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CHRISTMAS CONSPIRACY

Did you know that one of the world's most sung Christmas carols has been censored?

BY GLENN HOHNBERG

JOY TO THE WORLD is probably one of the most sung Christmas carols of all time. It is one of the Christmas biggies when it comes to carols – up there with *Away in a Manger* and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* and the one about the reindeer with the nose problem. Often it is the closing number in those big public carol events: it finishes the night with such a high note of joy.

The theme is terrific. All will be right with the world. A King is coming.

The song and musical score promise what we all want – the warm embrace of everyone everywhere. All will be right with the world. A King is coming.

Joy to the World – let the Earth receive her King.

Let every heart prepare Him room!

Heaven and nature sing!

This is a different kind of king from the ruler of our Commonwealth. I mean, King Charles might be a nice guy and all, but the angels of heaven and the fishes of the deep blue sea aren't bowing down to him.

Joy to the World is about the true King of all creation: King Jesus, coming to bring about His rule.

The Lord reigns and all the world celebrates. When? With the coming of Jesus!

Weird but true

But here is what is weird but true. There is a verse that constantly gets dropped.

The song has four verses, but popular singers mostly leave out the third verse: Mariah Carey: nope; Pentatonix: nope; Michael Bublé: nope; Live at the Helix in Dublin: an absolute banger, but still nope; weird collected music YouTube channels: nope; really famous Australian church (that shall remain unnamed): nope.

If *Joy to the World* is the most sung Christmas carol of all time, then this verse is the most dropped verse of all time!

Here is the offending verse 3:

No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

Clearly, some people don't want to sing about the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. But leaving it out destroys the whole point of the song. The song has been disembowelled to the extent that there is no point in singing it. None.

Verse 3 tells us about the change we need Jesus to bring. If Jesus comes, but sin still slays us, and sorrows still scar us, and thorns still tear at us, what was the point of His coming?

Our real need

The irony here is that Christmas itself demonstrates our need for a Savior.

Yes, we might have a wonderful time together. But don't all families know the heartache of broken relationships? Don't we all know the pain of separation – remembering love-ones not with us because of sickness or death? Meanwhile, in the wider world, wars and crime go on.

> **"Leaving it out destroys the whole point of the song."**

A Jesus who came as King, but failed to deal with sin would simply be a new captain on an already sinking Titanic.

But the real Jesus will come to change the world for the better – in fact, for the best. So let's sing *Joy to the World* with verse 3.

And, yes, I just said "will" come. Because I think the song probably isn't about Jesus' birth at all.

Rather it's about His return – His second coming. This seems particularly persuasive when we read Psalm 98:8-9:

"Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the LORD,
for He comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity."

This is why when we look around, there is still a shocking volume of wickedness, woe and waste.

What the song and Psalm promise hasn't happened yet. Jesus' first coming was to deal with sin.

He did this by dying on the cross and taking the punishment we deserve.

From that time until now He has been subduing sin and sorrow and ripping the thorns out of one heart at a time.

But as the book of Revelation and other Scriptures make uncomfortably clear, Jesus' second coming will bring judgement!

He'll return as the King. The slain Lamb who sits on the throne will rise to judge the world, end all sorrow, burn all the thorns, and slay all those who refuse to bow before Him.

And then, all the sabre rattling and sabre swinging will be over forever. The nations will come under His rule.

Those in the dust of death will rise again, and death will be no more.

And so, in response, "every heart must prepare Him room" That does sound a bit like an English understatement, doesn't it? Other things in our hearts ought to shuffle over a bit to make sure they have space for Him.

But you get the point from the rest of the song. All saved humanity will be singing the exaltation of Jesus and all of creation and the spiritual realm will be on backing vocals when He returns.

We better get prepared. When Jesus comes the second time, wherever sin and the curse live they will be hunted down and slain.

So then, we can see the problem with ditching verse three of *Joy to the World*. It implies that either there are no problems in our world. Or that when Jesus turns up, nothing will change. Or both!

We need the joy of Jesus coming. And we ought to sing *Joy to the World* with verse three. Or, we should strike it from our Christmas playlists, just as Jesus will strike down sin and sorrow when He comes. ●

This article first appeared in full at Glenn's blog at risenchurch.org.au and is used with kind permission.

A Christmas to remember

On Christmas Eve 1996 American Elliott Osowitt was given perhaps the greatest gift of his life – he was kicked out of home by his cancer-riddled wife.

"She came to the door crying, hairless and sick-looking from the chemotherapy treatment, and told me, 'I know where you've been, who you've been with and what you've been doing. I can't take it anymore. You're no good for this family. Go away. We're better off without you,'" Elliott remembers sadly.

Elliott and Polly were married when he was 19 and had two daughters together.

He was not a good husband or father.

He was a heavy drug user and, although he was never physically abusive, was a very angry man.

"I was always yelling and swearing and ranting and raving. Putting down my wife and putting down my children," he admits.

Then Polly developed breast cancer and had to undergo radical surgery and chemotherapy.

At the same time their daughter, who had already been in trouble with the law on more than a dozen occasions, got arrested again for fraud and jailed for three years, leaving Elliott and his wife to raise her two children.

To get away from these overwhelming problems, Elliott quit his job as a medical assistant and became a tour director for a British company.

He travelled a great deal of the time with a company that he called "Heathen Tours."

The purpose of these tours was to provide any and every sort of "pleasure" the clientele could afford.

He too, participated in the immoral acts he offered to his clients.

"I got paid to take drugs and drink with people all over the world," Elliott says. "What a great job for an addict! But it got crazy and out of hand."

Elliot Osowitt spent many years as an angry, alcoholic drug addict before finding a Gideon's Bible in his hotel room.

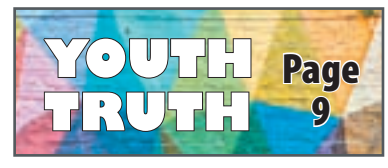
He barrelled along this path until he found himself homeless that fateful day in the middle of what should have been the most wonderful time of the year.

Elliott booked into a motel intending to shoot and kill himself.

While in the room, he noticed an open Gideon Bible on top of the television.

It made him so angry he cursed God and knocked the Bible off the television. He tried to kick it under the bed, but the bedframe was solid and the Bible could not go under. It fell open to John 14:27, which says: "*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you: not as the world gives it give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled neither let it be afraid.*"

● Turn to page 2



A Christmas to remember

From page 1

"I was 47 years old and I wept for the first time in my adult life," Elliott shares. His father had beaten it into him that "men don't cry" but he knows now that men who do not cry explode.

Elliott shut the Bible and called Polly to say goodbye. Polly asked him to at least call her pastor, which he did. Though it was Christmas Eve, this pastor came and spent time with Elliott.

Elliott spent the next three days in the motel reading that Gideon Bible. On Sunday, he attended church with his wife where he knelt and asked Jesus to forgive him, free him of his addictions and help him to live right.

"The minute I asked Him, He forgave me," Elliott marvels. "My sins were cast away as far as the east is from the west. They were cast into the deepest part of the ocean."

The God Elliott surrendered his life to during Christmas 1996 was nothing like what he thought He would be.

"To me, God was a rule-making Darth Vader out there in outer space somewhere," he revealed in a talk on Livestream in 2013.

Elliott grew up in Los Angeles California in a strict Jewish home. He had no real knowledge of Jesus Christ and was not even permitted to speak His name.

> **"The minute I asked Him, He forgave me."**

His father was a "heavy hitter" dad, one with whom he had no relationship. At 17, Elliott escaped the violence at home for a different kind of violence in Vietnam.

Over three years, the army turned Elliott from a non-drinking, non-smoking good boy into a drug addict, alcoholic womaniser.

Marriage – and even Polly's illness – did nothing to change him as he careened down the path to what could have been a violent and untimely end.

Had it not been for Polly's actions that night before Christmas, he may well have killed himself. But, as he found out after he gave his life to Christ – "God is awesome to forgive – wives are another story," he says ruefully.

After his conversion, Elliott stayed with his dying mother for a while and contacted an organisation called Jews for Jesus, which helped him to learn more about how his new faith was compatible with and had its roots in his Jewish background.

After his mother's funeral, Elliott returned home and he and Polly worked on their marriage.

He then got a job with a Christian touring company, which put him in contact with Christians from all persuasions and allowed him to encourage others with his story.

Polly fully recovered from cancer and worked two jobs so Elliott could complete Bible school.

Elliott became a pastor in 2000. Today both his daughters are happily married, raising his grandchildren.

"My family is proof that God does miracles even today!" Elliott says with a beaming smile. •

Coffee Break

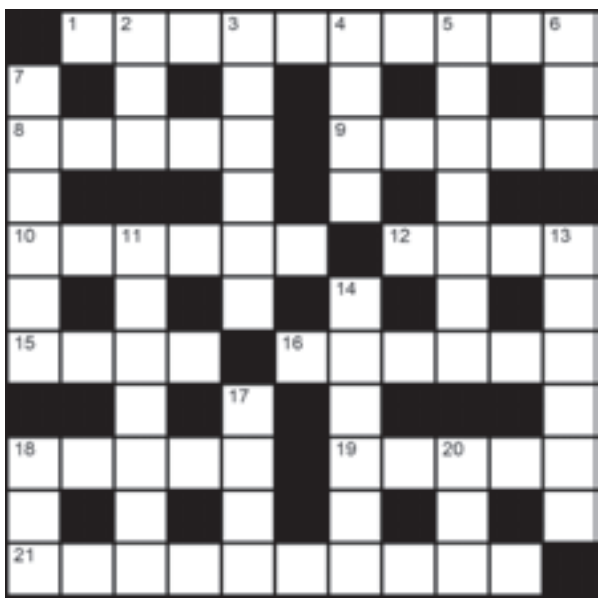
CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

ACROSS

1 Changed business from public to private ownership
8 Athletics venue
9 French city
10 Course component
12 Freckle's place
15 Harp ancester
16 In short supply
18 Fossil preserver, at times
19 Entire quantity
21 Non-deciduous trees

DOWN

2 Regret deeply
3 Capable of survival
4 Freeway fare
5 Variety of pool
6 MS ___
7 Type of warm-blooded animal



11 Long- lasting
13 Compass pointer
14 Crop cutting tool
17 A steep rugged rock
18 Terrific tennis serve
20 Tuna fish container

SOLUTIONS PAGE 11

"I was sure I heard someone knocking on the door."

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8	5	2		7				
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From trauma to triumph

BY JANICE TEO

Anne says she has finally found peace and healing.

After years of disappointment, hurt and a failed marriage, Anne (not her real name) was finally in a good place.

After a difficult divorce, she was remarried and had two beautiful children. She was working on her thesis for an Honours degree in psychology.

The rebuilding of her life was going well.

Then out of the blue came the bombshell – a family trauma that threatened to derail her entire world: her seven-year marriage, her family and her future.

It began with an innocent comment by one of her children that made Anne instantly suspicious. Her suspicions proved correct; one thing led to another and culminated a year later in a lawsuit and conviction. "It was my worst nightmare come true," Anne tells *Challenge News*. "The worst time of my life.

"I wondered if my marriage would survive. My whole life had been unhappy and I thought I had finally found happiness and peace with my second husband – and then this happened.

"Plus I was still doing my Honours at the time and was under pressure to submit my thesis.

"It was so terribly stressful that I became depressed."

Anne was not a spiritual person; she did not believe in the supernatural. Where she came from, such beliefs were considered superstition, so she didn't even have any kind of faith to bolster her.

But all that was about to change. Her youngest child, who was only three at the time, suddenly began noticing crosses and churches and pointed them out every time she saw one.

> **"This was the peace that I had been missing my whole life."**

Anna shares: "She would say, 'Mum, that's Jesus' cross. Mum, who was Jesus?'" Then, most inexplicable of all: "Mum, Jesus used to be my Father."

Anne shakes her head. "At that point I knew zero about God or Jesus. I had never even seen a Bible in my whole life."

That too was about to change dramatically.

One morning, Anne was in the ladies' room at the university when she saw a small book on the shelf.

She picked it up and opened it; instantly she knew it was a Bible. "I don't know how I knew it but I did," she recalls.

She started to shake. Just 10 minutes before, she had decided to buy one to satisfy her daughter's insatiable curiosity and her own growing interest.

Taking the Bible with her, she left the washroom and bumped into a fellow student she didn't even know.

Breaking every rule of polite conversation, she asked her: "Do you believe in anything?"

"Oh yes," the girl replied. "I'm a Christian. I believe in Jesus Christ."

Anne's legs went soft. "I just couldn't believe it! I felt like someone was watching me, knowing what I was thinking. Today I know these were no coincidences."

Her new friend invited her to that week's church service and that Sunday, Anne attended church for the first time in her life.

The effect on her was profound – she burst into tears and couldn't stop crying – "gushing like a river" is how she describes it.

"Straight away I felt incredible peace and I knew this was the peace that I had been missing my whole life. It was so powerful.

"My whole life I never really knew true love but I found it that day in Christ. It changed me completely."

She says Jesus saved her marriage, which until then had been hanging by a thread because of the family crisis.

"I used to get so angry and take it out on my husband. I was tense and anxious all the time because of our crisis.

"We fought constantly. Our relationship became really damaged.

"But since trusting God to take care of everything I have become much more peaceful. My marriage is so much better.

"God saved my marriage. He showed up in my life at my time of big trouble and I am forever grateful."

Anne says she has "never known such love. I have peace and comfort and hope."

Anne, who says she is considering becoming a Christian counsellor, says she has found release in being able to forgive others.

"Forgiveness is the path to healing," she says.

"It frees you, gives you power and strength. Many people believe it's a weakness, but it's just the opposite: it's power and strength. It frees you and that's where the power and strength is.

"God has filled me, fixed me, and healed me. I was not clean; I made so many mistakes in my life but God has forgiven me.

"Now I know that we go to God to get love so that we can share it with others." •

Ask Y:

Peter Meadows answers your questions about God

QUESTION: CAN'T I JUST FIGURE GOD OUT FOR MYSELF?

SOUNDS PRETTY EASY doesn't it? To use a bit of brain power and a smattering of commonsense to work out who or what God is, what he's up to and what he wants from us.

But if that was possible we wouldn't need Christmas. OK, I know that sounds strange but hang in with me for a moment. First, let me give you a few reasons why figuring out God ourselves is always going to be like trying to push a cloud of smoke up a hill.

First, have you ever been to the dentist for a check-up hoping they would find nothing wrong – even if potential disaster was lurking somewhere beneath the enamel? I know I have – being more interested in my own self interest than finding what was true.

In the same way there's a bias when we start asking ourselves God-questions. We try to limit our discoveries to things which fit our comfort zones, mesh with our timetables and accommodate our priorities. And God may well not be like that at all.

And what about the limit to our knowledge? Human kind has yet to even find a cure for the common cold. So how can we possibly believe we know enough to discover what the creator of everything is like?

More than that, there's also a limit to our reasoning power. A toddler asks 'Why?' and 'How?' and 'Why?' again and again. The parent has the answers and would love to be able to give them, but doesn't because the child's intellectual ability does not stretch far enough to cope.

That's how it is when exploring the God agenda. Our brain power does not match the task.

So are we stranded in this vast universe with no way of knowing its maker? That's how it would be – but for the event we celebrate at Christmas. Because the often sentimental 'baby in a manger' stuff is actually the story of God opening up the conversation with us, coming down to our level to give us the answers we need.

It's like what would have to happen if my goldfish were ever to come to know what I think of him. I'd have to become like him and enter his fishy little world. And at the event we call Christmas that is what God did himself. He came into our world as a man, to let us have the answers to our questions about him. That's why Jesus is worth listening to! •

Peter Meadows is the co-author with Joseph Steinberg of The Book of Y the basis for the eight week Y Course that explores life's biggest questions.

BREAKTHROUGH FOR THE BROKEN

Stubborn, bitter, broken and angry – that's how Nina Mhlanga describes what she was like in her younger days.

"I went through a lot of pain when I was a child and even as an adult," Nina, 30, tells *Challenge News*.

"As a result I really wanted revenge on the people who hurt me."

It bothered her a great deal that she could not shake off these feelings even though she had become a Christian when she was 12.

"I grew up in a Christian home. We attended church service every week. I joined the choir. I had such a passion for God I also joined the Scripture Union at school."

Even so, Nina says she never really understood what it meant to fully commit her life to Christ.

"I served God while I was broken and still wanted revenge. I never had peace and joy in my heart."

However, it was this very discouragement that led her to pursue the promise of Psalm 16:11: "In thy Presence is fullness of joy."

She approached her pastor, who led her to pray and recommit her life to God.

That made all the difference. "I accepted Christ when I was 12 but I became a transformed Christian three years ago," says Nina.

"That was when I discovered I had been living a life full of unforgiveness and brokenness. I went through Biblical counselling and that really changed my life.

"It helped me to forgive everyone who caused me pain."

Since her breakthrough three years ago, Nina says she has become a "true Christian" and is "living happy and free".

In fact one of her greatest delights is helping others experience the same joy.

"There is peace and joy in Christ when we forgive. I am no longer a victim of bitterness. Because God healed my heart, mind and soul I am also no longer a victim of depression. Instead I have victory through Jesus Christ.

"God is my strength, my salvation and my hope."

Nina, who is now a missionary (someone who tells people about the good news about Jesus), realizes that the missing part of the puzzle in her life was accepting she had a problem in the first place. •

Nina Mhlanga

Profound truths in animated classic

BY SIMEON NEO

WITH THE RECENT live-action adaptation of one of my favourite animated shows of all time, there comes a renewed interest in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. While the Nickelodeon classic has heavy references to East Asian spirituality and culture, I can't help but see parallels with Zuko's famous redemption arc to another popular parable in the Bible: the Prodigal Son.

In the first half of the show, Zuko is introduced as the main antagonist to protagonist Aang, who is also the Avatar – a saviour-like character destined to save the world.

We soon learn that Zuko is a banished prince, exiled by his own father, the Firelord. The only way to earn back his honour and the approval of his father is to capture the Avatar.

Zuko and Aang in Avatar: The Last Airbender.

In the first two seasons of the show, Zuko sets out on his mission with an obsessive fervour that, at times, puts his own life at risk.

Journeying alongside him is his uncle Iroh, who is a father-figure to Zuko, training him in battle skills while also providing words of wisdom.

In the middle of the show, Zuko eventually reaches a pivotal moment in his journey where he has to decide between capturing the Avatar and receiving his father's acceptance, or join the Avatar to end the war. Unfortunately, he chooses the first option, at the expense of sending Iroh to prison.

Zuko returns to the Fire Nation where he enjoys all the prestige and honour as a prince.

But even with everything that he has, he soon finds himself conflicted and empty and he leaves the Fire Nation once again. This time, to seek forgiveness.

In Luke 15:11-32, Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the parable, the son demanded his share of the inheritance from his father – an act that was akin to cursing his father to death.

However, the father gives in to his son's request and the son leaves home and squanders his wealth.

Utterly broke and living among pigs, he decides to return home to ask his father for forgiveness, expecting to return as a servant.

Yet, upon seeing him, his father embraces the son with these words: "*For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found*" (Luke 15:24).

In a similar vein, when Zuko finally meets Iroh again, he apologizes, expecting his uncle to reject him for betraying him.

However, Iroh embraces Zuko almost immediately upon seeing his nephew. With tears running down his face he says, "I was never angry with you. I was sad because I was afraid you'd lost your way… and you found it again."

As I rewatched *Avatar: The Last Airbender* as an adult, I find myself relating more to Zuko than Aang.

Like Zuko, there were many times when I choose to pursue things like ambitions, wealth or even relationships. While these things are not bad in itself, making them the main object of our pursuit often leads to emptiness.

But the Bible says that we who "once were alienated and enemies" of God are now reconciled to Him through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:21-22).

The stories of Zuko and the Prodigal Son illustrates the power of redemption, forgiveness and the Father's love.

The Bible tells us that, "*But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God*" (John 1:12).

If you find yourself unfulfilled and empty from pursuing the things of this world, believe in Jesus and come back to God and He will receive you with open arms. •

STOCK PHOTO

Angry boy no longer empty

For years Bill Sgro felt he was the wrong sex, not because he struggled with transgenderism but because his father told him so.

His parents already had a son, and his deeply traditional father very much wanted his second child to be a girl.

So, while Bill was much loved by his mother, he got only contempt and harshness from his dad. He was eight when his father shouted at him: "I wish you'd never been born! You should have been a girl!"

That was the day "something inside me went hard" he shares at a Full Gospel Business Fellowship Australia (FGBA) meeting. "I began to feel I was not wanted and no good. I felt his anger for the greater part of my life and in turn I became a very angry young man."

Bill did not do well in his studies. Report card times were the worst as his poor scores enraged his father. Consequently, Bill hated school.

He left school when he was 14, after a teacher told him - having gotten into yet another fight - that he was wasting the school's time and his parents' money, and that he should work on his father's farm.

"The thought of leaving school was heaven, but the thought of working for my father was hell," Bill laughs, but he did indeed give the family farm a try. He lasted a year and then moved on.

Life was tough but Bill was even tougher. "I was a young man with a real problem and heading for trouble," he says. He left his hometown at 18 and soon met and married Joy.

Life was good for about a year, but Bill says he soon began feeling "unsettled". The loneliness and emptiness became "unbearable". Money was a problem and Bill hit the bottle.

Things were already going downhill and could have spiralled out of control if Bill's partner's father hadn't suffered a stroke.

As Bill waited with his business associate, whose name was Doug, for the ambulance, Doug said to him: "I pray Jesus will take my father home to heaven for I know I will see him again one day."

> **"The emptiness I felt for so long has left me forever."**

These words, Bill says, pierced him like a knife. "I felt the love this man had for his father whereas I couldn't care if I never saw my father again.

"I told Doug I would love to have that kind of love for my dad and he said: 'you can have this special love for your Father in heaven'."

Doug invited Bill to church. Bill accepted the invitation even though he had a deep mistrust. He found the service strange. He had only ever attended Catholic mass, so hearing a married pastor talking about God as if He was a friend intrigued him.

Bill approached the pastor. "I wanted to talk to someone, but I didn't know who. He asked if he could visit me and I said yes."

They talked for hours. Bill pumped the pastor with questions. "I wanted to know the truth about this thing called 'life'. I began to share my emptiness, which I had never been able to put into words before."

The pastor explained the gospel to Bill, telling him that Jesus Christ had come to earth to die for the sins of mankind, but that men were free to choose whether to accept Him or not.

"Would you like to pray and ask Jesus into your heart?" the pastor asked Bill and Joy. "Your emptiness could be gone tonight, forever."

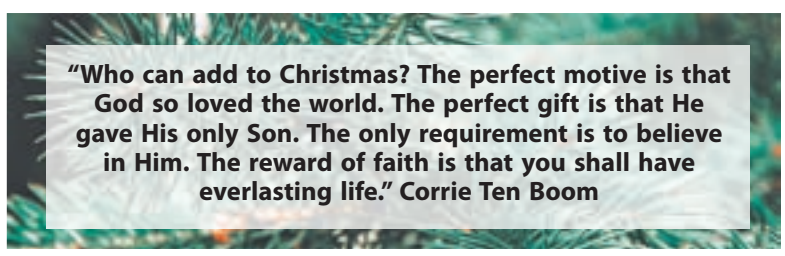
Joy agreed immediately; Bill only agreed because he didn't want to be left out. Together the couple committed their lives to Christ.

Immediately, Bill says, "I had a feeling of coming home, a feeling of love and peace, a place where I felt warm and welcome.

"Next day at work I felt Jesus' presence in my life for the first time."

Since then, Bill says, Jesus has done more and more to heal the scars of his childhood. "Today, even if I try really hard I can't remember what that empty feeling was like," Bill says with a smile. "The emptiness I felt for so long has left me forever, such is the love and peace of knowing Him personally and knowing where you will spend eternity." Bill's faith led him to join the FGBA. In 2006 he became national president and served for nine years.

"I will travel to the ends of the Earth to share what Jesus has done for me," he says. "Only He can take the emptiness out of your life and fill it with love." •



CHANGED FROM THE INSIDE OUT

When Jesse Bradley's parents divorced when he was a young child, he put all his focus into succeeding in school and sports. His dream was to become a professional athlete, which he achieved as an adult, playing soccer as a goalkeeper in the US, Scotland, and Zimbabwe.

Jesse Bradley

But while in Africa, playing soccer with the Highlanders in Bulawayo, a prescribed medication for malaria built up to toxic levels in Jesse's system and he began the fight for his life.

The previously energetic athlete now struggled to get out of bed. He experienced intense headaches, sweats, chills, double vision, and heart problems such as tachycardia and atrial flutter.

"There were also psychological side effects including waves of depression, anxiety, and panic attacks," Jesse tells CBN. Jesse returned to the US for his recovery where he was close to death for a year. "I was charting just how much I could walk," Jesse shares in an interview with the Unfolding Stories podcast. "Five minutes, 10 minutes, and that was for a couple of years. It was an intense recovery, about 10 years to really recover. I would start writing down a list of things I was really thankful for. Also, during that time, I really started to pray to God and pour my heart out to Him."

The power of grace

Jesse had been a Christian since he was in college, where he took a class called Introduction to World Religions. A number of religious texts were assigned reading but for Jesse, the Bible stood out somehow – it was powerful.

"I started to get a picture of who God is and I was drawn to God. I was drawn to Jesus... What stood out to me and made Christianity unique, is this 'grace'. So many other religions are about striving and performing, trying to climb or be morally good enough to be accepted by God, but Christianity was the opposite.

"It's that God comes to us, He loves us before we love Him, He pursues us and is interested in us before we ever seek Him, and grace means it's an undeserved gift. Jesus died for our sins and when we decide to follow Him, we have eternal life."

Jesse says he put his trust in Jesus after a year of studying the Bible and talking with a Christian friend.

"When I did that I knew I had forgiveness of sins and eternal life," he attests. "I knew no one could take that away – the love of Christ... my life changed from the inside out. I was able to forgive people I could never forgive before. I didn't cut people down. I'd go to parties but instead of drinking I just had more joy than ever before and I was sober."

Jesse even found his new faith impacted his soccer.

"I started to pray before games and it took the pressure off me... and instead of soccer being an idol in my life it really put it in its place. I enjoyed it more than ever but now Jesus was first."

A new strength

During his recovery, Jesse found he wasn't only becoming stronger physically but also spiritually.

"My prayers before had been intellectual or theological, they had never really been deep. My approach to handling challenges in my life was 'you stuff it (down) and then you get tough'. Like when my parents got divorced, I just tried to stuff that and work harder in school, grades and sports. With this health situation, this tragedy in my life, I couldn't just stuff that – it was too big.

"I couldn't just tough my way through it or control anything, so I had to learn how to rely on God and how to ask for help from the Holy Spirit [the unseen presence of God], how to pour out my heart to Him. It was a whole new way of walking through difficulties."

As Jesse looks back at his recovery, he says "God has a way to bring out wonderful things out of the worst things that we go through. Not every valley is a wrong turn."

On second thoughts

During his recovery, Jesse learnt to memorise Bible verses so he could practice something he calls "the second thought".

"In Philippians 4:8, it says, '*Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy – think about these things*.' So I would reject the first thought that would say, 'I'm never going to have any hope, I'm never going to get my health back.'

"Like a goalkeeper keeps the ball out of the net, I would keep those first thoughts from lodging and replace them with Scripture. The Word of God didn't just lead me to Jesus, but was also key in the restoration process."

> **"My life was changed from the inside out."**

World Cup hope

Now in his 40s, Jesse is married, has four children and is a pastor of a church. And, during the recent World Cup, he was able to combine his love of soccer and telling people about Jesus through his online media ministry. Recently he saw thousands of people respond to his message and put their faith in Jesus.

"I share my story and people are making decisions to follow Jesus... we want people to know that they are loved by God, they are pursued by God, they are known by God. You are made to have a relationship with God and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in God." •

Jesse Bradley played soccer as a goalkeeper in the US, Scotland, and Zimbabwe.

Jesse Bradley with his wife and four children.

WHITE POWDER TO WHITE FLAG

BY TED N (ABRIDGED)

STOCK PHOTO

A drug addict's life is a montage of freeze-frames. Like the night I was driving and noticed the disquieting red and blue strobe in my mirror. As I slowed the car to a stop, that's when I realized I was wearing a bathrobe and green plaid pyjama pants. I hurriedly took count of how many drinks I'd had in the last few hours, remembered the half-gram of heroin in my lumpy pocket, and the variety of other unmentionables scattered around the car.

The chap in blue cautioned me about deer darting across this stretch of road. He was forgiving of my speed and returned to his vibrant cruiser without issuing a citation. I must have seemed tired instead of drunk.

I had reached a point where I could consume generous servings of brandy without appearing drunk. In fact, I felt closer to normal after binging on booze. I was calm as he pulled away, and almost disappointed as I drove on.

As an addict, I both preferred and despised my own company; I feared myself and what I might do if left alone for too long. On more than one occasion I'd woken up in the morning on the kitchen floor as a grown man who'd cried himself to sleep, broken, cowardly, captive to my lifestyle and absolutely alone.

I used to cry out to God, weeping and screaming in anger for Him to rescue me. Every night I dreaded the morning, certain that I couldn't bear another day. I'd pour the first drink of the day before climbing into my car, knowing there would be more to come.

I so wished to die, but I knew what a sad funeral service it would be. No one would be surprised. People would talk about my potential rather than my achievements. My parents would blame themselves and live in shame and regret, and my brothers would lose their smiles and all innocence. My memory would be baggage to them.

It was time for a solution.

After two months of treatment and no progress, I was more exhausted than I'd ever been. Even though I hadn't had a drink or drugs for 60 days I was still harnessed by substances. I had no reference to function like other people. At least when I was drinking, I thought, there was a means of relief from all of life's expectations. Now I was vulnerable. I didn't have my solution in a glass before me or chopped neatly into lines on the dresser.

So many times over the last 10 years I'd fallen to my knees in painful despair, screaming in excruciation, "God, HELP ME!" I had demanded rescue, demanded that God fix this. But I never surrendered my will to God. Yet finally, this one night, alone in my room, I wanted to be honest and address God squarely. I told Him of my sincere desperation to change, to give my addiction to Him, and to be willing to take action. I slept soundly that night. It was the first taste of freedom I'd ever known.

The difference between that night's prayer and all the others is one crucial and powerful word – surrender. I had, even in the worst moments of my addiction, believed to a certain extent that God could relieve me of that burden. Nevertheless, I had insisted on things being done my way. I had never before handed over my problem to God, nor asked for guidance and wisdom on what my role in this process should be. It was the first time I had the assurance of "All right then, God is taking care of that because history shows that I can't."

Addiction is a crafty, relentless, seemingly unmovable force, but put addiction in the ring with God and it's a joke. Though self-will and human power are inadequate in my struggle against addiction, the power of God has no limits. Recovery from addiction truly is a spiritual battle.

My recovery program is simple – seeking God, whether I feel like it or not.

I try to follow what Paul wrote (in the Bible) to his friends, who were also followers of Jesus: "*Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things... practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you*" (Philippians 4:8-9). I loved the thought of dwelling on those things, rather than dwelling on sniffing stuff up my nose.

It's been over three years since that night I fell to my knees and I haven't felt hopeless since. My life is not "okay." It's extraordinary. That's not to say that I have millions of dollars, fame, everyone thinking I'm the greatest, and there's nothing in this world I cannot do. What I mean is that every morning I do my best to turn over my will to God and be open to His will, asking Him to work through me, and that's a prayer He never denies. •

This article was first published on EveryStudent.com and is used with kind permission.

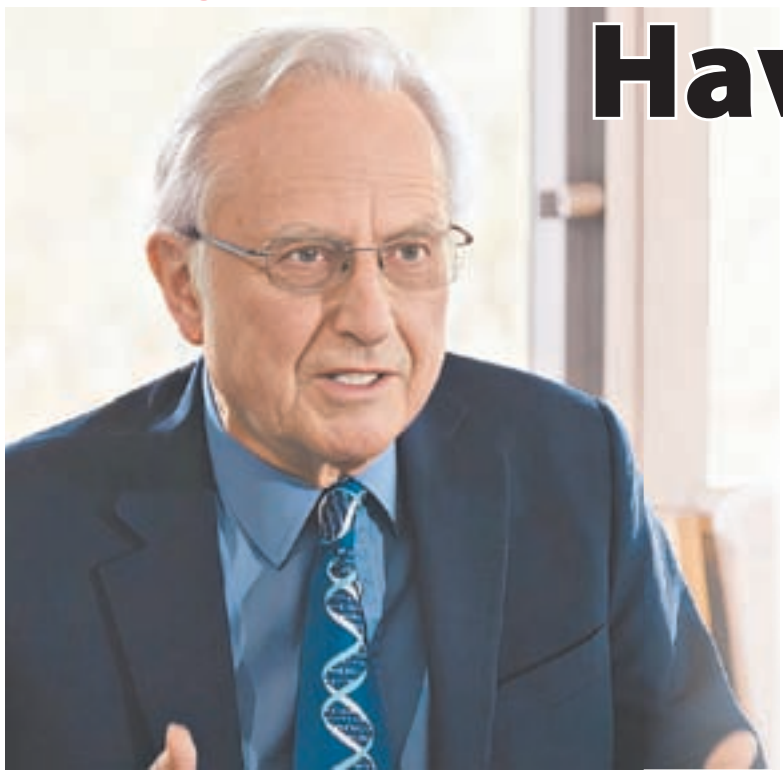
nudge WITH KARL FAASE

Grace is not approval

THE value that differentiates the Christian faith from other world views or religions is grace, God's unmerited favour. Christians don't believe you earn God's favour, this is not a transaction. God does not do a deal that if you perform to the standards of A and B, God will deliver for you X and Y.

But there is a danger here. God's grace should not be confused with approval. Just because God extends grace, unmerited favour, does not mean God approves of our behaviour.

Jesus' interaction with the women caught in the act of adultery, is instructive. He does not condemn her, but neither does he approve of her behaviour. His words were, "Go, and leave your life of sin". Jesus says those same words to all of us. •



Biologist and writer Richard Dawkins. (Photo by David Levenson/Getty Images)

Have Richard Dawkins' beliefs changed?

Evolutionary biologist and author of *The God Delusion* Richard Dawkins now claims to be a cultural Christian.

BY ANDREW SIBLEY, CREATION MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL

MEDIA REPORTS HAVE recently highlighted Richard Dawkins' comments that he considers himself to be a cultural Christian.[1] This was in a London Broadcasting Company (LBC) radio interview over the Easter 2024 weekend, with Rachel Johnson, sister of former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. However, this doesn't mean that he has given up on his belief in atheism and evolution, or his attacks on biblical creationism which he referred to as "pernicious nonsense" in the interview. It is of course good that he has moved to find Christianity appealing culturally, but what about the deeper reality of faith, and what does it mean to be a cultural Christian?

Cultural Christianity

Richard has in fact been making such statements about cultural Christianity since at least 2007, commenting that he enjoys singing Christmas carols, and other traditions of the faith. He stated that: "I'm not one of those who wants to stop Christian traditions. This is historically a Christian country. I'm a cultural Christian… So, yes, I like singing carols along with everybody else. I'm not one of those who wants to purge our society of our Christian history."[2]

In January 2024, Richard said Christianity was a "fundamentally decent religion", and that: "I feel at home in the Christian ethos… and I'm happy with that. But I would not be happy if we lost all our cathedrals and our beautiful parish churches. So I count myself a cultural Christian."

But he still says that actual belief in the virgin birth and the resurrection are "nonsense".

There are admittedly some Christians who struggle with these beliefs, but ridiculing the faith as Richard continues to do is another matter entirely.

The fruit of godlessness

Richard's earlier statements suggest a lack of clarity in his worldview thinking, and it was not clear that he was still holding to Christian faith values at all. In River out of Eden (1995) he wrote with a sense of nihilism: "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."[3]

Such nihilistic statements encourage the rise of godlessness; or belief in the 'death of God' as Nietzsche put it. Nihilism opens up society to anarchy and violence, and the undermining of cultural values and institutions.

With the loss of Christian faith and values a power struggle arises that risks merciless and brutal regimes taking control of society.

In the 1930s in Germany, it was the rise of fascism and belief in racial purity which followed from the hollowing out of Christianity; for Richard, he is fearful of militant Islam. Is he going to repent for writing his former books because he now sees the danger? His statements here do not reflect the Christian belief that the universe is not indifferent; that divine love, design, purpose and goodness are real.

There is at least a measure of good in Richard's affirmation that Christianity leads to benefit for society in terms of cultural outcomes, but his own thinking seems muddled.

One cannot say they value the benefit of Christian culture, and at the same time work to undermine it by calling the belief nonsense. Richard is working to cut down a tree, while also wishing to sit in its shade and enjoy its fruits. Is it possible to be only a cultural Christian? The short answer is no. The type of Christianity that shaped Western culture required real commitment to the faith by many saints. A weak, woolly belief that goes with the flow is of no use to hold society together and cannot shape anything, although it is perhaps mirrored in the thinking of some church leaders today. As British theologian Theo Hobson pointed out, "The distinction between a believing Christian and a cultural Christian is dubious, because religion is culture."[1]

Richard says that he loves to sing hymns and carols, but these were written by people who truly believed what they were composing. The same with the churches and cathedrals, they were funded and built by committed people.

In truth, the scriptural accounts of Jesus Christ call us to make a real commitment, not just pay lip service to a belief and culture that one may find more pleasing than the alternatives. The Messiah has been given anointed authority over all people and nations. But Christ is one who rules in humility.

He is King of kings and Son of God, born of a virgin and the One who died in our place for our sins. He then rose from the dead, and now is enthroned in the heavens. •

References and notes

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MASTER COMPASS BUILDERS

BY DAVID THOMAS

COMPASSES HAVE PLAYED a pivotal role in the history of navigation. However, for thousands of years before humans invented them, compass needles were manufactured and used for navigation by microscopic bacteria.

These bacteria live in almost all aquatic environments around the world. In his renowned book *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin stated: "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down."[1]

In line with this, famous evolutionist J.B.S. Haldane claimed that evolution could never produce "various mechanisms, such as the wheel and magnet, which would be useless till fairly perfect."[2]

Yet, since then, both magnets and wheels (circular components of machines that rotate around axles) have been discovered in many species of bacteria, along with many other living things.

How bacteria use them to navigate

It appears that the compass needles passively turn the cells towards north or south, in the same way that man-made compass needles passively turn towards north.

However, there is evidence that some species also measure changes in magnetic field strength to optimise magnetic navigation.

This makes the system more complex than previously thought.

Why do these bacteria need to know which direction is north?

In the water column and sediments there is a layer above which there is oxygen and below which there is almost no oxygen. Magnetotactic bacteria (those that can detect Earth's magnetic field) like to live in this layer where oxygen concentration is low. If a bacterium swam above this level, the oxygen concentration would be too high and it would need to swim back down.

Micro photograph of bacteria.

This is where the compass needles come in. Magnetic field lines are best known to travel from the earth's magnetic South Pole to the North Pole. But they also come up out of the earth in the Southern Hemisphere and bend back down into the earth in the Northern Hemisphere.

Thus, bacteria wanting to travel downwards travel towards magnetic north in the Northern Hemisphere, and towards magnetic south in the Southern Hemisphere.

If these bacteria are moved between hemispheres, they soon learn that the downwards direction is now in the opposite direction relative to the magnetic field.

The bacteria can also find optimal growth conditions more quickly because they only travel forwards and backwards along the magnetic field lines, rather than in a random three-dimensional swim. Such compasses are just one component of these microbes' complex navigation system.

Compass construction

Building the compass needles within the bacteria is no small engineering feat.

It requires an exceptionally high level of control and coordination by a number of molecular machines.

The needles are made of magnetic crystals of the mineral magnetite (iron oxide Fe3O4), or sometimes greigite (iron sulfide Fe3S4).

Different species make crystals of different sizes and shapes.

[They are] "increasingly sought after … for industrial and medical applications"[3] [but] humans have struggled to produce magnetic nanocrystals of such high quality.

We can thus conclude that bacteria are far from 'primitive' [and could not have evolved step by step]. •

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This article has been abridged, for the original please see Creation.com.

"The God who created, names, and numbers the stars in the heavens also numbers the hairs of my head..He pays attention to very big things and to very small ones. What matters to me matters to Him, and that changes my life." - Elisabeth Elliot

nudge

WITH KARL FAASE

The imprint of God

EVERYONE who is a parent knows the experience of looking at your children and working out which bits came from you. Is it your eyes or hair perhaps or even that nose? Our DNA is imprinted onto our children.

The same is true of God's imprint on us. The Bible tells us that we are created in God's image. So what does that mean? I believe it means that in some areas of our lives, we actually reflect the God who created us.

There are three specific areas where we can see this. First our love, second our creativity and third, morality. If you believe that life was an accident, these three qualities of humanity are hard to explain. But if we believe that we are created by God then the qualities of love, creativity and morality are the imprints of God on us.

Of course, each of these is broken – our imperfect lives taint God's image in us. But the knowledge that God created you ought to be a great encouragement for you to reach out to God and see his mark in your life. •

Youth Truth

Freed from the weight of regret

Angie Restrepo. Photo: YouTube/Delafé Testimonies.

When she was a baby, Angie Restrepo's father left the family.

"When my dad found out that my mom was pregnant, he told my mom that I wasn't his," she says in a video interview with Delafe Testimonies.

"I didn't understand why he left and I didn't understand why my mom was telling me what she told me. Why didn't he love me? I wanted to be in his life but he never fought to be in mine."

Growing up, Angie felt rejected and abandoned.

When she was five, she was sexually assaulted by someone whom she looked up to as a father figure. The incident "opened up the door to a lot in my life when I was in middle school," she says. "I started experimenting with pornography and masturbation."

The first time Angie experienced the presence of God was when she was 13. Her friend's mother had invited her to a youth service at church.

"[The church] was just so different. When I was there, it felt like I belonged. Like I was known. I was discovering who Jesus really was, who God was." Soon, she began to attend church and she started serving.

"I would go and I would serve at the church and...I started playing on the worship team," says Angie. "Someone gave me a student Bible and I just started reading and I couldn't put it down. Something inside of me was like, 'I want more.'"

But after a broken relationship with a boy she met at church, Angie left.

"Before I got into this relationship, I was still struggling with masturbation. I was still struggling with wanting attention from other guys. I didn't share this at all with anyone at church because I didn't know that I could.

"We ended things and we stopped talking completely and I left the church." Angie fell into depression and got into drugs, smoking, partying and drinking. She also got into a relationship which eventually turned toxic and abusive. It was then that she had her first abortion.

"I was like, 'I don't want to do this' and in my heart I knew what I was doing was wrong but I did it anyway," she admits.

> **"In my heart I knew what I was doing was wrong but I did it anyway."**

"Having an abortion... for six or seven years, I lived in so much shame.

"I had never carried so much weight before in my life."

Angie eventually entered college and started playing soccer in Texas. But when she came back, she felt lost. And so she went back to drinking and partying.

"I didn't go back to church at all... I never wanted to go back to God because I felt really guilty. Like I let Him down. How could I go back to God after having an abortion?" Then Angie went through a second abortion.

"I couldn't believe that I allowed it. I was so angry with myself and I remember that Saturday night I decided that I want to kill myself.

"[I thought] 'I don't deserve to be alive.'"

Angie attempted suicide but was rescued in time. After that incident, she was invited by a friend from high school to visit her church. When she did, she broke down in tears.

"I felt like crying and crying." Every time Angie went to church, she sobbed.

"I came again and again, little by little and the Lord was always there. But I started seeing Him more and I started recognising Him and I was afraid but that fear started to just fall off. Little by little, I wasn't afraid of Him anymore. One time I asked for prayer. This person didn't know my personal stuff [but] as they were praying for me they mentioned the abortions and I just knew it was the Lord."

As Angie started sharing about her past with the people in the church, she received acceptance and love.

"These people showed me the love of Jesus.

"They did not turn their backs on me. They didn't reject me and I knew that it was God's heart listening to me."

Angie felt the Holy Spirit [the unseen presence of God] nudging her to surrender to God and make changes in her life.

"I had felt the Lord share with me that I had to surrender and walk away from this lifestyle [of partying] or it was going stay with me for the rest of my life."

She also cut off relationships that she knew were not glorifying to God. It was not an easy process and she asked God for help: "Lord, please help me surrender this to You."

Now happily married, Angie has experienced deep healing and forgiveness. "My purpose was just to be loved by [Jesus]. It took a lot of time, like I partnered up with people and experienced healing. I'm thankful because God just met me with such gentleness and love." •

PULLED FROM THE LEDGE

Nigel Liew

BY SIMEON NEO

Nigel Liew was sitting on the ledge of a multi-storey carpark. After enduring daily bouts of bullying at school, the 13-year-old had had enough.

"At this time, the bullying was quite severe. I couldn't really handle it anymore," he tells *Challenge News*.

"All I wanted to do was just end my life."

But a woman whom he had never met, appeared on the rooftop where he was at.

"Boy, why are you there? Don't jump. Come over here," she said in Mandarin.

"She was trying to convince me not to jump," he explains.

"Then I started crying."

> **"I was constantly being bullied."**

Nigel grew up in a Christian household in Singapore and attended church with his family every week. Though he knew about Jesus, he didn't have a relationship with Him.

"I just followed them because I thought it was the right thing to do.

"I wasn't really doing it because I wanted to know God, I did it because I thought it was a tradition."

Nigel described his childhood self as 'rebellious'.

"We were a group of rebellious boys, always getting up to mischief.

"One time, we nearly got suspended because of something we did."

However, the bullying began when he entered high school.

"I was obese. And maybe that's why they picked on me," he recounts.

"They'd wait for me by the school gate every morning. When they saw me, they'd grab me, rub my head and call me names.

"For that whole year, I was constantly being bullied."

To make matters worse, one of the bullies was an older boy who went to the same church that Nigel did.

"Who would have thought that one of the guys I looked up to at church is one of the bullies?"

By this time, his faith had grown stagnant. But the bullying was pushing him further away from church and God.

Unable to take it anymore, he wanted everything to end. And the only way he knew how was to end his own life. So when school ended, he headed straight to the roof of a multi-storey carpark.

"But I thank God that He sent this random Chinese woman."

The woman told Nigel that she had been doing house chores at home when she saw a vision of a boy sitting on the ledge, ready to jump.

"She felt like she needed to look out the window. And she saw me, and she ran towards where I was."

The woman pulled him off the ledge and held him as he cried.

"God is always here for you," she told him. "If you have troubles, just go to Him and He will give you peace."

"As she prayed for me, I felt relieved," Nigel shares.

"I felt like it wasn't just her hugging me. God was also hugging me. It was a very peaceful feeling, very serene."

Nigel returned to school after that, as if nothing had happened. But things were changing.

"I started reading the Bible more, talked to my mentors more. I went back to serving in church.

"I did all these because I wanted to grow closer to God."

Bit by bit, Nigel was surrendering his life back to God.

"My walk was still shaky, there were good days and bad days," he admits.

But things got better as he grew older.

"I took my life and my studies more seriously and I grew closer to God."

Now living in Perth as an international student, Nigel confesses that like many others, he struggles with lust. But through prayer and spending time with God, he has found freedom in this area.

Though he still finds it hard to forgive his bullies, he knows it is a journey where God will be with him.

"I was very curious, why did God decide to save me?

"Maybe He has a plan for me. He wants me to live out my life. He knows my future.

"So I was ready to submit my life to God." •

"Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God's saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us." – Timothy Keller

lifestyle and entertainment

Seeking the ultimate joy

Since her debut in 1985, Hong Kong entertainer Vivian Chow has become a household name in the Cantopop world. A quick Google search of her name will reveal the number of music awards she has received as well as the long list of films and TV shows she has appeared in.

For more than 40 years, Vivian trained herself to live by her own rules. She saw herself as the source of her confidence and strength.

"Prior to my believing in God, I regarded personal development as the ultimate goal in life," she writes in a 2013 Christmas message on vivianchow.asia.

"I was always self-confident, regarding the dependence on others or relying on religion as a kind of weakness."

Her views changed after a casual conversation with a friend about religion. She noticed that out of all the religions, Christianity was different.

"I realized that the other religions (other than Christianity) stress on the importance of self-development.

"But the standards set by them are almost impossible to accomplish."

Reflecting on the conversation, Vivian asked herself: what if what the Bible says is true? "Then I thought more about it – if what the Bible tells us is true... I have not obtained salvation from Jesus Christ. That means no matter how well I have developed myself, I am still a sinner, still not eligible to get into the gate of heaven.

"But what if the Bible is wrong? I won't lose anything even if I decide to be a Christian. I am still the same person and my personal quality will not be affected. I decided to open my heart to learn about Christianity, to understand the faith emphasised in the Bible. My life has been changed since then."

In 2009, Vivian attended an Easter service. It was her first time going to church. "I was extremely excited and I couldn't sing the hymn at all with my trembling voice. But in my heart, I kept praying to God: 'Father, I am home! I am home!'"

Vivian Chow

On the night that she made a commitment to follow Jesus, Vivian went home and cleared everything to do with false idol worship. She then prayed, confessed her sin and received salvation from Jesus.

"Immediately, I felt so relaxed, peaceful and calm. I have never felt so easy."

In the early stages of becoming a Christian, Vivian shares that she tried minimising distractions and focused on seeking God.

"But being a public figure, it is not easy to have a lot of privacy. I couldn't do anything but pray to God for help."

Vivian and her husband eventually joined an English-speaking church in Hong Kong. She got water baptised (public declaration of dying to one's old self) a year later.

"For the whole year I felt very blessed by the Holy Spirit, everything relating to my seeking of God went on smoothly, such as going to church with my husband and gathering with fellow Christians for bible study."

Vivian says she has changed since becoming a Christian.

"When I learned more about the Bible, I realized that my life was changing step by step, to the extent where I am even willing to let go of the values that I have established for decades," she shares in a video on social media site Weibo.From relying on her own strength and her own confidence, Vivian now relies on Jesus. "The Bible teaches me a lesson – salvation comes from Jesus and not self-development. Nobody can boast about themselves as a well-developed person.

"Now I have a clear direction towards seeking God, I am more powerful to let go and seek for the ultimate source of joy, as well as the great faith which self-strength can never compare to."

In a 2014 video posted on her Weibo account, Vivian shares that she sees humility as the greatest character trait to have.

"Humility does not mean we underestimate ourselves, but take more care of other people's feelings and needs. I found that my perspective changed when I put down my needs, and I saw my disadvantages, as well as people's weaknesses and limitations."

Vivian now uses her talent in music to glorify God. Her gospel album, *Him*, was released in 2014 as a way for her to share her faith journey and her relationship with God. Her gospel song, *Psalm 23*, was released in 2022. •

I trust the Author with my story

Singer Katy Nichole released her debut single in January 2022, but before that, it had already racked up tens of millions of views on TikTok and Instagram.

The song was inspired by her experience growing up with congenital scoliosis, a rare form of curvature of the spine.

"That was kind of scary in the very beginning, because doctors were like, 'She might not be able to walk, she might not be able to do the things that the other kids are doing,'" she says in an interview with CBN. Admitting she is stubborn and strong by nature, Katy had to draw on that strength when she was 15 and underwent surgery to put metal rods and screws into her spine to straighten it out.

But the procedure took a toll on her physically and emotionally, leaving her in intense pain, depressed and anxious.

"I didn't really see a point in being here anymore," she admits. "I genuinely felt as though I was a waste of space in every room that I walked into."

Katy shares in an interview with K-Love that she considered taking her life.

"I picked up a bottle of pills on my dresser, and I looked at it and I said, 'It would be that easy,'" she says. "But that bottle of pills fell out of my hand, and I just felt the Lord say, 'I'm not done yet.'"

Her doctors eventually decided to remove the rods and screws. When she woke up from the surgery, she saw an incredible bright light, despite being in a windowless room.

Katy Nichole.Picture: facebook/ katynicholemusic

"I looked up and I saw the light again for the first time," Katy says. "It was as if I was meeting Jesus for the first time. I know that's kind of crazy because I've known Jesus my whole life ... but I just knew that His presence was all over that room."

Katy says she left her surgery with desire to live for God completely. The experience led her to write *In Jesus' Name (God of Possible)*, hoping she would be able to inspire just one person. Having experienced hopelessness in her own life, she wanted others to know they are not alone. She posted a clip on TikTok and it immediately went viral. In only a few hours it had racked up 1 million views.

Then in January 2022, Katy officially released *In Jesus' Name*. It went on to hit number one on Billboard's Hot Christian Songs chart and the Christian Airplay chart in only 12 weeks – the quickest trip to number one in the chart's 20-year history.

The song was also nominated for Pop/ Contemporary Recorded Song of the Year at the 2022 GMA Dove Awards.

"I'm really just trying to encourage people that there's a path that can lead you to peace and redemption and so many great and wonderful things," Katy says.

"I can't express that enough. When you are finally out of that pit that you're in, you're actually gonna be able to look back on your life and see how God's handprint was just on every moment.

"For me, that's what I saw. I saw how God had actually just been with me in those moments and brought some form of peace, because if He hadn't, I definitely wouldn't be here today." Katy tells JubileeCast, "There's no story that doesn't matter to God. Every story was written by Him, and He's the greatest author of all time. God's healed me, so I know He can heal someone else. I'm going to share my story and hope it will encourage others to go and share theirs." •

Recipe of the month

GINGERBREAD COOKIES

OFTEN GINGERBREAD COOKIES are either hard, dry cookies that are liable to break a tooth, or they are overly spicy and send small children running away from the table in disgust. This recipe, however, yields four dozen soft, chewy gingerbread cookies that have just the right amount of a kick that both grown-ups and children will try to sneak another cookie when no one is looking.

Prep: 45 min
Chill: 4 hours
Cook: 45 min
Total: 5 hours 30 min
Yields 4 dozen cookies

Ingredients

1 cup, 6 tablespoons butter, softened
8 ounces brown sugar
2 large eggs
1 cup molasses
1 pound 8 ounces all-purpose flour
2 ¼ teaspoon ginger
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon baking soda
¾ teaspoon salt
¾ teaspoon cloves
Small bowl with about ⅓ cup all-purpose flour
1 large egg white
1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice
1 ½ cups confectioners sugar

Method

Preheat oven to 350°F. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

In a large bowl, cream butter and sugar with an electric hand mixer until light and fluffy.

Add eggs and molasses. Cream with hand mixer until well combined.

Add flour, ginger, cinnamon, baking soda, salt, and cloves. Mix with a spatula until just combined.

Cover and let chill in the refrigerator until dough is less sticky and easier to handle, about 4 to 8 hours.

Roll out into 1/2cm thick sheet on a lightly floured surface.

Dip cookie cutter in flour and cut out desired shape. Place cut shapes onto parchment paper on baking sheets leave 3cm space between cookies.

Bake at 350°F until cookies just start to brown on the tops and edges, about 10 to 11 minutes.

Remove from oven and let cool completely before decorating with icing.

To make the royal icing, in a medium bowl, beat egg white and lemon juice with an electric hand mixer until foamy.

Add sugar and beat on low until thickened. Use immediately or cover tightly with plastic wrap as icing will harden when exposed to air.

To decorate cookies, transfer icing to a piping bag or place in a small zip lock.

Cut off a very small portion of the corner of the bag and squeeze onto cookies as desired. •

Picture and recipe from MakeBetterFood.com

nudge WITH KARL FAASE

The insight of the wise men

ONE OF THE most intriguing elements of the first Christmas to me is the story of the wise men. Here is a group of eastern astrologers who notice a new star and get onto their camels to travel who knows how far to worship a king they have never heard of.

Stranger still is that when they get to the palace of Herod, the Jewish teachers of the day knew where Jesus was to be born but did not go. Yet these foreign intellectuals head off to meet and worship Jesus.

These blokes are smart enough to read the signs of the day and see the evidence of God at work. What about today? With the eyes of faith, I believe you can see God at work everywhere. From the beauty of creation, to the birth of children, to the wonder of our universe, through to the acts of grace and kindness by people who could only be motivated by the Spirit of God.

God is at work in our world. Can I encourage you to look more closely for the hand of God in your life? The evidence is there, you just have to be ready to see it. •

Building better relationships

The truth of the Christmas story

BY ROB FURLONG

A tradition for many families at Christmas is to watch their favourite Christmas movie. For many it will be *Home Alone*, for others, *It's a Wonderful Life*, while some will prefer *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

The appeal of each of these movies – and many others – is that they powerfully remind us of the importance of family, self-sacrifice, redemption, and love for others, especially the poor and vulnerable.

They are stories that touch our hearts in meaningful ways.

There is a problem when we use the word "story", however. We can be inclined to think that because it's a story then it isn't true and this is often the case for many when they think of the Christmas story about Jesus – "It's a great story, but it didn't really happen!"

If you think I'm overstating my case, then you will be surprised to learn that a couple of years ago a survey of average Australians revealed that 25 percent of them didn't believe Jesus was an actual historical figure, while a further 25 percent were unsure! In other words, 50 percent of Aussies either don't believe or don't know that the story of Jesus is true.

However, historical evidence has shed much light on the truth of the Christmas story about Jesus.

We are told in the Bible, in the Gospel of Luke, that the birth of Jesus took place at the time when "Caesar Augustus decreed that a census be taken of all the Roman Empire" and that everyone was to return to their city of birth to be counted in the census. While this seems impractical to us, archaeological evidence reveals that this was the practice of the time. One official edict from AD 104 reads:

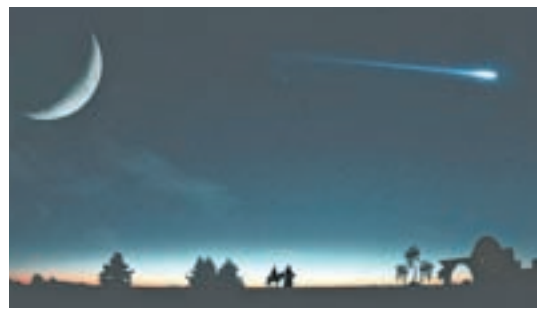
"Seeing that the time has come for the house-to-house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing out of their provinces to return to their own homes, that they may carry out the regular order of the census."

Luke also tells us Jesus was born in extremely humble circumstances, and "laid in a manger" in the town of Bethlehem.

The significance of the manger is that it was a rough, stone trough – nothing like the elaborate, polished versions you see in many Nativity scenes – which was used for the feeding of animals. And there were plenty of animals in Bethlehem, particularly sheep!

The historical record reveals that flocks of sheep to be used in the temple sacrifices were cared for in Bethlehem because of its proximity to Jerusalem (about 10 kilometres away). Archaeological excavations have also uncovered the existence of a small shepherd settlement in the area at the time of Jesus' birth.

There is plenty of historical evidence supporting the truth about the birth and life of Jesus.



STOCK PHOTO

Most important of all though, is what His birth meant for the world – for you and me.

The angel announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds declares Him to be the "Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."

Over and over again, when you read the Christmas story you come across this thought – "Jesus is the Saviour of the world." In fact, His Name – Jesus – means "God is our salvation."

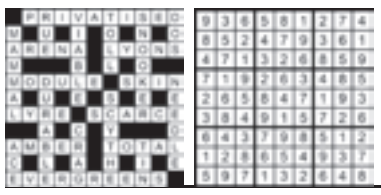
This tells us some important things. It tells us we are all sinners, that sin has broken our relationship with God. It tells us we all need rescuing. We need to be saved, and we cannot do this ourselves.

It tells us that when we trust in Jesus, He rescues us from our sin and its consequences – He becomes our Saviour.

This is the truth of the Christmas story – it is the greatest story ever told – and it can become your story this Christmas by praying a simple prayer like this:

"Lord Jesus, I am sorry for my sin. Please forgive me, become my Saviour and help me live for You."

May Jesus change your story this Christmas! •



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HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered though Jesus Christ

We read in God's word: *"God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16)

OUR PROBLEM: **Separation from God**
"Everyone has sinned. Nobody is good enough because God's standards are perfect" (Romans 3:23) — ADMIT

GOD'S REMEDY / SOLUTION: **Jesus died on the cross**
"God demonstrates His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8) — BELIEVE

OUR RESPONSE: **Trust Jesus by receiving Him**
"To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12) — COMMIT

Here is an example of how you can pray.

Dear Father in Heaven. I come to you now because I want to be saved. Please, forgive me of my sins. I believe that you sent your Son Jesus Christ to die for me and that you have raised him from the dead. I now ask Jesus Christ to come into my life as my Savior and Lord. Take control of my life. Please make me the person You created me to be. In Jesus Christ's name. Amen

The Lord Jesus says: "*I tell you the truth. Everyone who believes in me has eternal life.*" (John 6:47). *He gives life of a wonderful quality that continues forever.*

What now?

1. Tell someone - either a Christian that you know or email us at usaoffice@challengenews.org
2. Use the resources in the green box on this page to find a Bible to read and more information regarding Christianity.
3. Keep praying. Talk to God anywhere, about anything. He is always listening and you don't need a formula.
4. Find a Bible-teaching church to attend.

AS A NEXT STEP :

I have prayed the prayer [ABOVE] ☐

Please send me:
- ☐ Bible
- ☐ Some 'starting off' literature
- ☐ Information on a helpful church

** Please check and write clearly **

Name _____ Phone _____

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Email address _____

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Asking the right question

BY JOHN HUTCHINSON

DURING A CHRISTMAS concert, Australian singer Delta Goodrem called to a crowd of cheering fans, "Do you believe in Christmas?"

The response was rapturous, but I struggled with her question. What is Christmas? It seems to be anything people want to make of it.

The question should've been, "Do you believe in Christ?" It's the all-important question. To believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He came into the world to save us from our sins and give us eternal life is a life and death issue. The correct answer can be life-changing and impact us for eternity.

The Bible says in John 3:16-19: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because He has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*"

Jesus said to His friends in grief, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.*" (John 11:25-26) It's vital to believe in Jesus for He said, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" (John 14:6) He also said, "*I came that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*" (John 10:10)

As a young person I believed in Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. It was the best thing I ever did.

The Bible says: "*If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*" (Romans 10:9)

The right question is, do you believe in Jesus? •

Want to explore more?

Here are some **free**, helpful, Christian online resources

Online Bible - **Olive Tree app** (we recommend that you start with an easy-to-read version like the ESV)	Audio Bible - **Bible.is app**, or **Youversion Bible app**
Christian radio station - **CBN radio app** (different channels for all genres of music)	Christian podcasts and sermons - **Edifi app**
Christian movies, serials and kids' shows - **Good. app**	Daily thoughts and inspiration - **Our Daily Bread app**
Advice on specific issues, Bible reading plans and studies for new believers - **Youversion Bible app**.	The Bible explained with visual aides - **Bible Project on YouTube**.
Alpha Film Series on Youtube - an online introduction to Christianity	For kids - **Superbook Kids Bible, videos and games app**
Comic book Bible online- **goodandevilbook.com**	**Manga Messiah app** Christian comic with free games app, illustrated in Japanese-style art
YMI (meant to be read as "Why am I?") Christian news outlet for young adults with various content, devotionals and resources. **ymi.today**	More inspiring faith stories - **back issues of Challenge News at challengenews.online**

The power of the words we choose

BY MAL DAVIES (ABRIDGED)

A FEW YEARS ago, my wife and I were fortunate enough to fulfil a long-term dream and holiday in Greece and the Greek islands.

On our last day on Mykonos we visited the archaeological museum where they were promoting a showing of jewellery through the ages.

In the small booklet that was available I noted some of the introductory text, "The Museum, from an entrenched Foucauldian heterotopia, is converted to a space-time wormhole ready to take visitors on a journey to the Cycladic heterochronies of the past."

Read that again, slowly. Then go and have a cup of tea and a good lie down.

What on earth does that mean? More so, who was paid to write it?

The point of writing is to have people read your words and understand something.

Writing becomes pointless when someone – say a visitor at a museum – can't even understand the brochure provided to explain what is on display.

I think my vocabulary is pretty good, but really: "heterotopias", "Foucauldian", "heterochronies"?

When you boil it all down, the sentence simply means: "We've changed things around a bit so that you can see some old Greek stuff."

Our choice of words is important.

Words can build others up and also tear them down (see James chapter three in the Bible for a good explanation of this).

We can encourage someone with a word ("Champion!") and also reduce them to tears with a word ("Loser!").

We can also say words that play like a tape in someone's mind, constantly on repeat – imagine hearing, "You'll never amount to anything, you're useless," over and over in your mind for years.

The Bible contains more than 700,000 words and every one has been discussed, debated, studied and explained over the past 2,000 years. Scholars can, and have, spent a lifetime studying this deep and meaningful book.

I'm so glad that the apostle Paul – who wrote many books in the Bible – was a master of simplifying complex truths.

In a letter to the church in Rome, he said: "*If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*" (Romans 10:9-10)

Well, that's pretty straightforward.

No need to look up "heterochronies" to understand that message.

Believe in my heart and confess my faith in Jesus and I'm saved.

Paul's focus was on helping us enter a life of faith and an understanding of who Jesus is, rather than forcing us down a Foucauldian wormhole!

He chose his words carefully... and so should we. •

Major Mal Davies is a Salvation Army officer (pastor) and writer living on Kaurna land, Adelaide.

This article was first published by Salvos magazine and is used with kind permission.

Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone of Team USA celebrates her gold medal and new World Record in the Women's 400m Hurdles Final of the Olympic Games Paris 2024. (Photo by Julian Finney/Getty Images).

Tsige Duguma of Ethiopia. (Photo by Sam Mellish/ Getty Images)

Challenge SPORT

OLYMPIC FAITH

The limelight shone bright on the medallists of the Paris Olympics.

For one particular group of athletes though, that glory rightfully belonged to Someone else – it belonged to Jesus Christ. And that's where they directed it.

Using songs, Instagram and even sign language, they declared their thanks and faith to God.

Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone, USA – 400m hurdles gold

Four-time Olympic gold medallist, world champion, world record holder – American hurdler Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone wears many crowns.

But the one that means the most to the 25-year-old has nothing to do with her athletic accomplishments. "The title that means the most to me," she says, "is daughter of God."

Australian high jumper Nicola Olyslagers reads her Bible and writes in a journal during a competition. (Photo by David Ramos/Getty Images).

She shares her faith story in her autobiography *Far Beyond Gold: Running from Fear to Faith*.

At the post-race press conference after winning the gold, she said: "I credit all that I do to God… I have a platform and I want to use it to glorify Him.

"Whenever I step on the track it's always the prayer of, 'God, let me be the vessel in which You're glorified… regardless of what happens, He's going to get the praise through me. That's why I do what I do."

Sydney wrote in an article on the Guideposts website that she had been raised in the church, but she didn't really know God.

"I'd been avoiding Him because I had this idea of Him as a harsh taskmaster who'd demand that I give up what I enjoyed, including running, to serve Him. Even so, my soul must have been yearning for him, because I found myself thinking, 'The only way I'm going to heal from this is with God.' So I started going to church again."

Her personal life changed when she met former NFL player Andre Levrone Jr. They were married in 2022 and she credits him with helping her to fully embrace her faith.

She disclosed in her book that it was with his help that she realized "my life wasn't about me. It was about showing the world God's power, wisdom, kindness, love, and forgiveness.

"Win, lose, or draw, it's an opportunity to glorify Him, and my value is already secure in Christ."

Nicola Olyslagers, Australia – high jump silver

Few people understand having a higher calling than Australian Olympic high jumper Nicola Olyslagers.

At 1.86 metres, the 27-year-old not only stands tall in regular life, but also in her sport. At the Paris Olympics in June, she won the silver medal and in doing so became the first Australian field athlete ever to win a medal at consecutive Olympics, having bagged a silver at the 2020 Games in Tokyo.

She sets the bar high for the other – greater – purpose in her life: living for Jesus Christ.

Nicola became a Christian in her teens. In her last year of primary school she went to a new school and remembers being nervous about her new surroundings.

But she worried for nothing. "When I walked in I was immediately met by this overwhelming, non-judging love from the students and teachers," she recalls.

"It was a love that left me with questions and envious of how they were able to show that sort of love. They all said they loved because Jesus loved them… it changed my entire life. It was the first time I came into full realization of the Gospel [story of Jesus saving us from our sins] and the reality of God.

"I committed my life to Jesus."

Her Instagram profile is peppered with Bible verses and prayers.

After winning the silver, she posted: "Praise be to God my Rock! He is my strength and song!!"

Gabriel Medina, Brazil, surfer – surfing gold

Brazilian surfer Gabriel Medina was told to remove an image of Jesus from his surfboard as he was in breach of the Olympic Charter, which prohibits political and religious manifestations.

Brazil's Gabriel Medina during the 5th heat of the men's surfing round 3, of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. (Photo Jerome Brouillet / AFP) via Getty Images)

It didn't stop him from winning the gold medal with a score of 9.9 – the highest ever in Olympic surfing history.

The picture of him surfacing from the wave – with a hidden message – has gone viral. It shows him and his surfboard seemingly levitating as he points his index finger to the sky – a gesture well known to Brazilian evangelicals as praising and thanking God.

Gabriel's post-victory Instagram post bears this out: he quoted this verse from the book of Philippians – "*I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.*" (Philippians 4: 13)

Noah Lyles (Track and field, USA) – 100m gold, 200m bronze

As he lined up for the men's 100m final, USA's Noah Lyles could be seen mouthing the words: "Thank you, God. Thank you, God."

After winning gold, the sprinter told Premier Christian Radio that he had to find his "own journey with God". "I thank God every day for getting me through each and every round. Healthy, mentally and physically", he added.

In a victory interview with BBC Sport, the 27-year-old was asked what his final thought was before the race. He said with a grin: "Thank you, God".

Team Fiji

Team Fiji delighted the athletes by singing worship songs in the Olympic village regularly. Australian water polo player Matilda Kearns shared the moving scenes on Instagram. "Having the best seat in the Village being next to the Oceania building," she wrote in a post. "Still not sick of it!"

Tsige Duguma, Ethiopia – track and field 800m silver

Ethiopian track and field athlete Tsige Duguma won silver in the 800m. The words "Jesus is Lord" were written on the back of her race bib – fitting words to end this wrap-up. •

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