

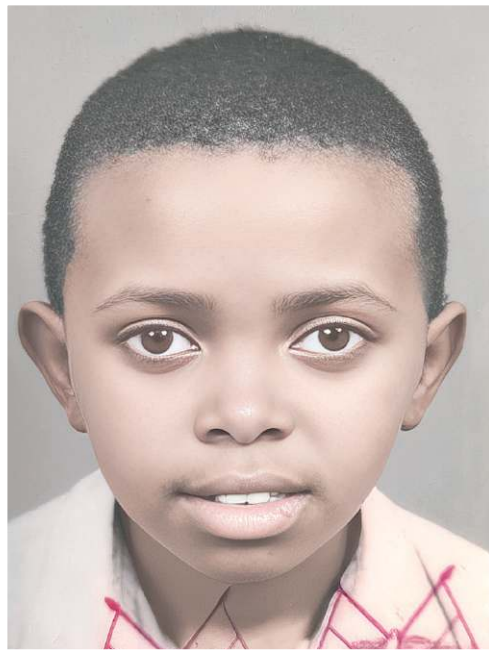
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MY FIRST CHRISTMAS

GIFT

After Rwanda's brutal genocide, five-year-old Alex Nsengimana found himself in an orphanage, where he received his first ever Christmas gift. That shoebox planted a seed of hope within him that helped him begin to make sense of the trauma he had lived through. Now Alex shares that hope with others.



Alex Nsengimana as a child growing up in Rwanda.

To say Alex Nsengimana has faced trauma in his life would be a massive understatement. One of his earliest memories is of his mother dying of AIDS. Then, during the genocide, family members he lived with were brutally murdered in front of him. Somehow though, he still manages to be thankful for the blessings in his life.

After his mother died, Alex and his siblings went to live with their grandmother and uncles. They lived in poverty, sleeping on banana leaf beds. Their grandmother took them to church, and Alex recalled feeling jealous of the altar boys. At just four, he decided he wanted to be a priest.

When Alex was five, ethnic violence swept through Rwanda. Hutu militias began targeting the Tutsi minority.

"It was so brutal; this hatred was so ingrained in people's lives that a

neighbour never saw a neighbour anymore as a human being and the dehumanisation went on for years and years," Alex told Paul Hastings on the Compelled podcast.

On April 7, 1994, Alex awoke to the sounds of bombs. Soon, men stormed their house.

"We were watching through the window. It was the toughest day. It was rough because these people were not strangers. These were our neighbours. And it wasn't a gun. It was just literally beating our grandmother to death with sticks."

Not long after, Alex's uncle was also killed. "We were right there, closing our ears," Alex remembered. "They shot him through the ribs... As little kids standing there and watching that, that [destroyed] me, my brother and my sister very deeply and years later we would reap the consequences of that trauma."

The children fled to their aunt's home in Kigali, where 19 other people were sheltering. One day, a militia member discovered them. "And he is looking at us and he's yelling at us to lie down and he went to load his gun. In the process of loading his gun, the magazine fell out of the gun and his bullets fell to the ground."

Alex's life was spared again when a bullet narrowly missed his head. Eventually, Tutsi rebels captured Kigali and ended the genocide. In just 100 days, up to one million people were murdered, 500,000 women raped, and 95,000 children orphaned.

Life after the genocide
The violence had ended, but the effects continued. Soon after, Alex's aunt and her husband died. His sister went to live with family friends, while Alex and his brother were placed in an orphanage.

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On April 7, 1994, Alex awoke to the sounds of bombs. Soon, men stormed their house. "We were watching through the window. It was the toughest day. It was rough because these people were not strangers. These were our neighbours. And it wasn't a gun. It was just literally beating our grandmother to death with sticks."



In 2013 Alex returned to the Rwandan orphanage where he used to live to deliver gifts for Operation Christmas Child.

"After three months on the run, the trauma we had been unable to process was catching up with us. In the middle of the night, there were screams after screams in the orphanage, because the kids were reliving exactly what they saw."

The orphanage encouraged the children to pursue faith. Remembering his grandmother's example, Alex began attending church.

"I memorised scripture and prayers, but I did not have a relationship with the Lord," he admitted. That Christmas, Alex received a shoebox gift through Samaritan's Purse's Operation Christmas Child.

"That was the very first time I got to receive a gift. When we got to receive that gift, the orphanage shared with us about Jesus Christ being the greatest gift of all. For me,

a seed was planted but I didn't know what kind of seed it was."

Seeds of faith
After two years, Alex and his brother joined the African Children's Choir, a Christian organisation providing education and care for orphans. In Uganda, Alex learned English and more about Jesus.

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Never the same again

BY FAY FOSTER

IT STARTED AS just another ho-hum night at work for the shepherds around Bethlehem.

Taking care of sheep was a 24-hours-a-day job, so the shepherds lived out in the open with their sheep. They made, or found, 'folds' in which to keep the sheep at night. A fold could be a cave, a circle of stones with some branches or thorns for a roof, or a basic shed.

Each day, the shepherds led their flocks out of the fold to find pasture, then at night, once all the sheep were counted back into the fold, they would lie across the door of the fold to protect their flock. Thieves, wolves, lions and bears were constant dangers. It is very likely that the shepherds took turns to sleep.

Shepherding was considered an unskilled job, and shepherds were on the lowest levels of society. How amazing then is this account from Luke chapter 2, verses 8-14, of the night when Jesus was born:

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good

news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on Earth peace to those on whom His favour rests.'"

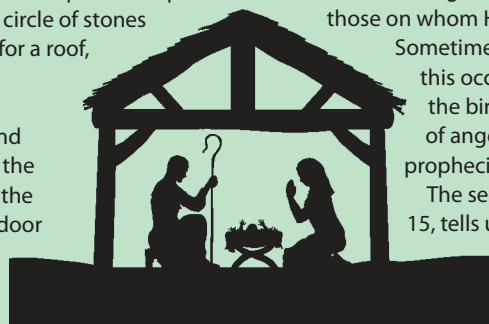
Sometimes God does things quietly. But on this occasion, this holy night, He announced the birth of His Son Jesus with a sky full of angels, with singing and light and prophecies.

The second chapter of Luke's gospel, verse 15, tells us that after the angels had made their stunning announcement, they returned to heaven, leaving the shepherds in the fields.

Having witnessed this spectacular direct-from-heaven announcement, the shepherds were clearly expected to do something about it! Why else would the angel tell them they would know they had the right baby when they saw Him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger? And how could they NOT respond on such an amazing night?

So the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" (verse 16).

● Turn to page 2



Loved and transformed

YOU MAY HAVE heard that Jesus accepts you just the way you are. And that's true – He meets you right where you are, no matter your story, your past, or your struggles. He knows you are broken, and He loves you anyway.

But the deeper truth is this: He loves you far too much to leave you the way He found you.

Maybe it shows up in addiction, pride, jealousy, bitterness, or sexual brokenness – whatever it is for you, the Bible puts it plainly: *"You were dead in your transgressions and sins."* (Ephesians 2:1)

Not just sick. Dead. Spiritually lifeless because of our sin. Sin is anything we think, say, or do that goes against God's way. It separates us from Him and damages our relationships with others and ourselves. But thankfully, He sent Jesus to rescue us and reunite us with God.

"God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

He lived the perfect life we couldn't live. He died the death we deserved. And then He rose again – to offer you real life. Forgiven life. Changed life. Eternal life.

"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

God doesn't just forgive sin – He changes hearts, making you a new creation. And this transformation happens through the work of the Holy Spirit – God's presence inside us, helping us grow, guiding us, and giving us strength to turn from wrongdoing and follow in Jesus' footsteps. He gives peace that lasts, joy that's real, and hope that doesn't fade.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

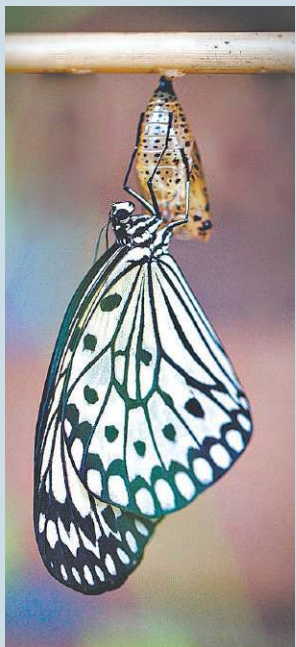
This isn't about being good enough. It's about a relationship with the One who made you, knows you, and gave everything to bring you back to Himself. He's not in the business of improving lives. He's in the business of raising the dead.

This new life is received by faith – not by trying harder or fixing yourself, but by trusting in what Jesus has done for you. You don't have to fix yourself before you come to Jesus. Just come.

Talk to Him honestly. Ask Him to forgive you. Tell Him you want the new life He offers. You could pray something like this:

"Jesus, I know I've messed up. I've tried to live life my way, and it's left me empty. I believe You died for my sin and rose again. Please forgive me. Make me new. I want to follow You."

If you meant that, or even if you're still unsure but want to explore more – you've taken a first step. Keep going. Open a Bible. Find a church where you can grow, ask your questions, and discover what it means to follow Jesus together. Jesus isn't afraid of your doubts – He's big enough for all of them. •



STOCK PHOTO

MY FIRST CHRISTMAS GIFT

• From page 1

"I started to think, does God love me? Does God really care?... The Bible said we were all created in the image of God, and that God sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for all of us for all of our sins.

"As a nine-year-old boy in Uganda, I'm thinking, how can a God who loves all of His children in this world, who created all of us, watch a million of his children being killed in Rwanda?"

"He loves me so much. He loves us so much that He sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on cross for me. Why would He watch while my grandmother and my uncle were being killed in front of me? How about the people who killed my grandmother and my uncle, does He love them?"

"Did He send His Son Jesus Christ to die for them on the cross?"

I was so angry... But the angrier I got, the more I pointed fingers at God, the more I missed out on the miracles that He did to protect me because I had never processed the fact that I'm alive, that I walked through it for three months and nothing happened to me."

While reading the Bible, Alex came across Jeremiah 29:11: *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans of welfare and not of evil, to give you a future and hope."*

He reflected on the miracles in his life – that his mother's HIV virus was not passed to him, that a gun jammed, that he survived bullets and explosions, and that a shoebox gift had planted the Gospel in his heart.

"When I saw that God's presence was with me from the day I was born,



Alex spending a moment with his surviving uncle who cared for Alex and his siblings during the opening days of the Rwandan genocide.

that's when I specifically invited Jesus Christ in my life, to be the Lord of my life."

Processing the past

On tour with the African Children's Choir in America, Alex's chaperone Christine encouraged him to share his story. "The more I did that, the more I realized I was actually processing." Christine asked him, "What would you do if you saw the person who had caused you the most pain in your life?" Alex already knew: "I would kill them." He began to pray instead: "Lord help me to heal so that

one day I can actually see them. I can see them face-to-face and tell them what You have done."

Over time, he realised that God even loved those who had hurt him. "We will never ever forget about that pain. But that pain doesn't have to define who we are."

New life, new mission

When Alex was 14, he and his brother were adopted by an American family.

Every Christmas, he packed shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child – the same kind of gift that had once given him hope. That eventually led to an internship and then a job with the organization.

In 2013, at age 24, Alex returned to Rwanda to distribute shoeboxes at the same orphanage where he had once lived. With help from the director of the prison system, Alex was able to meet the man who had killed his uncle.

"It was the toughest day of my life. I've never been so nervous in my life." Alex shook the man's hand and prayed with him. "I shared how God had transformed me and that God loved him too."

Alex said he can never forget what happened to his grandmother and uncle, but he now knows that doesn't have to define him.

"The journey of forgiveness is not easy, but it is possible." •

This article is adapted from an interview with Alex by Compelled Podcast. To listen to it and other stories, visit compelledpodcast.com.

“Forgiveness is not easy, but it is possible.”

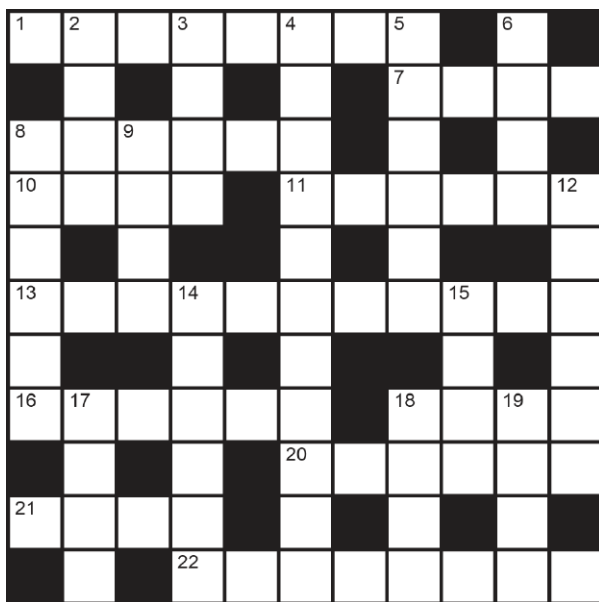
Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

ACROSS

- 1 Loch Ness site
- 7 Off-ramp
- 8 Changing house
- 10 Inviting store sign
- 11 Restored to health
- 13 Winter sleep
- 16 Beard removers
- 18 Gardener's gear
- 20 No longer a teenager
- 21 Bath stopper
- 22 Good-looking, ... man

DOWN

- 2 Farm harvest
- 3 Identical individual
- 4 Kabul's country
- 5 Take off, as a plane
- 6 Abrasive tool
- 8 ___ of pearl
- 9 Action word



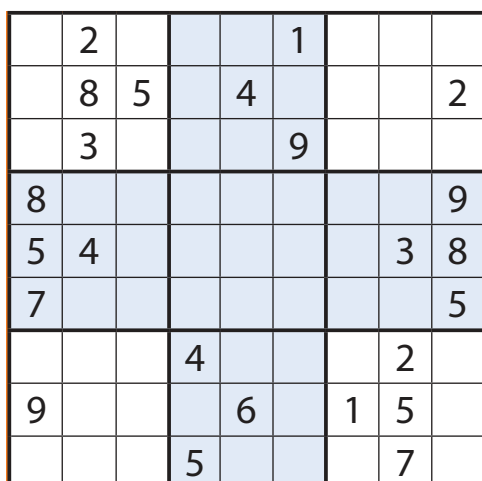
- 12 Shrek's bestie
- 15 Clothes presser
- 18 Coop females
- 14 Adequate for need
- 17 Friend in war
- 19 Flower's stalk

SOLUTIONS PAGE 11

Smile files...



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Never the same again

• From page 1

I suspect that none of the shepherds stayed in the fields that night – hopefully God looked after the sheep on this very special occasion.

We don't know how long it took the shepherds to walk to Bethlehem, or how they managed to find the right building. Luke just tells us that they "found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger". And once they had seen the baby for themselves, they couldn't stop talking about what had happened. Everyone who heard them was amazed at what the shepherds said to them (verses 17-18).

The shepherds returned to their flocks, but they would never be the same again. They had seen and heart things that filled them with a new kind of faith. As they walked back to the fields, they glorified and praised God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Sometimes, when we decide to act of the good news we have heard, God provides such great evidence of His truth that we are overwhelmed with the reality and the goodness of it all. And we will never be the same again. •

This article was first published in *Salvos Magazine* and is used with kind permission.

Melodies to miracles

Music has always been Giselli de Oliveira's lifeblood. There doesn't seem to have been a time when she was not surrounded by melody and song.

Both her grandfathers directed the church choir, her mother conducted the women's choir and her father, a retired colonel, was an orchestra conductor. Everyone in her family played a musical instrument and sang.

Giselli herself was just three when she sang her first solo in church and five when she got her first violin.

There has also been another, even more powerful and ever-present influence in her life – Christianity.

Giselli, who true to her roots is now a music teacher, was brought up in a Christian home by her devout parents. In addition to being so involved with the church music ministry, she said her grandparents "literally helped build the church where I lived," she tells *Challenge News*.

"I grew up experiencing life with Jesus." However, even as a child, Giselli knew more than just belief was needed – commitment was necessary too.

"I always believed in Jesus, but I knew I needed to take the step of giving my life to Him. So one day, at the end of a ministry puppet show I prayed and told Jesus He was my only Lord and Saviour. I was only nine or 10 years old at the time.

"I remember feeling gratitude for being loved and forgiven by Jesus."

However, she said there have been times when she has felt distant from God.

"Like the prodigal son's older brother, I felt like just a worker in God's house," she shared, referring to the parable Jesus told in Luke 15 in which the older brother felt angry



Giselli de Oliveira

and overlooked by the father.

"This feeling distanced me from Jesus," Giselli said. "However, when loneliness and sadness invaded me, I cried out to Him and asked Him to forgive me for not enjoying the loving presence of my best Friend."

Giselli has followed in her family's footsteps and is very active in church – all that activity, however, comes with its own pitfalls.

She explains: "My biggest challenge is remembering that the Lord doesn't love me for what I do.

"The number of ministries I serve on does not make Him love me any more or any less. He loves me despite my failures, my stumbles and my cloudy days."

Something else that reassures her is one of her favourite verses from the Bible – Romans 8:38-39, which says: *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* •

Solving a 2000-year-old cold case

Jim Warner Wallace grew up as the son of a police officer. He followed in his father's footsteps, starting out as a patrol officer, then spending four years working undercover and three years in the SWAT team before eventually becoming a homicide detective specialising in cold case murders.

Most of his cold cases have appeared in media outlets including *Dateline*. One of his cases was from as early as 1972.

Growing up with an atheistic upbringing, Jim's father believed that religion was a "very useful delusion that teaches good morals" and Jim held the same views.

"I was the kind of atheist that was obstinate. I had reasons why I rejected God's existence," he shared in a talk at the Summit Worldview Conference.

"I was pretty thoughtful about my atheism."

He told *CBN News*, "I was more than happy with the idea that I would live my life, and when I closed my eyes for the last time, I would be in the dirt. I came from nothing, I'll go back to nothing. The idea of a life after this one was meaningless to me."

Working in law enforcement, Jim thought he knew what evil looked like. "I took bad guys to jail. I thought I understood the difference between right and wrong, good and bad. I was on one side of the bars; bad people were on the other."

When Jim married and had children, his wife wanted to take their children to church. So Jim agreed to tag along.

"I was the kind of person who would have been more than happy to go to church with my wife, as long as I could go as an atheist."

But when he heard the pastor calling Jesus "the smartest man who ever lived", it caught Jim's attention.

"He said, 'All of western culture has been grounded on the moral teaching of Jesus out of two sermons,'" he recounted in his YouTube video.

Intrigued, Jim bought a Bible for \$6. He read the Gospels [the books in the Bible about the life and death of Jesus] and was struck by how they resembled the eyewitness testimonies he encountered at work.

"As I'm reading through the Bible, it has the texture of eyewitness statements," he shared. "One of the things that was so profound was that eyewitnesses never ever agree."

"So the fact that the Gospels were not unified precisely in every detail, well, it had the ring of truth for me."

Jim spent the next few months applying years of investigative skills and experience to examining the Gospels.



Former atheist detective Jim Warner Wallace, who applied his investigative skills to the Gospels.

He also read other accounts written by ancient historians to verify the writings in the Bible.

"At the end of my examination, I was confident in their reliability. I believed the Gospels were telling me the truth about Jesus."

Yet, while Jim believed in the credibility of the Bible, he admitted that he wasn't ready to accept Jesus as his Saviour.

"I was never someone who saw myself as a bad person. In fact, my

role as a police officer only amplified my own pride and sense of 'goodness.'" But Jim had more questions, important ones.

"What is the cross all about? Why did Jesus have to die that way?" As he read through the Gospels again, he came to a profound truth. Jesus Christ died as a Saviour for sinners. And he was one of them.

"As I saw myself on the pages of Scripture, I had to admit their accuracy. They described me perfectly. The more I read, the more I recognised my need for a Saviour. Suddenly, the Gospel [the good news about Jesus coming to Earth to die for our sins] made sense."

With this newfound realisation, Jim knew he had to make a decision.

"I submitted everything to Him. I submitted everything to [Jesus] Christ," he declared.

"The first thing that changed for me was a sense that this huge separation I'd always drawn from the people who were on one side of the bars and the people who were on the other side of the bars vanished."

Jim is now a Christian apologist and the author of *Cold Case Christianity* where he records his investigative process on the claims of Christianity, such as the resurrection.

"I think God reached me through that evidence. It may not be how everyone hears the Gospel for the first time, but for folks like me, I needed to be reached this way."

"So I'm only a Christian today because it's true." •

“I was pretty thoughtful about my atheism.”

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Where do you find your identity?

BY CAROL ROUND

IF YOU WERE asked to identify yourself, what would your answer be? Would you reply with your name? Maybe your answer would be more detailed. Would you add your vocation or some other title?

For example, before I discovered my identity in Jesus, I identified myself as one of the following: Carol Round – wife, mother, high school teacher. But what if those titles change during your lifetime? Marriages end. Retirement or job changes happen. Would that leave you feeling lost? I've been there.

How would you reply if someone randomly asked you, "Who does Jesus say you are?" In other words, have you discovered the real you? The "you" created by God to be the best version of yourself. To become a new creation. Become a follower of Jesus Christ?

Understanding your identity in Christ

If you're lost because you've let others define you, then it's time to discover who Jesus says you are. I was in my late 40s when I reached out to God. Oh yes, I was lost. I'd spent most of my life letting others define me. As a people pleaser, I was addicted to pleasing others, not God. Although I was a believer, I wasn't His follower. And I didn't find my identity through His Son. Oh, the release I felt when I became a new creation in Christ.

Jesus set me free to look in the mirror to see the person He sees and not as the world does. It's humbling and comforting.

John 1:12 says, "Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become

children of God..." Becoming a child of God gives us rights. We have an inheritance more precious than gold.

More precious than gold

Once you become a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ, material things cease to matter.

It doesn't happen overnight, but as you grow in your identity as a child of God, possessions lose their glitter. I recall selling or giving away all my gold jewellery.

Eventually, because I also had a large collection of costume jewellery, I started paring down, giving much of it away. It simplified my life.

Scriptures abound in the Bible to help us grow into our identity.

Look up the following: John 15:15, Romans 3:24, Romans 6:6, Romans 8:1, Romans 8:17, Romans 15:7, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:28, Galatians 4:7, Galatians 5:1, Ephesians 1:11, and Ephesians 2:4-5.

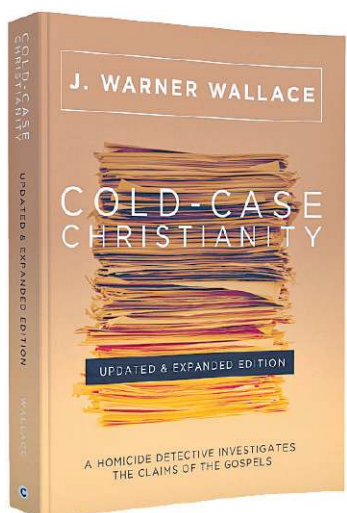
This is just a partial list, but they affirm our new identity.

If you're lost or not completely convinced who you are in Jesus, seek Him in the pages of scripture. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you. Grab a notebook or a lined journal and write down the scriptures above.

Look up more scriptures to help you understand how much God loves you. He sacrificed His Son so you can have eternal life. Meditate on the scriptures. Let them settle into your spirit as you seek to fully understand who you are in Christ.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17) •

Please feel free to share your comments by emailing me at carol@carolaround.com.



Jim's book about his investigation, Cold Case Christianity.

The life and legacy of Charlie Kirk

Charlie Kirk was never one to shy away from controversy. Outspoken, direct and often unafraid to challenge cultural and political norms, he built a reputation as a bold voice for conservative values.

To supporters, he was a courageous truth-teller who carried his convictions onto campuses and into the public square. To critics, he was a polarising figure whose confrontational communication style often inflamed cultural and political tensions.

In September, Charlie's voice was silenced when he was fatally shot during a public appearance at Utah Valley University.

He was meeting students as part of his American Comeback Tour when he was struck by a single gunshot wound to the neck, which led to his death. After a two-day manhunt, 22-year-old Tyler Robinson was arrested and charged with aggravated murder, felony discharge of a firearm causing serious bodily injury, and other related offenses.

His death has been widely regarded as a politically motivated assassination, and stunned friends, followers and even opponents.

Charlie made his mark early. At just 18, he co-founded Turning Point USA to bring conservative advocacy to high school, college and university campuses.

His vision spread quickly: thousands of chapters soon sprang up nationwide.

He also launched a daily podcast, which NBC News reported in 2024 was downloaded between 500,000 and 750,000 times each day.

He travelled constantly, visiting universities and high schools, engaging students directly in heated but often thoughtful exchanges. His trademark "Prove me Wrong" Q&A tables – livestreamed sessions where anyone could challenge him – embodied his confrontational yet articulate style.

It was while running one of those tables that Charlie was shot and killed. He is survived by his wife, Erika, and their two children.

But while Charlie's life ended in tragedy, but his faith, his hope, and his voice remain alive. Beyond politics and debates, his deepest message was one of hope rooted in faith.

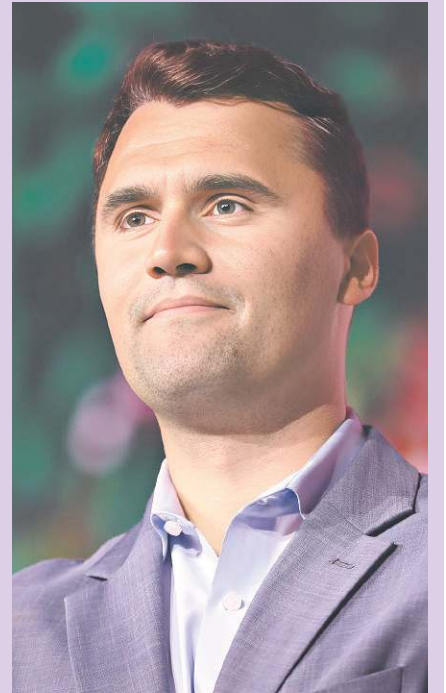
At one of his recent events, a student asked Charlie if he was a Christian. "Very much so," he replied. When pressed on why, he said: "Jesus saved my life. I'm a sinner. I gave my life to Christ – it was the most important decision I ever made."

In a testimony shared on YouTube, Charlie said he gave his life to Christ while he was in fifth grade.

He often explained that faith, for him, was not a static label but something that grew deeper with time.

"It means more this year than it did last year, it means more this year than it did when I was 20," he once said. "It's almost a gift that grows sweeter with time. The more I read, the more I live – I'm completely able to admit I'm a total, absolute sinner and I fall short from the grace of God."

Charlie described salvation not as achievement but as rescue: "It means that I was drowning in an ocean and I happened to get picked up by a lifeboat, and that's about it. It's not like I earned it or that I swam better than anyone else... There's a great comfort in actually knowing that you're completely and totally depraved and an awful person, and knowing that you have to accept a Saviour because of that. It's actually the most comforting thing in the world." •



Charlie Kirk. Photo by Gage Skidmore.



Charlie Kirk was engaging with students at Utah Valley University on September 10 when he was shot and killed. (Photo by Trent Nelson/The Salt Lake Tribune/Getty Images)

Sir Lionel Luckhoo is listed as the most successful lawyer in history by the Guinness World Record's. A former atheist, he was knighted twice by Queen Elizabeth and was challenged to investigate the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. He concluded: "I say unequivocally the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."



STOCK PHOTO

The perfect Christmas gift

BY SIMEON NEO

LAST CHRISTMAS, I experienced the same struggle I experience every year: what do I get my friends and family for Christmas?

Although I'd consider gift-giving one of my top love languages, buying gifts for friends has become more challenging as I have gotten older. I wanted to gift something that was more personal than a box of chocolates, yet not too expensive that I'd be emptying my bank for it.

That day, I was shopping specifically for my friend, Kate. As I roamed through the shopping centre, I was overwhelmed by the endless options I seemed to have, yet underwhelmed at how little choices I actually had.

I knew her well enough that she liked perfumes (too expensive!) and makeup (which I already got her on her birthday) but those options were out.

So what else was left?

After nearly 10 years of friendship, surely I'd know what to get her by now?

Not knowing what else to do, I decided to mumble a quick prayer under my breath.

"God," I prayed. "You know Kate better than I do. Please help me get her a gift that she'll cherish."

As I did that, I walked into Myers and my eyes land upon a moka pot – a stovetop metal pot that uses steam pressure to extract coffee.

It was the perfect gift for my caffeine-addicted, former barista friend. And since it was on sale, it was priced below my budget. What a find!

The gift

As I handed over the nicely wrapped giftbox to Kate, I watched her eyes light up upon seeing the moka pot.

"Wow! You know me so well," she said.

Seeing her reaction, I couldn't help mentally patting myself on my back.

But recently as I reflected on this incident, I am reminded that it wasn't me who made the choice of getting her a moka pot. It was God.

The thing is, Kate, who is not a Christian, doesn't know God (or she doesn't have an active relationship with Him). But that doesn't matter because God *knows* her.

I, who have known her since our uni days, was clueless on what to get her for Christmas. But the God of the universe, the God who created her, knew her enough to know exactly what she wanted.

It reminded me of the famous verse in the Bible from Psalm 139:13, "For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb."

God created my friend Kate while she was still in her mother's womb. That's how intimately He knows her. It's little wonder that He could so easily pick out the one gift that would bring a smile to her face.

The good news is whether or not you know Him, God knows you. He's the One who carefully knit you together while you were in your mother's womb! He's the God who numbers every strand of hair on your head (Luke 12:7). And He is the God who desires to have a relationship with you. This is why He gave us His greatest gift – His Son Jesus Christ – to live as a man on Earth and die on the cross for our sins [wrongdoing against God] so that we can have a relationship with Him when we surrender our lives to Jesus. For more information, see the box entitled **How Do I Become a Christian** on page 11.

New life on death row

Forty-two years ago, Karla Faye Tucker and her boyfriend murdered two people, while high on a cocktail of heavy drugs. It didn't take long for the police to catch up with them and they were taken to county jail.

It was there Karla experienced a transformation that gave her a sense of peace and joy that even 14 years on Death Row couldn't break.

Karla told her spiritual advisor, Linda Strom, about her challenging childhood. She remembered her parents fighting a lot and they divorced multiple times.

She began experimenting with drugs when she was just seven or eight.

By the time she was in the seventh grade she was using drugs heavily and dropped out of school.

During her parents' divorce proceedings when she was 10, Karla discovered she was the product of her mother's extramarital affair.

When they split for the last time, she lived with her mother and at 14, followed her into a life of prostitution.

At 16, Karla married a man who also had substance abuse problems. After the pair separated a few years later, her best friend, Shawn, and her husband, Jerry Dean, introduced her to Danny Garrett.

The pair began dating when Karla was 21 and they lived in a group house full of drugs, sex and physical abuse.

In June 1983, Karla and her friends spent a weekend partying and using heroin, cocaine and other drugs.

She told Lifeway that Shawn arrived at the party with bruises on her face.

The group discussed the couple's recent breakup and Karla wanted to get even with Jerry. Sleep-deprived and high on drugs, Karla and Danny drove to Jerry's apartment, planning to case the place so they could steal his motorbike.

Jerry was asleep in bed with a woman he had met that day at a party, Deborah Thornton.

"Something went horribly wrong," Linda writes in her book, *Karla Faye Tucker Set Free: Life and Faith on Death Row*.

"Instead of stealing a motorcycle, Danny and Karla murdered two people."

Karla later told Larry King that she didn't feel guilty after the murder.

"I didn't care about anybody. I didn't care about myself. I didn't place any value on myself or anybody else."



Karla Faye Tucker's mugshot (Photo by F. Carter Smith/Sygma via Getty Images)

In April 1984, Karla's trial began. But since her crime, Karla had transformed. She had come to faith in Jesus.

While in the county jail awaiting her trial, a Christian prison ministry group visited the jail and put on a puppet show.

"When I walked through the door, my mouth kind of dropped," Karla told Linda.

"I felt something that I had never felt before. I know now that it was the presence of God."

She looked at the ministry team and thought, *I want to feel what they are feeling.*

"I didn't place any value on myself or anybody else."

"They had such a peace and a joy – something that was real. I had never seen that in anybody."

When the service finished, Karla stole a Bible, not realizing they were being given out for free.

"I opened the Bible and started reading," Karla told Linda.

"I don't know how long it took, but I remember that I was kneeling on the floor, crying, asking God to come into my heart and forgive me for what I had done.

"I don't know that I felt forgiven at that point, but I do know I felt love.

I knew that no matter what I had done, I was loved, just like that, just like I was.

"That's when the whole weight of what I did fell on me. I realized for the first time that I had brutally murdered two people and there were people out there hurting because of me."

At her trial Karla was repentant and emotional.

She confessed to the murders and was found guilty of capital murder. Two weeks later, she was sentenced to death.

Not long after this, Karla received a letter from Jerry Dean's sister, Peggy, saying that she forgave and loved Karla, and that Jesus did too.

While in prison, Karla earned her high school diploma and married a man, Dana Brown, who was involved in a prison ministry group.

"She also earned the respect of prison guards who credited her with helping prevent the suicide of two other inmates," Laura writes. Karla called Death Row "Life Row" as "The Life of the Lord is here!"

Karla told Justice Files, "I love life now. Instead of taking lives I just want to share the life in me."

Karla's first execution date was set for June 30, 1992 but the Court of Appeal stayed the execution. This was lifted in 1995 and in 1997, a new execution date was set: February 3, 1998.

Despite appeals and requests to review the case and a request to then Governor George W Bush to commute her punishment to life imprisonment, Karla was executed by lethal

injection.

She was the first woman to be executed in Texas for 135 years.

A month before her death, when Karla was interviewed by Larry King, she told him, "when you have done something that I have done, like what I have done, and you have been forgiven for it, and you're loved, that has a way of so changing you.

"I mean, I have experienced real love. I know what real love is. I know what forgiveness is, even when I did something so horrible. I know that because

God forgave me and I accepted what Jesus did on the cross. When I leave here, I am going to go be with Him."

The Lord's show

Poem by Karla Faye Tucker

It seems like so many years ago that I went to see this show.

There were puppets and people who used to be just like me

But they were really different, these people. This I would soon be able to see.

As I entered the room with them My body felt weird

All through each limb.

I walked to a chair, and then I sat down My mouth wide open, hanging almost to the ground.

Then I heard a cackle from a girl named Ellen What's going on? I wondered,

But there was no tellin'!

That was the last sound I remember hearing At the show that night

But I remember seeing people They glowed with such a wonderful light!

The message I heard, but not by their words For God's presence was there,

YES! It was everywhere!

Their faces all glowed As the Holy Ghost flowed

Jesus delivered me that night from death to LIFE

I snuck a Bible back to my cell For something was happening

But what I couldn't tell!

I sat on my bunk And in the corner I sunk.

You see, I needed to hide For I was still so full of pride.

But as I opened that Book and started to read Pretty soon I was on the floor

Down on my knees I asked for forgiveness as the tears did fall

"Come into my heart Lord Jesus, I'll give you my all

"O God I'm begging You, please set me free "Come into my life and give me liberty.

"You said You love me, "But I just can't see

"How such a lost sinner "Can ever be a winner."

Then Jesus put His arms around me And gently said,

"My precious child, your sins are forgiven; you are no longer dead."

The puddle beneath me was quite a sight, I was redeemed by the blood of the Lamb

that night.

As I looked at my tears in the puddle below, I thanked my Savior for that awesome show.

And then all of a sudden I knew without a doubt

The Holy Ghost had come with a mighty shout

He opened my eyes and to my surprise I was given new life

He made me His wife!* Yes, I remember that night so long ago.

I remember it well, Jesus. It was quite a show!

*Editor's note: The Bible compares the relationship between Jesus and the church to the union of a husband and wife in Ephesians 5:22-33.



Karla Faye Tucker in December 1997, two months before she was executed by lethal injection for the 1983 pickax murders of Debra Ruth Davis Thornton and Jerry Lynn Dean. (Photo by Smiley N. Pool/Houston Chronicle via Getty Images)

How old does the Earth look?

CMI'S CARL WIELAND summarises some of the evidence that is consistent with a young age for the world:

1) The continents are eroding too quickly.

If the continents were billions of years old, they would have eroded by wind and water many times over. Mountain uplift and other "recycling" processes are nowhere near capable of compensating for this.¹

2) There is not enough helium in the atmosphere.

Helium, a light gas, is formed during radioactive alpha decay in rock minerals. It rapidly escapes and enters the atmosphere much faster than it can escape Earth's gravity.² Even if God had created the world with no helium to begin with, the small amount in the atmosphere would have taken at most around two million years to accumulate. This is far less than the assumed 3,000-million-year age of the atmosphere.

3) Many fossils indicate that they must have formed quickly, and could not have taken long time-spans.

a) Common fossils. There are billions of fossil fish in rock layers around the world which are incredibly well-preserved. They frequently show intact fins and often scales, indicating that they were buried rapidly and the rock hardened quickly. In the real world, dead fish are scavenged within 24 hours. Even in some idealised cold, sterile, predator-free and oxygen-free water, they will become soggy and fall apart within weeks.³ A fish buried quickly in sediment that does not harden within a few weeks at the most will still be subject to decay by oxygen and bacteria, such that the delicate features like fins, scales, etc. would not preserve their form. Rapid burial in the many underwater landslides (turbidity

currents) and other sedimentary processes accompanying Noah's flood would explain not only their excellent preservation, but their existence in huge deposits, often covering thousands of square kilometres.

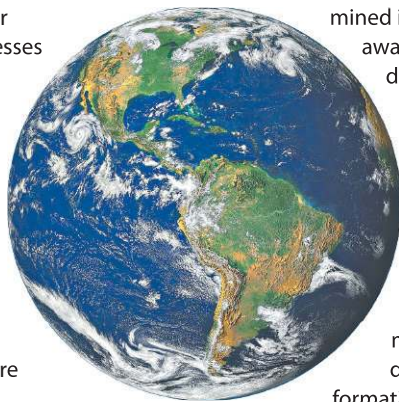
b) Special examples. CMI often highlights instances which are particularly spectacular, like the mother ichthyosaur apparently 'freeze-framed' in the process of giving birth. Then there are the fossil fish which are found either in the process of swallowing other fish or with undigested fish intact in their stomachs.

4) Many processes, which we have been told take millions of years, do not need such time-spans at all:

a) Coal formation. Argonne National Laboratories have shown that heating wood (lignin, a significant component) and clay at 150°C (rather cool geologically) for four to 36 weeks, in a sealed quartz tube with no added pressure, forms high-grade black coal.⁴

b) Stalactites and stalagmites. There are examples of cave decorations forming quickly, given the right conditions, including a mining tunnel in Mt Isa, Queensland. Documented photographic evidence shows stalactites and stalagmites had formed when the tunnel was only 50 years old.

c) Opals. Despite the common teaching that it takes millions of years to form opal, Australian researcher Len Cram has long been growing opal in his backyard laboratory. His opal is indistinguishable, under the electron microscope, from that



mined in the field. He was awarded an honorary doctorate (by a secular university) for this research.

All he does is mix together the right common chemicals — no heat, no pressure, and definitely no millions of years.

d) Rock and fossil formation. Scientists have long known that petrification can happen quickly. A petrified boulder hat is on display in The Buried Village, an open air museum dedicated to the Mt Tarawera eruption, in New Zealand. A roll of no. 8 fencing wire which, in only 20 years, became encased in solid sandstone, containing hundreds of fossil shells. Petrified wood can also form quickly under the right conditions — one process has even been patented.⁵

The famous multiple levels of "fossil forests" in America's Yellowstone National Park have now been shown to have formed in one volcanic event.⁶ Successive mudflows transported upright trees (minus most of their roots and branches) whose tree-ring signatures confirm that they grew at the one time.

5) The oceans are nowhere near salty enough.

Each year, the world's rivers and underground streams add millions of tonnes of salt to the sea, and only a fraction of this goes back onto the land. Using the most favourable possible assumptions for long-agers, the absolute maximum age of the oceans is only a tiny fraction of their assumed billions-of-years age.⁷

Despite some inevitable unsolved problems in such a complex issue, it is thus not hard to establish:

The reasonableness of believing what the Creator of the world says in His Word, the Bible, about the world being thousands, not millions or billions, of years old. The fact that the

earth neither "looks old" nor "looks young" as such — it all depends on the "glasses" through which the evidence is interpreted. We all need to be aware of how much we have been conditioned by our culture to "see" geological things as "looking old". The earth is old! But let us stretch our minds still further.

It concerns the way we use words such as "old" or "young" for the earth's age. I actually believe that the earth is old — very old. It is thousands of years old — as many as 6000, in fact. Does that angle surprise you? My point is to make us aware of how we have allowed our culture to condition us into thinking that a thousand years is a very short time, and that "old" always means millions or billions of years.

That is why tourists, coming across the "petrified waterwheel" in Western Australia gawk in amazement. "It only took 60 years to cover this thing in solid rock?" Sixty years, with water carrying dissolved limestone dripping night and day onto an object, is actually an incredibly long time. It is our culture, soaked in the myth of "deep time", that has indoctrinated us into the belief that a million years (an unimaginable time period, in reality) is only like "yesterday".

We need to recapture our thoughts from this enslavement to secular philosophy. The Bible concurs with this way of looking at things. In 1 Chronicles 4:22, it refers to human records as "ancient".

But it is clear from the Bible's



Majestic cliffs and clear waters in Bonifacio, France. Stock photo.

genealogies that at the time of its writing, "ancient" meant no more than some 4,000 years — certainly not billions.

This realisation puts things in perspective when Scripture also talks of "ancient mountains" (Deuteronomy 33:15), an "ancient" river (Judges 5:21) and "ancient times" (Isaiah 46:10).

Compared to a person's lifetime, these things are indeed ancient — thousands of years old. The "millions of years" idea is nowhere found in the Bible.

So next time you hear someone say that the earth "looks old", you can respectfully disagree — it can look almost any age you want, depending on how you interpret the factual evidence through the belief system in your mind.

And if someone says the earth is old — you can agree with them, so long as you define what you mean by old — it's really, really old, in fact it's ancient.

Some six entire millennia have elapsed since God made the world (once perfect, now corrupted due to sin and the Curse) in six real days.

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NUDGE

WITH KARL FAASE

God of the gaps

THERE ARE MANY people, both atheists and some Christians, who think that we believe in the "God of the gaps". In other words, we use God to explain what science can't tell us about the world or the universe. People can think that belief in God is just a way to cover ignorance.

However, Christian faith does not decrease as scientific knowledge increases. Science helps us understand the world that we live in, but it does not give an explanation of all of human existence, nor the origin of life itself. As Professor John Lennox of Oxford University says, you don't have to pit science against belief.

Science tells us about the world we live in, but it does not give us an explanation for life itself. However, the Bible and Christian faith can.

Peacock 'eyes' that hypnotise

BY DAVID CATCHPOOLE

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT the way a peacock shakes his fan of spectacularly elaborate tail feathers that attracts a peahen's admiring gaze. It now appears the allure is indeed in the motion, not (as had once been thought) the size of the male's feathery train, or the number of its colourful eyespots. Researchers using high-speed video found that the tail vibrates at an average frequency of around 26 beats per second. The peacock sustains this for more than 25 minutes at a time.

When the peacock vibrates his tail, it seems those 'eyes' can hypnotise the one he is trying to woo.¹ When the train is rattled, the vibration of the tail feathers creates a "dynamic iridescent background" around each eyespot.² The behaviour of the eyespots during tail-shaking is remarkable — not their movement as such, but their apparent non-movement. While feather barbs in the background, even near the eyespots, moved laterally by up to 9.6mm, the eyespots themselves had a maximum side-to-side movement of just 1.7mm.

From the peahen's perspective (typically one metre directly in front), the researchers say "the eyespots would appear to be almost stationary" relative to the stunning dynamic iridescence shimmering from the rest of the tail.² No wonder she's mesmerised.

But how can the eyespots stay relatively still when the whole tail is shaken vigorously? Scanning electron microscopy revealed that the eyespot feather structure is different.

Eyespots are heavier, having densely intermeshed barbules with microhooks,³

enabling eyespot feather barbs to cling together as a single motion-resistant mass. Meanwhile the loose barbules of the background feathers are widely spaced and free to move independently.

Avoiding the logical conclusion of intelligent design, today's evolutionary storytellers might seek to use this discovery to revive Charles Darwin's theory of sexual selection for the peacock — that its tail evolved to attract a mate (periodically hotly disputed by evolutionists themselves⁴).

But sexual selection arguments still fall under the fallacy of using biological advantage of a current system as 'proof' of a neo-Darwinian origin of that system.

The basic problem remains unresolved; such an unwieldy tail would be a huge handicap for the peacock's escape from predators.

So wouldn't it be more sensible to realise that this latest tail-rattling discovery seriously rattles the evolutionary tale, too? (For those not totally 'hypnotised' by it, of course.)

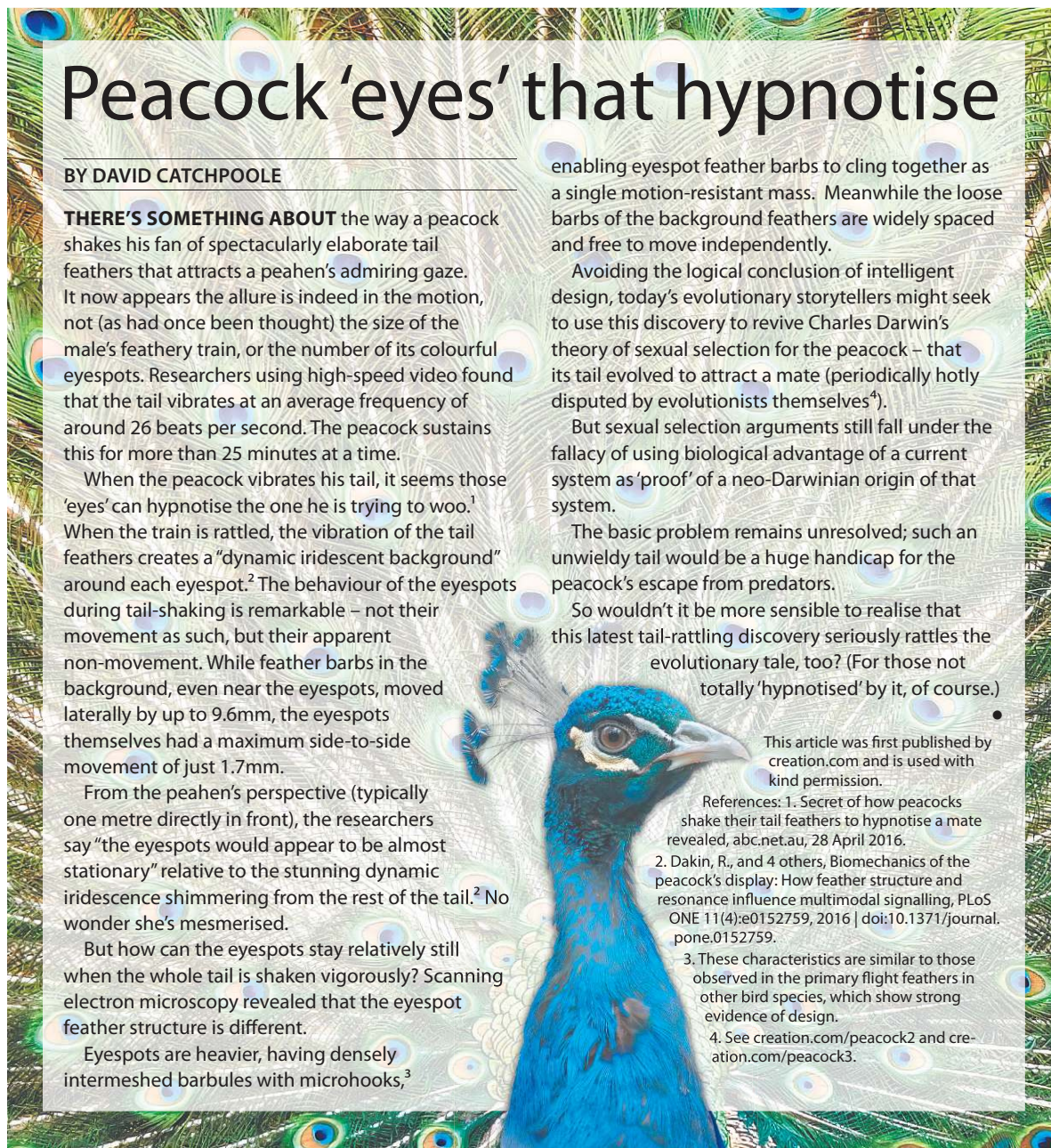
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3. These characteristics are similar to those observed in the primary flight feathers in other bird species, which show strong evidence of design.

4. See creation.com/peacock2 and creation.com/peacock3.



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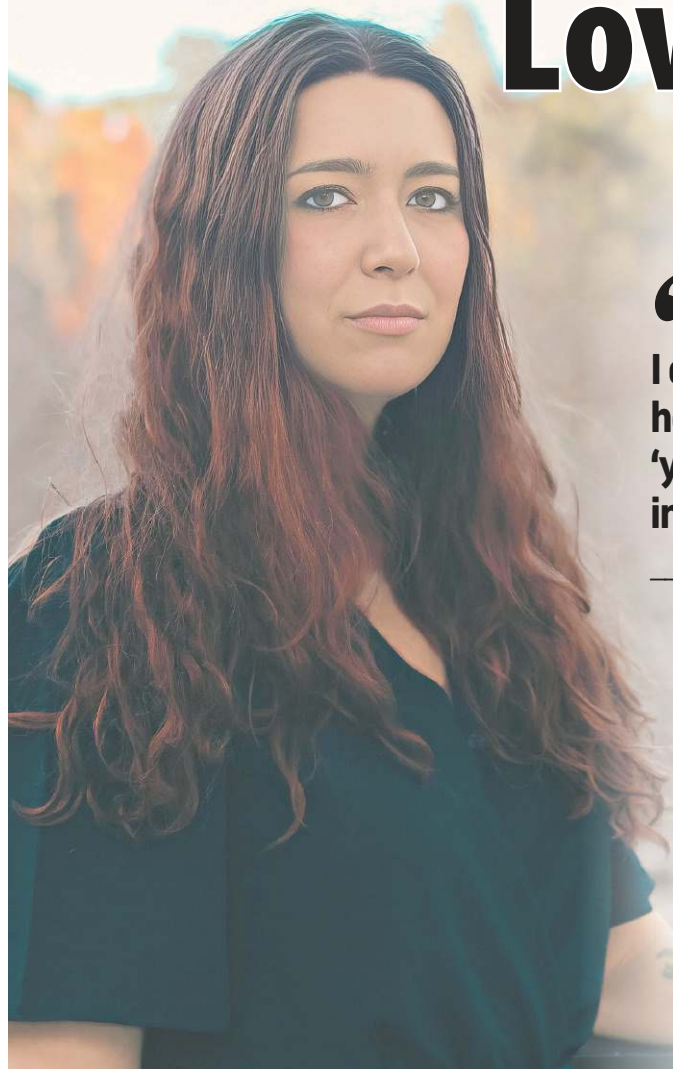



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Youth Truth

Love found me in a closet



Lindsay Holifield. Photo by Marina Moore.

“ I couldn't help but say 'yes,' even in my fear. ”

At 15 years old, Lindsay Holifield developed a severe eating disorder that put her in a mental health treatment facility.

This was also the time when she started asking difficult questions about her Christian faith.

“I asked hard questions, pushing back on unsatisfying answers about the supposed hope that [Jesus] Christ offered,” she told *Christianity Today*.

“But questions were not especially welcome in a religious system predicated on having tightly controlled, black-and-white answers to the world's problems.”

Growing up, Lindsay was taught that obeying the rules perfectly was needed to earn God's favour.

In her mind, God was distant and unpredictable, shaking His head at her in disdain whenever she fell short.

“It messes you up,” she said in an interview with Pilgrim Radio.

“I was in the middle of deep suffering and I didn't feel God's presence and there were a lot of confusing things around that.

“So I began asking questions

internally but not to my community because I knew that it wouldn't be met with the best response.”

She went through books, podcasts and blogs, which helped her process her thoughts and led to more questions.

In college, she joined a Christian campus ministry which gave her space for her questions.

“But by the time I graduated and was admitted to the master's program in a divinity school, I found that I was doing mental gymnastics to recite creeds or sing worship songs,” she told Christian website Mockingbird.

“Finally, I admitted it to myself, just days before I began divinity school: Jesus was no longer a part of my belief system.”

While in divinity school, Lindsay started visiting a Jewish synagogue. Through discussions with rabbis and hearing the Torah read in the original Hebrew, she began to see God in a different light.

“It was healing to hear them talk of God's loving-kindness and mercy throughout Torah. In those spaces, God began to heal some of the old images and models of Him that I'd been given, and I began to trust this God to be loving.”

She added, “For some people, the Old Testament can be scary. But for me, it was really healing to hear that God didn't give up on His people despite their unfaithfulness.”

In 2019, she started her life as a Reform Jewish woman. For the next three years, Lindsay studied alongside a rabbi and observed Jewish holidays.

“I thought this would be where I will be for the rest of my life.”

But life took a surprising turn after a seemingly mundane video call with a close friend who was a Christian.

“The conversation itself wasn't anything abnormal. We were talking like usual. She was describing what she believed Jesus was doing with her life. And I was like, ‘yeah cool.’”

But soon after the call, Lindsay

found herself weeping.

“It wasn't new information to me that she was a Christian. But for whatever reason, she unknowingly opened a floodgate with her words that day.”

In the days after, Lindsay felt an intense nudging. She researched about who Jesus is and spent her nights praying in the privacy of her closet.

“I hoped this insistent pull was merely a fluke, or a craving that I could satisfy by reading enough books or listening to enough podcasts. But it wouldn't let up.”

She wrestled with the idea of believing in Jesus again.

“I knew God was leading me to Jesus and that was a scary prospect. Jesus did not feel like a safe person.”

She found it difficult to reconcile the person of Jesus to the God she read about in the Torah.

Yet, it soon became undeniable to Lindsay that Jesus is God in human form, the Messiah that was alluded to in the Old Testament.

“God had to bring me out of the place of my painful childhood belief system to teach me that God loved me, and then gently bring me back to integrate the images of Jesus with the God I had come to trust. I couldn't help but say ‘yes’, even in my fear.”

Sitting in the confines of her cramped closet, Lindsay surrendered her life to Jesus.

“In [Jesus], I've learned that God is not a fearsome, trigger-happy deity. Nor is He a bland deity with nothing to say to the evil in the world.

“Instead, He loves His people so much that He refuses to abandon them to inevitable destruction.”

But following Jesus was not without its sacrifices.

“Encountering the biblical God did not bring my life ease, and it cost me multiple communities and friendships,” she admitted.

“But the more I beheld the person of Jesus... the more I knew He was worth [giving up anything].”

God vs the universe

BY SIMEON NEO

“I'M PUTTING IT out there into the universe,” she said. My friend, in her mid-20s, said she's non-religious but spiritual. It's a sentiment shared by many others, including celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Will Smith, who attribute their success to the power of manifesting and aligning with the universe's energy.

It's a belief that's been made popular through books like *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne, which promotes the idea that positive thinking attracts positive outcomes by aligning our thoughts with the energies of the universe and trusting that what we put out will be rewarded.

While statistics tell us that adhering to religion is declining, with 40 percent of people in Australia identifying as ‘no religion’, it has become apparent that people are now turning to a new kind of belief system and a new kind of god.

Which leads me to ask the question:

Is God just another word for what people call ‘the universe’?

While some may say yes, as someone who believes in the God of the Bible, I would disagree.

In the Bible, God is seen as an all-powerful being who created the universe. Genesis 1:1 tells us that, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth.”

This means that God is not only a being that is separate from nature, but He is the Creator of nature itself.

Psalms 19:1 tells us, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands.”

The universe, as defined by NASA, is composed of energy, space, time and planets. That means the universe is everything that is in the material world – including Earth. The universe is God's creation and artwork.

Saying the two are the same is like saying Vincent Van Gogh and his famous painting *The Starry Night*, are one and the same, which is of course ludicrous and untrue. In the same way, saying that God and the universe is the same would be untrue.

Secondly, the God of the Bible has distinct characteristics that separate Him from the universe.

While there are many definitions of the universe, it is difficult to know what the universe is beyond the physical world. Some believe the universe to be a divine force while others see it as an illusion.



STOCK PHOTO

However, the Bible gives us a full picture of God as a conscious being with His own thoughts, feelings and characteristics.

In fact, one of the main defining traits of God in the Bible is ‘love’. Not love in the romantic sense, but a love that is unconditional and self-sacrificing.

1 John 4:8 says, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

John 3:16 tells us, “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.”

The original Greek word for ‘love’ is ‘agapao’ or agape which means to love unconditionally.

God isn't just able to love, but He is love.

So why does this matter?

Knowing our Creator and knowing the fact that all of the universe (including us) are intentionally created with a purpose gives our lives meaning.

If the universe – an intangible being with no spoken set of values or intentions – is truly our God, then what is our purpose? How do we know what is right and wrong?

But we know who the God of the Bible is, that He created the universe and people out of an overflowing love and that He longs to have a relationship with us.

More than that, the God of the Bible gives us hope for the future, as well as life after death. Which is something that the universe cannot give.

At the end of the day, the universe and the God of the Bible are two separate beings that are not to be thought of as the same.

So which will you choose to believe in?

“ Is God just another word for what people call the universe? ”

NUDGE WITH KARL FAASE

Wake me up inside

THE BAND EVANESCENCE released a song back in 2003 called *Bring Me to Life*. While it's over 20 years old now, it still has some great truths to consider. The songwriter cries out “wake me up inside” and to “save me from the nothing I've become.” What a great challenge for us today.

We can think that being asleep is doing nothing but it is possible to be busy, really busy and yet asleep. We can be asleep to all the opportunities around us and to what life could hold. We can be asleep in busyness, in work, in acquisition, in our relationships and all the activities that fill up our time.

There is so much more to life than working to acquire and consume. There is love of our family and friends, there is beauty that surrounds us – in nature and in art – and there's a God who cares for us. Wake up to the possibilities in life and the opportunity of a relationship with God. Recognise that God is reaching out to you. God does not want to stop you from enjoying life but in fact to complete you and for you to experience fulfilment. You were created to live in a relationship with God. God wants to bring you to life.

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THE STAR: THE FIRST CHRISTMAS SEEN THROUGH ANIMALS' EYES

BY RUSTY WRIGHT

CHRISTMAS MOVIES ARE

common this time of year, and you've probably seen many. But have you ever seen one about the first Christmas as experienced by ... animals?

The Star (2017) is a fun and funny animated film-with-a-message and follows Bo, a rambunctious young donkey, on his quest for freedom from the daily grind at a mill.

He escapes his bondage and teams up with Ruth the sheep and Dave the dove as they follow an unusual star in the sky.

Along the way, their band grows to include three wisecracking camels, a goat, a cow, a mouse, and a slew of other creatures.

The star leads them to a manger in Bethlehem, where they sense something significant and wonderful is about to happen involving a pregnant woman named Mary and her husband Joseph.

Celebrity voices

The list of celebrities voicing the animals and humans is what first grabbed my attention about this one.

Oprah Winfrey, Tyler Perry, and Tracy Morgan voice camels.

Kris Kristofferson voices a donkey, Kristin Chenoweth a mouse, Patricia Heaton a cow, and Oscar winner Christopher Plummer does King Herod.

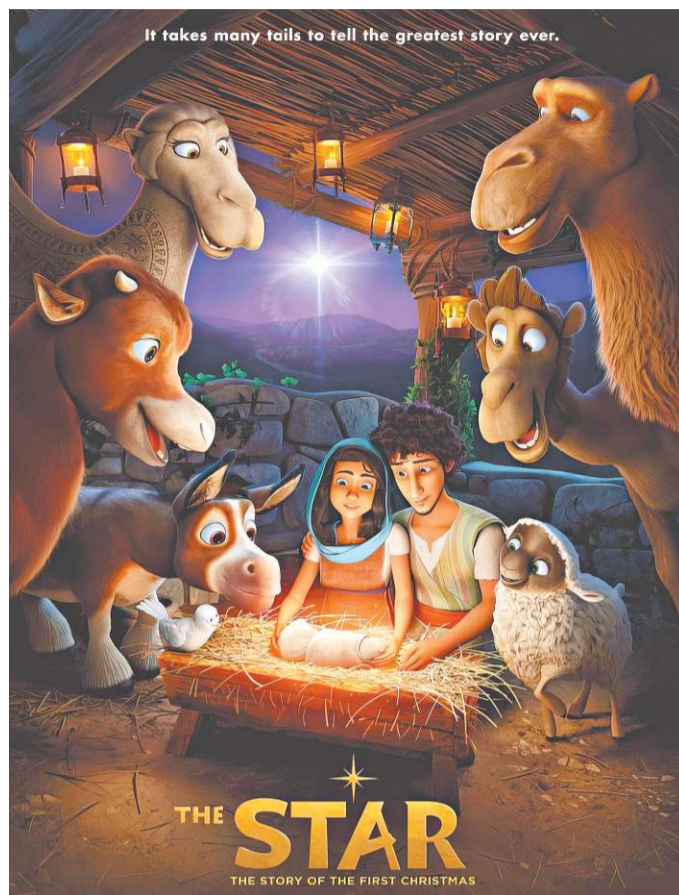
Gina Rodriguez (*Jane the Virgin*) is Mary; Zachary Levi (*Chuck*) is Joseph; Aidy Bryant (*Saturday Night Live*) is Ruth the sheep. Grammy winner Kelly Clarkson voices a horse; comedian Gabriel Iglesias is a dog; radio personality Delilah plays Mary's relative Elizabeth.

Claims of fun and inspiration echo from cast members. For instance, Emmy winner Patricia Heaton says this "animals'-eye view" is "funny, engaging and inspiring ... the perfect family movie!" She's right.

Executive producers of this Sony film include DeVon Franklin (*Miracles from Heaven*), Lisa Henson and Brian Henson (The Jim Henson Company). Academy Award nominee Timothy Reckart (*Head Over Heels*) directed.

Spoiler alert

God causes Mary to



The Star film poster.

conceive, telling her she will give birth to the Messiah. She explains this to Joseph, who is predictably perplexed, but remains with her. A government census takes them to Bethlehem, where there is no room at the inn. The couple retires to a stable. When the child is born, they lay him in a manger. But you knew all that.

The beauty of this film is capturing the emotion of very human moments – plus equine, canine, bovine, and a host of other creaturely moments – to help us sense what the actual players might have been feeling and thinking and how their stories might apply to our lives.

Family strife

For instance, lots of families experience strife: marital conflict, sibling spats, financial pressure and more. Joseph and Mary had their share of family challenges.

How would you feel if your fiancé/fiancée exhibited apparent evidence of sexual activity with someone else during your engagement? Suppose your intended said that God had sanctioned the whole thing? Would your trust and self-esteem take a nosedive? Would you cancel the wedding?

Joseph, described as "a righteous man," ... did not want to disgrace [Mary]

publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly." But an angel appeared to him in a dream, explaining that the child in her was conceived by God, and told him to "name him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Humour and grace

The Star uses humour and grace to tenderly portray how Joseph might have reacted when he realised Mary was pregnant, and how the two resolved to become partners for life anyway.

Joseph's continuing commitment to Mary and Jesus played a significant part in the boy's birth and early childhood.

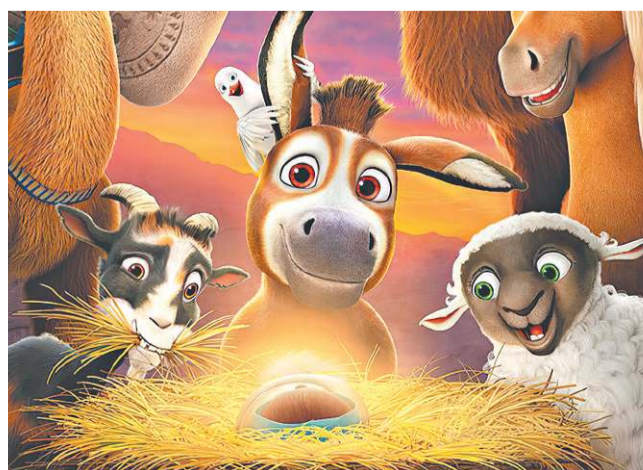
With divine help, the family overcame major obstacles. And – as the film illustrates – so can your family.

Deborah the Camel (aka Oprah) gets my vote for best denouement line.

As creatures gaze on the infant, she muses, "You know, I think people are gonna remember this night. What happened here around this manger will be celebrated for thousands of years." Though her dromedary pals scoff, I have a hunch she's right.

Rated PG (USA) "for some thematic elements."

Rusty Wright is an author and lecturer who has spoken on six continents. He holds Bachelor of Science (psychology) and Master of Theology degrees from Duke and Oxford universities, respectively. www.RustyWright.com



The animals watch over Jesus in the manger.

When love came down at Christmas

BY CAROL ROUND

ONE OF THE things I love about this time of the year is the music, including the hymns and the contemporary versions of those songs. It's interesting to read the stories of the songwriters and what inspired the lyrics they wrote.

Love Came Down at Christmas is one of my favourite hymns. Written by Christina Georgina Rossetti in 1885, the lyrics capture the essence of Christmas in one word – love.

One of the most well-known scriptures is John 3:16: "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."

The essence of Christmas

In his book titled *Christmas Gifts That Won't Break*, author James W. Moore, writes, "Well, of course, the essence of Christmas is love. God's incredible love for us, expressed when He sent His only Son into the world to save us. Love came down at Christmas – that's how the hymn writer puts it. That's the answer to our question. Whenever and wherever we receive God's sacrificial love, whenever and wherever God's love is accepted and shared, Christmas comes once again."

He explains it this way: "When we, like the shepherds, fall

down in awe, wonder and commitment before the manger of God's love, there is Christmas! When, like the three wise men, give our best to the Master, there is Christmas! When we, like Mary and Joseph, trust and obey God and try our best to do God's will, there is Christmas."

In other words, we can celebrate Christmas every day of the year. It's not just a time to put up a tree and decorate. Buying and giving gifts isn't the meaning of Christmas – even though we like surprising our loved ones.

Christmas happens when we love others

In Matthew 25:31–45, Jesus' parable about the sheep and the goats, reinforces a lesson He taught about love.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me...'"

During this time of year, we're usually in a giving mood. Caught up in the Christmas spirit, we're more generous. Donations to food pantries, coat and toy drives, and financial help to charities, increase as people are filled with Christmas joy.

1 John 3:18 reminds us that "our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action." Love is a verb. Love is the basis of the Gospel of Jesus Christ [the good news of how Jesus' death and resurrection reconciles sinners to God]. He's our role model for loving others. Once we accept Him as our Saviour, His love dwells in our heart. It's unconditional love and we didn't do anything to deserve it. So, how can we love like Jesus?

Loving others like Jesus

First, we can show kindness to everyone we meet. Whether it's our family, our neighbours, a co-worker, or a stranger, we can choose to be kind (see Ephesians 4:32). Second, we can pray for others and not just when they're facing trials. When we have nothing else to offer, we can pray for them, trusting God will answer (see Ephesians 6:18).

Third, before we can love another, we must love ourselves. This means we must receive God's love, which is freely given (see Matthew 22:29). Fourth, show patience. Each day, we encounter people who are different from us and we have no clue what battles they are facing (see Ephesians 4:2).

Finally, one of the most difficult choices we face is loving our enemies (see Matthew 5:44). When we choose love each day, then we can share the greatest gift of all, not just at Christmas but always.

I always love hearing from my readers. Please feel free to e-mail me at carol@carolaround.com with your thoughts or visit my blog for more inspiration at www.carolaround.com.

Recipe of the month



PEPPERMINT BARK

A DELICIOUS HOLIDAY treat that's even better with a big mug of hot chocolate.

Prep: 25 min

Chill: 1 hour

Total: 1 hour 25 min

Yields 2 pounds bark

Ingredients

1 pound semi-sweet baking chocolate or milk chocolate, chopped
1 pound white baking chocolate squares, chopped
1 teaspoon peppermint extract (optional)
½ cup peppermint candy canes, crushed

Method

Line a 13x9 inch baking pan with wax paper.

In a double boiler, melt chocolate, stirring frequently, until smooth.

Pour chocolate into lined baking pan.

In a double boiler, melt white chocolate, stirring frequently, until smooth.

Stir peppermint extract into white chocolate until combined.

Slowly pour white chocolate over semi-sweet chocolate on baking sheet. Swirl chocolates together with a knife.

Sprinkle chocolate with crushed candy. Chill until firm, about one hour or longer.

Use wax paper to lift bark from baking sheet; break into pieces. Store tightly covered at room temperature.

From MakeBetterFood.com.

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

The gift of perspective

BY ROB FURLONG

I REMEMBER READING a Peanuts cartoon several years ago where Lucy was writing out her annual letter to Santa detailing what she wanted for Christmas that year. Her letter went something like this, "Dear Santa, I don't know exactly what I want for Christmas this year... just give me lots of stuff!" At her side is Snoopy, watching on and his thought balloon reads, "Tis the season to be greedy!"

By now, Christmas decorations have been in our department stores for a couple of months, reminding us that the silly season is just around the corner. I call it the silly season with good reason. For example, last Christmas, Americans spent around \$994.1 billion on gifts!

Sometimes it can be difficult to put things into perspective. At the very moment when we are madly fussing over whether we need to buy our child the toy they "absolutely must have", some 648-719 million people in the world are living on less than \$2 per day. Only 34 percent of people in Papua New Guinea, one of our nearest neighbours, has access to safe drinking water and only 24 percent of their population has decent sanitation.

Things that we take for granted in the USA are regarded as luxuries in countries like PNG.

Several years ago author, Max Lucado, writing about greed,

provided a disturbing insight into the habits of Americans. A study he cited revealed one in five American families owned three cars or more and that US citizens spent more on garbage bags than 90 of the world's countries spent on everything!

Gordon Gecko, the character played by Michael Douglas in the film *Wall Street* proudly proclaimed, "Greed is good!"

I prefer Lucado's advice: "it is better to live life by not consulting your greed."

If you think I am trying to lay a guilt trip on you then you have misunderstood my intent. All I am asking is that you and your family will try and use this wonderful season of Christmas to gain a little perspective this year. When you open your presents on Christmas Day or sit down to your Christmas lunch with family and friends why not take some time to reflect on the many blessings that you all enjoy?

- Read the Christmas story aloud from either Matthew 1:18-2:23 or Luke 2:1-20. (We have done this every year as a family).
- Share with one another what you are most thankful for in the past year.
- Spend some time thanking God for His grace in placing you in a country like the USA and for the many freedoms that you enjoy.

Christmas is a great time to put things into perspective. Enjoy your meal together and the giving and exchanging of gifts – but



don't fret over the fact that you could not afford the \$200 "must have" toy or the latest smartphone for your children— they will not be scarred by this!

But the money that you save on that and send to a family that enables them to buy a filter for clean water will change their lives forever. I'm not saying don't give each other gifts; I am saying, find something in your budget to give something to the poor this Christmas, some need that touches your heart, even if it means trimming

down your gift giving budget to make room for it.

At the heart of the Christmas story is the message that by sending Jesus, God was declaring "Good news to the poor and release for the captives."

So, this Christmas, remember Jesus, the reason why we celebrate this wonderful season, "who became poor that we might become rich" – rich in that greatest of all gifts that God freely offers us – His salvation.

May your Christmas be a spiritually enriched one!

S	C	O	T	L	A	N	D	F	6	2	9	3	5	1	4	8	7
R	W	F	E	X	I	T	1	8	5	7	4	6	3	9	2		
M	O	V	I	N	G	P	L	4	3	7	8	2	9	5	6	1	
O	P	E	N	H	E	A	L	E	8	6	2	1	3	5	7	4	9
T	R	A	R	R	O	5	4	1	9	7	2	6	3	8			
H	I	B	E	R	N	A	T	I	7	9	3	6	8	4	2	1	5
E	R	N	T	R	E	K	3	5	8	4	1	7	9	2	6		
R	A	Z	O	R	I	S	9	7	4	2	6	8	1	5	3		
L	A	D	T	W	E	N	T	2	1	6	5	9	3	8	7	4	
P	L	U	G	A	N	E	7	9	3	6	8	4	2	1	5		
Y	H	A	N	D	S	O	M	E	2	1	6	5	9	3	8	7	4

Scan here to donate to the work of Challenge around the world.

HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through 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: Please send me: Bible Some 'starting off' literature Information on a helpful church

I have prayed the prayer [ABOVE]

* Please check and write clearly *

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Email address _____

Challenge. 2634 Drake Road Lebanon Ohio 45036 Cell: 513-804-8818
 E-mail: usaoffice@challengenews.org
 All overseas inquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

You are not alone this Christmas

CHRISTMAS IS OFTEN pictured as a joyful time, filled with family, friends, and celebrations. Yet for many, it can feel empty or lonely. Even in a crowded room, we can sense something missing – a quiet longing in our hearts that no gift, meal, or festive event can fill. That sense of emptiness is real, and it points to the One who came at Christmas: Jesus.

The reason for this emptiness is the reality of sin. We've all fallen short of God's perfect standard, and that separation from Him brings pain, guilt, and loneliness. As the Bible says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Left on our own, there is no way to fix it, and that gap creates

the ache we often feel inside.

But Christmas brings good news. Jesus came to bridge that gap. He lived a perfect life, died on the cross in our place, and rose again so that anyone who trusts Him can be forgiven and restored. "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

Jesus offers more than comfort; He offers salvation and a relationship with Him. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). This Christmas, you don't have to face loneliness alone.

You can take a step today – speak to Jesus, invite Him into your life, and discover the peace, love, and hope that never leaves.

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



Let there be peace on Earth

BY CAROL ROUND

IN 1944, JILL Jackson attempted suicide, but she didn't succeed. Later, in an interview aired on National Public Radio, Humankind, Jill talked about her background and what led her to write the song, *Let There be Peace on Earth*.

"When I attempted suicide and I didn't succeed," she said, "I knew for the first time unconditional love – which God is. You are totally loved, totally accepted, just the way you are. In that moment I was not allowed to die, and something happened to me, which is very difficult to explain. I had an eternal moment of truth, in which I knew I was loved, and I knew I was here for a purpose."

After this realisation, Jill's spiritual journey led her to explore a relationship with God. During this time, she discovered her love of writing and, along with Sy Miller, whom she'd married in 1949, began writing songs.

Peace is a gift from God

While I don't know Jill's reason for attempting suicide, I can relate to her despair. She didn't know the unconditional love of our Heavenly Father until she didn't succeed at killing herself. Until I found peace with myself through a relationship with my Heavenly Father, I sought affirmation of my worthiness through people. I was an overachiever and a people pleaser. Then, Jesus set me free.

In his book, *Christmas Gifts that Won't Break*, author and pastor James W. Moore wrote, "More and more psychologists are telling us that we can't feel good about life and other people until we feel good about ourselves. They call it healthy self-esteem, which is simply another way of saying that we need to be right with ourselves."

We can get right with ourselves and find peace by inviting the Prince of Peace into our hearts and lives. It's then we'll understand that peace on earth does begin with each of us. Evangelist Billy Graham once said, "There can be no lasting peace until Christ has come to the hearts of all people and brought them His peace."

We long for world peace

Strife. Fighting. Conflicts. War. Adam and Eve were at peace in the garden and with God, until their disobedience led to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. But on a memorable night in the hills of Judea approximately 4,000 years later, the angels sang "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men..."

Jesus' birth was a turning point for mankind. He came to save us, redeem us, to bring peace, healing, forgiveness, love, and reconciliation.

His presence in our lives can show us how to love others. Peace on earth will become a reality when Christ abides in our hearts. His words in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you," will continue to prove repeatedly the truth that peace begins with each of us when we let Him set us free.

I always love hearing from my readers. Please feel free to e-mail me at carolaround.com with your thoughts or visit my blog for more inspiration at www.carolaround.com.

Matthew Maher in action on the field.
Photos: Facebook/Matthew Maher

SOCCER STAR'S GREAT SAVE



Matt was convicted of aggravated manslaughter charges and sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison.

Professional soccer player Matthew Maher was a gifted defender on the field, but as he faced a judge in January 2010, he found himself staring down a penalty he had no hope of avoiding.

Matt, then 24, had gotten drunk – and then got behind the wheel of his hulking Cadillac SUV. He was depressed because he had badly torn his knee muscles during training, an injury that could spell the end of his career.

He was speeding down the freeway at 160km/h when tragedy happened. He crashed into the vehicle of 55-year-old immigrant Hort Kap, killing him instantly. Police said Matt's blood alcohol level was 0.21 – three times the legal limit.

It was a cruel irony. Hort had escaped death in the killing fields of Cambodia in 1980 and immigrated to the US, where he worked as a fac-

tory worker and raised six children.

Matt was convicted of aggravated manslaughter charges and sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison.

“My world exploded – not to mention somebody else's world, a family, who I did not know at the time, their world imploded,” Matt told the Christian Broadcasting Network's *Faith vs Culture* program.

He hit rock bottom harder than any soccer tackle. Yet it was there, where the ground rose up and smacked him in the face, that the re-building of Matt's life began.

Still speaking to CBN, he said, “The cliché goes like this: when you hit rock bottom, you discover Christ is the rock at the bottom.

“And that kind of began the reckoning of God getting my undivided attention. I came crashing down, or falling back on this faith foundation. And that became my reality.”

The bedrock of that foundation was the forgiveness unexpectedly offered by the victim's third son, Noun Ung.

At first the devastated Noun unloaded his grief onto Matt, rebuking him for “destroying his world”.

But moments later, according to Matt, “a composure came over this young man that only heaven could provide, and his very next statement to me was, ‘But I forgive you, my brother.’”

“He came over to me right in the courtroom... and he and I embraced and hugged, and I tell you the truth, all that weight, all that guilt that I carried into the courtroom, it completely evaporated; it completely melted away.

“In that moment, before I would be physically incarcerated... I was spiritually liberated.”

“Before I spent even a single second as an inmate in the state of New Jersey, the Lord had given me something that I did not deserve, and that was forgiveness.”

Speaking of that moment to *The Star-Ledger*, Matt added: “I did not even care about anything else at that point. The judge could have said 10 years. I would have said, ‘Thank you’.”

He immediately saw a purpose for his devastating experience. In the three months before he began his prison term, Matt visited 34 high schools and colleges and told the students his story of how one irresponsible decision can take and change lives.

He is now an author, speaker, and pastor, passionate about sharing his testimony in hopes it will illuminate for others the power the Gospel has to redeem and restore a life of pain

and suffering. His website, truthvertrend.com, shares his tale to an even wider audience and has chalked up tens of thousands of hits.

Matt explained to CBN that the Lord used the horror of his sins to reveal the way Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection – the Gospel story – redeems suffering, for the good of all who trust in Him as their Savior.

He said his experience with earthly justice was “a picture of the Gospel. Everyone will stand before a judge one day, and we're all guilty as charged for breaking the laws of God.

“No one can get out of it – not by good works, not with a résumé, not with a lawyer who can articulate the law of God eloquently. Everyone is guilty as charged; that's what the Word of God says. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

“The wages of sin equals death,” he continued. “That's terrible news, unless you understand there's an advocate in that courtroom: a Son

“**I was spiritually liberated.**”

who decided to step up, step out, and give the offender what he did not deserve.

“And that's what that sentencing day became for me: a perfect picture of Romans 5:8, how God demonstrates His own love toward us in that, while we were in our sin... far from God, that is when Christ died for us.”

But he also speaks of the kindness of God that saved him from drowning in the guilt of what he had done.

“All of us have that same testimony,” he explained.

“Jesus' death on the cross – if you believe He died for your sins and He would redeem and recycle all suffering – you become born again.

“I stand in awe of what God has allowed in my life as a testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”



Matt now with his wife and children.

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