

Paul's Epistle



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Our Source of Hope and Faith

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Cor. 13:13

Reflection: While Saint Paul's epistle to the Corinthian church, particularly chapter 13, is usually read at weddings because of its focus on "Love," there are two other aspects that are usually overpassed: faith and hope. Love binds things together, but without faith, our love is superficial. And without hope, our faith is a hypocrisy. Terry Law, in his book "The Hope Habit" states that hope is a choice, but as Christians we have no choice but to choose hope! The moment we doubt God's goodness, even in difficult circumstances, and lose hope, our faith is tested, and God's love — which we are commanded to transmit to others — disappears.

Hope is best portrayed when circumstances around us seem hopeless. This is not a call to be unrealistic optimists, but rather a reminder that we have access to the source of hope, no matter what difficulties encountered. Such hope is still seen in the eyes of refugee children, living in unimaginable circumstances and their future is unknown. If they can choose hope, we can too.

Choose hope!

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for providing us with an unlimited fountain of hope that we can quench our thirst and strengthen our faith and transmit your unconditional love to a world where love is usually conditional.

Dr Michael Bible Society serves as the General Secretary/CEO of the Bible Society in Lebanon, overseeing operations in Syria and Iraq as well.



A prayer to prepare our hearts for this upcoming Christmas season

Lord, as we gather for another holiday season, there are so many reasons we have to be grateful. But with new seasons, come new challenges. For many, this is the first season without a loved one. For others, this is the first Christmas as a blended family. Or maybe these days as a whole bring up painful memories.

Wherever we are this season, we are trusting that You will meet us there. Give us guidance and wisdom as we navigate new normals, traditions, and feelings. May our homes be filled with harmony and may our hearts remember the hope we have in You! Hope that comforts us in our grief. Hope that helps us work through hard things. Hope that something better is coming! Amen

P31 Ministries

A Prayer to
prepare our hearts
for this upcoming
Christmas season ...

Cover: <https://www.pema.it/en/p/Block%20Nativity/Holy-Night-crib?ModID=794000&Page=1>

A Christmas message from Ken and Lynette

Much of this year has had an element of looking back,

- we did after all celebrate 50 years of ministry partnership with Jesus in Belconnen,
- we have said farewell to some long-time members, and
- we are contemplating life in a new location.

Yet there has also been plenty to anticipate.

- The mainly music playgroup is continuing to grow and there is a real sense of community developing.
- The food pantry serves an increasing number and continues to grow as a genuine community for its members.
- The growing desire for unity and cooperation within the Anglican parishes of St James and St Barnabas excites me greatly.
- Our Community Carols event is now a joint effort with Mosaic Baptist in Evatt.
- There have been several cohorts of students using St Paul's as a base for training and learning... many of whom benefit from our love and friendship because of the unique learning difficulties they face.

As I sit and write this Advent is upon us. It is a time of longing, hoping, not in desperation as if there is some great calamity approaching, but with a joyous anticipation for what God will do next.

Many Christians are waiting, even expecting that Jesus will return shortly, hoping to see an end to the pain and suffering, the despair and injustice that seems to be all around us.

I too wish to see that event... but not just yet.

Too many see eternity starting after they die and not realising that eternity with God began the moment, they accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour. But it is not a promise for later it is for now.

I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life. (John 5:24 NLT)

For in him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28 NIV) Because Jesus is also Immanuel, God with us, I am excited to see God at work even more powerfully as we anticipate his return.

As Peter reminds us that God wants to give everyone the chance to be saved (2Peter 3:9), then I expect the pace of Gods work to also increase as the time of "His promised return" draws ever nearer.

Indeed, he is presenting us with many opportunities to proclaim the "Good News" more widely.

In view of all this, what can we say? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom 8:31 GNB)

As we anticipate 2024 my hope is that you may find:

- excitement in the promise of God to bring in the harvest,
- a real thrill in discovering what God has prepared for us, and
- genuine joy in knowing that your Lord and Saviour is not finished with you just yet.

I hope you find both comfort and thrilling anticipation in these words from Isaiah (52:12).

*For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight;
for the LORD will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rearguard.*

In this Advent and Christmas season I pray that for all of us there will be the deep personal revelation (a disclosure by God of His truth) that expands our faith and grows our spiritual maturity.

- Hope – the security of our faith in a Saviour who is "for us",
- Peace – that which comes from Christ which surpasses all our understanding,
- Joy – that Christ gives so we may be full and uplifted in Him,
- Love – created by God as a gift that we may know we are accepted by His grace and not our actions.

Finally let me share with you a prayer from Micheal Leunig.

Dear God,

*We pray for another way of being:
another way of knowing.*

*Across the difficult terrain of our existence
we have attempted to build a highway
and in so doing have lost our footpath.*

God lead us to our footpath:

*Lead us there where in simplicity
we may move at the speed of natural creatures
and feel the earth's love beneath our feet.*

*Lead us there where step-by-step we may feel
the movement of creation in our hearts.*

*And lead us there where side-by-side
we may feel the embrace of the common soul.
Nothing can be loved at speed.*

*God lead us to the slow path; to the joyous
insights*

*of the pilgrim; another way of knowing: another
way of being.*

Amen.

(<https://www.leunig.com.au/works/prayers>).

If you are staying home this Christmas, I look forward to seeing you at one of the Parish Christmas Services.

If you are travelling go with God, call on His peace, His presence and His grace while you are away from home.

Lynette and I wish you, your family and all whom you encounter, every blessing through Jesus our Lord this Christmas.

Reverend Ken Rampling

Christmas @ St Paul's Spence

Community Christmas Carols

(Dec 15th)

- 5pm Gather for BBQ / picnic
- 6pm start the carol singing

Christmas Eve

(Dec 24th)

- 9am Sunday Communion Service
- 6pm Lessons and Carols

Christmas Day

(Dec 25th)

- 9am Sunday Family Service



Jesus is your ...

Maybe you are in need of a friend who can comfort you in this hard season...

Maybe you are in need of a provider in the midst of financial crisis...

Maybe you are in need of peace in this chaotic world...

Oh friend, Jesus is not a far-off and distant figure in history. He became a very real human experiencing very real fears and trials. Whatever you are facing, He understands so very deeply, and He longs to meet you there.

P31 Ministries

Jesus is your ...

- | | |
|--------------|-------------|
| ☼ Friend. | ☼ Provider. |
| ☼ Comforter. | ☼ Rock. |
| ☼ Counselor. | ☼ Savior. |
| ☼ Peace. | ☼ Rescuer. |

Joy to the world, the Lord has come

For the hurting hearts...

The weary souls...

The tired and tempted minds...

Today we celebrate the gift of Jesus' life! His miraculous birth was just the beginning of the way He would show His love for us through His life, death and resurrection. Christmas is the very hope we need today, the beginning of the story of our rescue!

Thank You, Lord!

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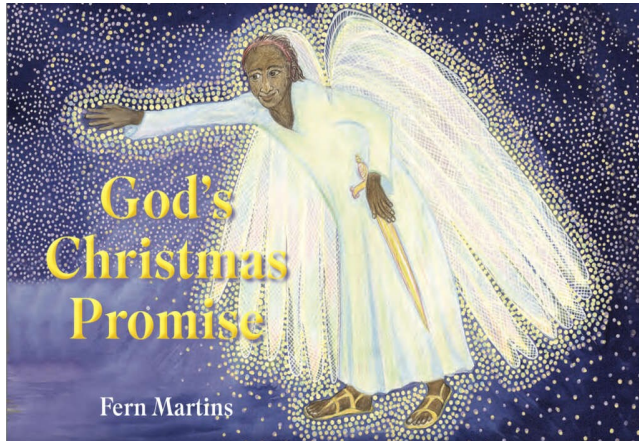
*JOY TO THE
WORLD, THE
LORD HAS
COME!*

Christmas through uniquely Australian Eyes

Before she came to the Lord, Aboriginal artist Fern Martins saw Christianity as an imposed colonial concept. As a sculptor, printmaker and artist, her early work was politically motivated, and as a university lecturer, she taught the buried history of atrocities to Australia's First Nations people. She even describes her past self as a "reverse racist".

But one evening in 1993, as a newly separated single mum, Fern read the Gospel of John in a caravan at Caves Beach, NSW, and her spirit was transformed.

"I had gone out of a darkness into the kingdom of light. It was an immediate transformation," says the Waka Waka, Ngarabul and Bundjalung woman who has been creating art for the past 50 years.



This is why Fern hopes her beautiful new book, *God's Christmas Promise*, created in partnership with Bible Society Australia, will break down cultural barriers to Christian faith such as she used to feel.

"It'd be lovely to have God's favour on it and to touch people's hearts with the story of Christ." – Fern Martins

It's a children's picture book that tells the nativity story from the Gospel of Luke in Fern's words, accompanied by her beguiling illustrations featuring Aboriginal artistic iconography, such as Aboriginal tribesmen camping around a fire with a dingo and some sheep.

"It'd be lovely to have God's favour on it and to touch people's hearts with the story of Christ that would normally see it as just a colonial concept, not understanding the depth of spirit, the depth of life that God has given us through Christ. That is my



Illustration by Fern Martins For this reason, Fern has used dot painting styles extensively, which she usually avoids, as a path in for Indigenous people.

"I had to think of the audience it was going to, and if it was going to take the blinkers off Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people to see the gospel, to see Jesus, I used the dots as a tool to draw them into the story rather than dismiss it because it was in a European style. That was the reason why I used the dot work, to attract a different audience to knowing about the birth of Christ and the promise."

Beginning her career with her own exhibition at age 19, Fern has had a varied career as an artist. She helped set up the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative in Sydney and supported the Aboriginal Land Councils and the very early treaty movement.

"It was like a blessing from God for me to do this."

But after her conversion 30 years ago, Fern moved out of the mainstream art movement, concentrating solely on painting God's glory and illustrating the Scriptures.

"When I came to the Lord, I was very much in the art scene, and I destroyed all my work because it was an idol. And I didn't want anything in front of my Lord and Saviour.

"About 18 months later ... I picked up the brush again, but my work was completely different than my work previous to that. It was a remarkable change and I've just followed that," she explains.

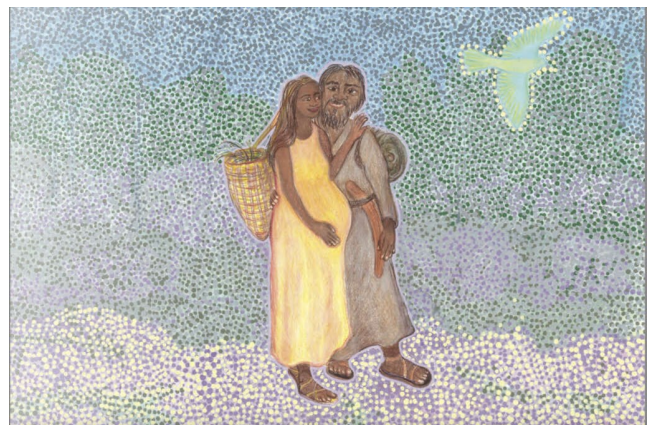


Illustration by Fern Martins



aim," she tells *Eternity*.

Illustration by Fern Martins

.../cont

Christmas through uniquely Australian Eyes, continued

Unfortunately, because of her strict focus on spiritual subjects, Fern has been unable to sustain herself by her art practice alone and works looking after children in after-school care. Her fervent prayer is that God would show favour on her creativity and prosper it so that she can concentrate purely on her art.

"So it was like a blessing from God for me to do this," says Fern about *God's Christmas Promise*. "It wasn't easy because you want God with you in everything you do. So it was a challenge. I just kept on praying about it and then I had to make sure that I was absolutely respectful to God's word, but also respectful to Aboriginal people at the same time, including a reflection of us in the story rather than it being a blonde, blue-eyed Jesus."

Anne Lim | Eternity | October 2023

Comfort and Hope this Christmas

"... I am the one who answers your prayers and cares for you. I am like a tree that is always green; all your fruit comes from me." Hosea 14:8 (NLT)

As I write to you, I glance over the top of my computer, and my eyes are immediately drawn to the 8-foot artificial Christmas tree in the corner of our den. It's been up since Christmas 2020.

It was a little embarrassing at first when friends came over in the middle of June and saw our tree, but I got over that because I love it. Every morning, I get up and switch on the Christmas lights. The sight makes me smile!

I think part of the initial reason we left the tree up after Christmas 2020 was that life was so hard and colourless. With countless others, I found myself struggling with depression again as we felt the impact of a global pandemic.

Then I realized that somehow the tree's sparkling lights speak of hope, reminding me of better days. But it is also much more than that. The tree reminds me daily of that moment that changed the world forever — the coming of our Saviour, the moment when hope began in the middle of a lifeless world.

There is a lot of debate over the origin of the Christmas tree, but I love the account of Martin Luther. In her children's book *Luther's Children Celebrate Christmas*, Dorothy Haskins says that Martin Luther was walking through the woods near his house one night. Snow had fallen on the branches of the trees, and they sparkled in the moonlight. He was so taken by their quiet, brilliant beauty.

"The little trees stood there bravely, keeping green while everything else around them went dry and drab and lifeless."

So Luther cut down a tree, carried it home and decorated it with candles. According to Haskins, "He explained to his children that the tree is green in the winter like our faith in Christ. It stays fresh even in a time of trouble. Our faith in Christ stays green even in sorrow. His comfort remains even in the midst of despair."

If you think about it, the beginning of our story started with a tree. When God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, He told them they could eat freely from every tree except one. They were forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or they would die.

When the serpent entered the garden, his first act was to make Adam and Eve question God: "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit ...?" (Genesis 3:1b, NLT). His second act was to call God a liar: "You won't die!" (Genesis 3:4, NLT). His third was to insinuate that God was holding out on them: "God knows that your eyes will be opened ..." (Genesis 3:5, NLT).

When Adam and Eve listened to the serpent's lies and not only picked fruit from the forbidden tree but ate the fruit, the whole earth shuddered. Everything changed. Suddenly, Adam and Eve felt shame and hid from God. In His mercy, God clothed them in the skins of animals and sent them out of the garden (Genesis 3:6-21). If they had stayed, they could have eaten the fruit from the tree of life and lived forever ... but forever broken. God loved them too much for that, and He loves you too much for that as well.

So just as our desolation came from a tree, so also our redemption came on a tree. Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, was willing to become a curse in the eyes of God and humanity to bridge the great divide between a holy God and sinners such as you and me. It's hard to take in the weight of that kind of love.

God describes Himself this way: "I am the one who answers your prayers and cares for you. I am like a tree that is always green; all your fruit comes from me" (Hosea 14:8). When I think of that image during the Christmas season, I'm reminded He hears our prayers and He is our constant provider.

If you feel anxious or afraid this season, remember that the evergreen mercy of God is with you. Just as those trees captivated Martin Luther's heart and brought joy to his children by candlelight, you and I can remember as we gaze upon the trees this season that God is always with us. Let's share the light of His love with those around us.

Heavenly Father, thank You that You never change. You are the same yesterday, today and forever. Thank You that You hear my prayers and watch over me. In Jesus' Name, Amen.





Affluenza

There is a disease sweeping the western world and Australia has not been immune. Unfortunately, quarantine controls have not saved us from being infected. The disease is "affluenza".

The unsuspecting victims of this condition are compelled to spend every waking moment thinking about, or working towards, collecting symbols of affluence in the vain attempt to hold off the terrible symptoms of this condition. The symptoms include feelings of jealousy, greed and the overwhelming fear of being a loser in the race of acquisition.

The most unfortunate side effect of affluenza is that there is no way to keep ahead of it. It does not matter how much you manage to accumulate, there will never be enough to feel satisfied. There will always be something more you will just "have to have" in order to feel life is complete.

So what is the cure for such a terrible illness? Simple - give. The only antidote to affluenza is to give to others. Look to the example of Jesus who gave His life for others. Let Jesus be your example and inner motivation. Don't be another victim of the affluenza disease.

Do you have a story to tell.

Taking the first step on any journey can feel terrifying.

Perhaps you've felt a tugging on your heart to put your story into words, but those words seem to hide.

Maybe you're wanting to grow your social media presence, but you don't know where to begin.

Possibly you've felt a calling to speak at your church, but you've never seen yourself as a speaker before.

Oh friend, we understand how scary it can be to step into the purpose God has for your life, especially when it doesn't quite make sense. But here's the beautiful truth: God has placed unique gifts within you, and He longs to use them to further His Kingdom. Even though it might seem daunting at first, He will equip you every step of the way.

P31



When life changes in an instant, God remains the same. He is a solid rock, a pillar of strength, and a safe place to dwell.

Faith story - Marion



From childhood I was raised to believe in Jesus. I still recall my Sunday school teacher giving us small cards with a text from scripture. They were kept in a tiny tin to bring out and practice. I was a devoted lover of Jesus. In my teen years, I sang on Christian radio and at public youth events.

Sadly, in my early adult years, I turned away from what I understood as conservative, legalistic teaching. My heart was for the poor and challenged, and in immaturity and lack of understanding of God's word, I threw out Jesus as their prime model of faith. I became rebellious.

One day, in angst and rejection of Christ, I threw away my Bible. I saw so much injustice, and I didn't want to be part of it.

The following 14 years of scorn and unbelief brought hardship in my relationships and deep sadness and confusion. I had a complete mental breakdown. It was terrible. I was so perplexed and despairing of life. Everything seemed faceless and empty.

But all through those 14 years, my faithful father prayed daily, "Bring my girl back, Lord! Bring her back!"

In my mid-thirties, I reached out to God – the God I did not know. I decided to go back to church. My first morning, I remember setting off, wheeling my baby in a grand Cyclops pram. I stopped in front of the church, and said to God, "This time I am not turning back. Whatever anyone says to me, I am not turning back!"

I went to the women's Bible study, and Ephesians was the book to study. I was astonished by the word 'grace'. I don't ever remember hearing it before, but I melted. My independent defiance and my failed ability to endure in relationships utterly broke.

The mercy of God in Christ staggered me. I just wept. Salvation was not up to me. Jesus died on my behalf and welcomed me into his beloved family. I read in wonder from Ephesians 2:8: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God..."

I wept in repentance over days and weeks. A hunger for more of God's Word quickened in me. I got up early each morning to read my Bible and talk to God. The tiny texts I had learned as a child took on life and joy in me.

Three years on, sitting in my kitchen, I was reading the book of Romans, when I sensed someone in the room. I immediately sensed it was Jesus. I threw myself at his feet! He said, "Get up." I looked into his face, and his eyes spoke love. A fire seemed to radiate from his forehead. His left arm was outstretched to me, and I saw the deep furrowed scars in his hands. It seemed he was composed of love. I knew then that Jesus was alive!

It's been almost 30 years since that beautiful encounter with Jesus. I'm a happy grandmother. In 2006, I retired from my work, and I sought the Lord for his leading. Within my heart, I sensed his words, "Women, casualties of war. Afghanistan." It came as a surprise!

This led me to train as a Teacher of English to speakers of Foreign Languages (TEFOL), and I taught Afghani refugee women in Sydney. They became my friends, and it was so special.

Following that, I went to Pakistan, where there were many Afghan refugees. In 2010, the catastrophic flood intervened, and twenty million people were displaced. I'd never seen suffering on that scale. Grief works a weary face. I was able to live with Muslim people and love them and pray. We saw an incredible move of the Holy Spirit. It was beautiful.

Finally, at age 71, I went into Afghanistan, and taught English to young women in a college. The following year, I took a young Afghan refugee into my home in Sydney. This led to me being invited to live with his Muslim family in Pakistan in a refugee town. Truly, I have seen that God cares for the widows and the fatherless. He has compassion on those in the valley of grief. He is always present. Sometimes, he chooses the weak and the foolish to show his glory. He says, "Go and tell them I'm alive!"

Marion's book, *Tell Them I'm Alive*, is available at Koorong.

To read more of Eternity's Faith Stories, compiled by Naomi Reed, go to <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/section/faith-stories/>

Merry Christmas to you and the ones you love and care for.
Praying that the simplest acts of kindness will be appreciated
as we receive and give in this season.

Bible Trivia Questions

1. Who told Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem?
2. True or False: Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus because they were following a star.
3. What form of transportation did Mary and Joseph use to get to Bethlehem? The answer is not a taxi cab.
4. Which Old Testament prophet had the most to say about the birth of Christ?
5. In the accounts announcing the birth of Christ (Matthew 1 and Luke 1 and 2) how many times did an angel or angels appear?
6. Who told Joseph the baby's name was to be Jesus?
7. Can you list 5 names of Jesus found in the Bible? Some on my list are from Old Testament prophecies.
8. What are the meanings of the names Jesus and Emmanuel?
9. The shepherds and the wise men went to see Jesus. Which group followed a star and which group went to find the baby because an angel told them where to look?
10. What did the angels sing to the shepherds?
11. When the shepherds went looking for Jesus, what was the sign they were to look for?
12. How many wise men or kings or magi came to see Jesus?
13. Matthew 2:8 says that Herod asked the wise men to inform him where the baby Jesus was. Why does this verse say he wanted to know?
14. How old was Jesus when the wise men found him?
15. What are the three gifts which are mentioned being given by the wise men?
16. Which king ordered all the young children be killed?
17. What animals does the Bible say were present at the birth of Jesus?
18. What was the name of the unkind innkeeper who would not allow the pregnant Mary to lodge in his inn?
19. What is the name of the person who was told he would not die until he saw the Savior?
20. Two of the four Gospels do not mention the birth of Christ. Which two?

<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/christmas-bible-quiz-20-good-questions/>



As we step forward in faith, we can gain more courage in our life to pursue the things that God's calling us to do.

ANN WHITE

Taking on the Identity of Christ

"Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children."
Ephesians 5:1 (NLT)

Several times, when I've needed a costume to wear to a party, I've written the names of fellow party-going friends on name tags and then plastered them over a black shirt. Add a black ski mask, and I become an "Identity Thief."

It's a fun costume but not so fun in real life. Each of us wants to be known for who we are — an individual with a customized set of fingerprints, personal passwords, a unique personality and special abilities. A package like no one else. That's the way God created us to be: one of a kind.

Yet secretly, when I masquerade as the "Identity Thief," each person represented on my shirt has something I'd like to have. Their ability to say just the right thing whereas my tongue so easily slips into knots. Their organizational skills whereas my home desk is a mess. Their knack for buying just the right gift whereas I grab the first thing I see, and it ends up oh so wrong.

I fail miserably when I try to redraw my life to look like other people's. That's because I need to be me, the way God designed me to be.

The only person God wants me to imitate is Him. That's what our key verse says: *"Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children"* (Ephesians 5:1).

The Genesis 1 creation record says God made people in His image. But sin has marred us. While we are still made in the image of God, our quest as growing Christians is to transform back into His likeness — Christlikeness — through sanctification and our imitation of God.

Paul, the writer of the book of Ephesians, goes on to list what we should imitate about God: His way of love and truth, His holiness, goodness and righteousness (Ephesians 5:2-8).

But wait — aren't we also called to examine and imitate the lives of mature believers? After all, 1 Corinthians 11:1 says, *"And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ"* (NLT). Isn't Paul asking his readers to imitate him?

The key phrase in Paul's directive is *"as I imitate Christ."* Other English translations render "imitate" as *"follow the example of"* (NIV). We can aim to *be like* faithful followers of Jesus without wishing we could *be them*. We can watch the in-the-flesh example of other believers — how they put their faith in action, how they serve with love, and how they are able to endure through tough times because of the hope they have in Jesus — but our final guide is Jesus as represented in the Bible.

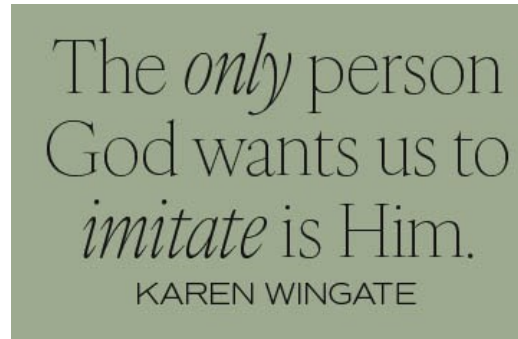
We may admire qualities someone else has and see them as superior to our own. But our best strategy is to follow the example of the only perfect human being — Jesus Christ. His life teaches us what character traits and behaviours are most important. He shows us how to centre our lives around an eternal perspective and how to live out the concepts of love, holiness, purity and righteousness based on our faith and trust in God.

If Jesus is the best example of all, why would we want to become like anyone else? The exciting part

is this: When we move toward becoming like Jesus and exercising the gifts He has custom-made for each of us, we find that we really are one of a kind, with a unique identity others can't help but notice and admire.

Lord, I want to be so in love with You that my desire is to become just like You and no one else. Please help me to know You better. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Karen Wingate



The first step to belonging

In our pain, our loving heavenly Father runs to us, is near to us, and comforts us with His presence and the peace only He can provide. In our pain, we belong close to our Saviour. It's the best place for us to be.

But when circumstances shatter our lives, instead of allowing God to come close and put our broken pieces back together, I think we sometimes pull away. Instead of allowing God to care for our wounds, we cover them and recoil. After all, wounds hurt, and we fear that exposing them will only hurt more.

But as with an untreated physical wound, untreated heart wounds grow more and more tender.

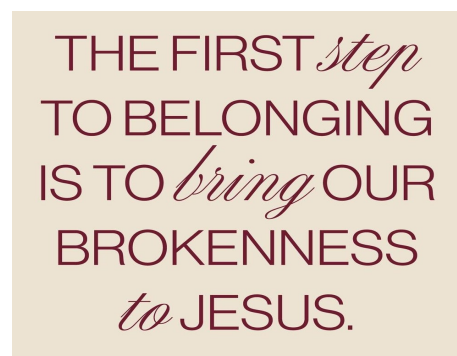
Though covered up, the wounds get worse, and if they're not treated, infection will spread and create even more hurt.

The first step to belonging is to bring our brokenness to Jesus. Instead of tirelessly trying to fix things ourselves, we can let Jesus put the broken pieces of our hearts back together.

God doesn't want us to spend our lives endlessly trying to keep it together. He wants to heal us, fill us, and lead us to the rest found in His arms when we belong to Him.

What do you need to bring to Jesus today so He can heal you and lead you to the rest found in His arms?

Katy McCown



O Come

If you were to identify the No. 1 theme in Christmas carols, you'd find there's not even a close second.

The one-word answer? *Come*.

The word echoes through so many of those familiar lyrics:

"O come, O come, Emmanuel ..."
"Come, Thou long expected Jesus ..."
"Come to my heart, Lord Jesus ..."

This shouldn't surprise us — because "come" is the core meaning of the word "Advent." The Advent theme of Christ's coming reflects a centuries-long expression of yearning.

"Please, Lord, come!" This plaintive cry echoes throughout the Hebrew scriptures. As Psalm 80:1b-2 says, "*You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth. Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us!*"

The Messiah had repeatedly been promised and prayed for. For hundreds of years, a roster of fringe candidates trotted themselves out as seeming possibilities. But they all came and went. That was the pattern: Come and go. Never come and stay. Never come and change things. Never come and save our lives from what others have done to us and what we have done to ourselves.

And yet "*when the fullness of time had come,*" God the Father sent Jesus (Galatians 4:4, ESV, emphasis added). He *came*. And though the world was slow to realize His arrival, it soon became abundantly obvious, both to His friends and His enemies, that someone new was among them. Someone unlike any other. That's the reason for the shouts of praise at Jesus' triumphal entry, the blood-heavy cross of Good Friday, and the beyond-belief joy and amazement of Easter morning.

In fact, if any other single word can compete for prominence in the carols, it is "joy." But joy, when you drill down to its essence, is the result of His coming. The lyrics of those carols that most thrill us with joy are reminding us of how and why He came — and calling us to come as well:

"O come, all ye faithful ..."
"O come, let us adore Him ..."
"Come and worship, come and worship ..."

So the gospel of Christ's incarnation is also the gospel of invitation. In view of His coming and the fulfillment of His promise, we stand now in the light of His appearing, serving as shared communicators of His gospel message.

And thankfully, whenever we don't know exactly how to express what our salvation means, carollers from past generations provide us with help that never seems to grow old.

We can sing it. Let us sing today of His coming.

Lord, we praise You now for Your appearing, for Your coming to us. Not only did You recognize our truly desperate condition, but You stepped out of the safety of heaven directly into our danger. During this Advent season, as we worship You afresh, may the joy we receive become the joy we share so that others, too, may know of Your coming. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth

May the joy we
receive become
the joy we *share*
with others.

Peace rushes in...

When life is confusing, chaotic and crushing, it's easy to believe the lie that we are the ones who hold the responsibility to come up with the solutions.

We try to fix the distance in that relationship.

We go back and forth on whether we should quit or stay in our job.

We fill our calendar attempting to juggle everything in the schedule.

We're try to make peace and resolve all the family drama.

We strategize and plan. We make appointments, attempt conversations and get out our calendars, but in all our attempts we still feel anxious it might not be the best solution or maybe we have not done enough.

Isaiah 26:3 reminds us, "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you."

God's Word promises that God has perfect peace for us when we do two things...

Keep our mind on Him.

Trust He has a way for us as we seek Him.

If life feels heavy and you begin to feel your peace being replaced with anxious planning, shift your eyes towards our all knowing God and ask Him to help you find a way.

P31 Ministries

PEACE *rushes* IN
THE MOMENT WE
remember IT'S NOT
UP TO US TO *figure*
IT ALL OUT.

How the miracle of Christmas answers our deepest questions



I first heard "One of Us" while driving with the radio on quite some years ago. I was astonished. The song was raw, plaintive, powerful. I couldn't get it out of my head for days even though I had no idea who sang it or what the title was. It was ages before I tracked it down and heard it again. (This was well before the days of YouTube and Shazam!)

If God had a face, what would it look like ... ("One of Us" Joan Osborne, 1995)

The singer *wonders* about God; tries to imagine God in a *human* life. God is presupposed but unknown, distant, perhaps unknowable; unbelievable really.

"Yeah, yeah, God is great; yeah, yeah, God is good." Sounds orthodox, but what the heck? I am totally alone. Nobody calls on the phone.

Does God know? Does God care? Does God see?

What if God was one of us?

Just a slob like one of us?

Just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home

Back up to heaven all alone, nobody calling on the phone...

The miracle of Christmas is an answer to these beautiful questions.

In this baby we catch a glimpse — and more than a glimpse — of God.

Christmas is the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus. But though Jesus was born as a real person in the normal way, Christians believe that Jesus is more than merely human. His uniqueness began with what Christians call 'the Virgin Birth' but which really refers to a virginal conception. Imagine the teenage Mary trying to explain *that* to her father! They knew back then, just as we do now, where babies come from.

To believe in the Virgin Birth is to believe a miracle. The miracle distinguishes Jesus from every other human. It is an act of creation — new creation — in the womb of a teenage girl. It is something completely new, unexpected and undeserved. It is the birth of a new hope, in this Child, for a new world. But even more is going on. As Karl Barth has said, the *miracle* of Christmas points more deeply to the mystery of the incarnation, of the Word-assuming-flesh, of God becoming human, becoming 'one of us.'

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ... The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1, 14)

If you want to know what God is like, look at the human life of Jesus where he shows us his face and his heart.

In this baby who was born and grew up, in this truly human life, we catch a glimpse — and more than a glimpse — of God. God has a face, a human face. God *has* become one of us. And because of it, he does *know* what it is we experience, he does see, feel, and care.

In the story of Jesus' birth given in Matthew's gospel (Matt 1-2) we gain a sense of the significance of this miracle, through the names given to Jesus. When Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant — not by him — he is instructed by an angel in a dream to take Mary — and her child — as his own, and to name the child 'Jesus' (the Greek form of the Hebrew name 'Joshua' which means, 'the Lord saves'): "because he shall save his people from their sins" (1:21).

Matthew tells us that Jesus' miraculous birth fulfils ancient prophecy: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God with us.'" (1:23). Matthew also tells us that although he was named 'Jesus', he was also called 'Christ' (1:16). In chapter two verse six he is referred to as Israel's 'Shepherd'. In verse fifteen as God's 'Son'. And in 2:2 he was named by foreign visitors as 'king of the Jews' — a name confirmed at his crucifixion by the written charge placed above him (27:37).

The wonder of Christmas is that this child, *this* Jesus, is God with us, God come to us, doing for us in an act of new creation what humanity was unable to do for itself: God coming to bring salvation, forgiveness from our sins, a new beginning, a new hope. God coming to show us his face. God coming to show us that he hears, he sees, he cares, he understands. God coming so we would no longer be alone. God drawing near to us in order to draw us near to himself. God not only *with* us but also *for* us, sharing the burden our life and existence, ultimately taking upon himself our waywardness, brokenness, sinfulness, and alienation — in order to lift it from us.

If you want to know what a truly human life looks like, look at the human life of Jesus, where we see the Image of God displayed in all its fullness.

The miracle of Christmas, the miracle of new creation in the womb of Mary, points forward to the miracle of new creation in the lives of those who will come to Jesus who saves them from their sin. A new beginning is not only possible but offered to us.

If you want to know what God is like, look at the human life of Jesus where he shows us his face and his heart: gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and quick to show mercy. Further, if you want to know what a truly *human* life looks like, look at the human life of Jesus, where we see the Image of God displayed in all its fullness. Listen also to his teaching which is indeed the 'Word of God' to us and for us.

.../cont

How the miracle of Christmas answers our deepest questions, continued

We also find our hope in this miracle of Christmas. The world in which this child was born was not some problem-free idyll. On the contrary, it was a world of despicable and horrifying cruelty, despair, danger, and lament (Matt 2). It was a world in which reprehensible leaders slaughtered Jewish babies for their own political purposes; a world where families fled and mothers wept and the cycle and reality of violence seemed unending. In the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (2:1-2) The one born king will also one day return as King (25:31, 34), establishing his kingdom in place of the hated Herods of this world, wherever they are found.

Until that day, we live the miracle of Christmas, receiving the forgiveness and the hope that Jesus has brought us, and learning to live as he did, obeying his commandments and teaching (Matt 28:19), and learning from him how to extend God's friendship to others around us, being with and for them as he was and is for us.

If God had a face what would it look like?

And would you want to see, if seeing meant that you would have to believe in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints and all the prophets?

My answer: *Yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah.*

Michael O'Neil | Eternity

Michael O'Neil is Dean of Morling College

For the person feeling anything but joy the Christmas season

It's the most wonderful time of the year!

Or... is it?

Maybe this Christmas you are...

Mourning a loved one...

Battling feelings of loneliness...

Missing your family who lives far away...

Wresting with health issues...

Oh friend, we understand. This time of year may not feel as bright and cheery as we expect, but in the midst of the difficult emotions and memories that come with this season, we can hold tightly to the truth that the birth of Christ means there is hope in even the darkest of situations.

John 1:4-5 says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." God's light shines brighter than the darkness we face.

This December, let's remind ourselves of these truths:

Because of Jesus, we aren't alone. (Matthew 1:23)

Because of Jesus, we are loved completely. (John 3:16)

Because of Jesus, we can experience peace. (Luke 2:14)

His light shines brightly, even in the darkest of circumstances.

What truth are you reminding yourself of this season?

For the person feeling anything but joy the Christmas season, remember these 3 important truths:

Because of Jesus, we are not alone.

Matthew 1:23

Because of Jesus, we are loved completely.

John 3:16

Because of Jesus, we can experience peace.

Luke 2:14

P31 Ministries



God promises that even in our weakness,
He is sufficient. He is enough

The willingness to take something simple, something kind, something heartfelt, and offer it to God and others — that is enough. God promises that even in our weakness, He is sufficient. He is enough.

He works through whatever offering we can give to others.

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We’ve got big problems in this big world of ours. We don’t have big solutions or big resources or big wisdom to give. But what if we all just played our songs? What if we sat down at the metaphorical pianos of life and gave from our hearts what we have to give? God turns our small sacrifices into something powerful for a world desperate for beauty, peace and compassion.

If you’re waiting for the day when you’ll feel like you’re enough, lean in. That day is today. You are enough because God is enough.

Rest in that.

Can you think of a time when God’s power was revealed through a moment of your weakness?

Stevie Hendrix

God promises
that even in
our weakness,
He is sufficient.
He is enough.

STEVIE HENDRIX

Jesus is our Immanuel

As we pray for ourselves and the ones we love, it’s easy to think of the spiritual forces surrounding us as looming bullies: too strong to defeat, too shrewd to outsmart, or too slippery to take hold of. The prophet Elisha’s servant felt the same way when he was encircled by enemies in 2 Kings 6.

In 2 Kings, Elisha was really getting on the king of Aram’s nerves. Every time the Arameans planned to attack the Israelites, Elisha prophetically told the Israelites where and when the assault would come, which led to Aram’s defeat. Thinking there was a traitor among his men, the king “summoned his officers and demanded of them, ‘Tell me! Which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?’ ‘None of us, my lord the king,’ said one of his officers, ‘but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom’” (2 Kings 6:11-12, NIV). So the enraged king sent an army to track down Elisha and his servant, surrounding the city they were in.

I’ve felt like this before. Haven’t you? Difficult circumstances press in from every side. My story looms large while I shrink small. I cry, This is too much for me! I can’t do this anymore. I don’t even want to go out of my house. Where are You, God? You promised You would never leave me or forsake me, but if You are here, why aren’t You doing anything? I want out of this story!

But Elisha’s faith was strong. He told his servant, “Don’t be afraid ... Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, ‘Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.’ Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes,

and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:16-17, NIV).

And there you have it: “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” Elisha knew there was more power and strength in the unseen reality of God’s heavenly host than the seen reality of the enemy’s army.

Even though we may never see God’s angels surrounding what’s surrounding us, we can trust they are there. And most importantly, Jesus Himself is Immanuel, God with us, in every situation. Always.

Who are you praying for today?

Sharon Jaynes

Jesus Himself is
Immanuel, God
with us, in every
situation. Always.

SHARON JAYNES

Creation care is God's business ... and ours

Tony Rinaudo, recounts the instant when, feeling close to despair, God showed him how to restore tree cover in Niger – as well as a bigger lesson for all of us.

All but defeated, I was ready to give up and go home. I had been struggling to make an impact. Despite great effort, my attempts to reverse desertification in Niger Republic, West Africa, failed. The people had no interest in growing trees. It all seemed hopeless. I had nothing else to offer.

One morning, I read, "When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground" (Psalm 104:30). While the idea of God's Spirit renewing the earth caught my attention, the significance didn't dawn on me until later that day as I drove through a barren moonscape. I stopped the vehicle on a compacted area that could have served as a car park. I doubted this land could ever be restored. Then, looking down at my feet, I saw a tiny germinating plant pushing through a crack in the dry, hard ground and immediately recalled the morning's reading.

That's when I realised that God is not only in the business of saving lost souls and healing broken humanity. God is also in the business of renewing and healing his broken creation. With this revelation, I felt a great burden lift – the task of restoring the earth was not my burden alone. This was God's work, and I could go to him for guidance, help and strength.

The real battle was primarily against false beliefs.

Soon after, I was driving a pickup truck and trailer loaded with tree seedlings for the villagers. Knowing full well most trees would die and that the people didn't care, I was feeling particularly down. I stopped and reduced the air pressure in the tyres to prevent the vehicle from getting bogged down in the deep sand. As I looked out over the barren landscape, it seemed hopeless – I wondered how many years, how many million dollars and how many hundreds of staff it would take to make any meaningful impact.

Not having an answer, I turned to God in prayer, asking him to forgive us for destroying the gift of his creation and, as a consequence, people were now hungry, poor and fearful for the future. I reminded God that he still loved us and asked him to open my eyes, show me what to do and to help me.

As I looked across the landscape again, a seemingly useless bush caught my attention, and I walked over to take a closer look. As soon as I saw the shape of the leaves, I realised that it wasn't a bush at all. It was a tree that had been cut down and was re-sprouting from the living stump. I knew that there were millions of such "bushes" in the landscape and envisioned a vast underground forest just waiting to regrow.



In that instant, everything changed. I was no longer fighting the Sahara Desert; I didn't need a miracle species of tree that could withstand the goats and cutting and drought. Everything I needed was literally at my feet – an "underground forest".

In that moment, my approach shifted from being primarily technical (reverse deforestation with tree planting) to challenging spiritual, social and cultural norms. I reasoned that if it was people's false beliefs about the value of trees on their land that led to negative attitudes and destructive practices, bringing the landscape to the point where it could barely support life, then the real battle was primarily against false beliefs. I knew that restoration would be relatively easy if I could convince people that it was in their best interest to work with creation instead of destroying it. After all, everything needed for reforestation was literally at their feet!

The technique of growing trees from living stumps and self-sown seed is today called Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR). [1] From 1984, FMNR spread largely from farmer to farmer at an estimated rate of a quarter of a million hectares per year for the next 20 years. On-farm tree density increased from four trees per hectare to 40, resulting in 200 million trees restored across five million hectares of degraded land without planting a single tree.[2]

Restoration would be relatively easy if I could convince people that it was in their best interest to work with creation instead of destroying it.

Windspeeds, temperatures and evaporation rates decreased. Soil fertility increased. As the trees grew, habitats for beneficial predators, such as insect-eating birds, lizards and spiders were created, bringing back greater balance in nature and reducing crop damage from insect pests. Because of improved soil fertility and moisture levels and a more favorable microclimate, crop yields increased, and in time, farmers were able to grow and raise more and different types of crops and livestock. With greater diversity came greater resilience to climatic shocks. More children were able to attend school. The burden on women was reduced as firewood could now be found closer to home.

It is estimated that gross incomes in the immediate project area increased by \$1000 per household each year.[3] Extrapolating this added income from FMNR to the entire five million hectares implies aggregate income benefits of \$900 million per year, [4] benefiting about 900,000 households or 4.5 million people. Observations backed by subsequent research showed that the increase in millet yields ranged from 49 to 153 per cent. Through FMNR, Nigerien farmers were producing 500,000 more tonnes of cereal per year than in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, 2.5 million people are now more food secure.[5]

Indeed, God had not forgotten Niger. He has provided all that is needed for the physical life of its inhabitants. What was missing was a culture of caring for God's creation.

This article is the second of a three-part series by Tony Rinaudo, AM, author of the award-winning book, The Forest Underground.

.../cont

Creation care is God's business ... and ours, continued

Tony's life work has focused on forest and landscape restoration and helping farmers to become self-sufficient through natural farming approaches. He is World Vision's Principal Climate Action Advisor, promoting reforestation initiatives globally. Watch out for part three, coming soon.



Tony Rinaudo | Eternity | November 2023

[1] Tony Rinaudo., "FMNR Frequently Asked Questions with Tony Rinaudo," The Climate Action and Resilience Team, World Vision Australia, accessed Jan. 9, 2023, <https://fmnrhub.com.au/frequently-asked-questions/#.Y7tdS3YzZRY>.

[2] Tony Rinaudo et al., "Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration: Community Driven, Low Cost and Scalable Reforestation Approach for Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation," abstract, in Handbook of Climate Change Management, ed. W. L. Filho, J. Luetz, and D. Ayal (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-3-030-22759-3_281-1.

[3] C. Pye-Smith, The Quiet Revolution: How Niger's Farmers are Re-greening the Parklands of the Sahel, ICRAF Trees for Change, no. 12 (Nairobi; World Agroforestry Centre, 2013), 20.

[4] J. Sendzimir, C. P. Reij, and P. Magnuszewski, "Rebuilding Resilience in the Sahel: Regreening in

Even if all you have left is a whisper

It's discouraging to feel depleted and think, "This was not supposed to be my story." Whether it's the doctor's report we never thought we would receive, the ending of a relationship we thought would last forever, or maybe the job we worked so hard for that is not turning out the way we expected, we often cannot escape the wars we feel raging in and around us. Yet we wish we could hide rather than face them.

Thankfully, God gave us the beautiful story of King Jehoshaphat that can help teach us how to deal with our problems His way.

In 2 Chronicles 20, we meet Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. He had just received word that a vast army was coming to destroy him and his people.

Jehoshaphat pleaded to the Lord: "For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chronicles 20:12b, NIV).

God's gentle response settled the king's anxious heart: "You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you" (2 Chronicles 20:17).

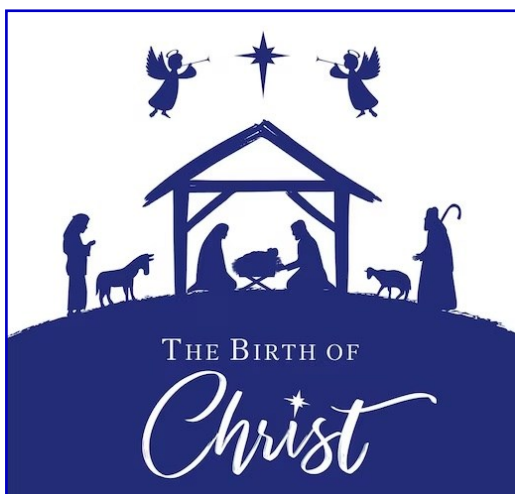
God cares about our safety and well-being, and often He does provide a way of escape from danger; in this story, though, God called the king to face his problem with praise. And as he began to sing of God's glory, the enemy began to fall (2 Chronicles 20:21-22).

God didn't tell Jehoshaphat to fight his problem, and He didn't tell him to flee; He told him to face it with God by his side. The king faced his impossible situation and responded with praise before he even knew the outcome.

In moments where you find yourself in a seemingly impossible situation and you're not sure whether to fight, flee or face it, you can invite God into that space too. Even if all you have left is a whisper, whisper His name.

How can you choose to praise God today in light of what you're facing?

Taylor Stuart



My faith story—Mike



"I grew up in a secular home in suburban Australia, where religion was categorically rejected; it was seen as a crutch, and people of faith were derided as morally deviant hypocrites. I remember, as a teenager, writing poetry mocking belief in God. My mother threw enough profanity at religious door knockers to make even a sailor blush.

Many years later, however, I was invited to church by a colleague in the military. I went along out of boredom, wanting to do something different. I thought most churches were filled with moralizing geriatrics. I was very, very wrong.

I began to read the New Testament for myself. The Jesus I encountered was far different from the deluded, radical – even mythical – character described to me. This Jesus – the Jesus of history – was real. He touched upon things that cut close to my heart, especially as I pondered the meaning of human existence. I was struck by the early church's testimony to Jesus: In Christ's death God has

vanquished evil, and by his resurrection he has brought life and hope to all.

When I crossed from unbelief to belief, all the pieces suddenly began to fit together. I had always felt a strange unease about my disbelief. I had an acute suspicion that there might be something more, something transcendent; but I also knew that I was told not to think that. I 'knew' that ethics were nothing more than aesthetics – a mere word game for things I liked and disliked. I felt conflicted when my heart ached over the injustice and cruelty in the world.

As faith grew from seeds of doubt, I came upon a whole new world that, for the first time, actually made sense to me. My life changed immediately. I wasn't always on the town with the guys looking for a good time in bars and clubs. I cleaned up my life, my language, and my attitudes to many things. I took to reading the Bible daily, and started reading about Christian theology, learning about the lives of important men and women in church history.

I was very touched by Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." That verse has always remained with me wherever I've been, in the good times and the bad.

To this day, I do not find faith stifling or constricting. Rather, faith has been liberating and transformative for me. It has opened a constellation of meaning, beauty, hope, and life that I had been indoctrinated to deny. It has compelled my lifelong quest to know, study, and teach about the one whom Christians called Lord."

To read more of Eternity's Faith Stories, compiled by Naomi Reed, go to

<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/section/faith-stories/>



Good On Ya Mate! Keep Going!

Many years ago we moved to Melbourne for a season. At the time, I was competing in triathlons and would do the bike training in the Dandenong Ranges. These are a set of hills on the eastern outskirts of the city. On the road to Olinda, there is one incredibly difficult stretch of road where the steep incline just seems to go on forever.

As I struggled up that hill one day, a car coming down on the other side of the road slowed down and a complete stranger stuck his head out the window and yelled...

"Good on ya mate, keep going!"

What a great moment! In the middle of my personal struggle up a meaningless hill, someone took the time to encourage me. That moment has always stayed in my mind. It reminds me of the importance of speaking up for those we know and love in the middle of hard times (and perhaps even those we don't know). They need to hear us say, "Good on you ya, keep going."

Jesus' example of love and grace to us means that we also need to extend that to others.

Karl Faase

Comfort and Hope this Christmas

"... I am the one who answers your prayers and cares for you. I am like a tree that is always green; all your fruit comes from me." Hosea 14:8 (NLT)

As I write to you, I glance over the top of my computer, and my eyes are immediately drawn to the 8-foot artificial Christmas tree in the corner of our den. It's been up since Christmas 2020.

It was a little embarrassing at first when friends came over in the middle of June and saw our tree, but I got over that because I love it. Every morning, I get up and switch on the Christmas lights. The sight makes me smile!

I think part of the initial reason we left the tree up after Christmas 2020 was that life was so hard and colourless. With countless others, I found myself struggling with depression again as we felt the impact of a global pandemic.

Then I realized that somehow the tree's sparkling lights speak of hope, reminding me of better days. But it is also much more than that. The tree reminds me daily of that moment that changed the world forever — the coming of our Saviour, the moment when hope began in the middle of a lifeless world.

There is a lot of debate over the origin of the Christmas tree, but I love the account of Martin Luther. In her children's book *Luther's Children Celebrate Christmas*, Dorothy Haskins says that Martin Luther was walking through the woods near his house one night. Snow had fallen on the branches of the trees, and they sparkled in the moonlight. He was so taken by their quiet, brilliant beauty.

"The little trees stood there bravely, keeping green while everything else around them went dry and drab and lifeless."

So Luther cut down a tree, carried it home and decorated it with candles. According to Haskins, "He explained to his children that the tree is green in the winter like our faith in Christ. It stays fresh even in a time of trouble. Our faith in Christ stays green even in sorrow. His comfort remains even in the midst of despair."

If you think about it, the beginning of our story started with a tree. When God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, He told them they could eat freely from every tree except one. They were forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or they would die.

When the serpent entered the garden, his first act was to make Adam and Eve question God: "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit ...?" (Genesis 3:1b, NLT). His second act was to call God a liar: "You won't die!" (Genesis 3:4, NLT). His third was to insinuate that God was holding out on them: "God knows that your eyes will be opened ..." (Genesis 3:5, NLT).

When Adam and Eve listened to the serpent's lies and not only picked fruit from the forbidden tree but ate the fruit, the whole earth shuddered. Everything changed. Suddenly, Adam and Eve felt shame and hid from God. In His mercy, God clothed them in the skins of animals and sent them out of the garden (Genesis 3:6-21). If they had stayed, they could have eaten the fruit from the tree of life and lived forever ... but forever broken. God loved them too much for that, and He loves you too much for that as well.

So just as our desolation came from a tree, so also our redemption came on a tree. Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, was willing to become a curse in the eyes of God and humanity to bridge the great divide between a holy God and sinners such as you and me. It's hard to take in the weight of that kind of love.

God describes Himself this way: "*I am the one who answers your prayers and cares for you. I am like a tree that is always green; all your fruit comes from me*" (Hosea 14:8). When I think of that image during the Christmas season, I'm reminded He hears our prayers and He is our constant provider.

If you feel anxious or afraid this season, remember that the evergreen mercy of God is with you. Just as those trees captivated Martin Luther's heart and brought joy to his children by candlelight, you and I can remember as we gaze upon the trees this season that God is always with us. Let's share the light of His love with those around us.

Heavenly Father, thank You that You never change. You are the same yesterday, today and forever. Thank You that You hear my prayers and watch over me. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Sheila Walsh

The coming
of our Savior
was the
moment
when hope
began.

SHEILA WALSH

If you have a loved one who is far from God, never stop praying in faith for their salvation.

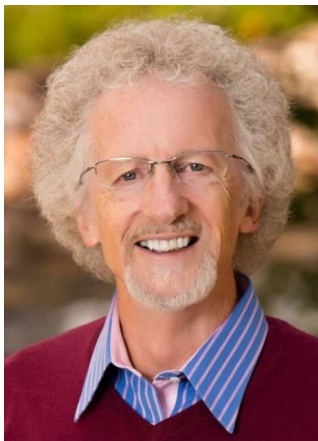
Philip Yancy on not trusting his body, healing a 50-year rift and what's so hard about Grace

The bestselling author on the gift he didn't want

Growing up in a strict, fundamentalist church in the southern US, a young Philip Yancey tended to view God as a scowling cosmic cop, "searching for anyone who might be having a good time – to squash them." He later discovered that God's grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it, even to him, who was "a single hardened link in a long chain of ungrace learned from family and church."

In this interview with *Eternity* on the eve of his 74th birthday, the bestselling Christian author reveals how his 2021 memoir healed a 50-year rift between his mother and brother, how he is grappling with his recent diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, and why so many of his 25 books are titled with questions. Speaking from his home in Denver, Colorado, he talks candidly about the pain of his messy background and how it gave him a unique perspective to share the real Jesus with others who have been badly damaged by the church.

Eternity: You've been very busy lately, doing speaking tours of Canada and the US and sharing what you've learned from your messy background, your journey of faith, and how you're coming to grips with your diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. So, how are you dealing with Parkinson's?



It's a daily habit, I suppose. I'm addicted to the medication. I have to take the pills four times a day, and if I don't, I immediately start feeling shaky, a little buzzed in the head, and more uncoordinated than usual. At this point, it's more an irritation than anything else where maybe I knock over a cup of coffee on the carpet or something like that, but compared to what it could be down the road and compared to what it is for some people, it can be very serious.

The thing is, in a nervous disease like that when it's destroying your nerves, it only gets worse. It doesn't get better because they die off and they don't regenerate. And it also affects your entire body. So I started feeling pains in my toes that were operated on 30 years ago. I presume it's either the medication or the Parkinson's itself because strange messages are going through those pathways and the body will often respond to a strange message with pain, which is a good thing because we pay attention to it. But it does make me aware of how cognitive abilities could go, executive function ... I figure I've got maybe 10 years of productive time left if everything keeps working as it is ... So I need to choose what I do with my time carefully.

Eternity: What's been the most challenging thing for you? Has it been the disability or the change in your identity?

The most difficult thing for me is, is I've always been the master of my body. One year, I decided to run a marathon and went through all that learning. [My wife Janet and I] knew nothing about climbing

mountains when we moved to Colorado. We'd lived in Chicago – we were city slickers. But eventually, my wife and I both ended up climbing the 54 highest mountains in Colorado. Each one is 4300 metres. So, I was used to beating my body into submission, and what I wanted it to do, it would eventually do. But now I can't really depend on it.

It can be rebellious. It can be disobedient. And it's a strange feeling not to be able to count on your body. I have not, to this point, started falling. That's likely in the future. It's certainly common among



Parkinson's people. I do balance exercises to prevent that, but it may happen, and it's an uneasy feeling.

Philip Yancey skiing in Colorado. In 2022, while skiing, Yancey realised something was wrong when his legs refused to turn and he slammed into a tree.

I was amazed at how clearly and in what detail you recall your early years in your recent memoir, Where the Light Fell. I guess

they were pretty unusual, growing up in a toxic church bubble.

Well, when you go through it, it seems totally normal. You think every family is like this; every church is like this. And only later did I realise these are some weird people over here – and I was one of them. But my first job was with a teenage magazine. All I had at that time was my first 21 years of life, and so I quickly wrote down everything I could remember about those years.

Then, later, I could go back with my brother, my uncle and my mother, and interview them about their own memories and try to put that together. So I consider it a gift, my life. It was not always pleasant; there were some hard parts, and people read it, and they say, "Oh, you were abused." Well, I didn't feel abused at the time. I just thought that that was life – you know, life includes pain. Now, it really did become a gift for me because all we writers have is, is our perspective. My perspective is different than yours and any other person in the world, and if it's not different, you shouldn't write – they don't need you.

So I was given a unique [story] and I found that the extremes of my church, which was an angry, fundamentalist, racist, unhealthy, toxic church, that gives me the ability to say to people who are complaining and dissatisfied about their own church, "It's actually worse than that – let me tell you my story." And they would say, "Wait a minute, I thought you were a Christian writer." And I say, "Well, I am, but it would be a bad trade to forfeit an opportunity to connect to the God who created everything because of the way the church treated you 30 years ago." And it just gives me an entree.

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Philip Yancy, continued



Philip and his elder brother Marshall.

You have acknowledged that not everybody likes your books, but that there's a need for them among those who have had bruising experiences of church and haven't encountered the real Jesus.

Yes. As long as you get the criticism from

both sides, I feel okay. My wife likes to say you cast yourself as a bridge builder. And I try to do that on controversial issues and things like that. She said the problem with bridge builders is you get walked across from both directions. But what's the alternative? A one-way bridge that just drops off into the ocean? I don't like that one either.

Eternity: Let's have a look at the bombshell of your father's death and how discovering that in your college years affected you.

Well, my father's death was the primary event of my early life. I was one year old when it happened, so I have no conscious memories of it. Of course, I knew he died. That was around us every day – there was no father in the house, never was. But I didn't really know the story behind this story.

I knew that he had polio ... he was 23 years old. And he went overnight from being totally healthy to being totally paralysed. So much so that he couldn't even breathe on his own; his lungs weren't strong enough. So he was put in this machine called an iron lung. You may have seen pictures. And the machine breathed for him. It was a miserable existence. He was in a charity hospital, the only one that had an iron lung in Atlanta at the time. And people wouldn't come when he tried to call. He couldn't even push a button to call the nurse. He was paralysed; he just lay there all day looking at the ceiling. There was no TV, he couldn't read a book, nothing. He was planning to be a missionary. They had actually gone around and raised support. So they had several thousand people on a mailing list and they were getting ready to go to Africa with two young sons.



Philip with his father

And then suddenly, he's in an iron lung, unable to move. So the Christians around him cared for him. Obviously, they wanted the best [for him], but they decided that it could not possibly be God's will for God

to take him at such an age with such a future in front of him. So they prayed and believed that he would be healed, and against all medical advice, eventually, they removed him from that iron lung, from that hospital. He showed a little bit of improvement, maybe for a few days, and then nine days later, he died. And I found that out, not from anybody telling me, but when I was a college student, by reading an old newspaper clipping from the main paper in Atlanta, the *Atlanta Journal*.

"My writing career really has been taking one part of doctrine, one question, one puzzle of theology at a time, picking them up, taking them apart." – Philip Yancey

Secrets have power, don't they? When the secret is out, it really has power. And one of the things I learned right away was not everybody who claims to speak for God does so. And that became a theme in my writing because, again, I grew up in a church that was blatantly racist, unashamedly racist. They believed it was doctrine – the Bible taught that people of colour were inferior. Later, I found out they were wrong. Not everyone who claims to speak for God does so.

So my writing career really has been taking one part of doctrine, one question, one puzzle of theology at a time, picking them up, taking them apart, going to some people that I trust, and then figuring out what I can stand behind. That's why so many of my books start with questions. Where is God When it Hurts?, Prayer: Does it Make any Difference?, What's So Amazing about Grace? [revised and expanded after 25 years.] I have that kind of "prove it to me" attitude as I circle around these questions, not just accepting what everybody would automatically say because I learned not to trust that, but to really pursue in a careful, systematic way and only talk about things that I feel confident in and other things I just don't deal with.

Eternity: Something that stood out for me in What's So Amazing About Grace? was how you said God shows a marked preference throughout the Bible for the real people, not the good people. I found that so comforting.

When you think about it, who are the giants of the Bible, the real giants? Well, you have to say Moses is right up there and David, those two in the Old Testament. Moses was a murderer and had an anger problem that got him in trouble. David was a murderer and adulterer. Well, let's go to the New Testament: Peter was somewhat like Judas. Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter did the same thing, saying "I never knew him ..." three different times. And then the Apostle Paul, well, he was converted after spending several years as a terrorist, sniffing out Christians, persecuting and helping murder them.

And those are the best of the lot – Moses, David, Peter and Paul. So no one can say, as you may be tempted to do, "Oh, God can't possibly use me. I'm beyond the pale. God can't forgive that." I think God deliberately chose those people, the giants of the faith, as it were, so that we can't say, "I'm beyond the reach of grace." No, no, look at these. They're the best.

.../cont

Philip Yancy, continued

Eternity: I noticed that in *What's So Amazing about Grace*, you tell your family story but under pseudonyms, as if it were happening to someone else. And then, in your memoir, you come out of the closet, so to speak.

That's right. Yes. For years, I was frightened to write my story because the people who were the main characters were still living.

I did finally publish it. My mother had turned 98, and I decided, "Now's the time." I didn't know how much longer I would be able to write. So I worked on it for about three years, and it was published about six months before she died. She died just after turning 99. And in that last year, after I had turned in the manuscript, which tells the story about my brother and mother not speaking for more than 50 years, they actually had their first contact, and I got them both on the telephone three or four times.

They didn't go especially well, but at least they made contact. And then my brother, unprompted, on his own volition, wrote her a card that had three words in it: "I forgive you." I had been afraid to use their names to write my story, thinking it would just destroy them. Actually, almost the opposite happened because of the coming to terms with it. We tend to push those things down and not deal with them. Sometimes, when you lance that boil, even though it looks messy, it's the only way for healing to come.

"Grace doesn't give us what we deserve. In fact, it gives us the opposite."

Eternity: You've written *What's So Amazing about Grace*, but you also discussed what's so hard about grace. Can you explain that to me?

Well, grace is just plain unfair ... The hard thing about grace is we're so used to, in a capitalist competitive economy especially, earning our way, being paid by how much we're worth, how much we deserve, and the world runs that way. But God does not. Grace doesn't give us what we deserve. In fact, it gives us the opposite. We deserve God's wrath; we get God's love. We deserve God's punishment; we get God's forgiveness. The Pharisees were ticked off at Jesus going around talking about these sinners and hanging around party people and tax collectors and people like that. They were mad at Jesus because he wasn't going by the rules. Now, you're right – God doesn't go by the rules. God breaks the rules again and again.

That's what grace is all about. So it's hard. It's kind of unhuman. I remember having a conversation one time with the singer Bono of U2. I'd just read a book he wrote based on interviews he had with a French agnostic journalist, and Bono kept trying to explain why he's a Christian to this journalist who couldn't figure out why would anyone want to be a Christian.

And finally, Bono says, "Well, at the end of it, it boils down to either the world runs by karma or by grace. And I'm going to cast my lot with grace." Most religions and a lot of Christians run by karma – "I'm going to get what I deserve." I don't run that way. And I don't think Jesus did

either. He said, "There's another way. It's an easier way. Seems hard, but it's actually easier." You've just got to overcome your pride and accept that God's love is a free gift. It's not something you have to earn. It's already there. You just have to act on it.

Eternity: And yet we all battle daily with pride and judgmentalism and a feeling that we somehow need to earn God's approval. How can we just accept God's love and stop trying to earn it?

One way I know is to find people who don't have that option of looking upon their good deeds. I've learned a lot from the recovery movement. I've gone with friends to Alcoholics Anonymous and groups like that, and they start every meeting by saying, "Hi, I'm Bob; I'm an alcoholic." "Hi, I'm Joy, and I'm a drug addict." They start with their weakness. They start with the worst part about them, and that's why they're at the meeting and acknowledging, "I can't make it on my own. I live by the grace of God."

"Grace is free gift ... but to receive a gift, you have to hold your hands out."

I went one time to Folsom Prison (of *The Folsom Prison Blues* song by Johnny Cash). It's a maximum security prison in California, and there was a group studying my book on grace. They said, "We'd like to teach you what we know about grace." They told me that you couldn't get by for one day without grace in that place. And I realised that's really where we learn grace – hanging around people who are in recovery, who aren't making it and know they're not making it. If you hang around people with leprosy, or people who don't have a place to live, homeless people, or some people who have addiction disorders, you'll quickly find the veneers that we live by don't work, and they admit it. The only way for cure is to cry out for help.

Henri Nouwen used to say that grace is free gift. [There is] nothing you can do to earn it by definition. It's free, but to receive a gift, you have to hold your hands out. And it's religious people like the Pharisees who have their hands closed tight in a fist, thinking, "Well, I'm better than that guy over there. Look, he's a tax collector. He's a sinner." When you do that, the gift falls to the ground and you don't receive it. So it's the people at the lower end of success in the world, who teach me to keep my hands out so I don't end up like that Pharisee over there.

Philip Yancey has a new book out Undone, a modern rendering of the work of John Donne, one of the great minds and great poets of English literature. He is also finishing a book about the religious and social background to the Russia-Ukraine war.

PRAY

Some prayer points to help

Having spent most of his life writing about pain and suffering, Philip Yancey seeks prayer for wisdom in choosing how to spend the rest of his life. He feels he may have two or three books left in him. "What should they be? What has equipped me in these last days to speak most urgently? I don't know the answer to that question right now."

Anne Lim | Eternity | November 2023

Why is it so hard to be gracious towards others?



Most of us are aware that grace is an amazing thing and a sweet sound if we are acquainted with that famous hymn *Amazing Grace* by John Newton. We may also understand that the embodiment of the good news of the gospel is immersed in grace, as we consider Jesus' life, death and resurrection and what he did for humanity by dying on the cross and taking our place in punishment.

Many biblical narratives highlight that God is a person of grace; of undeserved favour who endows gifts freely upon us. Grace depicts who God is, fully revealed in Jesus Christ. It cannot be purchased through any merit, payment or effort of our own. The Bible shows that God is the giver of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9) and he calls for us to do the same towards others (Ephesians 5:1-2).

It certainly seems easy to receive grace, but it's much harder to offer it to others as a default position in life. So why is it that we are instructed to be gracious towards others through forgiving (Colossians 3:12-13), loving (Matthew 5:43-48) and doing good (Hebrews 13:16), yet can struggle to practise graciousness in various circumstances?

I believe that God looks at us and the world through gracious eyes. However, we humans need a correction to be able to do the same. We need to put lenses of grace into our spiritual eyeglasses, so to speak. I think there are three main reasons why people do not utilise these corrective lenses in their lives as their default position:

1. Influence of our society

We live in a secularised society of distraction with distorted philosophies and views that can espouse a warped view of God as only wrathful and vengeful rather than gracious, loving and kind. When we fail to have the lenses of grace over our eyes, we can see God in this way.

Believers of Jesus Christ need to counter the cultural narrative that conflicts with the biblical picture of grace.

However, in various Bible passages God is described as gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Exodus 34:6-7, Psalm 86:15, Jonah 4:2b). In fact, Jesus even stood against the cultural norm of his day when asked to judge a woman caught in adultery. He offers her grace instead of punishment (John 8:1-11).

Believers of Jesus Christ need to counter the cultural narrative that conflicts with the biblical picture of grace. This means defaulting to a posture that embraces God as good, loving, kind and abounding in grace. For instance, in the Book of Jonah, the city of Nineveh is spared from God's destruction because of his grace (Jonah 3:1-10),

despite the prophet Jonah seeing that the Ninevites did not deserve forgiveness.

2. Lack of understanding

I wonder if we really understand the depths of grace and the cost that lies beneath it. Sometimes, I think that we need to experience it, or identify the experience of it in others, to then recognise what grace looks like. Books such as those by Philip Yancey, Brennan Manning and Max Lucado have brought a focus to me over the years in my understanding and expression of grace, because they provide illustration of what it can look like.

Grace is audacious, ridiculous, unfair and reckless; yet, is the most delightful, sweet, stupendous, marvellous, amazing and spectacular thing we can experience in our lifetime.

As with any gift, we need to accept it so that we can be a vessel for others to experience it. In essence, grace is a practical and embodied experience, rather than just a taught concept. When we encounter and embrace it experientially, our understanding becomes integrated in our own lives. Then we can more effectively offer it to others.

An offer of grace might just allow differences to be accepted and considered, rather than dismissing the other person for their view.

3. Effort and energy required

Emotional and thoughtful energy is required when we consider offering grace, and sometimes the effort to offer it can seem overwhelming. It is so much easier to be black and white, so to speak, rather than allow for any grey. Taking a strict dual position on some issues as right or wrong, good or bad, hope or hopeless, faith or faithless, and so on, can be callous and ungracious.

Instead, some life situations are grey and require deeper biblical contemplation, contextual thinking, pastoral insight and rethinking theological frames that we previously held. For instance, some people hold that God created the world in six 24-hour days, while others see God creating through a longer and more evolutionary approach over millennia. Both are plausible approaches to creation. However, an offer of grace might just allow differences to be accepted and considered, rather than dismissing the other person for their view.

To make it easier to offer grace in more serious situations, practise on small matters, such as accepting the person who pushed in the queue at the supermarket or driving on the road. These small acts can breed a pattern in our lives that, over time, can make it easier to offer grace in the future on bigger matters.

So I want to encourage you to keep wearing those spectacles of grace to correct your spiritual eyesight and make it easier to offer grace to others, just as you embrace it in your own life. I invite you to further consider the words of the hymn *Amazing Grace*: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

Keith Mitchell | Eternity | November 2023

Rev. Dr Keith Mitchell is a senior lecturer at Morling College and teaches people in pastoral and practical areas.

Without God's word

For most of my life, I believed that there was no problem too large for me to fix on my own. But by my late 30s, I had to accept that this assumption was far from the truth. When God allowed me to finally reach the end of my self-sufficiency, I was forced to turn elsewhere for help.

God led me to His Word, encouraging me to pick it up, read it, and start applying it to my life. So I did just that. I joined various Bible studies and, within a year, began teaching them. For the first time, Hebrews 4:12 became real and personal to me:

"For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires."

God's Word was fully alive in my life; it was separating truth from lies and giving me the power to make God-honouring and healthy life decisions.

I began experiencing what the Centre for Bible Engagement calls the "Power of 4 Effect" — the deep life transformation that comes when people commit to engaging with Scripture at least four times each week. My life began to look radically different; I became better equipped to resist temptation and developed a greater ability to choose a positive outlook over negativity, frustration and discouragement. Over the past 20-plus years, my life has been filled with more opportunity, purpose and joy because I've been grounded in God's Truth.

No matter what relationship we've had in the past with God and His Word — or how ill-equipped we feel to approach it — we must always embrace the truth that without it, we are missing out on the greatest source of hope, guidance and inspiration there is. Therefore, let us always strive to make God and His Word part of our everyday lives.

How are you putting God's Word into practice today?

Ann White

Without GOD'S
WORD, WE ARE
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THERE IS.

ANN WHITE

Taking on the Identity of Christ

"Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children." Ephesians 5:1 (NLT)

Several times, when I've needed a costume to wear to a party, I've written the names of fellow party-going friends on name tags and then plastered them over a black shirt. Add a black ski mask, and I become an "Identity Thief."

It's a fun costume but not so fun in real life. Each of us wants to be known for who we are — an individual with a customized set of fingerprints, personal passwords, a unique personality and special abilities. A package like no one else. That's the way God created us to be: one of a kind.

Yet secretly, when I masquerade as the "Identity Thief," each person represented on my shirt has something I'd like to have. Their ability to say just the right thing whereas my tongue so easily slips into knots. Their organizational skills whereas my home desk is a mess. Their knack for buying just the right gift whereas I grab the first thing I see, and it ends up oh so wrong.

I fail miserably when I try to redraw my life to look like other people's. That's because I need to be me, the way God designed me to be.

The only person God wants me to imitate is Him. That's what our key verse says: *"Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children"* (Ephesians 5:1).

The Genesis 1 creation record says God made people in His image. But sin has marred us. While we are still made in the image of God, our quest as growing Christians is to transform back into His likeness — Christlikeness — through sanctification and our imitation of God.

Paul, the writer of the book of Ephesians, goes on to list what we should imitate about God: His way of love and truth, His holiness, goodness and righteousness (Ephesians 5:2-8).

But wait — aren't we also called to examine and imitate the lives of mature believers? After all, 1 Corinthians 11:1 says, *"And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ"* (NLT). Isn't Paul asking his readers to imitate him?

The key phrase in Paul's directive is *"as I imitate Christ."* Other English translations render "imitate" as *"follow the example of"* (NIV). We can aim to *be like* faithful followers of Jesus without wishing we could *be them*. We can watch the in-the-flesh example of other believers — how they put their faith in action, how they serve with love, and how they are able to endure through tough times because of the hope they have in Jesus — but our final guide is Jesus as represented in the Bible.

We may admire qualities someone else has and see them as superior to our own. But our best strategy is to follow the example of the only perfect human being — Jesus Christ. His life teaches us what character traits and behaviours are most important. He shows us how to center our lives around an eternal perspective and how to live out the concepts of love, holiness, purity and righteousness based on our faith and trust in God.

If Jesus is the best example of all, why would we want to become like anyone else? The exciting part is this: When we move toward becoming like Jesus and exercising the gifts He has custom-made for each of us, we find that we really are one of a kind, with a unique identity others can't help but notice and admire.

Lord, I want to be so in love with You that my desire is to become just like You and no one else. Please help me to know You better. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Karen Wingate

Bible Trivia Answers

1. Caesar Augustus. He ordered the people to go back to the city of their forefathers. Joseph's family was from Bethlehem. Luke 2:1.
2. False. As in the previous answer, they went not because an angel told them or because a star led them. They were obedient to the established governmental authority.
3. The Bible does not say how they went from Galilee to Bethlehem. It was an 129km trip for them. It is likely that they rode some type of animal, but the Bible gives no details. It is commonly depicted that Mary rode a donkey while Joseph walked along side. But that is simply an artistic depiction. We don't really know.
4. The book of Isaiah has much to say about the birth of the Saviour. If you have ever heard the oratorio by George Handel called The Messiah, you have heard many direct quotes from the book of Isaiah concerning the birth of Christ.
5. At least 3 angelic announcements for the birth of Christ and 1 for the birth of John. For Christ an angel appeared before Mary and Joseph individually and a multitude of angels spoke to the shepherds. For John's birth announcement in Luke 1 Gabriel appeared before John's father to announce the birth of John the Baptist. Matthew 1:20-24; Luke 1:11-20; Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2:9-15.
6. An angel in Matthew 1:21. The Bible does not say that this was Gabriel; however, it is assumed to be him since he was the one specifically mentioned as the messenger to Mary and Zacharias in Luke 1.
7. Jesus, Emmanuel, the Christ, Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 1:21, 23.
8. Jesus means Savior and Emmanuel means God with us. Jesus is the same name as the Old Testament name Joshua which also means Saviour. Matthew 1:21, 23.
9. The shepherds followed the instructions of the angels in Luke 2:9-15. The wise men followed the star to find the place where Jesus was. Matthew 2:1, 2.
10. Technically angels are never said to "sing" in the Bible. Each time they appear they only speak. However, to answer the question, the angels praised God with these words: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Luke 2:14.
11. A baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Luke 2:12.
12. The Bible does not say how many wise men there were. Tradition says there were three because of the three gifts. There are even names given to the three wise men in different countries and cultures, but we don't really know their names. It is also very likely there were many more than just three.
13. So that he could worship the child. But we know that his intentions were far from worship. Matthew 2:11-18.
14. It is certain that Jesus was somewhere between a month old and a couple of years old. The wise men saw His star at his birth and began following it. If the journey was 805km from Persia and Mesopotamia (around modern day Iraq) then it would have taken at least a month. By the time they arrived Jesus and His family had moved into a house. Later in the story Herod ordered all the children aged 2 years and younger to be killed. Therefore, Jesus was at least a month old and not yet 2 years old. Matthew 2:9-18.
15. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:11.
16. This was Herod. He ordered all the children in Bethlehem and the outlying areas who were 2 years old and younger to be killed. However, Jesus and His family had already moved to Egypt (Matthew 2:13).
17. In the New Testament accounts of Christ's birth there is no mention of any animals. However, Isaiah 1:3 could be a prophecy talking about at least a donkey seeing the crib of his Master (God). It could allude to the fact that an ox was there too. If a bunch of shepherds were there, one would assume sheep would have been present. But there is no definite list of animals mentioned in the Bible.
18. The Bible does not say. Nor does it even say that they were inhospitably turned away from an inn. It just says there was not room in the inn at Bethlehem. There may have been many hundreds of people camping in the streets and countryside during the mandatory census. Luke 2:7.
19. Simeon. Luke 2:25, 26.
20. Neither Mark or John tell the story of the birth of Christ.

<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/christmas-bible-quiz-20-good-questions/>

Gospel Reflection - Matthew 22:34-46

This reading summarises the Ten Commandments in two simple commandments about loving God and loving neighbour. It is about keeping the balance between these two, because Jesus tells that the second is just as important as the first.

This wonderful gospel summarises in a few sentences what takes several chapters in the Old Testament. The cross is the symbol of the Christian. It is made up of a vertical and a horizontal bar. The vertical represents God and me, while the horizontal represents me and others. The whole idea is to try to get the balance right between both. I could believe that I am committed to God, while not talking to my neighbour. On the other hand, I could be a philanthropist, handing out money to my poorer neighbours, while not having any belief in God. Jesus is insistent on getting the balance right when he insists that whatever I do to others, he takes as being done to him.

When I was a child, I was fascinated by the idea that God was everywhere. I did not understand this, but it intrigued me. It is much easier now, because I accept that God is in every person I meet. Though there may be times I find it difficult to recognize God in some of them! After the resurrection, Mary Magdalene thought Jesus was the gardener, the disciples on the road to Emmaus thought he was a tourist, while the apostles

thought he was a ghost. And these were people who had known him every day during the years of his active ministry.

Something had happened in his resurrection in that Jesus assumed the form and shape of every single one of us. We could say the Old Testament was radio, while the New Testament is television. The Ten Commandments are replaced by two, while Moses is replaced by Jesus. The Passover meal is replaced by the Eucharist (for Christians), while the concept of God is replaced by the concept of Father. The Old Testament is a case of coming events, throwing their shadows. We are invited into the full heritage of it all. We are truly blessed in that we have the hindsight of time in which to view all that has gone on before our time. It is an extraordinary mystery but, for some reason or other, God, decided that now was the best time for us to be alive, not a hundred years ago, not a thousand years from now. In the light of today we read today's gospel, and we reflect on it against the background of this day.

Rev'd Yvonne.Riley



God knows you're weary and worn out.
 God knows you don't know what else to try.
 God knows you struggle with blaming yourself.
 He knows.

Archbishop Kanishka Raffel's journey to faith



"My family came to Australia in 1972. My parents were Sri Lankan. My mother's family were Buddhist and so my two sisters and I were raised as Buddhists in Australia, which was unusual then.

I think Australia's first Buddhist temple opened in 1975 in Stanmore. It was a Thai Buddhist temple and Thai Buddhism is very similar to Sri Lankan Buddhism, so that was where the Sri Lankan community would go.

In my third year at university, I thought I should devote myself a little to the study of my religion. So, I started privately reading Buddhist literature. I visited the temple. I developed my meditation practice. But in God's kindness, I'd had Christian friends at high school and at university. And so, at the end of my third year at university, I was going on holiday with a few friends and we picked up some of them at the end of a beach mission.

So we arrived on the last day of the beach mission. And after we'd had lunch, the team said to me, "Oh, we're going to pray now. Maybe you could go for a walk on the beach." And I said, "Oh, I'll just stay here if that's okay."

That was the first time I saw Christian people in prayer, and it was quite surprising. I didn't know what they were going to do when they said that they were going to pray. They just stayed right where they were and started talking to God. So that was eye-opening.

Then I said to one of my friends, "What's being a Christian all about?" And he said being a Christian meant he'd "lost control of his life to Jesus Christ". Remember, I had devoted the year to serious study of Buddhism and was trying to develop, especially through meditation, control of my emotions and my ambitions and my desires, in order to be released from them. And here was my friend, who I respected, who said he'd lost control of his life to somebody who lived 2000 years ago!

Well, he asked me, "Would you read something if I gave it to you?" I said, "Okay." And he gave me Mark's Gospel and John's Gospel.

When I was back at home after our holiday, in my bedroom, I thought I ought to keep my word to my friend. So, I got John's Gospel out and began to read it. And as I did – wonderfully – God, in his kindness, convicted me, first of all, that I wasn't reading a fairytale but that I was reading history. And he allowed me to see the vitality, the beauty, the majesty of Jesus Christ – a person who had friends and enemies, who had compassion and a mission, who was a man of emotions, but also seemingly always in control.

The Lord drew my attention to a particular phrase that John uses. He relates a story, and then he'll say, "At this, the people were divided." God really drew my attention to this phrase and turned it around on me, so that I began to ask myself, "Well, you're not on the side of Jesus. Why not?"

As I read through the gospel once again, my attention became focused on John 6:44. Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me, and I will raise them up on the last day." Although this verse raises questions about God's sovereign election, what provoked me was the idea of "the last day". Buddhism taught me to expect that it would take hundreds of lifetimes, through many deaths and rebirths, before I could hope to achieve enlightenment. The Buddha himself took over 500 rebirths. If that was true, then the idea of a "last day" was problematic.

But then, I began to wonder what Jesus could have meant when he said, "No one can come to me unless the Father ... draws them to me." How would the Father draw someone to Jesus? How could this happen? Then I noticed the very next verse. John 6:45 says, "It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me." It occurred to me that as I had been reading the gospel, the Father had been teaching me about Jesus! If I had indeed "heard the Father" and "learned from him" then the necessary thing was to "come to Jesus". I was being "drawn to Jesus", and in God's kindness, I came.

Eventually, I couldn't think of any good reason for not being on Jesus' side. In a way that I couldn't have explained, I just felt somehow that Jesus was for me. And I thought, "Well, I need to be for him too." And so, in God's kindness, he saved me."

Eternity

Archbishop Kanishka Raffel Sydney Diocese

Whether you're running on empty, carrying a burden that is all too heavy for you, or simply need to hit the reset button, Jesus invites you to cast your cares on Him because He cares for you.

Questions to help shape your feelings

Eternity recently introduced this 'Well on the Way' series as an opportunity for me, a Christian clinical psychologist with three decades of professional practice, to offer readers some key principles for emotional health, along with practical tips. These are principles to maintain our core emotional health, it should be noted, rather than treatment strategies for psychological pathologies.

And here they are – my three key principles for emotional health:

1. Self-talk that is respectful, constructive and biblical.
2. Lifestyle balance that includes relaxation, exercise and prayer.
3. Healthy relationships.

Under each of these principles, I will explore several sub-topics. In this first article about self-talk, I want to dig into a core idea in both the Bible and psychology, that:

Core idea 1: Our thinking shapes our feelings.

Our conscious, present thought stream ('What are we having for dinner? Should I apply for that job? Why has this happened in my life?'), as well as our less conscious, less rational, deeper beliefs about ourselves and the world ('Are people safe? Can I trust my emotions? Am I loved?') profoundly shape our feelings about life.

Of course, the Bible was all over this concept before modern psychological science got there! It consistently tells us to guard our minds (Isaiah 26:3, Romans 12:2, Philippians 4:7-9) and our hearts (Proverbs 4:23).

Healthy people have some predictable things happening emotionally. They have a decent degree of confidence – to make decisions, take initiative, take risks and be vulnerable. They have a decent degree of acceptance about themselves – their body, personality, strengths, weaknesses – so they can enjoy being the person God has made them to be. And they have a decent degree of assertiveness and proactivity to set goals, solve problems and cope with setbacks.

But we can all find ourselves in less healthy zones from time to time when those poisonous patterns of thinking creep in. When fear, shame, powerlessness or helplessness (to name a few!) start to become plausible or dominate our inner world, we are heading for the notorious "black hole". We become more fragile, over-sensitive, self-doubting, insecure and scared and the black hole can become profound.

So, **practical tip 1** for emotional self-care is to use these four simple journaling questions when we notice ourselves feeling wobbly or confused. This approach does more than introspect. It helps me control my emotions, so I make wise decisions. So here they are.

1. How am I feeling?

It sounds very simple, but putting words or labels on our feelings can take a bit of learning. Sometimes it helps to give it more focus, such as "How do I feel about myself?" Or "How do I feel about my marriage/parenting?"

Thankfully, the Scriptures give us an extraordinary handbook on our emotions called the Psalms, where we see every emotion known to humans expressed and processed. The Psalmist does not avoid or deny his feelings!

But how do I begin to identify what I am feeling?

It's a process of listening to ourselves and testing out word concepts to find ones that fit. For example, "I'm feeling sad, but is it disappointed-sad or grief-sad, lonely-sad or scared-sad?" Ashamed or insecure, fearful or vulnerable, inferior or rejected? It can help to Google lists of feeling words or emotion charts to broaden our emotional vocabulary.

But having found an emotion or two that fit, my second question is this:

2. What is the thinking behind my feelings?

This is the "Pandora's box" question that lets us honestly and openly pour out all our confusion while seeking to get in touch with the ideas and beliefs shaping our feelings. This will engage with your expectations, your experience, your assumptions and most importantly, your beliefs about yourself and how you are treating yourself.

This will force you to look at your expectations of others – all those "shoulds" about life and other people's behaviour – and your expectations of their roles and yours. And it may well touch on how you are feeling and thinking towards God at the moment.

This leads logically to my third question:

3. Is my thinking constructive and helpful? If not, how can I change it?

I think of this as the therapy question because it usually takes some psycho-education to assist people in seeing the differences between healthy, constructive thinking and the opposite. It's often about discerning truth from lies.

Healthy thinking starts with respecting ourselves. It involves giving ourselves permission to be human and to have an entire range of normal human emotions that are neither right nor wrong. Our emotions are like colours of the rainbow in their breadth and indicator lights on the dashboard in their function. They tell us what is going on underneath the bonnet.

Two core definitions shape my psychology practice:

Anxiety is listening to fear.

Depression is listening to powerlessness and negativity.

Both are profoundly unhelpful and unhealthy, and we need to be vigilant. The Bible gives us hundreds of "don't fear" instructions (Deuteronomy 31:6, Joshua 1:9, Isaiah 43:1-2), with guidance on how to talk back to ourselves and remember what the Lord has done (Psalm 42:5 is one example).

We are doing excellent self-therapy when we can challenge poisonous ideas (lies) and feed ourselves some opposite truth.

.../cont

Questions to help shape your feelings, continued

4. What are my choices from here?

Do I need to think differently, talk to someone or get advice? Knowing “I have choices” is tremendously empowering and strengthening. I always have choices – in how I think and what I do.

A recent publication from the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has followed 700 men for over 80 years (Waldinger & Schulz, *The Good Life – Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*; Simon & Schuster, 2023) concludes that “when it comes to living a long and happy life, it is the quality of your relationships that matters most,” and that emotional awareness and control (as described above) are crucial to doing that.

So keep these four questions somewhere handy to test-run next time your emotions are confusing you.

In this second edition of our Well on the Way series, I want to focus on a principle of healthy self-talk that will undergird emotional health, and that is:

Core idea 2: I am an active agent in my emotional health.

People I meet in my practice commonly feel very passive about their emotional health. They have tried a range of strategies, usually for many years without a lot of impact, and so have come to accept and believe that this is part of who they are. “I am Jane and I have depression. I am Adam and I have anxiety. It’s permanent. It’s become built into my self-definition and self-understanding, and so becomes self-fulfilling!”

For many Christians, there is an additional layer of spiritual failure and disappointment with God. I have prayed, but he hasn’t taken away my struggle. Where does that leave me?

What do I believe about what is causing my emotional struggles? Do I believe they are a fixture in my life or something that God is using for my growth?

Sue Bartho is a clinical psychologist who runs Well on the Way Psychology in Sydney. To read more articles in this series, <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/well-on-the-way/>.

God often works in the unseen

It’s hard when we are living in that space where our heads know God can do anything but our hearts are heavy because He’s not doing what we’ve hoped, what we’ve prayed, what we’ve believed, for a long while. I get it — and I’ve cried many tears because of it.

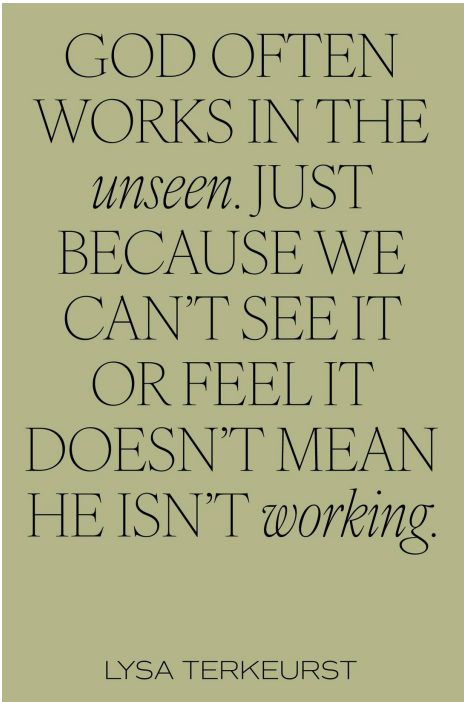
So what helps? It helps to know these things:

1. God often works in the unseen. Just because we can’t see it or feel it doesn’t mean He isn’t working (2 Corinthians 4:18).
2. What may feel like a lack of intervention from God does not signify a lack of affection from God (Lamentations 3:21-23).
3. God loves us too much to answer our prayers at any other time than the right time and in any other way than the right way (Romans 8:28).

Today, look for beautiful ways God is showing you assurances of His love. His affection is all around you, friend. Even in the waiting places.

How can you continue to seek the Lord today even in the midst of your circumstances?

Lysa TerKeurst



GOD OFTEN
WORKS IN THE
unseen. JUST
BECAUSE WE
CAN'T SEE IT
OR FEEL IT
DOESN'T MEAN
HE ISN'T *working.*

LYSA TERKEURST

While we wait for God to answer our prayers, let’s praise Him for our blessings.

4 reasons to pray when people hurts us

Obedying Jesus' command taught me several powerful truths we experience when we pray for people who have hurt us:

1. Prayer shields our hearts from bitterness. It gives us a verbal outlet for our pain, a way to begin releasing our resentment to God. It prevents righteous anger and real hurt from twisting into damaging bitterness.
2. Prayer humbles us. It reminds us that even when we have been hurt, we are imperfect and need grace too. It may even help us to consider the conflict from the other person's perspective.
3. Prayer helps us resist the temptation to seek revenge. It reminds us that God loves justice and that we can trust Him to defend and protect us.
4. Prayer gives us peace while we wait for resolution. Praying strengthens our relationship with God during our relational conflict. We trust that God is working even when we can't see or understand all He is doing.

If you're embroiled in a conflict, wrestling with bitterness, or feeling hurt or confused by a strained relationship, Jesus' encouragement to pray for your enemy may provide the protection your heart needs. You can pray about your situation, and pray for the person with whom you are in conflict, every day — even multiple times a day.

Feeling wounded by a friend's refusal to accept your apology? You can pray about that.

Feeling afraid she may hurt more people if she doesn't change? You can pray about that.

Longing to attempt reconciliation but not sure the other person will even speak to you? You can pray about that.

We can pray about all of it. God welcomes our requests, and He longs to help His children find forgiveness and unity (John 17:20-23).

It takes time, but when we commit to persistently praying for those who offend us, we give God the chance to work on their hearts — and ours.

How has prayer protected your heart when you've been hurt?

Elizabeth Laing Thompson



4 REASONS TO PRAY WHEN PEOPLE HURT US

1. Prayer shields our hearts from bitterness.
2. Prayer humbles us (*we are imperfect and need grace too*).
3. Prayer helps us resist the temptation to seek revenge.
4. Prayer gives us peace while we wait for resolution.



I LOVE THIS ANALOGY

When GOD wanted to create fish, HE spoke to the sea. When GOD wanted to create trees, HE spoke to the earth. But, when GOD wanted to create man, HE turned to himself. Then, GOD said "Let us make man in our image and in our likeness."

If you take a fish out of water, it will die; and when you remove a tree from soil, it will also die. Likewise, when man is disconnected from GOD, he dies.

GOD is our natural environment. We were created to live in HIS presence. We have to be connected to HIM because it is only in HIM that life exists. Let us stay connected to GOD.

My testimony - Ox

When I was 13, I was as tall as I am now. By age 15, I was like a man-child. One day as I was playing 1st grade Senior Football and Cricket, someone said, "Man, you're as big as an Ox." It stuck, and I've been called Ox ever since.

I grew up in a home where we attended church, but none of my friends did. At age 16, I decided it wasn't for me. My father was a policeman, which probably meant I rebelled even more than other kids.

For the next 12 or 13 years, I lived life my own way. I can't believe some of the stupid stuff I did. I spent a lot of time drinking and partying with my mates. I was devoted to playing football and cricket. Being one of the boys was the main focus of my life.

I have had several life-threatening accidents in my life, but I believe God protected me because he had things he wanted me to do to advance his kingdom.

When I was four, I was run over by a car, which broke my femur clean in half and fractured my skull. I spent two weeks in hospital, but was running around again in five weeks.

At age 17, I fell off a car on a rural property doing about 50km – I had scratches and bruising but no broken bones. The following year, I fell off a ute while spotlighting with a loaded shotgun in my hand, doing about 70km an hour. Thankfully, the gun didn't discharge, but all the people with me thought I was dead.

At age 19, I had another near-miss when a car pulled out of a side road in front of me while I was travelling at 100km an hour. I slammed on the brakes and somehow swerved to miss the other car, which was carrying five elderly people.

Over the next four years, I was arrested a couple of times for doing silly things, and I crashed a car three times through drink-driving. On one occasion, there were 11 people in the car, so it's miraculous that I never hurt myself or anyone else.

Things started to change in my early 20s when I met my wife, Karen. We instantly connected because she had also grown up in a Christian home and had walked away. We married in 1999 and had our daughters: Amber in 2000 and Emma in 2002.

While Karen was pregnant with Amber, she became sick with pre-eclampsia and spent a lot of time in hospital. The night before Amber was born, Karen made a deal with God that if Amber and she were okay, she would raise our child in the church. We hadn't been to church for many years, but she knew God existed.

Amber was born seven weeks early, weighing just 1.62 kg, so she lived in hospital for the first four weeks of her life. After she came home, my wife started taking Amber to church, which led to her attending the church playgroup.

When my wife got a new job and started studying, I started going to playgroup with my daughter and later our second child.

What led me back to the church was three ladies at the playgroup – Georgie, Nikki and Jenny – who just loved me and cared for me and my daughters, and I hadn't experienced that before.

God had a plan, because the first day I went back to church, in 2003, a sports chaplain of the Western Bulldogs AFL team and the Australian Boomers basketball team gave a sermon about sports. There were a couple of hundred people in that church, but I know God had that sermon just for me that day.

For several months, God worked on my heart. But I felt I wasn't good enough to become a Christian. I tried to change my life by getting rid of obvious sins, but failed miserably, so I almost gave up trying. Then a couple of people shared their testimonies at church, and God used their testimonies to show me that I couldn't change myself – God had to change me. I broke down in my seat and thought, "God, I'm stuffed; I need you to fix me".

That was on 9 November 2003. From that very moment, my life instantly changed. That night, I went to the newspaper where I was working and told my 35 work colleagues, "This morning at church, I gave my life to Jesus, and I will never be the same again." There was dead silence and everyone was really awkward, but it didn't bother me. My life was very different from that point on.

At that point, Karen had not yet made a decision, but the radical change in my life convinced her that God was real because there was no way that I could have changed myself, and some months later she was also baptised.

Since becoming a believer in 2003, I knew that my life was no longer my own and that I would always use the gifts and skills God has given me to advance his kingdom. I've been serving in church ever since and been in full-time ministry since 2009.

In 2019, we moved to the NT, and I became the director of Scripture Union in the NT. Then earlier this year I took on a role as Partnership & Fundraising Manager at Nungalinga College, where I pray God will use me to share the good news of Jesus and lead others to him – just as those playgroup ladies did for me 20 years ago.

Eternity



Every day is an opportunity to bless someone

No matter our circumstances — whether we're working in an office, working at home with our kids, taking classes, or caring for an aging parent — there is purpose in each day. Every day there are people around us who need a smile and encouragement.

We are to shine our lights, as Matthew 5:14-16 instructs:

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (NIV).

Every day is an opportunity to bless someone. There are days when I desperately need others, and there are days when others desperately need me.

We can start each day with excitement! Let's prepare for the week with thankful hearts, asking God to guide and renew us with hope every ... single ... week.

What's one thing you can do on a Sunday evening to prepare your heart for a new week?

Lori Snyder



God transforms lives

We know God ultimately controls all outcomes. But the need is so great that it leaves us vulnerable to human doubt. So we have a choice: Either we trust that God will inspire miracles, rescue and redemption to happen according to His will or we lie awake at night, stressed out and anxious.

I know what you're thinking: Great! I'll just choose to trust God. If only it were that easy!

Wrestling with this tension begs the simple question: How?

How do we actually go from desiring to be in control to choosing to trust in God? I'm learning that it's not through our own effort; rather, it is a journey of drawing close to our Father.

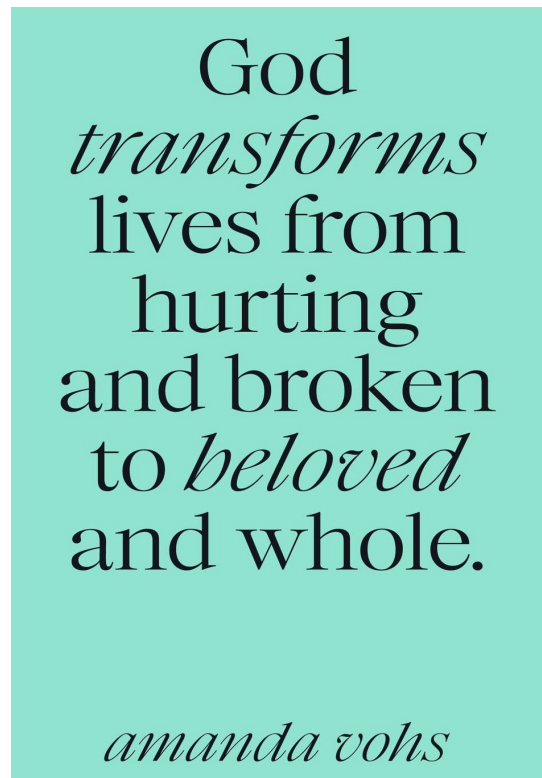
"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

And so it is with God. Drawing near to God requires first a quieting of the exterior so that we can quiet our interior. Laying down our distractions so we can enter the quiet places of our hearts.

In this vulnerable space, you can encounter your Creator, who is patiently and persistently pursuing you. He is the intimate lover of your soul, who knows you and loves you completely. If we can be courageous enough to lean into this, we can begin to feel whole again. And you were created to be whole.

Where is God asking you to trust Him more fully?

Amanda Vohs



About St Paul's

St. Paul's Ginninderra was re-established in 1973 to serve the suburbs of Spence, Melba, Florey, Evatt and McKellar. Four decades later people are more mobile and parish boundaries mean very little and yet a large proportion of those who attend St. Paul's today come from within that area and we also welcome people from all over Canberra. The church leases a section of Mt Rogers Community Centre (old Spence Primary School).

At St. Paul's we endeavour to:

- make Jesus Christ central to our life-related preaching
- nurture adults, youth and children in a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ
- encourage people to discover and exercise their Spiritual gifts
- offer opportunities for people to find wholeness in their lives
- create an atmosphere of love and friendship
- live out the Great Commission of Jesus
- see "His Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven"

Worship Services - normal time

SUNDAYS

8:00am - Holy Communion - a Traditional Service

10:00am - Holy Communion - a Contemporary Service with Kidz Alive (1st, 3rd & 5th Sundays) - [this service is available on Zoom, see the Parish's website \(https://stpaulsginninderra.org.au\)](https://stpaulsginninderra.org.au) for the link

10:00am - Prayer, Praise & Proclamation with Kidz Alive (2nd & 4th Sundays) - [this service is available on Zoom](#)
Kidz Alive may not run in school holidays

MONDAYS

2:00pm - Prayer Time

WEDNESDAYS

9:00am - Lectio 365 Prayer Time with Holy Communion and fellowship morning tea

10am Play Group—Mainly Music (during school term)

Contact Us

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Email: ken@stpaulsginninderra.org.au

Parish Office
Phone: 02 6259 2931
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