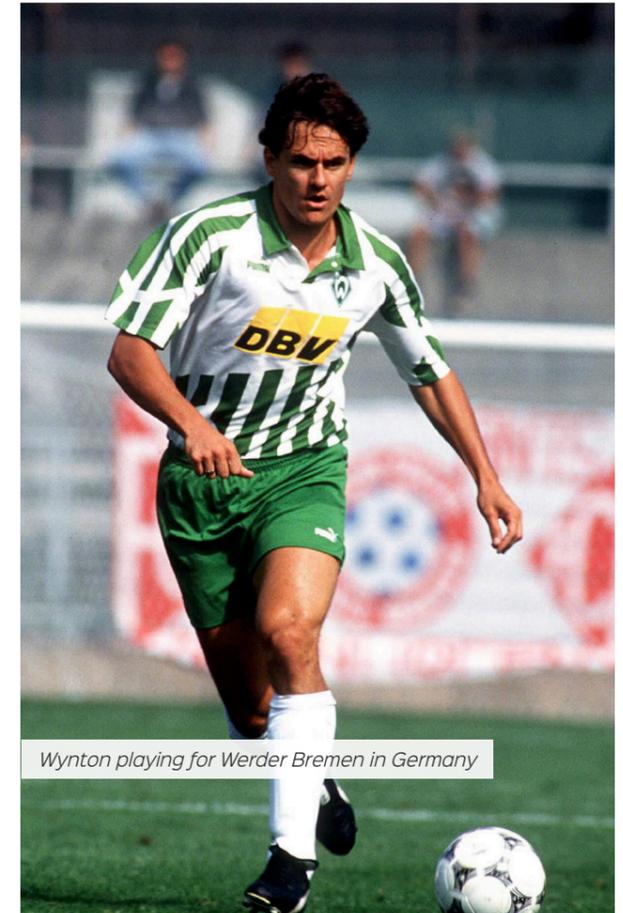
Looking back, my time with the Kingz was actually quite special - the team was trailblazing for what is now the Wellington Phoenix. I retired in 2001 at the age of 38.

Finally Wynton, in 2019, you suffered a massive heart attack and it's no exaggeration to say you almost died. You've said that even during that experience you sensed God's hand - can you tell me about it?

There were no warning signs beforehand. A visiting German friend and I had been to a Breakers basketball game downtown Auckland. I remember the team won and after the game we were headed home on some Lime scooters. We were going up a hill in Parnell at walking pace on the scooters, but the next thing I knew I woke up in hospital.

I later found out that one of my three main arteries was 100 percent blocked and a second smaller artery was 65 percent blocked. A passer-by - Nick Moss - performed CPR and literally kept me alive and saved my life. The heart attack was a total shock, because I was fairly fit and not overweight. In hospital I was in a coma for a day-and-a-half. I can say this though, with certainty, that when I did wake up in the hospital I had a sense of total peace.

■ Jeremy Smith is the new assistant editor of Authentic Magazine. He is an experienced, Waikato based journalist who loves the Lord and enjoys using his talents to glorify God.



Wynton playing for Werder Bremen in Germany

Before it happened I had always believed that I didn't have any fear of dying, and in that moment, when I first woke up, that got confirmed to me. I knew I was very lucky to be alive for sure, and very grateful to Nick and the medical staff. Everyone around me was freaking out and in shock, but I just had a total peace about everything. I attribute that to my faith in Jesus. I simply knew that whatever happened I would be with Him.

What a testimony! Thanks Wynton. Let's pray for Wynton and the WYNRS team, that they would seek the Lord's leading and guiding as they continue to work with some of New Zealand's top up and coming football talent. |A

For more information on the Wynton Rufer Soccer School of Excellence, see www.wynrs.co.nz. Wynton also has an online coaching program called The Success Path. If you are interested in finding out more, email wynnton@wynrs.co.nz.

Additional photography by Phil Botha Creative.





The Truth Christians Most Need?

BY ERIC LUDY

That's an extremely difficult question. That is because I would say there's a combination, some one-two punches in truth and in Christianity, that are very, very important.

I'm going to land on one, even though it's hard for me to say it's the most important, it's going to be up there. And that is the fact that God turns all things for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. The reason I'm going to put that as a centrepiece is not because no one knows it. For a lot of people, that's their favorite Scripture. However, it's actually really believing it that changes the game. Christianity hinges on faith, where faith goes, so goes the Christian. A lot of us have faith, but not necessarily in the Word of God or in Jesus Christ. That's a weird thought to some people - "How could I have faith in something different?"

Well, faith is not merely confidence. It's what you place your trust in. And so many of us have trust in our own ability. We have trust in our medicine cabinet. We have trust in our bank account. We have trust in something. "Hey, we have the right political leader in office, I'm at peace." Instead of our confidence being placed squarely in the Word of Jesus, in the

Word of God. When that's the case, it's a game changer for us. And so therefore in anything we go through, we can rejoice. When you have a grip on that truth, that God turns everything, even things that the enemy is conspiring in and deviously attempting to do, we can smile, rest, and rejoice. Why? Because we know that God will turn even that to good. Even in the difficulties that Christ would allow us to walk through, guess what? Even those get turned to good.

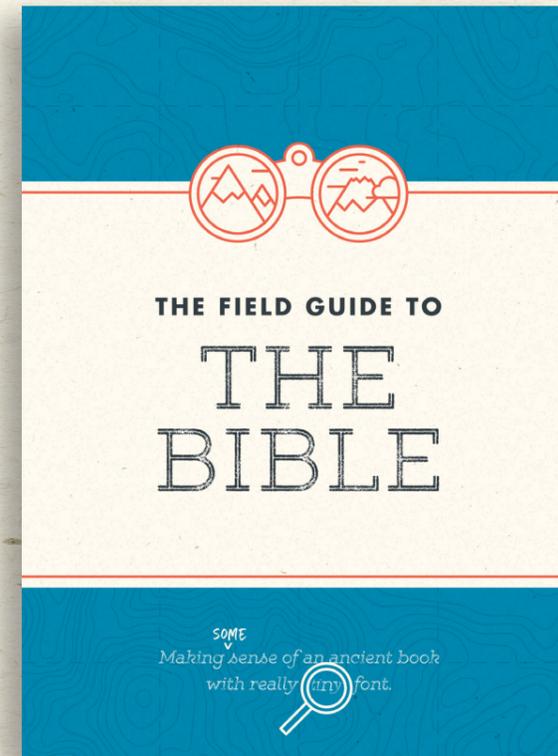
So therefore, we become the happiest people on earth in a momentary flash when we switch in our thinking, not to just esteem the Scripture, but to apply the Scripture to our functional faith. If we really believe that God turns all things — all things: good, bad, ugly — into good for those that love Him and are called according to His purpose ... game changed right there. As a result, you have a triumphant, very happy, and smiling version of Christianity that dances about, sings in prison cells, laughs at the opposition, holds it in derision, sitting up there with a King who is enthroned on High, who laughs at all the nations of the earth taking their stand against Him. Why? Because our God is in control. When you get that, the game has changed. | 

■ Eric Ludy is the president of Ellerslie Mission Society and the bestselling author of eighteen books on Christian thought and living. Eric Ludy functions as the director of Ellerslie Discipleship Training in Windsor, Colorado and serves as the teaching pastor at Ellerslie's campus church. For more from Eric visit www.ericludy.com



THE FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIBLE

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"I Have a right to be Offended!" That phrase has been thrown around a lot in the last few years. So, I wanted to pose a few thoughts:

Do we have a right to be offended?
Should we be getting offended?
What will getting offended achieve?
How can we deal with it when it comes?

The irony for me in sharing this is that while talking about offense many will be offended just by my doing so. Others will hear I have done this and be offended at the very thought of it.

From my little corner of the globe it is like people are waking up every morning and looking under every rock and bush in search of an offense. And again, that just offended someone else.

When I look at offense in the New Testament, there are only a few references to it. Most relate to religious people or powerful people being offended over what Jesus was doing. And what was Jesus doing? As Paul is quoted as saying - "He went around doing good."

I am not convinced that Jesus was being malicious and purposefully looking for ways to offend people, He offended people because He was doing what He knew God had asked Him to do. For any of you still willing to read, I do truly hope the following helps us all. And thank you for not writing me off just

yet! Depending on your Bible translation, there are generally on average around five passages dealing with the topic of offense in the New Testament. Most interesting and telling to me is that there are normally three times the number dealing with forgiveness. As a follower of Christ, I firmly believe you don't have an inherent right to be offended, instead you have the God-ordained power to forgive. Scripture tells us it is virtuous and to your glory to overlook an offense (Proverbs 19:11).

Offended people are not better people in the long run, in fact they find it easier to become bitter people. Here are couple of quick tips for dealing with it:

1. Get it sorted and quickly (Matthew 5:23-25),
2. Deal with it privately (Proverbs 17:9),
3. Forgive and then forgive and then forgive (Matthew 18:21).

Jesus hinted very strongly that this stuff would happen. He didn't tell you to justify it, but to let you know how to navigate and then deal with it. I will leave you with this thought and my sincere prayer and hope we can all grow up more in this area. We should be leading the way in overlooking offense and offering forgiveness.

"Being right, looking right and knowing you are right are not more important than doing right!"

Something to think about. | 



Locky McNeill is a faith-based Jesus entrepreneur living in Taupo, New Zealand. He is a father of two young men and husband to one talented wife, who can bake up a storm of goodness. He splits his time between being a digital pastor and festival director for both Easterfest New Zealand and Christmas in the Park Taupo.



An old African proverb I once heard raises an interesting question - one I've been pondering as we make our way through the early stages of 2021. It is said a certain village was having an issue with troublesome monkeys which would regularly break into homes and brazenly snatch bananas, peanuts or various types of other food.

Frustrated with the occurrence, the village elders came up with a cunning plan - strategically placing half-buried jars around the perimeter of the village.

In the jars they would place some of the items that the offending monkeys so eagerly desired.

But here's the catch - the opening at the top was only slightly bigger than the monkey's hand. And this meant one thing - something the monkeys in our story never quite figured out.

Whenever a monkey saw one of the jars and reached its empty hand into one, it would fit with no problem. However once the monkey grabbed the food, and its hand became a fist, it was stuck. Try as it might - so long as its hand clasped the food - the monkey could not be freed. The opening of the jar was simply not large enough for the clenched fist to get out.

In the proverb, it is said that the monkeys' unwillingness to release the food would keep them stuck and allow the village elders to make their way around, gather up the seemingly stranded animals and remove them from the village.

The truth is the monkeys did possess the means to escape the trap - if they did one simple thing.

Freedom was found in letting go of whatever it was they were holding onto - whatever was keeping them 'stuck' and held captive. Interesting analogy isn't it? So, here's what I've been pondering in prayer and reflection that I hope might be an encouragement.

As we head into a new year, I've been asking God if there are some things in my own life that He'd have me let go of and release to Him. I'm asking Him if there are things I have been holding onto that are keeping me 'stuck' - even unknowingly? Along these lines I read a passage of Scripture recently which really helped.

It was the story of Jesus calling some of His disciples along the shore of the Galilee, found in Matthew 4:18-22. When I read it, it helped me purpose something in my heart. To act promptly to His calling.

The passage of Scripture in the NIV tells us that "...as Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed Him." A quick note here, that when asked, they followed Him 'at once'. "Going on from there, Jesus saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother

John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him." Notice again that when called they went 'immediately'.

My prayer is that my heart would reflect that - when Jesus calls I follow, no hesitation. No doubt these disciples had goals, dreams, aspirations - perhaps a trajectory they felt their lives taking. Yet, at the call of the Master, they were prepared to 'let go' of all of those things - quite literally in this case their livelihoods and families - in pursuit of Him. Sometimes we're faced with a similar decision - to let go of how we thought things would go - and trust His plan.

How will we respond when asked?

We can find security in jobs, where we live - or quite literally anything that maybe we haven't yet fully surrendered to Christ. In my case, things that I can identify that may keep me trapped if I do release them to God could be feeling inadequate at times, perhaps even fearful. Carried around for too long though, these things become burdens - and not burdens God would have us hold on to. It goes without saying that holding onto things we should instead release to God keeps us capped, or limited. Those incorrect beliefs can quite literally keep us trapped. I certainly don't want that. Like many of us I'm sure, I want everything God has for me. But we might have to be prepared to release some things. May He help us in that area if that is the case. As mentioned regarding our story, 'freedom was found in letting go...' Jesus sets us free when we surrender to Him.

I'm reminded of the words of Jesus in John. In John 8:36, He says, "...so if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed..." and in John 10:10 Jesus says "...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full...". Ephesians 3:20 says - "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us." It is Christ's life in and through us - not in our own strength.

Of note too is that while we've talked a lot about letting go and laying down, there might be things that God would have you pick up, or lay hold of, this year. As I prayed about and considered writing this piece, our editor Dave picked up on this and directed me to a passage of scripture to ponder. He raised an interesting point.

Found in Exodus 7, is the account of Moses and Aaron speaking to Pharaoh. As instructed by God, Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials and it became a snake.

Scripture tells us, "Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs." (verses 11-12).

Dave's observation - and it was a good one - was this. The miracle we see in this passage happened after the 'throwing down', of Aaron's staff. God's command was to release the staff - only then would it become what God said it would be. "What if Aaron had decided to keep hold of the staff?," Dave asked. "Maybe the outcome would have been different". And consider too if the disciples too had not left their nets and boats and followed Jesus when He called? How different their lives would have been. One more story might help - the story of the flea and the jar.

In the wild, if you will, when fleas jump they shoot up as high as 38 times their body length - or about three inches. Relative to our size, if we as humans did that it would be the equivalent of us jumping the length of seven football fields from a standing

start. Here's the thing though, if you place a flea in a jar with a lid on it, they will begin jumping, hitting the glass lid and falling back down into the jar.

If you leave them in there long enough, they will begin to get used to the glass lid and learn to jump only as high as just below that lid - so as not to hit it. After

some time, even if you then remove the lid, that flea - for the rest of its life - will only ever jump as high as the lid would have let it. Why?

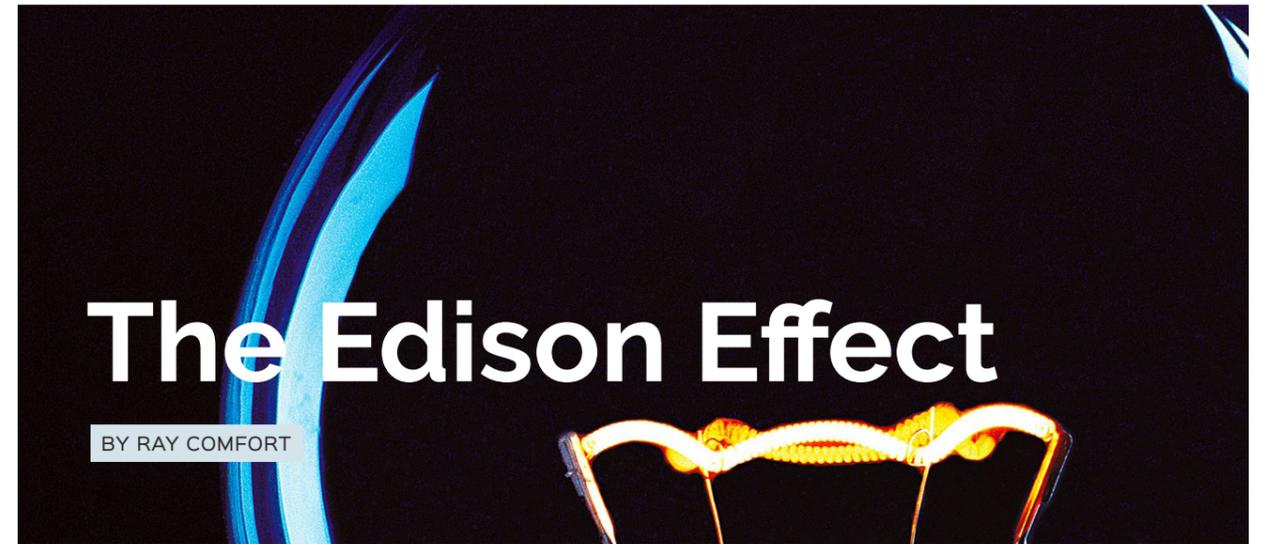
Because the flea has learned to limit itself from jumping beyond the height of the lid because it has been conditioned to the fact that they cannot escape from the jar. As mentioned earlier though, they are in fact capable of so much more - but they never again live as though the lid is off. Someone once said to me, "if you argue for your limitations long enough, you'll have them." When it comes to God's plan for my life, I want to be sure I live to the full extent of what He has for me - no limitations. And to do what He asks.

Might I ask this question as I end this little encouragement - in our own lives, are there areas in which we are living as though we are capped or limited? Are there things we're holding onto that we can purpose to either release to Jesus or pick up afresh as we walk in freedom this year?

Let's not live as though the lid is still on. | 

“Sometimes we’re faced with a similar decision - to let go of how we thought things would go - and trust His plan.”

■ Jeremy Smith is the new assistant editor of Authentic Magazine. He is an experienced, Waikato based journalist who loves the Lord and enjoys using his talents to glorify God.



Kiwi evangelist Ray Comfort answers a question he was asked about how to remain motivated to read (and re-read) the Bible.

"I have read the entire Bible. When I read it again, it's "Ok, I remember already reading this." And I don't have much desire for reading the Bible anymore because it's just re-reading what I've already read.

Now, since you've been reading the Bible every day for decades, I'm sure there isn't a verse you haven't read 50 times over. How do you remain motivated to read? Any tips?"

Your problem is that you are reading the Bible as though it's an ordinary book. I'm sure you know that there is great treasure hidden in the earth — diamonds, gold, silver, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, amethysts, etc., and that if we want them, we have to dig for them. They don't lie openly on the top of the earth. It takes time and effort to dig into the soil to find them. The Psalmist said, "I rejoice at your Word as one who finds great spoil" (Psalms 119:162). If you want to find great treasure in this supernatural Book, it will take humility, time and effort as you dig into the soil of God's Word.

Thomas Edison was a genius who acknowledged God's existence. Look at his humble and teachable attitude towards the Maker's creation. He said, "It's obvious that we don't know one millionth of one percent about anything." Have that humble and teachable attitude when reading God's Word. Every verse you superficially skim-read you show that you are not digging for treasure, so don't be surprised when you won't find any. Take for example two words from a famous verse: "Jesus wept." You can either skim-read the verse, or you can

stop, stare at it and say, "Where is the gold? I'm not seeing it." Then activate the Edison Effect. Say to yourself, "I don't know one millionth of one percent about anything. The Scriptures say, 'The entrance of your Word gives light.' I need You to please switch on the light-bulb and give me understanding in my darkness." Then prayerfully think about the verse. Think about His deity. This is Jesus of Nazareth - God in human form, weeping. He was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, and in that lowly state He was hungry, He was thirsty, was tempted, felt fear, slept, felt pain, and He wept. But why would Jesus weep?

He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Why then shed tears when He knows the joy that that will bring? Was it because He was touched by the pain of others? Dig and think, then think and dig. There's gold in there somewhere and when you find it, it will delight your eyes. Once you've exhausted your own energy, take advantage of the labor of the great gold miners of the past, or respected modern-day diggers.

I know that when I read a portion of scripture with which I'm intimately familiar, if there's a familiarity that breeds contempt on my part, I know that it's just my arrogant attitude in thinking I know it all.

So, I quickly humble myself and make sure I activate the Edison Effect. Most of the time though, as I read Psalms or other portions of Scripture and know exactly what's coming next, I have a sense of humble gratitude and an appreciation that I'm getting to intimately know God's Word, and that's a very good thing. | 

■ Ray Comfort, the founder and CEO of Living Waters Publications, is an internationally recognized evangelist and author. Ray is the host of the award-winning Way of the Master television program and radio program. He is also a best-selling author of over 80 books.





Freedom Of Choice

BY MAJOR W. IAN THOMAS

Never allow anyone to deceive you into believing that God has placed an arbitrary limitation upon the efficacy of the blood of Christ, or that there are those who cannot repent, even if they would, simply because God has deliberately placed them outside the scope of His redemptive purpose! This blasphemes the grace, the love and the integrity of God, and makes Him morally responsible for the unbelief of the unbeliever, for the impenitence of the impenitent, and saddles Him squarely with the guilt of the guilty as an aider and abettor of their sin.

Such is not the teaching of the Bible, for the Lord Jesus Christ made it abundantly clear that the reluctance is on man's part, not on God's! Without freedom of choice it is equally

impossible to obey or to disobey, to be commended for the one or to be condemned for the other!

Some would have you believe that only those can obey the Gospel and accept Christ as their Saviour, to whom God has given the ability to obey as a purely arbitrary, mechanical act on His part, leaving no option in the matter to any individual either way!

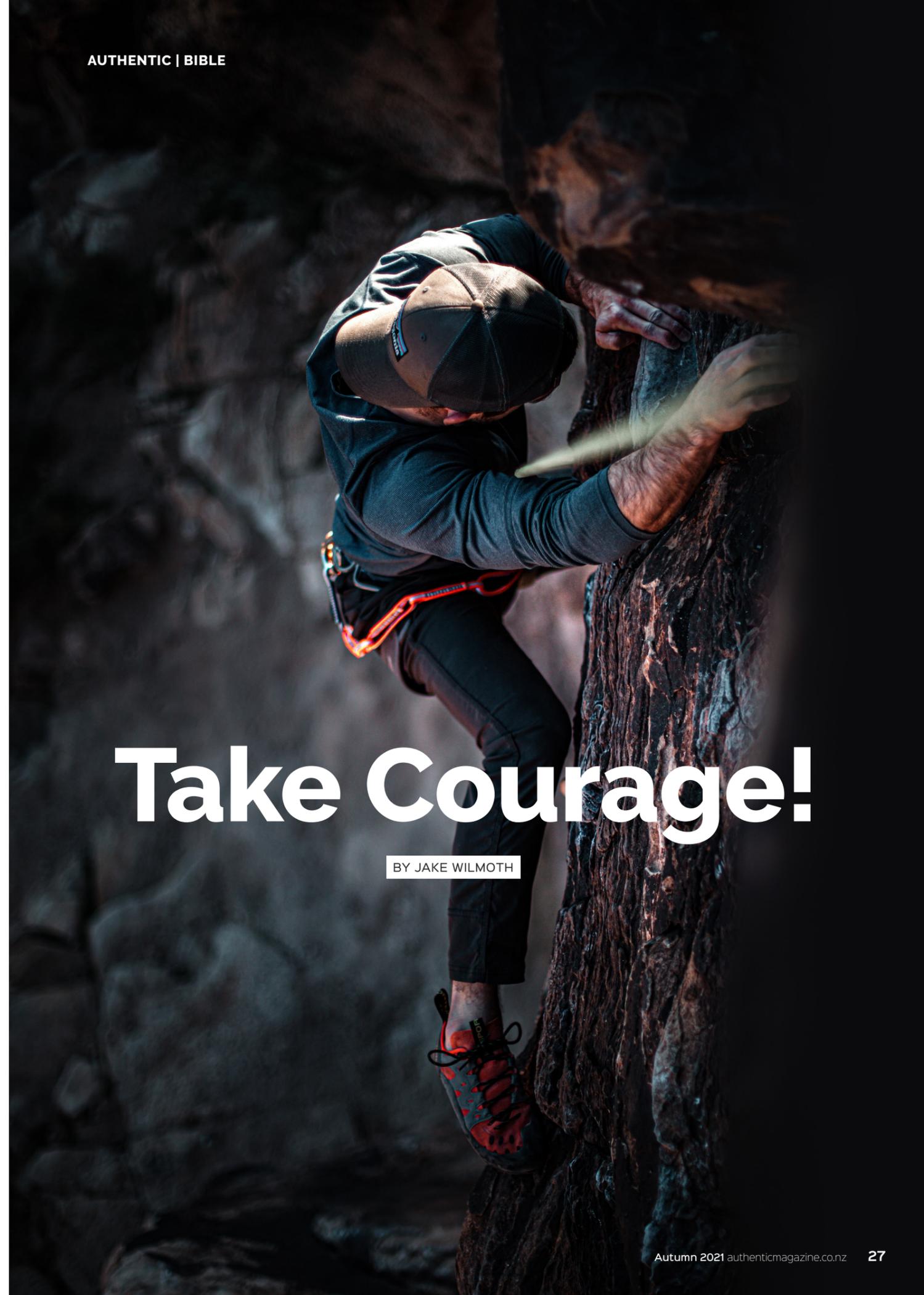
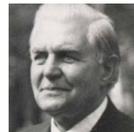
On the basis of this strange hypothesis, the fearful judgment of God is to fall upon those who have remained in their rebellious state of unbelief, only because they have been unable to exercise an ability to obey the Gospel, which only God can give, and which He has refused to give them! Needless to say, such an idea can only serve to bring the righteousness and judgment of God into contempt and disrepute.

The revelation that God has given to us by His Holy Spirit through the apostles is delightfully clear: "if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2); "Who gave Himself a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:6); "... that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man", (Hebrews 2:9).

It is your inherent right to choose which is at the very heart of the mystery, both of the mystery of godliness and of the mystery of iniquity. |A

From: The Mystery of Godliness. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. ©1964.

■ W. Ian Thomas was an evangelist, Christian evangelical writer, theological teacher and founder of the Torchbearers Bible schools. You can learn more about the ministry of Torchbearers, at www.torchbearers.org



Take Courage!

BY JAKE WILMOTH

Have you ever asked yourself, “How can I be strong? How can I have courage?” Did you know God told Joshua to be strong and of good courage three times in one chapter? Let's take a look at why, and see how we can be strong and have courage.

I have always been fond of the book of Joshua, as it tells the story of how the Israelites enter into the promised land. It is a book of battles and struggles, a book of victories and defeats. But most of all it is a book about a man who obeyed the Lord, regardless of what others did or thought.

Joshua was a man of war. He was known as the first commander of the Israelite army. Many believe that he was trained by the Egyptian army. Joshua was also Moses' servant. He was Moses's second in command. Joshua was obedient and faithful to Moses. But at the point of Joshua 1:1, Moses has passed away and now Joshua is the leader of not only the army, but of the entire nation of Israel.

The Lord gives Joshua some very specific instructions. Three times in four verses God tells Joshua to “be strong and of good courage.” So let's take a look.

In Joshua 1:1-5, God reassures Joshua that he is called to be the leader, by referencing Moses. Notice what the Lord calls Moses, “The Servant of the Lord”. What a title! One that is only used 26 times in the Old Testament, over 16 of those times just for Moses.

Joshua is not replacing just anyone, he is replacing the Servant of the Lord; therefore, it is understandable that he might have been nervous, or uncertain. But remember, the Lord did not want another Moses, he wanted Joshua.

“No man is indispensable in God's work. When Moses died, God did not need another Moses, but a man with other gifts and abilities... because it is God's work and not ours.”

It is important to remember that the Lord still has a plan. The plan was to bring the nation of Israel into the Promised Land. That goes all the way back to Genesis 12. This is why God says in Joshua 1:5 “I will never leave you nor forsake you”.

That word “forsake” means to leave or abandon. So the Lord is saying He will never leave nor abandon Joshua in this new venture of faith. In Joshua 1:6, we come to the first time the

phrase be strong and of good courage is mentioned. The word “strong” means to be strong or harden. It is the same word that is used when Pharaoh hardened his heart toward God in Exodus 7:13. The phrase “good courage” means victory, or conquer. The idea is being immovable. To be strong in faith or obedient in what has been asked.

The first time this phrase, “Be Strong and of Good courage” is used, it is in reference to Joshua's calling. As mentioned, the Lord is telling Joshua what he is called to. Before we move on, we need to see what Joshua is not called to, as this will paint a better picture. Joshua is not called to fight, he is not called to lead them into war, he was not called to judge.

So what was he called to do, you ask? He was called to lead the Israelites into the Land of Canaan, he was called to divide the promised land amongst the 12 Tribes; essentially he was a real estate agent. Now please do not misunderstand me. Battles, war and leading were

all a part of this calling, but look at what God says in Joshua 1:6. That is where the Lord tells Joshua what he is supposed to do. God is encouraging Joshua to lead and be strong in something that was different. It was not something he had done before, hence the extra encouragement from the Lord.

The second time Joshua is told to be strong and courageous is in Joshua 1:7 and following this he is encouraged to remember, or know, God's word in Joshua 1:8. Joshua is told: “observe the law; do not allow the Book of the law to depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, and observe all that is written in it”.

These four things serve as a reminder that Joshua had the potential to be distracted in what he was doing. In this new venture, Joshua needed to be reminded about keeping his focus on the Word of the Lord. The third time Joshua is told to be strong and of good courage is in Joshua 1:9. Here, the Lord is really encouraging Joshua not to allow other feelings to overwhelm him as he leads.



Notice the Lord says, “be strong and of good courage”; these are positive things. Do these. But then they are followed up with two negative things, “do not do these things. Do not be afraid or dismayed.” “Afraid” means distressed or anxious over future events. “Dismayed” means shattered, broken, terrified. Now you all might be thinking “that is great, be strong don't be afraid. But how does one go from being afraid to being strong?”

Notice what God says in Joshua 1:9, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

It would seem the ability to be strong is right there for Joshua to take hold of, so what is it? Obedience. As mentioned before, this is a book of obedience. Someone once said “A long obedience in the same direction will produce results.”

All we have to do is look at the life of Joshua and see a fulfilment of that. So my encouragement to us today is to be obedient to the Lord. That is how we will be able to be strong and of good courage. Obedience is simply following. It is

following what the Lord has asked us to do. It might be difficult, it might be uncomfortable and it might even look weird, but it is what the Lord has asked us to do. Imagine Joshua, he goes from being the commander of the army, to real estate agent; that had to be an unusual transition.

I am sure there were times when all he wanted to do was chop someone's head with the sword, or solve some dispute with a fight. I am sure there were even times when Joshua was glad they were in battle. That was probably where he felt most comfortable, on the battlefield. But Joshua always came back and led the people, and distributed the land as the Lord called him to.

What is the Lord calling you to do today? Is it something you are uncomfortable with, something that is not easy, something you may not have even imagined yourself ever doing?

“Be strong and of good courage!” The Lord is with you. Be obedient and He will continue to guide you in this venture of faith. Remember Hebrews 11:6 “But without faith it is impossible to please Him...”. So, as you take that step of faith, the Lord is not only with you but He is pleased by your step of faith. | A

■ Jake Wilmoth has been working with Calvary Chapel Bible Institute (CCBI) for about 10 years. Married to Tecla, they have a daughter named Jade, and a son, Jeremiah. Jake grew up in Yucaipa, California while Tecla grew up in Bucharest, Romania - they moved to New Zealand in 2010. Together, they oversee many of the practical aspects of the CCBI operation. Tecla specifically oversees the Women's Ministry.





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What's Your Routine?

BY PAUL CURTAS

Much of the daily routine surrounding our lives has changed over the last 11 months. Our communication has become more two dimensional, meeting online and through social media. Also, we are not moving about so freely. People feel hemmed in under greater limitations!

The Apostle Paul found himself in such circumstances more than once.

One time was when he was restricted to house arrest in Rome for two years (Acts 28:16, 30-31). While there he wrote in a letter to those in Colossae, asking them to pray for him, that God would open a door for the Gospel, and for him to be released (Colossians 4:3).

A year later, still under house arrest, he wrote another letter to those in Philippi, and reported that his restricted circumstances have turned into an open door to bring the Gospel to the Roman guards who were guarding him daily (Philippians 1:12-13). These were Praetorian guards, who were an elite group of upcoming leaders in Rome. Interestingly, at the end of this

letter, Paul sends greetings from all the Christians in Rome, and added, "especially from those of Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22).

Evidently, some of the guards had become Christians. I am quite sure that Paul did not plan to be arrested and

“Don't let your view of difficult circumstances determine how you think God can or cannot use you.”

detained in order to write letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Nor do I think he had a strategy to reach Caesar's elite Roman guard with the Gospel, by getting himself arrested. It can be hard for us at times to imagine how God

is incorporating opportunities in our difficulties and sufferings. Paul realised that his limitations turned out much greater than he had thought. During that time, he wrote a letter to the Ephesians... I am certain he reflected on his restricted circumstances when he said: "Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, by the power that is working within us" (Ephesians 3:20).

Don't let your view of difficult circumstances determine how you think God can or cannot use you. Instead, be willing for Him to provide what you need in these circumstances ... because it could turn out much different than you think! **||**

■ Paul M. Curtas is the General Director of FCAP. He is also the author of the book "When God Shows Up at Work", which is now available in German and Spanish, as well as English. Visit his website for more details - www.godinwork.com





HE IS NOT HERE!

BY DAVE FIRTH

If you were around in the late 90s, you might have heard of Tomb Raider. It's been made into a couple of movies but originally Tomb Raider was a video game for the PlayStation. I remember playing it in my early twenties, controlling a very scantily clad Lara Croft as she ran down tunnels and jumped over rivers and fought against bad guys and monsters.

It was actually a lot of fun, and part of that fun was that you got to discover treasures and solve puzzles and advance to the next level! Well, although there are probably a few tombs around the world that have gold or treasure in them, the vast majority of tombs are simply DEATH HOLES!

It's where the dead are placed. And that was just what happened to Jesus. Now Jesus' tomb was certainly a special one – and not one that he would have been expected to be buried in. Only criminals were crucified. That kind of death was for the dregs of society. They definitely weren't placed in posh garden tombs that had never been used before!

But Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took Jesus' body, used spices and strips of linen, and placed it in the brand

new tomb. Now, do you remember the story of Lazarus (see John 11:17-44)? Firstly, Jesus loved this guy. He was a pretty special fella! His sisters sent word to Jesus that he was sick because they knew He could do something about it! One of his sisters, Martha (the complainer), goes out to meet Jesus and says this,

²¹ "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But she has learned something so she adds...

²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the RESURRECTION and the LIFE"

Now, I love the seven 'I AM' statements in John's Gospel and I've taught on several of them. 'I am the bread of Life', 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life', 'I am the Vine' and so on – they're all great, easy to grasp and make sense, but this was the one I have always found the most confusing. In fact, I struggled to understand it until I was asked to teach on it at a camp and I

had to unpack this passage. I had never realised before that the Resurrection and the Life were two separate things.

Because, Jesus was actually in the tomb when He rose from the dead. He was in the tomb when He beat death.

He was alone. But an angel rolled the stone away (Matthew 28:2) and Jesus saw the light. But then what? Did He sit there in the tomb feeling sad that He was alone? Did He sit there feeling miserable about the persecution He had faced? Did He sit there grumbling about the friends that had let him down? Did He sit there complaining about how easy other people have it?

He'd just beaten death – forever! So, He stood up, and WALKED OUT OF THE TOMB.

Just take a moment to think about that. It's probably true to say that most Christians acknowledge that they have been CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST – good, well done – that's important. And many have embraced the truth that Jesus rose from the dead, beat death and came back to life.

But...THEY'RE STILL IN THE TOMB!

You see, the tomb is a place of death, darkness, loneliness and emptiness. If I was locked in a tomb and I didn't think I could get out, I'd panic, I'd be scared, I'd shout for help, I'd feel sorry for myself and I'd probably doubt that things were going to be ok.

But what if the stone had been rolled away? Jesus had a decision to make – and for Him it seemed a simple one – perhaps because He understood it a bit more than we do. Stay in the tomb and exist, or step out of the tomb into REAL LIFE – Life in its fullness (John 10:10)

Have you ever lost the glasses that were on your head the whole time? Or in a busy store had a child that's stood right in front of you, but they panic because they can't see you?

If you have your back to the tomb entrance you may not realise it's open! If we have been raised 'with Christ' – we need to get out of the tomb because He isn't in it any more!

Of course, the Bible shows us a whole bunch of people in Scripture that seemed to hang out 'in the tomb'. They were alive but not living life! One of my favourites is Peter.

Before Acts 2 he was living a life of doubt, pride, fear, wanting position, wanting to be first etc. Then, as we read Acts 2 (and

his two letters), we find that he is now living a life in total freedom (apart from a little blip in Galatians 2:20).

Eventually...PETER got up and got out of the tomb.

Our FREEDOM is 'in Christ' so we need to be present with Him – and He's not in the tomb anymore! Genesis chapters 6 to 8 introduce us to a man called Noah. He was blameless, righteous, he walked with God! Some years ago, I was studying Genesis and had the opportunity to discuss it with a renowned Hebrew Scholar. During our time together we discovered something exciting.

In Genesis 7:1 the NIV says that God told Noah to, 'Go in to the Ark' but the King James Version, and more importantly, the Hebrew text, clearly says that God told Noah to 'Come in to the Ark'. And then we discovered that in Genesis 8:15 the NIV says that God told Noah to, 'Come out of the Ark' but interestingly, when we checked the Hebrew, again it clearly says that God told Noah to 'Go out of the Ark'.

“ If we have been raised 'with Christ' – we need to get out of the tomb because He isn't in it any more! ”

This was exciting because of the implication. God told Noah to come to where He was. In the Ark. And Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, because that's where Jesus was.

It may seem insignificant at first until you think of the presence of God. Why would God send us away from

Himself? Jesus said, 'Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I WILL GIVE YOU REST' – Matthew 11:28

Jesus is the one who calls us – and He calls us to follow Him. I love that fact that in John chapter one, Jesus meets with Andrew and then Simon-Peter in Bethany. But it's about one year later, seventy miles North when Jesus stands on the shores of Galilee and calls those two brothers to follow Him. And they did. They knew who they were following!

Do you know who is calling you? And do you know what you are being called to? Jesus calls us to Himself, as the Father called to Jesus and He stepped out of the tomb.

"Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" The angels said.

Why do we look for life – for satisfaction – in the world? In money, people, position, fame? You will not find life inside a tomb – He has risen and if we want to share in His life – which we are heirs to – we must follow Him OUT OF THE TOMB and discover His life – life in its fullness! | 

■ Dave Firth is a husband, father, Bible teacher and communicator. He loves the Lord and has a passion for His Word. For more info and free-to-use-Bible study tools visit www.davefirth.org



WHAT IS THE GREATEST COMPLIMENT YOU CAN EVER GIVE GOD?

BY ALAN STANLEY

Everyone loves to receive compliments; compliments make us feel good. Scientific research has even revealed that receiving compliments has the same effect upon our brain as receiving a monetary reward.¹ In other words, we feel valued, better off and richer for having received a compliment.

Compliments, or praise, typically comes in the form of words - "You look fantastic," "I love your work," "You are such fun to be around," "I could listen to you all day." However, compliments and praise are by no means limited to words. We may praise someone by sharing private and personal information with them, indicating we trust them. We praise a person when we seek their advice, indicating we value their wisdom.

I have always considered it a great honour (praise!) whenever a couple has asked me to perform their wedding ceremony. Repeat business is great praise. In fact, some of the most powerful tributes are communicated without the normal words of praise or appreciation.

I remember a good friend of mine - known for his business acumen, wealth, experience, and wisdom - came to me one day for advice. Never before had that happened. Usually it was me going to him for advice. Boy, did I feel honoured.

God also loves to be praised, although admittedly, not in the way that we love to be praised. Praise appeals to our ego and egos are always needy and love to be inflated. Without affirmation and praise, which may take a variety of forms, egos become deflated.

But God is neither needy nor craving an ego boost. Unlike humanity, God is completely secure within Himself. It is we who need Him, not the other way around (e.g., Acts 17:25). With this qualification out of the way, it is worth asking "What kind of praise does God love?" Before we answer that question, it will help to understand what praise actually is - in God's mind.

The place to begin is with creation. Creation praises God.

"Praise Him, sun and moon, praise Him, all you shining stars! Praise Him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!... Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds!... Let them praise the name of the LORD, for His name alone is exalted; His majesty is above earth and heaven" (Psalm 148:3-4, 9-10, 13).

But, you ask, how can the sun and moon, mountains and hills, livestock and birds, praise God? Animals might have mouths, but the sun, moon, mountains, and hills don't.

How can anyone or anything praise God without a mouth? Answer: we obviously don't need a mouth to praise God. Now, this does not mean that we cannot praise God with our mouths. "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." (Psalm 51:15), "Because your steadfast love is better

than life, my lips will praise you." (Psalm 63:3). "My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD." (Psalm 145:21). "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name." (Hebrews 13:15).

But since stars and mountains praise God, praise/worship cannot be reduced "to verbal, emotionally charged expressions of praise."²

Furthermore, mouths may speak or sing forth praise that is effectively not praise. Jesus said of God's leaders, the Pharisees, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain." (Matthew 15:8-9). What counts, then, is not what comes out of the mouth, but the heart. The problem with the Pharisees is not that their hearts were insincere by the way. Just imagine someone telling you that you look awesome, and yet their heart is not impacted by your awesomeness.

"God loves people, and those who claim to honour God will love what God loves. It's illogical to think otherwise."

This doesn't mean they have lied or been deceitful. It's simply a compliment and for the purposes of this illustration, a genuine one. In the case of the Pharisees, what the heart lacked was not sincerity but honour. The word "honour" here means to value and hold something in high regard.

So, what Jesus is saying is that while the Pharisees said that they valued God and held Him in high regard, their hearts did not believe the same. Once again, this doesn't make their words insincere, but it does make them simply... words!

The key question is, "If their hearts are far from God, where exactly were their hearts?"

The answer is simple: their hearts were valuing something else. And Matthew gives us quite a bit of insight into the kinds of things their hearts were valuing: avoiding contact with anything that would make them feel impure and unholy (Matthew 15:2), the recognition and acknowledgment of others (Matthew 23:6-7), the fastidious observance of the law (Matthew 23:23-24), appearing righteous to others (Matthew 23:25-28), and so on.

We also know from Luke that they valued money (Luke 16:13-14). Again, none of this means that they did not mean what they said when they opened their mouths to praise God; but their hearts did not value God in the same way that their words suggested. That value, heart value, was reserved for other things. A further clue into their hearts is given to us in how the word "honour" is used elsewhere in Matthew. It occurs again with reference to people. The command to "Honor your

father and mother” occurs in Matthew 15:4 and again 19:19, followed closely by “love your neighbor as yourself.” This suggests that honouring God is closely related to honouring and valuing people! If this seems strange, it should not. The greatest commandment is to love God with all of one’s being, but the second greatest commandment is so closely related as to be inseparable — to love one’s neighbour as oneself (Matthew 22:36–40).

This close relationship between honouring or valuing God and people is seen throughout Scripture. One example will suffice. In Jeremiah God promises to give Israel “a heart to know me, that I am the LORD” (Jeremiah 24:7). This is the new covenant which Jesus brings about through his death (Luke 22:20). The central promises of this covenant is that “they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD” (Jer 31:34).

But knowing the LORD is not measured by how loud one can sing or how high one can raise their hands. The LORD gave Jeremiah an illustration: king Josiah “defended the cause of the poor and needy... Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the LORD” (Jer 22:16). Interesting. To know God and defending the cause of the poor and the needy are clearly one and the same. This does not mean that one who takes care of the poor and the needy knows God. But it does mean that those who know God take care of the poor and the needy.

This is clearly where the Pharisees fell down. In failing to honour their aging parents they demonstrated they did not in fact honour or value God. This failure to value people is seen throughout Matthew’s Gospel: the Pharisees did not value those on the margins of society (Matthew 9:11), Jesus’ hungry disciples (Matthew 12:1–2), a man with a crippled hand (Matthew 12:9–13), Gentile converts to Judaism (Matthew 23:15), and God’s messengers (Matthew 23:37).

No wonder Jesus could say to them that their hearts were far from God. How can one love God and not love people? It is impossible to read the Bible and not understand that God’s heart is for people. People are the pinnacle of God’s creation (Genesis 1:26–28). Israel are the “apple of [God’s] eye” (Deuteronomy 32:10; Zechariah 2:8). God “is close to the brokenhearted” (Psalm 34:18). He pays attention to our tears (Psalm 56:8). We are valuable to him (Matthew 6:26; 10:31).

To be sure, He punishes sin (Exodus 34:7), but “He does not treat us as our sins deserve” (Psalm 103:10). He takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 33:11). He cares for all people (e.g., Jonah 4:11) and is “not wanting anyone to perish” (2 Peter 3:9). He is “a gracious and compassionate God,

slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (Jonah 4:2).

God loves people, and those who claim to honour God will love what God loves. It’s illogical to think otherwise. In his great little book *Who is God?* Richard Bauckham points out the five characteristics typically used to characterize God — compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (see Exodus 34:6) — “these are all relational terms. They describe how God relates to people . . . Moreover, they are without exception positive. They portray God as overwhelmingly compassionate and caring, patient and forgiving, reliable in his commitment to people.” God is, Bauckham concludes, “this sort of God.”³

It explains why Jesus had a reputation for being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19). This does not mean that Jesus ate to excess and got drunk, but He gained such a reputation because He often hung out with these sorts of people. Jesus was not a task orientated person; He was people orientated. A woman bleeding for twelve years stealthily sneaks up behind Him for a touch of his cloak so as to be healed. She could care less about meeting the man, but Jesus doesn’t feel that way. He won’t be satisfied until he locks eyes with hers (Mark 5:25–34).

And of course, it was God’s love for people that drove Jesus to the cross (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). In Jesus’

own mind, there was no greater act of love, than to lay down his life for others (John 15:13). This rather extended look into the character of God is important for one reason: no one can love this God without sharing God’s heart for people. We might imagine that God takes great delight in our Sunday worship services, but what really brings Him delight is when we treat people with the same degree of honour and value that He does. Thus, “everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of Him” (1 John 5:1).

This refers to Christians loving Christians. But the Bible is clear, our love is to extend to all (see Galatians 6:10), even our enemies (Matthew 5:43–47).

So, let’s return to our original question: “What kind of praise does God love?” Or to put it another way, “What is the best compliment we can give God?” Think about how mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, beasts, livestock, creeping things, birds, etc., praise God.

Psalm 19 and Romans 1 gives us the answer. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). God’s “invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived,

ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20). How then does creation praise and worship God? The answer is by reflecting God’s character.

And that is the way that human beings best praise God, by reflecting his character. Mountains worship God by being mountains because that’s what God created them to be. Human beings worship God by imaging God because that’s what God created us to be (Genesis 1:26). Thus, when we image God, we praise him. Think about this for a moment. What is the greatest compliment (think praise) you can ever give anyone? Is it to tell them how much you love the clothes they wear? Is not the greater compliment to simply wear the same clothes? Is it for a fellow preacher to tell another preacher, “I love the way you preach?”

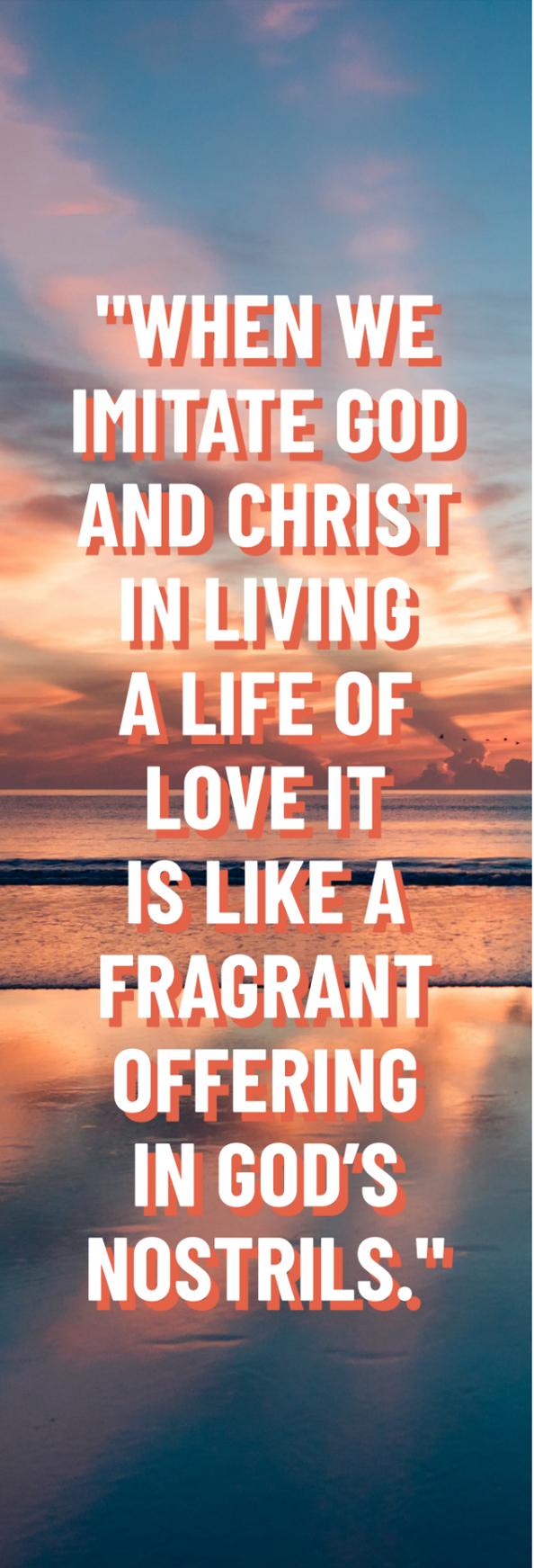
Is not the greater compliment to begin to emulate their preaching? When we seek to image someone else, then they know that our hearts really value them. We do more than just tell them how great they are; we seek to be like them. There is a compliment that beats all compliments, and that is, “I want to be just like you.” Let’s go one better, when that desire turns into action: they actually begin to be like you. This shows just how much the person giving the compliment truly values us. I remember a conversation I had with a seventeen-year-old girl who told me that she wanted to marry someone just like her dad. Imagine being her dad. Would you not feel praised?

Now, think about God. What do you think God loves more, the praise that comes from our lips; telling Him how great He is; how much we love Him? Or is it to image Him; to seek to be like Him? What would please you more if you were God? Think again of the Pharisees. They had worship down to a fine art. And yet their hearts, attitudes and actions suggested that they trusted in a different God from the one that so often stood before them in the person of Jesus.

So much so that they killed Him. And yet here is their doctrinal statement: “The only Father we have is God Himself” (John 8:41). Think of Jonah. He prays a marvellous prayer while stranded in the belly of a whale (Jonah 2).

He claims to know that the LORD is “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and one who relents concerning threatened judgment” (Jonah 4:2), and yet Jonah himself is none of these things toward the nasty Assyrians, whom God cares for (Jonah 4:11). Rather he is “angry” (Jonah 4:1, 4), void of any grace and compassion toward Nineveh, but delighted to receive divine benevolence for himself.

How do we truly praise God? How do we demonstrate that we value and honour God above all else? Paul answers the question for us: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1–2).



**"WHEN WE
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“The key question is, “If their hearts are far from God, where exactly were their hearts?” The answer is simple: their hearts were valuing something else.”

When we imitate God and Christ in living a life of love it is like a fragrant offering in God’s nostrils. Thus, in Romans 12:1, Paul describes the transformed life as “your true and proper worship.” And of course there is Micah 6:8: “what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

One more: “do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16). No wonder Paul described being transformed into Christ’s image as “glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Imaging Christ is the way we truly glorify God.

Over the years I have asked Bible College students, “How is your relationship with God?” Without exception, every single one would answer according to how their ‘Quiet Times’ were going. Their prayer life or the quality of their times in the Bible were measures, so they thought, of their relationship with God. Now, it’s not that these things aren’t important.

But they are hardly a relationship-with-God-barometer. If we think they are, we are, to borrow a phrase from someone who applied the same idea to worship services, “barking up the wrong tree entirely.”⁴

We know this from the Old Testament prophets who repeatedly told Israel that their times of praise and worship meant absolutely nothing to God (see e.g., Isaiah 1; 58; Jeremiah 7; Ezekiel 22; Amos 5; Micah 3). I mentioned to a class of students once this idea that our relationship with God is not revealed in how well our quiet times are going, but in how well we are loving our neighbour as ourselves.

One student spoke up, “Perhaps the next time someone asks us how our relationship with God is, we should reply, ‘You tell me!’” Great Point.

Why is this important? It’s important because it brings us back to basics, to what’s really important and what really pleases God. So much of the church today is divided on

matters concerning worship and doctrine. Churches have their distinctive worship styles and practices ranging from the post-modern to liturgical. Churches and denominations also have their theological distinctives.

What though is the distinctive mark of God’s people: is it the way we worship on Sunday? Is it our doctrinal statements? No, neither. It is our “fruit” (see Matthew 7:15–27). “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Oh, and by the way, Jesus does not have in mind any kind of love. “This is how we know what love is,” John wrote in his first letter, “Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:16).

Back around the turn of the century, I was walking down Swiss Avenue in Dallas, Texas. I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, and on this particular morning I was doing my regular prayer walk. I was in the final stages of it when a man came out from beyond a dumpster. White breadcrumbs spilled out of his mouth as he walked toward me and asked if I had anything that I could give him. Without missing a step, I extended my arm to communicate “No” and proceeded to walk on by.

And continued to pray! Yes, and then it hit me. What had I just done? I won’t bother rehearsing how this story ends, but needless to say, how easy it is to forget the kind of praise that pleases God. | 

1. Sarah DiGiulio, 8 October 2019, *Why compliments make us feel so good – and how to get better at giving them*, NBC Universal, accessed 4 February 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/lifestyle/why-compliments-make-us-feel-so-good-how-get-better-ncna1062546>.
2. For the quote and the ideas in the above three paragraphs I am indebted to J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 40–41.
3. Richard Bauckham, *Who is God? Key Moments of Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 68–69.
4. David A. deSilva, *Unholy Allegiances: Heeding Revelation’s Warnings* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2013), 97–98.



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Ministering With Music: Sitting Down With Strahan

BY JEREMY SMITH

"As a Christian with a ministry as a musician, it's never a performance and it's not a show. It's an invitation to lift up, honour and draw near to Jesus."

"Every time I'm on stage, I'm there by God's grace. The power of the Gospel isn't in talent, intellect or ability - it's in a life lived in Christ."

"As I see it, anybody willing to come to one of my shows to see an acoustic solo artist who sings about God is coming because they're thirsty. I'm not the one who can give them what they need - but Jesus can. On stage I'm continually praying, "Lord, these are your children, please speak to them."

Kiwi 'folk-psalmist' Strahan has kept that approach at the forefront of his mind through a storied decade-long music career touring through Australasia, the United States and Europe. His debut full length record, Posters, saw him win a New Zealand Music award.

In recent times, as he seeks to follow the Lord's leading, Strahan has also turned to the written word to express his art form - writing two prayer books and running weekly prayer classes.

Jeremy Smith caught up with Strahan to talk music, art, family and walking closely with Jesus through the ups and downs of life.

Firstly, let's talk about your music journey - how did that come about? Have you always loved music?

For sure. I started in music pretty young. My earliest memories of music were also probably some of my earliest memories of life. I was a huge Michael Jackson fan. In the 1990s, I got Bad on tape! I was captivated by the way he told stories and how he could create another world.

Somehow, that other world made your ordinary world feel beautiful. My dad was really into music too - that caught on with me I guess. I wrote my first song when I was eight, was in bands as a teenager, then I started writing my own stuff in my 20s.

Did you grow up in a Christian home, or did you come to know Jesus later in life?

A little bit of both. My parents started to teach us seriously about Jesus when I was eight or nine and we started going to church. I was a Christian throughout my teen years, but I think I struggled with genuinely following Jesus. I always had a sensitivity to God though - but it wasn't until university that all my ideas about God were deeply challenged.

I went through my own personal crisis - an experience which helped me realise that up until that point, the essence of faith that I had missed was the every day, lived experience of laying down my life for Christ and following Him.

I was 19 when I turned that corner and really started to give up my own life to follow Jesus. It's true for me at least, and likely the same for others, but I believe there's a shift that needs to take place for all of us - from being say a 'cultural Christian' - where you know things about Him that others have told you - to instead knowing Jesus personally and living out a genuine relationship with Him. There is a difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge.

I do think there's something about becoming a young adult, say in that 18-23 age bracket, when a really healthy crisis of faith kicks in and you're forced to let go of your 'idea' of Christianity, where you follow because you were told. In its place, we should pursue Jesus for ourselves and ask, "how does a personal relationship with Jesus fit in my life?" Of course, He does fit - and He should be our centre. As I came to a personal faith in Jesus, I started making decisions and answering that question for myself, based on seeing His calling a little bit clearly.

Tell me about your family. You guys recently moved to Tairua - what's it like living at the beach? What does your perfect family day look like?

I am married to Katie and we have three children - Mikal, Theo and Finley. Tairua is magic. For me, the perfect day looks like the little things - coffee in bed, reading a book, taking it slow. Katie and I love taking the kids down the beach - we've seen stingrays in the water and dolphins from the shore. The most amazing thing is simply playing with my kids and watching them just light up with laughter as they have fun. There's such beauty in that.

You mentioned several other music ventures you've been part of over the years. Probably most well known is your time as a solo artist performing under the moniker Strahan. How did that facet of your musical journey develop?

I literally just picked up an acoustic guitar in my late 20s and began doing living room shows and gigs around New Zealand. I kind of fell in love with the combined medium of storytelling and playing solo. That sort of began my journey of living a bit more of an alternative lifestyle - which meant lots of overseas travel and multiple shows. It was a 10-year season of our life as a family marked by learning to rely on God for absolutely everything. Out of that grew a desire to seek God even more - and that began to reflect in my music.

I think music invites everyone to see the world differently - less in zeros and ones if you will, and more in pictures, imaginations, ideas and dreams.

In your own words, describe your music and how you approach song writing?

Great question - I never know how to answer it! I would say my songs are acoustic psalms - prayers more than anything. I'm not trying to be technically brilliant. I'm trying to write prayers in a way that means anybody can join in. Sometimes that means

music that's way more electric, sometimes folksy, even at times quirky. People often call me a folk artist. I get that. But I think the way I write songs is a bit different.

Musical influence wise, early on I was shaped by a lot of folk artists from the 1960s and 70s - Bob Dylan, Cat Stevens and Don Francisco. All of them are such good storytellers - they draw you in. Growing up, I heard music from Jethro Tull through to Genesis.

A Christian artist who had a massive influence on me was Jason Upton - his work is poetic and contemplative and he writes prayers too. The intimacy and the closeness of his songs caught my imagination as to how music can point people to God.

Scanning your discography, do you personally have a favourite track?

I've done three full length albums, an EP and some singles and it's funny - the songs I like as an artist never seem to be the ones anyone else likes! I really love a song from my second album called Hello Heaven. Help Me Believe is also one I like.

It's not necessarily my favorite song technically - it's almost ordinary really. But knowing where I was as a person and the place that song came from when I wrote it, it's a track that resonates with me no matter how much I play it.



As well as music, you've recently released two poetry books - Prayer Volume One and Prayer Volume Two. Tell me about those...

I wanted to find an expression of my faith that wasn't necessarily music, but that lent into my experiences over those 10 years I spent touring and playing shows. I actually started the prayer books at a time when I was very sick and I couldn't sing. I

wasn't even sure if I could ever again - so, I chose the written word as a means of expressing that same poetic sensibility.

Of all the places in the world music has taken you, do you have a favourite memory?

Probably my most memorable musical moment from a show perspective was one I did years ago at a festival in Waikanae. It was so special - and not because it was a great show - but because of what God did in

people's lives. There was just such a sense of His presence. At the merch table after the show, we prayed for people for two-and-a-half hours.

How did you find the balance between traveling and touring both nationally and internationally as well as maintaining a healthy family life?

It took some work, sure. For Katie and I, our joint approach was to travel together with the kids as much as we could. At the height of my music ministry, when I was touring in the United States, I was probably doing about three or four tours there annually. In the early New Zealand years I was gone either every weekend, or every other weekend.

But I always made efforts to balance that by being as present as I could when I was home. I never had a 'nine to five' if you will and I was very intentional regarding family time. Katie and I are a partnership. She is amazing and I couldn't have done ministry without her. As a result of being that unified team, our marriage flourished. We definitely haven't got it perfect, but we've tried our best to keep the balance right, with God being central to all we do.

Have people who've heard your music, watched you live or read your books told you how much a particular piece of work impacted or helped them?

Yes. One story especially comes to mind. I was in a tiny little town in the United States to do a show, staying with a husband and wife. They took me out to dinner and they had a young child with them who looked to be maybe one-and-a-half or two. The wife then told me, in her own words, "... our baby is alive thanks to God and your music". I was stunned. She began

“Those encounters make me feel like the cost of what my wife and I have been through to produce all those songs and the music we create - as ethereal as it is in the art world - is worth it even if it speaks to just one person's heart.”



to tell me how they had wanted a baby for so long, but once she was pregnant she was told by doctors at one of her routine scans that the child appeared to have no spine.

They were devastated. She told me that she began getting all sorts of advice from all sorts of people - but every day thereafter she would listen to my music to pray. One day while she was listening to one of my albums, my song Your Kingdom Come came on. She told me she lay on the floor weeping saying, "this baby is yours, I'm keeping it because I know your will is for life, not death. I'll love this child come what may." The baby was later born happy, healthy and with a perfectly functioning spine. She told me that night that it was that song and that prayer that meant her son was sitting at the table with us that very moment. Stories like that just wreck me, they are so humbling. Those encounters make me feel like the cost of what my wife and I have been through to produce all those songs and the music we create - as ethereal as it is in the art world - is worth it even if it speaks to just one person's heart.

Tell me about your blog and podcast, Commoners Communion...

As I emerged from those years of being unwell, I was looking for a way to share my experience with others who may need a companion in their own spiritual challenges - so I started Commoners Communion. It started out as a blog about connecting with God, but soon became a podcast too.

It turns out there were a lot of other people wrestling with the same questions I was, looking for another way of seeing and walking with God. Commoners Communion has become the moniker for my ministry of helping others with prayer and communion with God ever since.

You mention a time when you were really sick. Without prying, can I ask what you learned in that season of leaning on God in difficult times?

That's a really hard question because struggles are such a personal thing. From my own experiences, one of the biggest challenges - and perhaps this is a Kiwi male thing - was the fact that as men we have tendencies to want to keep fighting, trying and being independent. And I had those. Sometimes that's a good thing, but sometimes it's about realising there's nothing more we can do in our own strength. It's okay to accept that - because that's where God comes in. I had to come to that point. I vividly remember when I realised that my sickness wasn't going to change anytime soon. I was finding it really hard as a husband and father - at that stage I'd been married for 10 years and had two kids - I was in bed for probably 70 percent of my weeks and was a total wreck. I had no money, nothing.

I sat in a cafe one morning, desperately praying, "God, I need you, I need to be healed". As I prayed I started thinking, "you know what? It's bad, but it could be worse." At that point my prayer changed to one of thanks - saying "If I never get well, if I never work again, Lord thank you. You are enough and I just need You and I don't need things to change just to be in a relationship with You God."

In that moment, I relented and released control. That was really hard to come to that point - it's difficult to let suffering shape you, without accepting it - we should never accept it but we have to let it teach us. If we don't let it teach us in the power of Jesus, then it robs us.

If I was to meet someone in a similar space now, I would say we have to let go and let God. Culturally, we maybe don't hear

that a lot as men. Sometimes you just actually have to say "...it's okay..." and give God control.

That doesn't always mean our struggles will end though does it?

Absolutely. For me that attitude shift changed my life, but I didn't instantly get better. I didn't wake up healed the next day. In fact, I had a year or two of going through a massive health trial, and the whole thing has come back around again recently. While it's fair to say nothing has changed for me physically yet, (I'm still praying!), shifting my focus to Jesus disempowered my suffering. That's not to say I'm pretending like it doesn't exist and ignoring it, but those struggles aren't my focus anymore - Jesus is. My struggles didn't get to determine whether I live a life of gratitude, joy, and freedom. If I don't get to sing again, if I don't get to work again, if I don't get to play with my kids in the same way that other dads get to, Jesus is still my everything. It's surrendering to Him - it sounds simple doesn't it? But there's such power in genuinely surrendering everything to Christ.

I really connect with the account of John the Baptist in the Bible. John lived an amazing life - completely alone for years eating locusts and honey. His whole calling was to proclaim Jesus' coming. As we know, Jesus arrives and is baptised and

John sees the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus. But, if we fast forward just a little bit, John is in prison and he has a question. He wants to know from Jesus, 'are you really the one?'. Essentially what John was asking was, "...how can you be the Messiah?, setting people free, when I'm stuck in prison?"

Luke's account (in Luke 7) tells us that Jesus' response was "the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the Gospel preached to them. Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me."

When I read that story, I realised Jesus didn't answer John's question at all. God never answered my prayer of "why?" either. But in that moment it was as if God said to me "Strahan, the Gospel is being preached in all the world, the blind see, the

oppressed are set free. If I never fully heal you, blessed are you if you are not offended." Once I reckoned with that level of faith, I felt truly free.

How would you encourage Christian men who are seeking Jesus and who want to go deeper in their Authentic daily walk with Him?

That's a massive question. As men, I think we often assume that what God wants from us is to achieve a lot - to achieve for the Kingdom and to be strong leaders. Which is all wonderful. But might I suggest that in and of themselves, those accolades or achievements are not necessarily our sole calling as men. Maybe this is somewhat counter cultural to an extent, but I believe the Lord is calling us to become men of the fruit of the Spirit, displaying love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control.

That's a totally different paradigm - but that kind of goal setting is achievable for any man. How do we become kinder husbands? How do we become more patient with our children? How do we become peacemakers in the workplace? How do we become the kinds of men who are a calming Christ-like influence no matter where we are.

Perhaps as men, we should at times aim to be a little bit 'softer' in terms of our character traits - men who display the fruit of the

"...sometimes it's about realising there's nothing more we can do in our own strength. It's okay to accept that - because that's where God comes in."



Spirit to those we come across and who aim to see those traits as an important cultural value.

The Kingdom of Heaven is for the meek, the peacemaker, the kind, the forgiving. My encouragement is that the only way we can authentically display those fruits is through abiding in Jesus. He literally said, "abide in Me..." Men have to become people of prayer.

If we do not abide in Jesus - not achieving with Him, not getting stuff done with Him - but simply abiding, then I believe we will never change this world. Genuinely abiding in Jesus is simply the greatest achievement for a man, I believe.

You mentioned that we all need to become people of prayer. Do we at times perhaps not value prayer as much as we should?

I'm convinced the way we're going to see our world changed is through prayer. My question is how do we respond to the world? As a man, a father, a husband, as a follower of Christ,

how do I respond to the culture we live in in order to reach people for Jesus? The only way I see us doing that is through deepening our prayer life. So, how do we respectfully challenge one another and keep each other accountable?

How do we not respond to the news, not respond to the latest thinking or trends, but only respond to God and to His voice and His leading? By deepening our prayer life and relationship with Him. I'm quite single minded on that.

Looking ahead, what does the rest of 2021 hold for you? God appears to be opening some exciting new doors!

Totally! As I said before, the truth is that health wise, I haven't really been able to sing for about a year. And I don't yet have a diagnosis as to why - so that's a serious inhibitor. Until my health changes, I can't guarantee that if I book a show for even a month's time I'd be able to do it. In that light, I'm kind of assuming that my music ministry is mostly over for now.

But, during those years when I was sick, I went down to the beach one day to basically seek God. I prayed and said, "God, music is gone, my life seems done, what do I do?". In the clearest voice I've ever heard I felt as though God spoke to my heart and said "Strahan, build me a house of prayer."

So that's what I've been doing. I've been undertaking speaking engagements, writing prayer books, I've almost finished a non-fiction book that I've been writing about prayer and I hold prayer schools and prayer classes. I love that work.

I do three or four prayer classes a week, with people attending online from all over the world - Ireland, the United States, Asia, the Middle East and more. I would love music to be able to fit back into that - the door's still open, but God would need to lead me in that.

During those first years in music, I was working so hard doing more than 160 gigs a year and living out of a suitcase. I often felt like the progress was small. Since I started this prayer ministry work though, it's almost as though every little bit of work I do, God takes it and multiplies it 100 fold. It's been so amazing to see God moving that way. And even though it's not what I expected for myself, I love seeing God at work and I feel privileged to be able to follow Him in that. It's a strange turn around.

Strahan, thank you so much for openness, honesty and vulnerability as you look to encourage others in Christ. To follow Strahan's journey and keep up with the various projects he is working on, visit www.strahanmusic.com |  

■ Jeremy Smith is the new assistant editor of Authentic Magazine. He is an experienced, Waikato based journalist who loves the Lord and enjoys using his talents to glorify God.



The Empty Tomb

A Textual Surprise

BY CHUCK MISSLER

Note: One day Chuck Missler had an unusual experience while in his library that he could not resist sharing. From time to time those happened and those incidents constituted some of the most exciting and satisfying experiences in his lifetime of adventures! We hope you find this as interesting as Chuck did.

Many of us who have visited Israel regard the visit to the "Garden Tomb" as one of the major highlights of the trip. It invariably ranks highest on our feedback surveys. The people in charge of the British trust that manages the site always present it as simply "representative," rather than insisting that it is the actual tomb. However, we feel they are understating the actual facts. Even though I harbor a skeptical cynicism toward most "traditional" sites, for a number of reasons I personally regard this tomb as the actual one referred to in the Gospel accounts.

Notes From Leviticus

In my study I was digging through my library on the Book of Leviticus and, in particular, was digesting the commentary by Andrew Bonar (a classic that I particularly treasure regarding this particular book of the Torah). I was reviewing the many detailed specifications of the various categories of offerings - every one of which profiles or foreshadows the various aspects of Christ's person and work. I was particularly intrigued with the following:

"And he shall kill it on the side of the altar northward before the LORD: and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall sprinkle his blood round about upon the altar." - Leviticus 1:11

Like so many of the textual details, this one was also expressly fulfilled by the fact that the ultimate sacrifice to which it points was, indeed, offered on the north side of the city, just outside of what is now called the "Damascus Gate." However, a footnote also caught my eye that included some unusual details about Joseph of Arimathea, which proved strikingly instructive.

Joseph of Arimathea

Andrew Bonar's footnote noted: "A rich man, one of the most honorable and esteemed in Jerusalem, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a disciple, unexpectedly appears at Calvary.

This was Joseph of Arimathea, without exception the most singularly noble character introduced to us in the Gospels.

This rich man had been driven into concealment by the plots formed against him by the Jews, on account of his defending Jesus in the Sanhedrin openly (Luke 23:51)." In the Gospel of John we find a subtle but significant mistranslation:

"And after this Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews..." - John 19:38

"...being a disciple": "kekrummenoV de dia ton fobon tw n ioudaiwn" not [the adverb] "secretly," for it is not kekrummenwV but [the adjective] "secreted," or forced to hide, by reason of their plots. This makes his appearance before Pilate even more unexpected.

An Unrecorded Conversation

I cannot resist including the unrecorded conversation that occurred between Joseph of Arimathea and Pontius Pilate, who was, of course, shocked by Joseph's request for the body in the passage above. Pilate responded: "Joseph, I don't understand. You're the richest man in the region; you have made this brand new tomb for your family; and, you're going to give it to this criminal?" "Oy Vey! It's just for the weekend!" Joseph responded. (I have this on good authority: from Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel.)



Where was His Tomb?

Andrew Bonar points out that in Isaiah 53 we find some very significant prophetic details:

"He made His grave with the wicked [plural], and with the rich [singular] in His death;" - Isaiah 53:9

I had always assumed that the "transgressors" in Isaiah 53:9 simply pointed to the two thieves who were crucified with Him. It was Bonar's insight that this refers to the burial itself, which included both the wicked and the rich. Another of the Levitical specifications deals with the offering being "...without the camp unto a clean place ..." (Leviticus 4:12; 6:11). It was this detail that actually gave rise to the Andrew Bonar's footnote.¹

"Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid." - John 19:41

The very spot that criminals were put to death was where Joseph's new tomb was hewn out of a rock! The stony sides of the tomb - the new tomb - "the clean place," where Jesus was laid - were part of the malefactor's hill. His dead body is "with the rich man and with the wicked" in the hour of His death! His grave is the property of a rich man; and yet the rocks which form the partition between His tomb and that of the other Calvary malefactors, are themselves part of Golgotha."

Anyone who has visited the Garden Tomb recognizes the validity of Bonar's perceptions: the site of Golgotha is topologically identifiable as at the peak of the ridge system between the Kidron Valley and the Tyropean Valley; midway between the Mount of Olives and Mount Zion. It is also a very short walk to the tomb, and the tomb itself seems to fit a number of detailed specifications from the Gospel texts:

1. It is proximate to Golgotha (Jn 19:41).
2. It was a new tomb hewn in the rock (Mt 27:60; Lk 23:53; Jn 19:41).
3. It was a garden area (Jn 19:41, 42). The enclosed cistern of 250,000 gallons implying a single, very wealthy, owner.
4. It was adjacent to a wine press.
5. It had a rolling stone door (Mt 27:60; 28:2; Mk 16:3; Lk 24:2).
6. The tomb itself was just to the right of a wailing chamber (Mk 16:5).
7. And, it is empty! (Lk 24:6, 12; Jn 20).
8. Gordon's Calvary.

The present site of the "Garden Tomb" is often called, derisively, "Gordon's Calvary." It remains controversial despite the evidence that favors it. General Charles George Gordon was a British general who distinguished himself with assignments in the Crimean War and other exploits in the Far East. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1852, and eventually found himself assigned in Palestine.

One day from his hotel he noticed the features of a "Skull Hill" and became convinced, despite church traditions to the contrary, that this was the true location of the crucifixion.

His discovery was based on the physical features of the area, derisively called "Gordon's Calvary" by those who still favor the traditional site.

(The "Church of the Holy Sepulchre" is on the traditional site at another location that was selected by Queen Helena in the fourth century and was protected until 1009 A.D., when it was destroyed by Khalif Hakem. The Greek Orthodox Church and the Russians erected the present Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 1810, where it stands today.)

General Gordon's discovery of what we now know as the "Garden Tomb" was in 1883. What struck me about Andrew Bonar's observations, from the text, was that his commentary

was published in 1846, almost 40 years before the discovery of the present site that so vividly presents the drama that is the very cornerstone of the entire Christian faith!² It is inspiring to realize that the clarity of the situation was perceived by Andrew Bonar strictly from the text itself, without the physical benefits which we can presently enjoy on our visits to Jerusalem!

What an encouragement to all of us to pay close attention to details and to take them seriously! "Not one jot or tittle," indeed!³ |A

1. Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh 1846, footnote, p.116-117.

2. Paul presents the discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 as the most important issue in the entire Bible (Cf. vv.13ff).

3. Matthew 5:17, 18.

“It is inspiring to realize that the clarity of the situation was perceived by Andrew Bonar strictly from the text itself.”

■ Chuck Missler was an author, Bible teacher, engineer, and former businessman. He was also the founder of the Koinonia Institute. Chuck went to be with the Lord in May 2018.



What if I feel God has let me down?

BY ERIC LUDY



There are certain things that I've been praying and asking God for, for decades, that haven't yet happened. And yet I've never once come to the place where I would say, "God has let me down." Because I know something. And that is that God will allow certain things to take time and His request of me is to hold on.

That's what faith is. Faith is a form of wrestling. It's a form of perseverance. And so when you have a limit to how long, or some expiration date to how long you will give God, it inevitably will lead to disappointment because you will find that God has to bring you to the end of that to see where you stand.

In other words, for me, I don't have an expiration date, and that's a deliberate choice - because when I first started out my Christianity, I was really struggling with the fact that I read the Bible and it seems like Paul prays and it just happens. You feel like saying, "How come it seems like there's more power back then and I don't have it here today?" That's an immature approach to the ideas of faith and the ideas of God. God promised and He's faithful. The idea of faithfulness means ... He's faithful. That means He will in fact do it.

So when you stand on the Word of God, if you're standing for your own thing, like, "God, I want a Ferrari. God, I want a Ferrari. God, I want a Ferrari." Well, you're going to be disappointed, but for a different reason. If you look at the Scriptures, they're going to say you're asking "amiss," and therefore you can't expect to receive, because God is going to honor His Word. He's not going to honor your flesh. He's not going to honor your selfish cravings. Otherwise He'd be a terrible father.

Could you imagine if my kids came to me and said, "I want an ice cream cone. I want an ice cream cone. I want an ice cream cone. Now that I mention it, I want 10 ice cream cones." And they think that just because Daddy's a "good Daddy," that I would just give them everything they crave and whatever they ask for. I want my kids to delight in life. I want them to smile, but there's certain times when I know (especially if they're hyperactive kids) that if I give them that ice cream cone at 10pm at night, they're not going to sleep. And so, because I love them, I'm going to say no to that.

However, for the most part, many of us have approached God with faith, but our faith had a weak root system and it had an expiration date associated with it. It's sort of like saying, "I'll give three prayers, and if by the end of the third prayer, God hasn't come through, then God has disappointed me." Well, I'm going to tell you that that mentality will disappoint you, because God will have to bring you to the end of your three prayers to say, "How you doing? Do you still trust Me?" And

the question is, do you trust Him? Do you trust that His Word is true? Do you trust that no matter what is going on in your life, He is faithful? And so, think about this: there's a prayer in the book of Revelation that has been prayed for 2000 years. It says, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come. Come Lord Jesus, come.'" So it's not just the bride, the Church that's been praying Maranatha for 2000 years, the Holy Spirit has been praying, "Come Lord Jesus, come." The Holy Spirit could be a little disappointed in God. Don't you think? And of course, if you have good theology, you say, "I thought the Holy Spirit was God?" You're right. In other words, even God has participated in this prayer and guess what? It will happen. Jesus will come. Should we get disappointed in the fact that He hasn't come yet? His timing is perfect. Everything He does is perfect. It says His ways are perfect.

So, our job is to believe that. Our job is to believe that when He gives us a burden and He sets us out to pursue it, even though it doesn't happen immediately, it will happen in due time. He gives a promise to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. These are His friends. Every other person that ever came

to Jesus that was sick was healed, except for one — his good friend Lazarus. Instead He gives Lazarus a promise and He gives it to Mary and Martha, too. "This sickness will not end in death." And then He leaves town and Lazarus gets sicker and sicker and sicker and then dies.

The Word of God — which is what Jesus gave — said this sickness will not end in death, but it sure does appear to be death. This is where faith comes in. Did Jesus speak or not? You see, our job is to hold on to the Word of God. And even though it looks like Lazarus is ... he's not around, okay? He's been wrapped in grave clothes, he's been stuck in a tomb, and a stone has been rolled in front, and four days have passed. God's Word is still God's Word. Jesus shows up in His perfect timing, "Roll away the stone. Lazarus, come forth."

Our job is to be believers, not doubters, not "disappointed" people — believers. And when you understand that in your Christian life, there's no disappointment. There are rough patches. There are challenges. There are tests of faith. There are trials by fire. But there's joy in the midst of all of that, knowing that our God will in fact come through always. |A

“God promised and He's faithful. The idea of faithfulness means... He's faithful. That means He will in fact do it.”

■ Eric Ludy is the president of Ellerslie Mission Society and the bestselling author of eighteen books on Christian thought and living. Eric Ludy functions as the director of Ellerslie Discipleship Training in Windsor, Colorado and serves as the teaching pastor at Ellerslie's campus church. For more from Eric visit www.ericludy.com



Accepting the Process

BY LOCKY MCNEILL

The very nature of life itself follows a process - I am wondering if accepting that fact is half the battle?

You are not born an adult and well adjusted. You don't even wake up to be a totally different person to who you were the previous day.

Even before that you had nine months of what we called gestation. A hidden away process to develop you from conception to your first birthday. Butterflies have a change process in a cocoon as they metamorphosis from a caterpillar with insane amounts of little legs.

Frustration is magnified, I think, for us when we forget that there is a process that even God is working to in our lives. I have been fully and sorely reminded of this during the change process that last year brought pretty unexpectedly to our lives and ministry.

In the corner of our garden is a plant, a bush, some might say it has been an eyesore. We have left it alone for three years and talked more about dealing with it than actually dealing with it.

I began to wonder a few months back if I was not playing my part, not following the process for its life and development. And besides, it looked like it was dead and worthless.

So, armed with a quick gardening tutorial via our friends on YouTube, I pretended to have a green thumb and pruned it

to within an inch of life itself. That pruning confirmed our very unqualified gardening fear, it was a dead stump, now with dead brown stalks presenting itself sadly to the world.

Had I made things worse? Was the video a have and a sham? I actually decided to walk away and forget this shameful experiment had even happened. Resigning myself to digging out the carcass in some sort of pre-holiday season ritual.

So, here we are right now and, honestly, stunned by what is now proudly displaying itself. This stump of doom is now a thriving bush of glory. It is beginning to live up to its name and identity as a Hydrangea. (Some of you reading this will even be shocked I even know its name!)

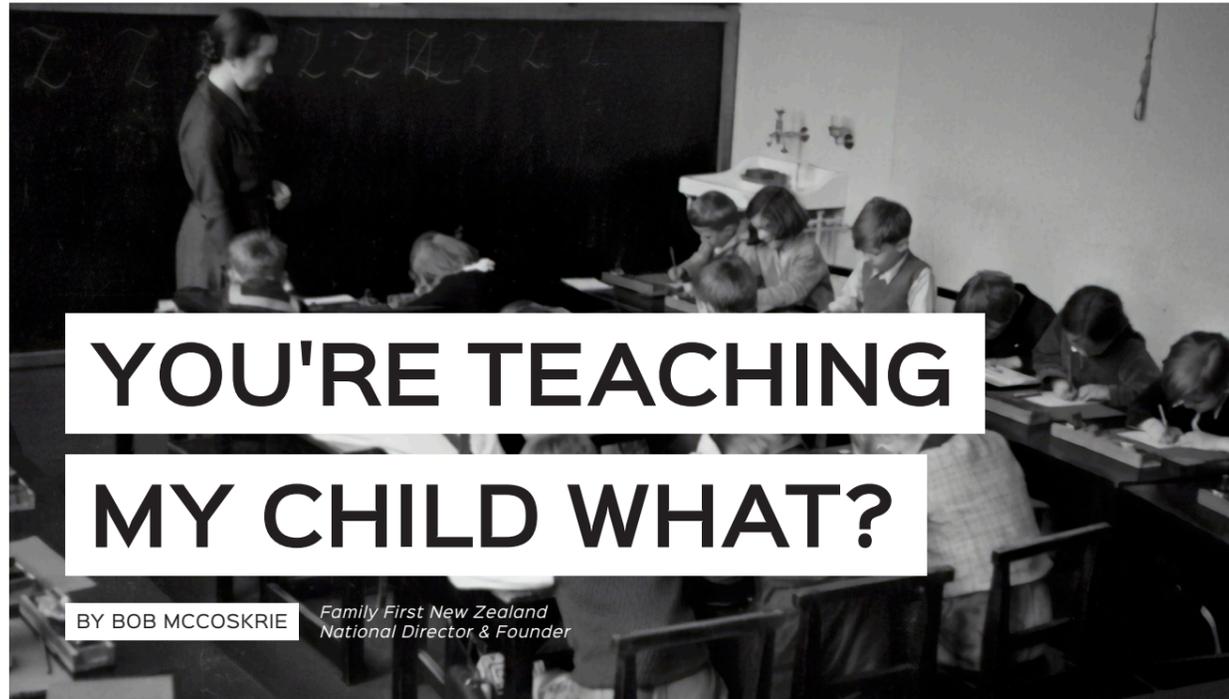
What changed in this plant's life is something we can learn from.

We need to accept that life is a process that God is orchestrating on our behalf. We might think we look dead, but God knows, with His care, there will be new life. We might think we are fully grown, as messy as we might feel, and yet God prunes away what is holding us back.

Don't fight the process my friend! Your life is about to change. There may very well be a brand new season about to open for you if you just accept the process. |A

■ Locky McNeill is a faith-based Jesus entrepreneur living in Taupo, New Zealand. He is a father of two young men and husband to one talented wife, who can bake up a storm of goodness. He splits his time between being a digital pastor and festival director for both Easterfest New Zealand and Christmas in the Park Taupo.





YOU'RE TEACHING

MY CHILD WHAT?

BY BOB MCCOSKRIE *Family First New Zealand National Director & Founder*

ARE YOU – AS THE PARENT – PREPARED FOR SCHOOL?

As children have begun their 2021 academic year at school, there's some study prep that parents need to do to become aware of what your children may be facing in the classroom (depending on the values of the school!) around the issues of sexuality and gender identity.

It seems evident that the majority of New Zealanders are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with this curriculum and agenda in schools. If you're not sure what's being taught to your children, we've already done some of the homework for you, and we have two important reports for you to study up on. The good news is that you can do something to protect your children.

The Relationships and Sexuality Education Guidelines (or RSE for short) are a new set of proposals produced by the Ministry of Education and released in September last year. Despite being well-intentioned, with an aim to create more inclusive school environments and reduce bullying, these proposals are for the most part ideological, and while their content is portrayed as scientific, they have no basis in science. This should be concerning to all parents and caregivers.

Primary age students are now being targeted with the confusing and dangerous message that changing sex is as easy as changing clothes, girls are discovering that biological boys have free access to their changing rooms and the curriculum states that parents are able to be kept in the dark when their child has decided to identify as transgender during the school day.

In the new curriculum for primary age children, requirements include the following:

- » Students should be addressed by their preferred name and pronouns.
- » Schools need to ensure that students can access toilets and changing rooms that align with their gender identification. Trans students should not be required to use the gender-neutral toilet, rather than male or female toilets of their choice.
- » Challenge sex norms – for example - in the curriculum's words, the assumption that sex characteristics at birth are always male or female.
- » Challenging homophobia, transphobia, sexism, gender binaries and interrogating the ongoing effects of colonisation
- » Labelling uniform items by gender is an exclusionary practice.
- » In Science, consider how biological sex has been constructed.
- » In Social Science, research the #MeToo movement

In these points, our emphasis has been added, and a new Family First New Zealand report deals with the following issues with the new curriculum:

- » The new curriculum is rife with dangerous misinformation.
- » It seeks to inject sexuality education into the rest of the curriculum.
- » It wants schools to implement controversial and divisive policies.
- » It puts schools at risk of becoming ideological and indoctrinatory spaces.

If you read the short report - a web address to which can be found under 'Resources' at the end of this article – you'll see for yourself the agenda that the Ministry of Education is trying to push in your child's school or schools.

HOW TO RESPOND – APPROPRIATELY AND EFFECTIVELY

At the beginning of 2020, we released a document called Responding To The Transgender Issue – Parent Resource Guide. This resource is designed especially for parents, but it's also important information for school leaders and teachers and any parents who are on their school board of trustees.

This guide is designed to:

- » Help parents understand the basics of the transgender trend and its consequences.
- » Help them understand the implications of transgender activism and “gender-inclusion” policies in schools.
- » Explain parental rights and give parents the tools to communicate with school leaders in order to protect their children's rights to privacy.
- » Encourage parents and school officials to work together to create a respectful school environment.
- » Help parents advocate for common sense policies that will respect the dignity of all students.
- » Help schools act with compassion toward everyone involved in the conversation.

It has been reviewed by a number of principals, paediatricians, parents, teachers and board of trustee members.

The guide will help parents make a positive and effective case for policies that encourage acceptance and diversity in a way that communicates to every student they were born in the right body. The link to the guide for parents is also at the end of this article.

AM I THE ONLY PARENT CONCERNED BY THIS ISSUE?

Definitely not! Polling that we released in early January – and which the media conveniently ignored (!) – found increasing opposition to gender ideology being taught to children in schools, and increasing support for sex education in general to be opt-in, rather than the current status of opt-out.

Only 16 percent think primary age children should be taught they can choose their gender and that it can be changed through hormone treatment and surgery if they want it to be, while three out of four people surveyed (74 percent) said they shouldn't. Opposition to gender ideology has grown

significantly from a similar poll in 2019, where 54 percent said children should not be taught this, and 35 percent said they should.

52 percent think sex education should be opt in (a parent has to opt in for their child to receive them) and 36 percent opt out (compulsory unless a parent opts out in writing). Support for opt in has increased from 34 percent in a 2019 poll and down from 55 percent for opt-out.

Additionally, 22 percent of respondents think boys who identify as girls should be allowed automatic access to girls toilets and changing rooms and almost two in three (61 percent) disagree. A similar poll in 2019 found that 46 percent compared to 36 percent said that biological sex should trump gender identity. Then, 26 percent of respondents said they thought boys who identify as girls should be allowed automatic access to girls sports teams and 58 percent disagreed. Opposition has increased from 39 percent in a similar poll in 2019, and support has decreased.

It's time that the Ministry of Education and the Government placed priority on scientific evidence and sound medical practice, rather than bowing to special interest groups pushing a radical agenda. Biology is not bigotry.

Family First is also calling for sex education in schools to be opt-in, rather than opt-out.

Before your children head back to school, take some time to read the reports mentioned in this article. Links to the respective documents are below and you'll be glad you did! 

Resources and Links:

The Ministry of Education's RSE proposals can be found at: <https://www.education.govt.nz/news/refreshed-resource-relationships-and-sexuality-education-released/>

Family First has released a report analysing what the proposals will mean for parents and caregivers here: <https://www.familyfirst.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ANALYSIS-Relationship-Sexuality-Education-Guidelines-2021.pdf>

An additional guide for parents is here: <https://www.familyfirst.org.nz/parentguide/>

A link to the poll conducted by Family First New Zealand: <https://www.familyfirst.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Gender-Sex-Education.pdf>

■ Bob McCoskrie is the director of the New Zealand social group Family First New Zealand. He has a master's degree in Commerce from the University of Auckland and is also a qualified teacher.





Romans 5 :1-5 (ESV) Peace with God Through Faith Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

These two words; faith and hope, are striking deeply for many of us in this season. There is much faith needed to get through each day at the moment. Just about everyone is searching for some kind of hope for the future. Hope that we will get through the current challenges faced, and that blue sky will once again grace the horizons of our lives.

In this article I hope to unpack my own journey of faith and what these words mean to me from a biblical perspective. Then we will move to a theology of hope that I hope will encourage and inspire you. But first, it might be helpful to frame where I find myself in this current context.

Two years ago my wife and I felt God leading us to change location. Not just within the United Kingdom, but to another country! Because my wife is a Kiwi, we have always felt we would spend a season in New Zealand - and as my job was coming to an end - it felt like God was confirming the timing was right.

We went through all the applications and processes and I got my visa. Two weeks later, Covid-19 broke out - and soon after that we went into lock down. The last six months of our time in the United Kingdom was very challenging. Trying to emigrate during a pandemic should not be recommended, as it involves trying to close down your job well, tie up loose ends, sell belongings, work out shipping, pack, sell more stuff, say lots of goodbyes, sort out finances and so on.

We lost our first flights, nearly lost them again, had to take Covid tests.....and then face a New Zealand quarantine which is a whole story in itself.

It has meant starting a whole new life in our 40s, settling teenage kids, finding new schools, trying to find jobs, looking for a home, acclimatising to a new culture, learning new ways of doing things, grieving the life you have left behind, enduring

sleepless nights, making new friends, trying to find a church, starting a business, more grieving - .you get the picture!

When you take new steps with God, a lot of faith and hope is needed to move forward. You live with a lot of second guessing, such as 'Did we hear God correctly?', 'will it all work out in the end?', 'where are we going to find the money to buy food!?' and 'oh no, what the heck have we done?!'

It could be the same emotions you experience in starting a new job, adjusting to a new rhythm of life (post lock down?), experiencing your church or community going through lots of changes, health scares or just facing the kinds of normal emotional pressures that humans go through on a daily basis.

If we are to be honest, even Christians ask the question 'God, are you there?', 'Are you with me in this?', 'will you provide for my family/friends?'.

I started this article with a scripture from the book of Romans which I think is pretty amazing. "Justified by faith, and having peace with God through Jesus."

What a wonderful promise to hold onto in this life. The word justified often gets misunderstood (or misused), the Greek word is *dikaioō*, meaning to be declared as righteous, to be pronounced just and good by the God of the universe.

Through nothing we have achieved, deserved or paid for. Someone else sorted all that for us for free.

Let us start with unpacking this word 'faith'. If I am to be honest this has been a turbulent word for me during my years as a Christian.

Perhaps we have all been there, but if something didn't work out so well, could it be that I just didn't have 'enough' faith? If my prayers aren't answered where do I get more faith from?, If I am weak, is my faith limited? The confusion and uncertainty of 'having faith' revolves around our daily lives as Christians. It is not a magic formula however, reserved for stronger Christians or superheroes of the 'faith'.

So let's unpack the word from the Greek, used in the scriptural context above in Romans. The word is *Pistis*, meaning "persuasion or to be convinced (of the truthfulness of God)". More roundly, to be fully convinced, fully persuaded in your

heart and mind that God, and His words to you, are true. The truthfulness of God if you like.

You might need to read that again and just ponder on it for a moment- to be fully convinced of the truthfulness of God. It is a game changer because in essence it is not talking about a magic formula, the certain quality of one's Christian devotion, or how much you believe something can happen by the power of thought alone. It goes much deeper to the heart of knowing God's character, and more importantly, the quality of your relationship with him.

A depth of relationship that is built on trust from past experiences and on-going intimate knowing. So faith is about being fully persuaded that God is consistent, good, kind and steadfast in his character and love. He has been this way for all of time and He will not change. When He speaks, His words are to be trusted and clung onto because He is really good.

It is not a choice thing, meaning we don't 'choose' to have faith for today, even when we don't feel like it or are having feelings of doubt. To be 'fully convinced' means you have done a whole lot of work already at the relational level. You have read about God's interactions with his people, and more than that, you have experienced this for yourself to the point of it becoming an absolute truth in your heart and mind. He is good and He can be trusted.

We stand by faith, fully persuaded by the grace, loving kindness and acceptance of God on a daily basis.

So much so that we can rejoice simply and celebrate the glory and magnificence of our God in this world. It is deeply relational and nothing to do with circumstance at this point, it is more about who He is and how we are relating to him in the day to day. He is real, and He is closer to you than you realise.

There is perhaps a little renewing of the mind at this point. Faith doesn't define how good a Christian you are, nor even the quality of your prayer life, or ability to see powerful breakthrough. It is to be fully convinced in your heart by the truthfulness of God.

A new working definition needs to be installed in your mind, this might take some time. So have faith, my friends! May you grow in deep persuasion that God's word to you in this moment is true.....because He is good, consistent and kind. It is who He is. |A

“The confusion and uncertainty of ‘having faith’ revolves around our daily lives as Christians. It is not a magic formula however, reserved for stronger Christians or superheroes of the ‘faith’.”

■ Carl is English, recently emigrated to NZ with his Kiwi wife and kids. Carl has worked with Youth With A Mission (YWAM) for 26 years in youth work, church planting, art ministry and as a travelling speaker. With a Masters in Applied Theology, he is setting up afresh in NZ, still working with YWAM in education projects throughout the Pacific, as well as a Story Teller, Chef and Lecturer on the side! He has recently launched a YouTube channel called 'Heavenly Nosh' combining theology, cooking and art!



UNASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

BY JEREMY SMITH

“Don’t ever put pressure on yourself to lead somebody to Christ. Honestly, it’s actually not you who leads people to Christ. It’s Jesus - He draws people.”

“We are the sowers in that process and sometimes we get to be the reapers, but He gets the increase and we just have to trust that person in God’s hands.”

Luke Collis’ heart is full of passion for evangelism and reaching the lost. Based in Hawke’s Bay, Luke heads up a team,

mostly made up of “amazing volunteers”, who help facilitate an outreach movement called UNASHAMED. For about five years, Luke and his team have been following a prompting of God and a two-fold mission - a desire to see every young person in New Zealand reached with the message of Jesus and to raise up a movement of Christian young people committed to doing the same.

Jeremy Smith finds out more about UNASHAMED...

We here at Authentic love your unbridled passion for sharing the Gospel message of Jesus. Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood and how you came to know Christ?

I was brought up in a believing home. My dad is a passionate evangelist. It was instilled in me from an early age that as a Christian, you share Christ - it just went hand in hand. Thinking back, I remember a moment when my personal relationship with Jesus became incredibly real to me. At the end of Year 12, I was offered an apprenticeship, but it fell through. So, there I was, leaving school with nothing to do. I got a full time job at a factory, which ended up being a really difficult time in my life - it was a dark environment.

One day after work, my parents were going to pick me up, but they had forgotten. As I began the 8km journey home, I just remember reaching a certain point along the way and crying out to God, pouring out my heart. I was questioning His reality.

A verse I’d learned in Sunday school came to mind. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands.” - Psalm 19:1. Right then, I looked up at the sky and saw the biggest, brightest shooting star. In that moment, God spoke to my heart, and just told me He loved me. Everything shifted - all doubt about His reality vanished and I knew He had a plan and a purpose for my life. God began to open doors to share Jesus with people and wherever I was I had that on my heart. It was never something forced, it just began to overflow.

You mentioned that as Christians we are all called to share Jesus - but the fear of man often stops us. Can you offer some encouragement regarding overcoming that?

Hang out with people who don’t walk in the fear of man! I find that if I’m not consistently spending one on one time with Jesus, I lack bravery. But when I’m walking with Jesus closely and He tells me to step out, I’ve found myself in all types of situations.

Yes, at times sharing the Gospel can be scary and you’ve got to overcome worries about what people will think. But walk with Jesus and take little steps - it could be something simple like just having a conversation with people, but listen to the Lord as He prompts you and take those opportunities.

Once, when I was in Sylvia Park in Auckland, I was literally in the food court eating sushi and I felt the Holy Spirit prompt me to stand up right there and share the Gospel with people.

I honestly thought I would get booed, but I stood up and just said something simple like “Kia Ora every one, my name’s Luke and there’s something I’d just like to share with you. Many of you feel like there is no hope, like there is no light at the end of the tunnel. I just want to tell you that there is and His name is Jesus.” And as soon as I said that, there was this eruption of applause.



I then spent about 30 seconds sharing the Gospel and simply said, "you guys have a great day." When I sat down I felt the Holy Spirit say to me, "Luke, it's not until you step out that I will step in." That has always stuck with me.

How would you encourage other Christian men?

Let's be intentional about spending time alone with Jesus. Sometimes I think we focus more on journeying together and our pursuit of God together. Don't get me wrong, it's fantastic being in community. But let's not neglect time where we are just alone with God - like Daniel. Nobody sees necessarily, but we're alone spending time with Jesus. Even Jesus went to quiet places to spend time with the Father. Out of that flows rivers of living water, welling up to eternal life. I think that's where the Christian life really comes alive, as we pursue Jesus. Sometimes, as we spend time with God, we may not understand exactly what He is teaching us in that moment - but in season it will bear fruit.

Psalm 1 verses 1-3 says, "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take, or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither - whatever they do prospers."

I also think of Joshua 1:7. "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go."

Can you tell me about your family?

I am married to Jess and we have three kids - Liberty (8), Corban (6), and Camille (3). And we have another one on the way - due next month. Jess actually quit her job to join me



in ministry, so that was a step of faith in itself. I couldn't do what we do without a supportive wife and Jess is 100 percent supportive - an absolute gift from God who I am so grateful for. She's got opposite giftings to me. I'm kind of spur of the moment, unorganised and I can roll with stuff. She's super organised.

That's so cool that you're in ministry together! That requires complete reliance on God. Can you tell me how you got into ministry and how you've found living a life marked by faith in Him for your sufficiency?

I would say, and perhaps this applies to the evangelism side of things as well, that you don't ever really get comfortable in it, you just have to get used to being uncomfortable.

I've been in ministry for 12 years now. Prior to 2016 when UNASHAMED started, I was with a number of other organisations - Open Air Campaigners (OAC), Word Of Life for two years and alongside my church.

In every step of faith there's an element of discomfort - but it's about completely trusting Jesus, embracing that discomfort and stepping out. You will grow in your ability to trust God, because He will consistently come through. During all of those years in ministry, it has literally been living by faith and not knowing how God is going to provide financially. Two years ago when we decided to go full time with UNASHAMED, that was a step of faith again. I had had a part time job as well up until that point, but when we trusted God we never had to worry about money - in the early days we had amazing stories of how God came through.

Matthew 6:25-34 is probably a life-long verse for me. Jesus tells us not to worry about our lives, what we eat, or drink or wear. He tells us that life is more than that. He reminds us to "seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

You mentioned the beginnings of UNASHAMED. Could you tell me about how that started and the heart behind the movement?

A few years back, I lived in Ngāruawāhia and myself and a group of young adults just started hanging out with some youth down at the skatepark.

Many of the kids were young people who were dealing with neglect, the fact that there were times when their parents weren't home and struggling for food.

It became a regular thing - every Monday night we would just hang

out, have a sausage sizzle and share Christ with these kids. Out of that, young people just started coming to know Jesus, so we moved into a church building across the road from the skate park. Then, the school opened up to us.

Essentially, I found myself becoming a youth pastor of a youth group of mainly young people who would never step foot in a church - a group I led for two years.

God opened my eyes then to the fact that so many young people were open. The thing that was holding them back wasn't that they'd heard the message of Jesus and rejected it. But that they'd actually never even heard it. For so many of them, when they were presented with the message of Jesus in an authentic, genuine way, they were so hungry. UNASHAMED literally came out of a vision to see the Gospel message go forth like never before and see every young person in Aotearoa reached with the message of Jesus.

We then ran an event sharing the Gospel in as creative a way as we could - seeking to speak their language. It was a night full of the creative arts, spoken word, drama and music, all summed up with the challenge to come to Jesus.

So many of the students from the local high school gave their lives to Christ. The head boy even wrote about it on Facebook and it spread like wildfire.

The very next day we were planning to go to Hawkes Bay to run a similar event but we just had to pull the plug. All these

young people needed discipleship, and so every single day after school we'd meet with them, hang out, have some kai and learn how to practically walk out our faith.

Usually before an UNASHAMED event we'll have a pre-event called The Commission and it prepares the Christian young people with the UNASHAMED vision. That helps to equip them in sharing their faith and then a couple of weeks later, we'll come along with the main event. The idea being that in the meantime, they can be praying and inviting their non-Christian friends along.

The calling of UNASHAMED that God laid on your heart then began to be 'noised abroad' further than Ngāruawāhia didn't it? All around New Zealand in fact...

Yes. We ended up partnering with about 20 youth groups in the Waikato and running a city-wide UNASHAMED event in Hamilton. And young people were coming to know Christ. Hamilton opened the door for another event - in Tauranga, then one in Whanganui. Then, as we followed God's leading, people started asking us to hold UNASHAMED events in places all over New Zealand. Young people are hungry for Jesus.

In New Zealand today, I believe there are about 700,000 young people between the ages of 13-25. Approximately 600,000 of those don't go to church. So, that means only about 100,000 young people either attend a church or know Christ.

"...in every step of faith there's an element of discomfort - it's just about completely trusting Jesus, embracing that discomfort and stepping out. You will grow in your ability to trust God, because He will consistently come through."





Raising up those 100,000 young people to share their faith is key to how I believe we will reach the 600,000 young people for Jesus. If those 100,000 people shared the Gospel with just six people who don't know Christ, our whole nation would be reached. In John 4, Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman at the well. It's an encounter that impacted that woman so much that she went and told her whole town "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

That's what our young people need - an encounter with Jesus. From there, everything changes.

Speaking of those 600,000 young people, what's it like when you see even one of those lives touched by the transforming power of Jesus?

I can't even describe it really. Fairly often I'll get someone coming up to me somewhere and say, "Luke, I just want to thank you - you led me to Christ. My reaction is to give all glory back to Him and simply say, "Jesus, you are awesome!" It's beautiful, not only when you see that young person come to Christ, but then when you see them also get really well disciplined in a church, begin witnessing to their friends and then seeing their friends come to know Christ.

I remember once, the head boy of Morrinsville College weeping on my shoulder and saying "thank you, thank you!" Honestly, sharing Jesus is what I was born for. It's actually what we were all made for.

We've all got different callings, yes, but Christ's commission was not just to evangelists - it was to His disciples, all believers. It's wonderful seeing someone surrendering their life to Christ

With the work UNASHAMED does, we're surrounded by a massive volunteer team from all around the nation who give so much of their time, completely unpaid. They serve because they have a heart for young people.

Are there steps we can take as Christians to perhaps be more effective in sharing our faith with people?

Philemon says it like this, "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."

This verse is actually not talking about sharing your faith with unbelievers, but rather sharing your faith with other believers. There is something deep to that.

If we step out and begin to connect with other believers, encourage them in their faith and speak into their lives, then that's actually going to help us when we step out and look to connect with those who don't know Jesus. It doesn't need to be forced, or something awkward - it comes naturally. Just start a conversation.

We shouldn't feel pressured to get out the whole Gospel in one sitting. Let's use the analogy of the Gospel being like a whole pizza - sometimes you don't want to grab the whole Gospel and shove it down people's throats.

Some are ready for that whole pizza, but some people just need a slice - they need one aspect of that whole message. In the moments where you have a chance to share, you've got to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit as to what to share at what time, and then trust God with the results.

You've spoken of looking for opportunities to reach people by 'speaking their language'. One avenue you've explored is your spoken word pieces to camera and other video content on social media. Those have created some cool opportunities to speak into young people's lives haven't they?

I've always envied rap artists like Lecrae and others to be honest! They are passionate about Jesus and are using

their art form to captivate an audience and communicate a message. I'm creative, but I can't sing for peanuts, I can't rap and I can't play a musical instrument that well. But what I can do is speak.

I remember seeing a spoken word artist early on and thinking it was awesome. It got me thinking about whether I could write my testimony in spoken word format. I did, but never used it.

One day though, I was having a quiet time at a place in Ngāruawāhia called The Point. As I'm reading my Bible, two young Māori boys arrive in a car. We got chatting and they asked me what I was reading. It turned out they were in town for a spoken word competition and they had made the finals, which were going to be later that night. I asked one of them to share one of their spoken words with me and it was powerful - all about his desire to return to his Māori roots.

As he spoke, I felt the Holy Spirit prompt me that it was my time to share - and so I did. When he finished I asked him if I could share a spoken word with him - my testimony. It was a powerful moment and God was moving. I was amazed, because he then asked me to come along that night and share my spoken word at the competition.

So, there I was standing on stage in front of all these people - with the very first words of my testimony being "...do you know Him?". Amazing. How overt is that? Subsequently, I recorded it and put it online and so many people were contacting me telling me how it had impacted them. My third spoken word reached 70,000 views online. From that experience, God really gave me a heart and a desire to find creative ways to speak young people's language, in order to reach them for Christ.



■ Jeremy Smith is the new assistant editor of Authentic Magazine. He is an experienced, Waikato based journalist who loves the Lord and enjoys using his talents to glorify God.



In addition to the outreaches we spoke about, at the end of last year you held the first ever UNASHAMED training camp. Can you tell me about the vision for those?

Absolutely. Those have opened up a whole new world. We spoke about equipping those 100,000 young people, and that's the thought behind these training camps. I'm super excited about doing more. Seeing young people grow in their faith and go from timid and quiet to bold and courageous is amazing. The camps are nine days long and are limited to 10 young people per camp, so we can spend time investing in them. The camps are all about raising up a generation of young people who are equipped and emboldened to share their faith.

The idea going forward is to have a series of other camps as we progress which will see young people who have already been to camps helping to equip and train other young people. It's important to note that while we consider ourselves a voice in evangelism, we partner with local churches to see young people come to Christ and then linked in with those local churches.

Looking forward to 2021, can you tell me a little bit about the vision for UNASHAMED this year?

Last year we'd been aiming to run about eight gatherings, but because of Covid-19 we only ran four. As a team, we had set a long term goal to be running annual events in seven regions of New Zealand by 2023.

We'll achieve seven regions this year - likely with three events in every region. In two years, God-willing, we'll have annual UNASHAMED events in 12 regions, maybe even up to 14. Truthfully, there's just such a hunger for Jesus, that demand is exploding and opportunities to enter new territories are opening up. Our overarching question as we follow God's leading, one step at a time wherever we go, is "...what will it take to reach Hamilton for Jesus? What will it take to reach Tauranga for Jesus? What will it take to reach Aotearoa's young people for Jesus?"

Thanks so much for sitting down to catch up Luke! To find out more about UNASHAMED, or for information about dates and locations of regional UNASHAMED outreach events in 2021, visit www.unashamed.nz. To watch some of Luke's spoken word videos, visit the UNASHAMED Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/unashamedNZ | 



The Providence of God

BY NATHAN JOHNSON

New Zealand is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to minister for a couple of weeks with Authentic in the Waikato region of New Zealand, and its rich beauty and endearing people left a profound impact on my life. Since then, I think of New Zealand and its amazing people often in my prayers.

And I can understand how New Zealand is at the top of the list of places to go to when a crisis hits the world. It seems ... well ... nearly perfect. Yet whether someone wants to escape to New Zealand or you want to escape from it, it's actually not the location that is the issue — it's our focus.

It's easy to see "greener pastures" elsewhere, thinking a new location will solve our problems. But too often, those who move locales soon find their problems catching up with them.

Again, it's not about your physical location but where your focus lies. Though God may call us to move to a new place, we must remember that He desires to use us foremost right where we are at. In His providence, He has placed you where you are at, for "such a time as this."

Providence of God

The word "providence" comes from a Latin word meaning "to see" with the prefix "before." The idea is "to see beforehand" and is similar to "provision," which is foresight accompanied with taking action for preparation, security, defense, or for the supply of wants. In this case, God sees what is coming and makes provision or supply for it. Your life, where you live, and being in this season of history is not an accident. God has a purpose and a plan, and we need to remember we are in the middle of it if we are believers.

Even if there is pain, problems, and difficulty, we know "that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose," (Romans 8:28). God is leveraging all things (the good, the bad, and the ugly) to bring about His purpose and plan in our lives.

The early church summarized it by saying, "God for us."

After writing Romans 8:28, Paul makes a bold declaration, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord," (Romans 8:31, 8:37-39).

places, Müller did what he always did and knelt his head and thanked God for the provision of food. A few minutes after praying, a knock was heard at the door, and a baker stood there and said, "Mr. Müller, I couldn't sleep last night. Somehow I felt you didn't have bread for breakfast, and the Lord wanted me to send you some. So I got up at 2am and baked some fresh bread and have brought it."

Müller thanked the baker and no sooner had he left when there was another knock at the door. This time a milkman asked if they could use some milk. His milk cart had broken down right in front of the orphanage and not wanting the milk to spoil and not sure what else to do, he thought maybe it could be of use at the orphanage.

Such stories of faith and provision are all throughout Christian history because our God is the Great Provider, Jehovah Jireh.

"Your life, where you live, and being in this season of history is not an accident. God has a purpose and a plan, and we need to remember we are in the middle of it if we are believers."

You can see God's providence and provision throughout Scripture when He led a ram into the thicket as a sacrifice rather than Isaac, when He opened the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape but destroy her enemies, and when He established Esther as queen at the same time God's people needed someone to stand on their behalf. There are countless other pictures of God's providence in the Bible but let me give you one of my favorite modern-day stories.

I love the life of George Müller of Bristol. Throughout his life, he oversaw the care of over 10,000 orphans and never once asked for money for the orphan work or his personal needs; rather, he trusted in the provision of God to supply all they needed.

During his early years of orphan work, Müller was told there was no food for the children one day. As the 300 children entered into the dining room before school and sat at their

What about you? Are you resting in the provision and providence of our God? Do you see the opportunities He has placed around you as divine opportunities to showcase His life and love and declare the truth of the Gospel? Rather than look for greener pastures elsewhere, New Zealand or otherwise, let's first turn to God and ask how He wants to use us right where we are at.

Perhaps He is leading you to a new job or a new location, but it could be that He desires you to be light amidst darkness, the voice of truth amidst lies and deception, and a beacon of hope pointing to our Hope and Saviour, Jesus — right where you are at. |A

■ Nathan Johnson is program director and an instructor at Ellerslie Mission Society in Windsor, Colorado. Learn and see more at deeperChristian.com. Used by permission.





Read The Bible

BY STEPHEN WHITWELL

"Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end." - Psalm 73:17 NKJV.

As we're in the first part of a new year, allow me to pass on an important encouragement. It is simply this; *Read the Bible*. That's the simple yet profound, the metamorphic and life-changing message. Every single one of us, no matter what role we have in life, will benefit from a regular reading of God's Word.

If we believe the Word of God, is *the Word of God*, then we will commit to the priority of waiting on God, and listening for His voice as we spend time in His Word.

Recently I was reading *Psalm 73*. The Psalm writer Asaph was noting how the wicked prosper, and are in blessing, and he started to envy their blessing. But he had a revelation, from God's sanctuary, from His presence, from the meeting place with Him. He says, *Until I went*. His revelation was this: in reality, without God they are doomed, but the righteous are safe forever in His presence.

Perspective comes when we're in His presence. We see things as they are. *Until I went*. Before; no revelation. After; revelation. Until we go into His presence, we'll still see things from a wrong perspective, we'll still see things from a temporary and human perspective. Are you and I in need of some perspective on life? Is there a situation that on face value seems to look like it's hopeless, wrong or just plain unfair? When we go to God, seek Him, and spend time in His presence, He can open to us a view we hadn't seen before. We can see things as He does. That fresh, Godly perspective changes everything.

"A few days after that I read this; *"Oh, that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways!"* Psalm 81:13. NKJV.

If God is wanting us to listen, then He must have something to say. Let's be a *God-listener*. In the busy-ness of life and the many pressures and demands we have on our time, let's prioritise our place and time to meet with our Saviour to read, listen, and pray. Then, we are empowered to walk in His ways.

The thing about reading the Bible is that it is not like a chore around the house, it is not just something that must be done. It is far deeper than that. It is the Word of God, so as we read we are communing with Him. Jesus is the living Word, so when we come to our time of reading we are actually coming to Him. I can't wait to get up in the morning and come to my place and read His Word.

Then one morning I read this;

"In Judah God is known; His name is great in Israel. In Salem (Jerusalem) also is His tabernacle, And His dwelling place in Zion. There He broke the arrows of the bow, The shield and sword of battle. Selah." Psalm 76:1-3. NKJV.

There is a place where we can meet God. A place where He can be known. A place where His presence is particularly manifested. It is there where the battle is won, where the

enemy's strength is broken. It is the place of prayer, the place of meeting with God, our own personal Jerusalem.

There when we meet with Him;

- » He is known
- » His name is great
- » There is His dwelling place
- » He breaks the enemy's attacks
- » He breaks the enemy's defenses

Thank You Lord! How important it is to be there, where He is, to meet with Him in our own Jerusalem. There are places where God can be met and known more so than others, including our own prayer closet and the house of God.

The spiritual battle is won in God's presence. It is there to be won in His presence. If we fail to come to our own Jerusalem, the battle against us may not be won. We may fight on various fronts (issues of life) but it is won from the throne room, it is secured from where God is, it is won from where He is known.

We can only fight and win when we start from where He is, His presence, His dwelling place. Then, He assures us of victory.

Are we there? Are we meeting with Him, are we going to where He is? Going physically, emotionally, spiritually? Oh the joys, the victories, the wonders, the peace, the safety

and security of being there, in His presence, where He is. This is very true; The more quantity of time we take, the more quality it becomes.

Many find it difficult to establish a regular pattern of Bible reading and prayer. I know the pressures of doing just that; shift work, certain seasons of life and health issues make it difficult. Yet the invitation remains from the Holy Spirit, to come aside regularly and commune with Him.

"Until I went ... Then I understood ..." Psalm 73:17 NKJV.

There's a wealth of understanding and perspective God wants to show you and I. He wants to give us 20/20 vision. For our family. For our work. For our business. For our parenting. For our ministry. For life!

The invitation stands. He loves you! *"But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint."* Isaiah 40:31 NKJV (emphasis added). |A

“Perspective comes when we’re in His presence. We see things as they are.”

■ Stephen Whitwell has been a pastor for 33 years. He writes a monthly e-letter, Brief Word, which circulates worldwide. He has a passion for helping people discover who they are, and for writing and speaking about life! He can be contacted at www.goodwords.nz.



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AUTHENTIC
MEN'S MAGAZINE



Don't just pray your way out of trouble

BY CHARLES PRICE

The knee-jerk reaction to trouble is usually to pray our way out of it.

And so we may. At least we may try. But troubles can be friends as well as enemies. Tears enrich us more than laughter. Tough times grow us faster than easy times. If we are inclined to pray hard times away, we may find ourselves praying away a friend not a foe, a help not a hindrance.

To pray things away puts us in good company. Here is an example from one of the aristocracy of Scripture, the Apostle Paul who describes coming under attack with what he calls, 'a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me'. (The whole story is in 2 Corinthians 12.7-10).

This is not just uncomfortable, but evil in its origin. It is, 'a messenger of Satan', and its intent is, 'to torment me'. We might be intrigued to know what it actually was but all we are told is that it was, 'a thorn in the flesh'. The word 'flesh' probably means it was a physical ailment or disability. It could also mean some moral weakness or struggle, for 'flesh' is a word Paul uses to describe the distorted nature of fallen human beings. It could, I suppose, have been something circumstantial. I am glad he didn't say, or we would say we have a scripture only for that particular struggle. If he was going blind (he suggests he was in one of his letters), we would say we have a passage for people going blind! But he doesn't, he

uses an ambiguous term because one size fits all! It may be any dilemma or a multitude of them. You may have something similar. It likely comes under the category of 'if only...'. If only I didn't have this disability! If only my work was different! If only I had different neighbors! If only my wife would change! If only my kids behaved differently! If only I had more money. If only I didn't struggle with this weakness! 'if only ... fill in the blank! Then I would be a much better person than I am now.

Faced with his thorn, Paul does the obvious thing. 'Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me'. It is evil, it torments me, so Lord, please, please take it away. Three times he did this, which surely doesn't mean he prayed three prayers, one at morning, one at noon and one at night, but that over three periods of time, he engaged in urgent intercession. He pleaded for what he believed to be the obvious, logical thing, that God take away this thing that has been given him by Satan. Evidently, during the first two periods of praying he saw no action and heard no answer. His prayer petered out.

But when he prayed the third time, his ears were more open than his mouth and he heard God speak. 'He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul, this thorn is a source of great weakness to you, but I have a more vested interest in your weakness than I do in your strength. You have demonstrated remarkable strengths and enjoyed marvelous experiences. But this

tempts you to be self-sufficient, to assume your abilities and experiences of today create a momentum that will carry you over into tomorrow. To that extent, your strength tempts you to self-sufficiency and has become weakness.

The reason he was given this thorn was to 'keep me from being conceited'. He had just written about an amazing out-of-the-body experience in which he had been caught up to paradise. He tells us he had received, 'surpassingly great revelations'. He could boast about that, he wrote, and it would be the truth. But his experience might just make him a little too pleased with himself, pleased enough to become conceited, to enjoy the pat on the back, the pedestal to stand on and the congratulations of adulators. He would be humble about it of course, but with a measure of satisfaction that it was ever-so-slightly, deserved!

So, the tactic of his Master was to allow the delivery of 'a thorn in my flesh', something to slip through the net as, 'a messenger of Satan', designed 'to torment me'. The thing he might have expected protection from, the thing that aroused a chorus of prayer for deliverance from, is allowed to remain. God's answer is, 'My grace... my power...' It is enough! His answer was not the elimination of the thorn, but the addition of His presence in the dilemma and His grace for the struggle.

Jesus Christ, as an article in our creed, is not a lot of use to us in trouble. Jesus Christ as the crucial piece of a doctrinal jigsaw, is still not a lot of use to us in trouble. If Jesus Christ is simply the patron of our Christianity, in whose name we seek to live it, He will not be enough in time of trouble. It is the living Jesus Christ with whom we must engage. He is not only the giver of life, He is himself the Life that He gives. It is His life Paul declares to be his strength. It is the presence and strength of God that he is to trust. He doesn't have to see an outcome to that trust that makes everything make sense, but he does have to trust. The acknowledgment of our weakness creates the measure of our dependence, and the measure of our dependence leads to the experience of his strength. Most of us want to find a solution to our problems. We want our difficult stories to have an ending we can understand and explain, preferably a happy one. Paul doesn't come to an explanation of his thorn. I assume he continued to live with it, and it continued

“Most of us want to find a solution to our problems. We want our difficult stories to have an ending we can understand and explain, preferably a happy one. Paul doesn't come to an explanation of his thorn.”

■ Charles Price serves as 'Minister at Large' with The Peoples Church, Toronto, Canada. He is also an itinerate speaker and preacher and author of several books. For more information please visit: www.livingtruth.ca



to plague him. But he has a massive change of perspective. He writes, 'Therefore, (because of His presence) I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me'. The very thing I was asking God to deliver me from, is now the very thing I will boast about! Not begrudgingly, but with delight: 'I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong'. Who but a masochist delights in weakness, insults, hardships and persecutions? A person who has learned to relate their circumstances to God, to find strength in God and who is trusting his presence not just on the sunlit uplands, but in the tough dark valley.

What would you change if you could? I wonder what hurts, disappointments and fears rise up to haunt and oppress you? It is very true that some may change because they can and need to. But some may not. What then? We may ask God to take them away, and He may, or He may not. But whatever He does, His presence and grace come into our weakness and we rest in Him.

Annie Flint, in her young days, had the ability and ambition to become a concert pianist. But in her late twenties she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis that crippled her, leaving her twisted up in bed for many decades. Her fingers became so gnarled by arthritis that she was unable to hold a pen. She developed cancer of some internal organs, became incontinent, and started to go blind. She battled bedsores and discomfort at a time before there was much relief for pain, dying at the age of 64 in 1932.

She faced decades of suffering, but learned what Paul learned about his thorn in the flesh, and she wrote a hymn that expressed it beautifully:

He gives more grace when the burdens grow greater, He sends more strength when the labors increase; To added afflictions He adds His mercy, To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

Refrain: His love has no limits, His grace has no measure, His power no boundary known unto men; For out of His infinite riches in Jesus He gives, and gives, and gives again.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance, When our strength has failed ere the day is half done, When we reach the end of our hoarded resources Our Father's full giving is only begun. |/A

Charles and his team are putting together a YouTube channel of his preaching, broadcast on Living Truth from The Peoples Church in Toronto. To watch more of Charles' preaching, visit: www.youtube.com/c/CharlesPriceMinistry/videos

THE COVID-19 VACCINE

Making An Informed Decision For Your Family

BY BOB MCCOSKRIE

With the first Covid-19 vaccines having arrived in New Zealand just a few weeks ago, Family First New Zealand is regularly being asked for its view on the vaccine.

Here's some of the important questions that we know you may be asking:

- » Is it true that the new COVID vaccines have not undergone normal safety testing procedures?
- » Is it true that the new COVID vaccines contain tissues from an aborted fetus?
- » Should we accept a vaccine that is 'morally tainted'?
- » Is being pro-vaccine incompatible with being pro-life?
- » Is it true that the risks of coronavirus infection have been massively exaggerated for political or other devious reasons?
- » Is it true that Western democratic governments are planning to make coronavirus vaccination compulsory?
- » Any other conspiracy theories that I should be aware of?

To be blunt, we are not medical experts! But we do monitor the advice of credible medical specialists, infectious disease specialists, bioethicists, scientific researchers and Christian ethicists, and our partner organisations around the world who are sharing the views of these professionals. So, in an attempt to help Kiwi families make an informed decision, we offer a list of articles and other resources for reader's consideration in a document that is online on our website.

It should be noted that Family First New Zealand is not telling you whether to take or not take the vaccine – it's a matter of individual conscience. There are genuine and legitimate concerns on both sides of the debate, and we should accept and respect the conscientious decisions made by others.

We have however gathered articles recommended by Christian Concern and International Christian Medical and Dental Association, based in the United Kingdom; Focus on the Family, Charlotte Lozier Institute and the Family Research Council based in the United States, and have sought the opinions of our own Family First medical advisers. Our heart is that it is vital that families make their decision with full knowledge of the facts and arguments. There are several links to other resources

available in a longer document prepared by Family First (the address for which will be at the bottom of this article) - including a full gamut of discussion from those more favourable to the vaccines, those who would consider themselves neutral on the topic and those who are less favourable.

One key question is often asked - "are vaccines dangerous?" It is one of the points addressed in a recent document written by Christian Concern UK called Vaccines – safety, ethics and the bigger picture.

The report states, "...by and large, Christian medical experts – many of whom have stood against the tide on contentious issues like abortion and euthanasia – agree with the scientific consensus that the vaccines are fundamentally safe and that the risks of COVID-19 are considerably greater than the vaccine." The organisation does also acknowledge the concern that these vaccines have been developed very quickly – but states that is partly due to the urgency amongst the world's scientific community who are working together, and also the significant financial investment to develop a vaccine to stop this pandemic.

One final thought in this context. Christian Concern UK argues that those who support taking the vaccine "ought not to trample on the consciences of those who believe that it is morally wrong. It is one thing to seek to persuade – it is another to act in judgement."

As mentioned, for links to additional resources collated by Family First from all sides of the discussion, see www.familyfirst.org.nz. We at Family First trust that these articles will assist in your decision making progress on this significant issue. |/A

Some Initial Resources:

1. Christian Concern UK: <https://christianconcern.com/resource/vaccines-safety-ethics-and-the-bigger-picture/>
2. Dr Jonathan Sarfati, creationist physical chemist and spectroscopist at Creation Ministries International: <https://creation.com/cmi-vaccination>
3. Focus On The Family <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/episodes/broadcast/covid-19-vaccines-what-you-need-to-know/>

■ Bob McCoskrie is the director of the New Zealand social group Family First New Zealand. He has a master's degree in Commerce from the University of Auckland and is also a qualified teacher.



What if someone says, “What about the issue of suffering? Little kids are born deformed, people die of terrible diseases and there are earthquakes and tornadoes that cause havoc. This proves that there is no God! We are on our own...” How do you answer that?

Three philosophers are seated in a plane. The first man said that he heard that during the early hours of the night hijackers took over the controls. As he spoke, the plane lunged to the left and thrust a number of passengers against the wall, seriously injuring some of them.

After the second man gained his composure, he said, “because of what just happened, I don’t believe that this plane was ever made.” Even though his statement didn’t make sense, he continued to maintain that the entire plane, with its seats, windows, lighting, air conditioning, engines, etc., happened by accident.

As the third philosopher began to give his thoughts, the plane again lunged to one side. This time it was so violent that many passengers were seriously injured and two elderly people were killed. He was obviously shaken, but was able to share his thoughts about what had happened. He said that despite what was happening on the plane, he thought all was well in the cockpit.

It was then that someone quickly passed a hand-written note to the first man. It read, “Hijackers! All to be thrust out of the plane. Parachute under seat. Put it on now. Going to cut the lighting. Be ready to jump!” As he read its words, his eyes widened. This confirmed that something was radically wrong. He quickly reached under his seat and put the parachute on, and then passed the note on to the second philosopher. The second man read the words on the note. He smiled and said, “this note hasn’t used correct grammar. ‘Parachute under seat’ isn’t even a complete sentence...” With that, he crumpled the note and dropped it to the floor.

The third man, still shaken by what had happened on the plane, picked up the note and read it. He said, “it sure looks authentic. It does have the airline’s letterhead. What’s happening on the plane does add up to something being radically wrong... I think I now believe there is something wrong.” However, he then sat in his seat, not bothering to put his parachute on, or even to pass the note on to others!

Three Common Reactions

Here we have three common reactions to the message of the Gospel. Obviously, the first passenger is a genuine convert. He understands that the issue of suffering — disease, pain and death— shows that something is radically wrong between God and man. His knowledge of the jump that he must take

through the door of death causes him to trust in the Savior. The second man is an atheist. He uses the issue of suffering to somehow make an illogical leap into the philosophy that there is no God. The thought that the whole of creation, with its flowers, its birds, the sun, the moon, the animal kingdom, the beauty of the seasons, the incredible variety of succulent fruit trees, etc. all happened by accident.

The notion that such reasoning borders on insanity doesn’t enter his unthinking and sin-loving mind. He doesn’t bother to humbly study the warning of Scripture. Instead, he exalts himself above the mind of his Creator, and condescendingly becomes a critic of the Word of God. He maintains it is full of errors and therefore can’t be trusted.

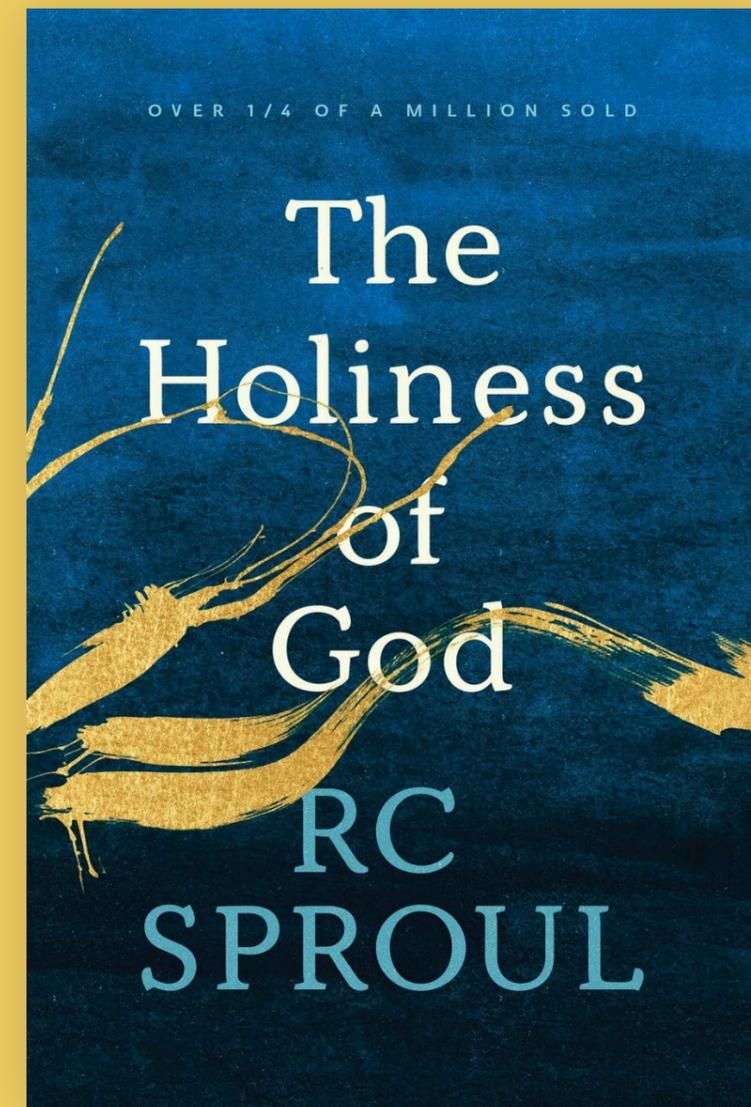
The third man is an average person. He believes in God. He even believes the Bible. He is easily convinced that something may be wrong between man and God... but he doesn’t see his urgent need to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. How do we awaken these two men?

Don’t Avoid It

For the answer, let’s go back to the plane. The first man simply needs to tell the other two philosophers to look out of the window for a moment, and to think about the 25,000-foot fall. Their knowledge of the unbending law of gravity should kick in, and from there common sense should do the rest. It should cause both men to look under their seat for the parachute. The issue of suffering is not something the Christian should avoid. It is glaring evidence that man has rejected God — all is not well on board the flight. It works for our cause, not against it. All these things — pain, disease, droughts, tornadoes, earthquakes, etc — should cause the thinking person to investigate the claims of the “note” of God’s Word, and see its explanation.

However, the ultimate convincing agent is of course the unbending Law of God. It is the knowledge of the Law and the fearful consequences of transgressing its precepts that should cause fear to kick in, and hopefully common sense should then cause the sinner to seek after the Savior, who lovingly died and rose again, so that they might be saved. |A

■ Ray Comfort, the founder and CEO of Living Waters Publications, is an internationally recognized evangelist and author. Ray is the host of the award-winning Way of the Master television program and radio program. He is also a best-selling author of over 80 books.



The Holiness of God

R. C. SPROUL // REVIEW BY JOSHUA ENS

RC Sproul begins his book, *The Holiness of God*, by writing “how we understand the person and character of God the Father affects every aspect of our lives” (p13). The greatest duty of humans is to love God with everything we have (Mt. 22:37). There is an essential connection between knowing God and loving Him. Stated another way, when we seek to know God truly, we are obeying Jesus’ command to love God with our minds.

Central to a true knowledge of God is grasping his holy character. Sproul argues that the holiness often talked about by Christians, holy living, cannot be understood without first understanding God’s majestic holiness. “There can be no worship, no spiritual growth, no true obedience without it” (p14). What is the reason for the focus on this attribute, or perfection of God? The author contends that Scripture itself presents the holiness of God as a vital doctrine. One of the primary ways that Biblical authors stress the importance of their words is through repetition. Instead of italicising, underlining, or adding exclamation marks, ancient Hebrew writers used repetition.

“Outside of the Bible, no book has had a greater influence on my thinking than this one. It is the first book I recommend to people who ask for a book on the character of God”

“Only once in sacred Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree. Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love; or mercy, mercy, mercy; or wrath, wrath, wrath; or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, that the whole earth is full of His glory” (p25).

The incident referenced here is the prophet Isaiah’s vision of the throne room of God in the sixth chapter of his book. In that passage, Isaiah sees a glimpse of the Heavenly glory of God, complete with seraphim singing His praises. Sproul argues that

Isaiah’s unique experience is programmatic for all Christians who desire to know God’s holiness. Upon seeing God’s holiness, Isaiah was made painfully aware of his sin, crying out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Is. 6:5). God displays His grace by restoring his prophet, atoning for his sin, and purifying his lips. Only at this point does God Himself speak to Isaiah, calling him to be His prophet, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Is. 6:8) “There is a pattern here, a pattern repeated in history. God appears, people quake in terror, God forgives and heals, God sends.

“From brokenness to mission is the human pattern” (p32). These quotes are the foundation for the rest of the book; the author goes on to develop this pattern, explaining its ramifications for several areas of our lives.

Outside of the Bible, no book has had a greater influence on my thinking than this one. It is the first book I recommend to people who ask for a book on the character of God, and it is a book I recommend without people

asking also. The author’s greatest strength is to take deep, weighty, difficult-to-understand concepts and communicate them simply without compromising their truth. For this reason, *The Holiness of God*, is a book from which both young and mature Christians will benefit. I return regularly to read portions of this book, and each time I do, I am struck with the greatness of God’s holiness, the seriousness of my remaining sin, the beauty of the Gospel through which I am forgiven, and the life of holiness to which I am called. | A

This book is available from



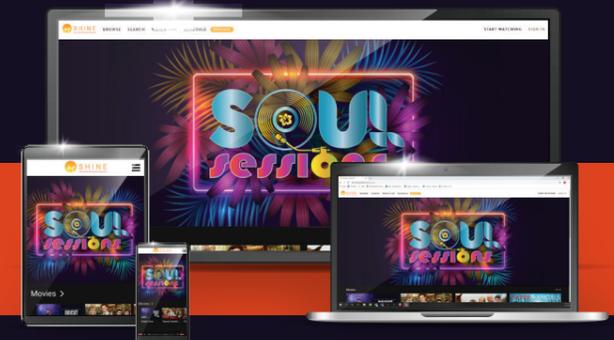
Joshua Ens is a Canadian currently residing in New Zealand. As well as a book reviewer for Authentic he is a Youth Pastor at River City Bible Church and a full-time Secondary School Teacher.



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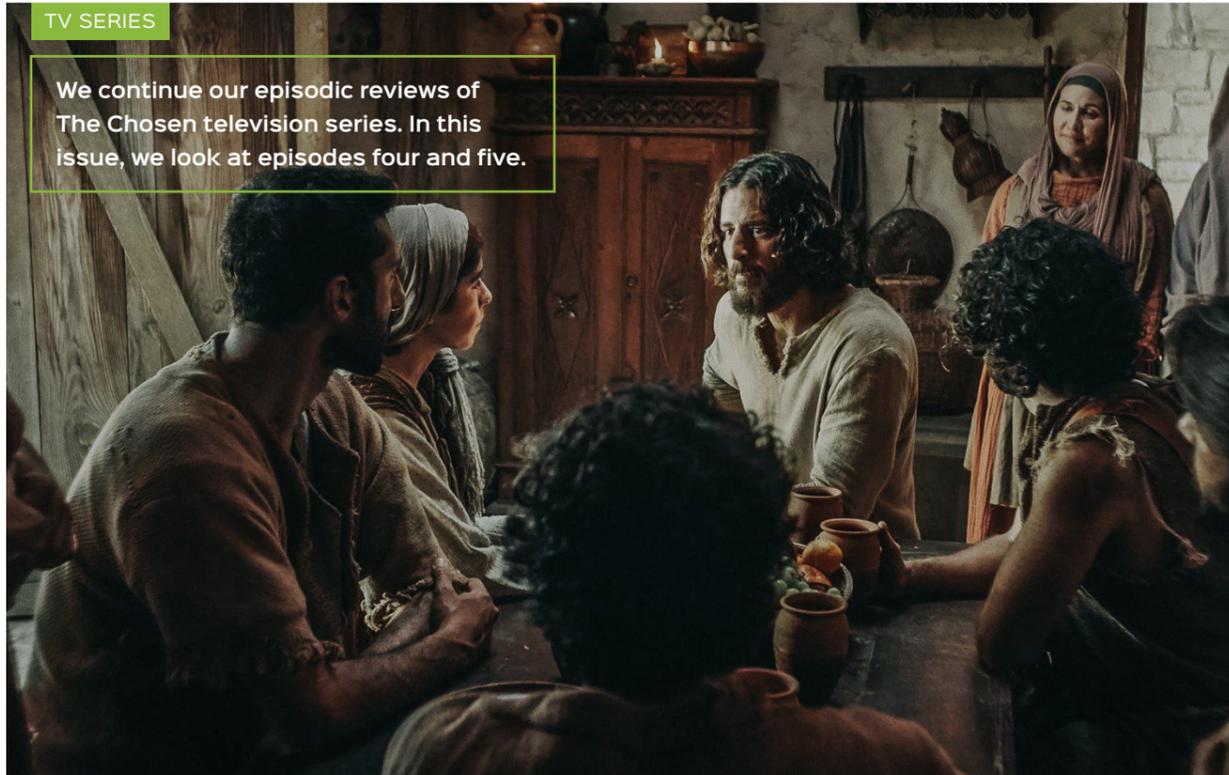
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TV SERIES

We continue our episodic reviews of *The Chosen* television series. In this issue, we look at episodes four and five.



The Chosen

DALLAS JENKINS // REVIEW FROM PLUGGEDIN

Episode 4: The Rock on Which It Is Built

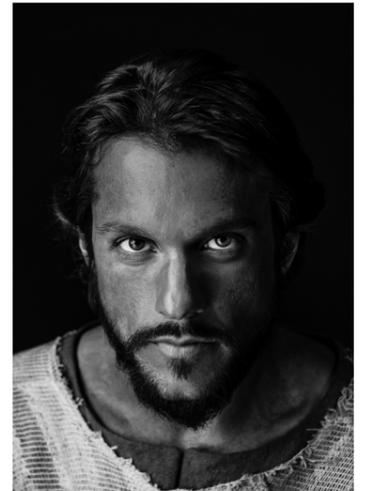
Simon goes out into the water with Roman soldiers, who are intent upon catching the Jewish fishermen breaking the sabbath (and thus cheating the Romans out of their taxable share). Instead, he steers the boat to a sandbar and runs aground. Capernaum's Roman leader suspects Simon of duplicity, so he sends the tax collector Matthew to follow the man. Elsewhere, Simon comes clean to his wife, Eden, about the dire financial straits they're in and tries to work every possible angle to keep from going to prison. Andrew suggests another possibility: trusting the man whom the crazy baptizer John called the "Lamb of God."

Simon misleads the Romans, tries to keep a sick relative from living with them and has a serious fight with his wife, Eden. When fellow fisherman Zebedee and his sons, John and James, ask how bad things are with Eden, he laments that he could be enjoying his last night of freedom — his last night, in other words, to enjoy Eden's company — and he's out fishing. Simon throws a bit of a fit on his boat in the middle of the night, too. He cries out in anger to God, narrating the blessings and

miseries of the Jewish people. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say You enjoy yanking us around like goats and can't decide whether we're chosen or not," he said. When his friends come upon him and ask who Simon was talking to, Simon says, "apparently no one."

But things change in the morning, when Simon and the other fishers come across Jesus preaching to a small group of people by the water. After the sermon, He performs a miracle — telling Simon to cast his nets one more time, after which the fisherman and his friends pull in enough, apparently, to pay off Simon's debt. (The boat, in fact, nearly sinks from the weight of all the fish.) "Fish are nothing," Jesus tells Simon, now willing to do anything for the man he now believes is the Lamb of God. "For now on, I will make you fishers of men."

We hear references to Simon's past gambling issues and a reference to the "fiery furnace" of hell. Simon threatens to beat a couple of men "with my bare hands." Someone is so sick that they're spitting up blood.



Episode 5: The Wedding Gift

Jesus and His small band of followers go to Cana to celebrate the wedding of a family friend. But things go awry when the wine runs out. Meanwhile, the rabbi Nicodemus questions the newly imprisoned John the Baptist to see what he might know about the strange exorcism that took place some time ago — an exorcism that would appear to be a miracle.

John and Nicodemus clearly don't like each other much. John calls the Pharisee out on the extravagance of his "frock," while Nicodemus accuses John of blasphemy — misquoting Scripture (Nicodemus believes) to suggest that God would have a son. "God does not have a son except for Israel!" Nicodemus says. John holds his ground, though. "Some will not want to waken," the discomfiting prophet says. "They're in love with the dark. I wonder which one you'll be?"

Alcohol is obviously a big part of the wedding celebration — and indeed central to the miracle that takes place at the end of the episode. We see people drink wine, discuss its quality and talk about how the beverage can dull the mind (since it's common

practice to serve the bad stuff later on in the celebration). The actual miracle feels pretty low-key — and one that Jesus performs in private, ordering everyone (including a young, doubting catering expert named Thomas) out of the room. Before leaving to follow Jesus, Simon helps his own wife stomp grapes, and they get a little flirty. Later, at the wedding, Simon talks with some of Jesus' other new followers and learns that Thaddeus was called by Jesus when the two were helping to build a latrine. "Our Master building a privy," Simon marvels. Jesus performs magic tricks for children, too (which look like carnival-type shell games when we briefly see them); and when Simon jokingly asks Jesus if He can do something about the clumsiness of his brother, Andrew, Jesus watches him dance a bit and jokes, "Some things even I cannot do." Christ also talks about having been a clumsy teenager. Another disciple, James, jokingly chucks dates from a tree at his fellow travelers. | 

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