

# Christian Odyssey

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Exploring Life and Faith

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The tsunami smashed buildings  
two miles from the coast in Banda  
Aceh, Indonesia.



# God vs. the Tsunami

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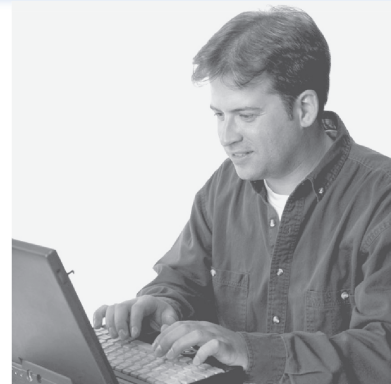
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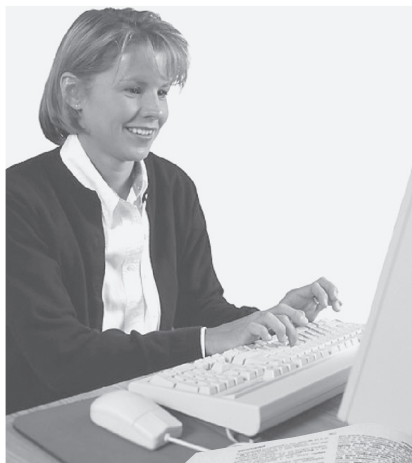
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# God vs. the tsunami

By Mike Feazell

If God loves people, why does he wipe them out? The devastating tsunami of Dec. 26, 2004, has shaken the faith of religious people the world over. What kind of God would kill 200,000 people in a single stroke?

“God didn’t do it; he just allowed it,” some say. Maybe they think that’s a good defense. I don’t, and I doubt you do. Allowing something that you could stop is not much better than doing it yourself.

When something bad happens, we want someone to blame. When the bad thing is a natural disaster, there’s no one left to blame but God. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, tidal waves, lightning strikes. The insurance companies call them “acts of God.” Nobody



Doctors and medical workers help injured and try to stop spread of disease at medical aid center in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. [All photos by Tony Christian Tunya, courtesy of Compassion International]

is to blame—nobody except God, that is.

The recent tsunami is just one example in a long line of history’s mind-numbing natural disasters. Looking back, more than 3.5 million died in the North Korean floods and famine of 1995-98. More than 900,000 died in the Ethiopian famine of 1984. Two hundred forty-two thousand died in the Tangshan, China, earthquake of 1976. The Ethiopian famine of 1974 claimed 200,000.

The Bangladesh sea flood of 1970 took 200,000-500,000. China’s famine of 1960 took 20 million. One million died in the flu pandemic of 1957, and up to 100 million died in the flu pandemic of 1918. Earthquakes in Nanshan, China, in 1927 and in Gansu, China, in 1933 killed 200,000 each. Up to one million died in Huayan Kou, China, in the Yang-tse Kiang flooding of 1887. The smallpox epidemic in France in 1870-71 killed 500,000. One million died from the Irish famine of 1845. The Iran earthquake of 1780 killed 200,000. Ten million died in the Bengal, India, famine of 1769. The Shensi, China, earthquake of 1556 claimed 800,000. And the black plague of Europe and Asia in 1346-42 took 25 million lives.

People ask, why does a loving God let such astounding mayhem happen?

I have another question. Why does God let anyone die?

I recently attended the funeral of a woman who was celebrated for her many personal ministries of love. She died of cancer, and her suffering was nothing short of horrible. Last month a teenager died in a fiery car crash on slick win-

ter roads. She was on break from a Christian college, and I’m sure her suffering and the grief of her parents, relatives and friends was every bit as real as the suffering and grief of any individual who died in the tsunami.

Why did God let Mother Teresa die? “She was old,” someone might say. “It’s the natural way of things. We grow old and die.”

Yes, it is the natural way of things. Bodies wear out. Plaque builds up in arteries, and if enough builds up, it cuts off the blood flow and causes strokes or heart attacks. Sometimes cells get mixed up and go crazy, becoming cancer cells and disrupting the tissues and organs around them. Over time bones lose their density and an accidental fall can break a hip. Joints lose their elasticity. Eyes lose their sharpness.

The ground erodes too, and the earth’s crust shifts. Water evaporates. Rain falls. Rivers rise. Winds blow. Even healthy people and young people can get hit by falling rocks or flying debris. People get caught in flash floods, mudslides and collapsed mine-shafts. People fall off roofs, out of windows and off scaffoldings. Sometimes it happens when they are doing humanitarian work, trying to help or save someone else. And God, far, far more often than not, sits by and watches it happen without lifting a finger to stop it.

When someone we love grows old and dies of “natural causes” we accept it as the way God has designed the creation—there’s a time to be born and a time to die.

But when someone we love dies before growing old, we ask, “Why would God allow this to happen?” See God vs. Tsunami, page 4

# God vs. the Tsunami

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## Not a 'Stepford' creation

No doubt, God could have made the universe in such a way that nothing ever went wrong. But he didn't. He created a world that is free to be itself—and to express its



Message boards were created to help survivors find family members and others separated by the tsunami.

identity in continually fresh and creative ways. For some reason, he thinks that is good.

Maybe that's because it takes such a world, a wild and free world, to be the breeding ground for things God values in human beings—things like courage, devotion, loyalty, self-sacrifice, kindness, generosity, hope, trust. By anybody's reckoning these are a few of the noblest features of humanity. Would they be in a world without risk, danger, calamity—and death?

And where would love be? Love isn't just a matter of getting along. Love is made real in the crucible of suffering, of self-sacrifice, of loyalty and devotion against the odds.

"Oh really," someone might say. "If God thinks that is so great, why doesn't he just come down here and go through what we go through in his so-called good creation?"

Well, that's just what Christians believe he did. And just like death happens to every one of us, he died. But Christians believe that his death changed death itself. He made death a pathway to resurrection, to new life, to a new creation in which "there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

As much as we hate to admit it and hate to talk about it and throw stones at those who do, we all die. We all die of something. Whether we die of "natural causes" or of "natural disasters" makes little difference in the end. Either way, we die, and nothing will stop it, regardless of how kind we are or how mean we are or how smart, careful or wise we are. But the good news is, regardless of how or when we die, Jesus resurrects the dead.

God could stop all natural movement of earth, air and water. He could stop humans from making mistakes, making unwise decisions, being selfish, or stubborn or rude.

God could have made a "Stepford" creation. But he didn't. God created a world in which something far more valuable than long physical life could exist. He made a world in which love can exist and grow. In love, humans pull together and respond to suffering and calamity. In love, humans forgive one another, help one another, encourage one another and stand by one another.

## God suffers with us

God is not a stranger to human suffering. Christians believe that God became a man, suffered as a man and died as a man, and that from that time, humanity itself has been taken up into God's own being. In Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, humanity's cause has become God's cause. When we suffer, God suffers with us.

God loved the world so much,

John the Gospel-writer recorded, that God gave his Son that whoever believes in him would have new life. God sent his Son to save the world, he added, not to condemn it (see John 3:16-17).

Death is part of life, and every person who lives will also die. Even you and even me. But death is not the end of the story of our lives. God did not make human beings merely for this life of suffering and grief—he made us for his new creation of fulfillment and joy. The lives cut short now, deprived now, stifled now, cheated now, will find their fulfillment in the life of the new creation. That is the Christian hope, and Christians hold that hope in faith—faith that God who freely took up our human cause as his own, even to the point of dying like a criminal as one of us, is true to his word.

In that hope and in that love, we extend compassion and help to others. As we do, we experience the deepest riches of true life, riches that are unseen but more real than physical security and safety. Love truly does "make the world go 'round." 🦋



A boy from a refugee camp helps distribute bottles of water in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

# Safe in God's Hands

By James Henderson

Where was God when the tsunami struck Dec. 26? Is God useless in a crisis? What is the fate of those who perished?

As we face such questions, it helps to rehearse the basic principles of our Christian faith.

Some of the religious leaders at the time of Christ saw most instances of mass human destruction and untimely death as God's judgment against sinners. Christ condemned such uncharitable explanations, saying that those who so judge should repent of their hurtful attitudes. He said that victims of tragedy are not worse sinners than others.

Even today, some writers and speakers judge victims in the same way as those religious leaders did—but Christ's instruction remains, that we should turn to God and stop judging others (see Luke 13:4).

That life is unfair is part of the human condition. Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 tells us that "time and chance" happens to us all, "like fish taken in a cruel net." God does not plan out in advance all the details of our lives and then make them happen. Time and chance are part of the very fabric of the universe, the way God freely chose to make things.

What God did plan in advance and bring to pass was to send Christ for the redemption of the world (Revelation 13:8b). In Christ, we have been freed from sin, and that freedom enables us to trust God for our lives and for the lives of others. It also enables us to trust God to give us what we need to endure suffering. In Christ's love, we have hope that goes beyond death, and we have courage to reach out to help others in times of need.

The Christian message is that



through Christ's wounds and sacrifice God understands our suffering and pain. Matthew 25:35-40 reminds us that Jesus identifies with victims. In helping someone in desperate need it is as if we are helping Jesus himself. Mother Theresa of Calcutta interpreted it this way: "When we touch the sick and the needy, we touch the suffering body of Christ" (*Mother Theresa: In My Own Words, 1910-1997*, page 26, compiled by Jose Luis Gonzales-Balado, published in 1996 by Gramercy Books, New York).

In Christ, our response to calamity and evil is a reflection of God's infinite compassion. As we pray for the survivors, we participate in Christ's love and compassion for those who suffer. Prayer gives voice to love. In Christ's love, we pray for all those who grieve, whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed, whose health is in danger because of possible disease, who need to rebuild their shattered existence.

We pray that they may find comfort and courage in God. And, as we are able, we give to help them in their desperate need. Acts 10:4 shows us that our prayers and our alms-giving—giving of our substance to those in need—are a memorial before God.

God tells us that he does not take pleasure in the physical death of anyone (Ezekiel 18:32). In fact, God hates death and will destroy it.

So what happened to all those who perished in the tsunami, and to the nearly 3,000 who were killed in New York on 9/11? Or to the estimated 3.1 million who died of AIDS in 2004? What about the 937,000 Tutsi and Hutu moderates who were slaughtered mercilessly during the Rwandan genocide attempts of the 1990s? And the reported 240,000 deaths in Chech-

nya since 1994? Or to the teenage pregnant girl who bled to death in some back-street abortion?

Are all these people lost to God? We know that the Christians who perished are with the Lord, but what about those who, as far as we know, never had the chance to receive or reject Jesus Christ? Are they gone forever?

God reveals himself in the Bible as loving the world, and as sending his Son into the world not to condemn it but to save it (John 3:16-17). If God is anything, he is mercy. "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). The answer to the question lies in the mercy of God.

In Psalm 88, David wonders whether death signifies the abandonment of God, and then in Psalm 139 he refutes that idea and proclaims that the Spirit of God finds us even in the grave.

Similarly, in Ecclesiastes 3, the writer, called the Preacher, queries what happens to a person's spirit or soul. Then, in chapter 12:7, he asserts that the "spirit will return to God who gave it." Dead or alive, human beings are in the hands of the merciful God. The Bible tells us that God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

God is faithful to his covenant love. In his faithfulness God sent his Son to die for us while we were still sinners. In his faithfulness, God loved us even before we loved him. In his faithfulness, God reconciles to himself the world he created (Colossians 1:19-20).

Because of God's faithfulness, we can put all our trust in him. We can trust him to be who he says he is. He is the God who loves the world, who redeems the world, and who in Christ has shared in human suffering. He is the God who prom-

See God's Hands, page 6 

# God's Hands

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ises that beyond death, in the new creation he has prepared for us, we will see our Lord Christ as he is.

In Christ, we can rest in God's word of faithfulness concerning

his mercy and grace for all his creation, for all people, even for those who may die without yet having met Christ.

The tsunami was not Judgment Day. Only God can decide how Judgment Day plays out, and the Bible tells us that God has decided that the final result of Judgment Day is that there will be "no more

death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

The Song of Solomon says, "Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it" (8:7). Neither can tsunamis, earthquakes, diseases, violence or war. God's love is the hope of humanity. And nothing separates anyone from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Nothing. 🦋

## Why don't more people go to church?

By Ken Williams

**S**ACRAMENTO, California—What can we do to help the unchurched find their way home to the Father?

The most precious gift God has given us is our personal relationship with him. Remarkably, God knows us personally, and we know him. By God's grace we are calmed by his presence in the midst of our difficulties. When everything and everyone else fail, we rest confidently in his loving hands.

During less troubled times, we soar like eagles on the updrafts of joy. There is nothing more important than this intimate relationship given us through Jesus Christ.

According to George Barna, many of our fellow Americans want what we have, a personal relationship with God. God created us to have this personal relationship with him. It would seem that evangelism would be easy.

Since people are hungry for a personal relationship with God, let's open the church doors wide and let them pour in. But, we know this isn't happening in America or in our congregations. People who have given exit surveys after visiting a church say they found the people to be friendly but they didn't perceive God's presence. They complain that the church doesn't seem relevant to their need.

We could point out that God is always present, so if they didn't experience him, they must be spiritually blind. While this would be true for some, we need to consider our part in this.

Jesus said, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him." Jesus didn't say God is seeking teachers, evangelists or preachers. While he gives some of us these spiritual gifts, Jesus said that God seeks worshipers.



Our loving response to his love for us is worship. Gratitude follows grace. Like the forgiven woman washing Jesus' feet with tears of joy, or the apostle Paul remembering what he did when he was Saul of Tarsus, we also bow and worship, thanking him for his grace.

God draws us to Jesus; Jesus saves us from sin; the Holy Spirit gives us life and gifts. Worshiping God is our individual and corporate response in this intimate relationship.

George Barna, Henri Nouwen, Sally Morgenthauer, Robert Webber, Jack Hayford and others believe that the missing dimension in today's churches here in the United States is worship. Too many churches are looking at the unchurched as consumers who are seeking products rather than children seeking their Father. Our local churches can serve the unchurched week in and week out by helping them find God by following our lead as we worship him.

Our personal daily worship is the power behind relational evangelism, and corporate worship is the power that makes our church services real or relevant. Everything that distracts people from experiencing Jesus' presence must be removed from our lives and our worship services. Hungry souls need Jesus. We need to focus on how we can share the Bread of Life with hungry souls.

This is a challenging goal. Worship teams and pastoral teams need to plan and pray together to ensure that no other personality than Jesus Christ is front and center in our congregations. We seek to create an environment that is grace-based, Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Word-directed, fellowship-building, and disciple-making.

We can't give what we don't have, but we can, by God's grace, express our gratitude in worship from start to finish in our weekly services. The unchurched can then follow our lead in worship and come home to our Father in heaven. 🦋

# Black History month

An Interview with Curtis May

Odyssey executive editor Mike Feazell interviewed Curtis May, director of the Office of Reconciliation Ministries, an outreach ministry of the Worldwide Church of God, about Black History Month.



Curtis May

**Mike Feazell:** What is Black History Month?

**Curtis May:** Black History Month began in 1926 as Negro History Week. It was established by Carter G. Woodson as a way to bring attention to the positive contributions of black people in American history. In 1976 Negro History Week became Black History Month.

**M.F.** Who was Carter G. Woodson?

**C.M.** Dr. Woodson was a son of former slaves. He worked in the coal mines in Kentucky to put himself through high school. He graduated from Berea College in Kentucky in 1903, and then went on to Harvard for his Ph.D.



Carter G. Woodson

It bothered him to find that blacks had hardly been written about in American history books, even though blacks had been part of American history from as far back as colonial times. And when blacks were mentioned, it was not in ways that reflected the positive contributions that they had made.

So he wanted to do something about that. In 1915, he established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now called

the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History) and then founded the *Journal of Negro History* and *Negro History Bulletin*.

Then in 1926 he started promoting the second week of February as Negro History Week.

**M.F.** Why February?

**C.M.** Woodson chose February because the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist Frederick Douglass were in that month. These were two men who had a great influence on black Americans.

In addition, several other important events took place in February. For example, the 15th Amendment, which said that the right to vote could not be denied on account of race, was ratified on Feb. 3, 1870.



W.E.B. DuBois

W.E.B. DuBois, educator and writer, was born in February 1868. The first black U.S. senator, Hiram Revels, took his oath of office in February 1870.

The founding of the NAACP in 1909 took place in February, as did the murder of Malcolm X in 1965, and the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in 1960.

**M.F.** Why is Black History Month important today?

**C.M.** All young people need positive role models to inspire them and spur them on and to help them know that



Hiram Revels

they, too, have the potential to achieve their dreams and accomplish worthwhile and important things.

Young blacks need to know about the many positive achievements of black men and women throughout history in every field of endeavor. Knowing what others have done inspires confidence in young people to know that they can do worthwhile things too.

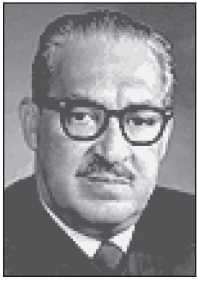
Knowing about the achievements of black doctors, scientists, lawyers, economists and journalists provides encouragement and incentive to black young people to strive for excellence themselves. Without such knowledge and encouragement, young people can end up wasting precious time and energy blaming the system and feeling victimized.

**M.F.** How would you describe the value of Black History Month for non-blacks?

**C.M.** Black history is not merely black history, it is American history. By better understanding the positive contributions of another ethnic group, all Americans benefit. When we understand one another better, we are that much closer to having positive relationships with one another.

Many non-blacks, even many blacks, have erroneous stereotypes in their minds about blacks and their history in the United States.

See **Black History**, page 8



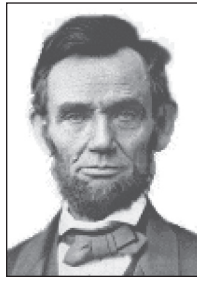
Thurgood Marshall



Rosa Parks



Frederick Douglass



Abraham Lincoln



The Greensboro four after the sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in North Carolina, 1960.

## Black History

Continued from page 7

These negative ideas and impressions create barriers to good relationships and to the true potential that all Americans have for working together toward our common goals for freedom, peace and achievement.



Martin Luther King

Black History Month provides a focus on the positive history, achievements and contributions to American ideals that blacks have made throughout history. And that helps to dispel the negative ideas and stereotypes that invariably spring up when the truth is not given the light of day.

The experience of black Americans in our history can be a further inspiration to all Americans that no matter how tough the struggle, no matter what the odds, when we don't give up, when we stand together firmly for the right and

the truth, great things can happen. And there's nothing more truly American than that. It's our collective legacy and heritage.

**M.F.** How can Christians benefit from Black History Month?

**C.M.** The civil rights movement was born in Christian faith and values. The early leaders of the movement were Christian

ministers, black and white alike, who saw injustice and worked in non-violent ways to bring the love of Jesus Christ to bear on a system that reflected neither the gospel itself nor the deepest values of the U.S. Constitution.

As Christians, when we rehearse that struggle and celebrate the positive achievements of Americans who excelled despite having been socially marginalized, we affirm the values and responsibilities of our faith.

**M.F.** Can you give me one word that in your mind characterizes Black History Month?

**C.M.** Well, I think I'd have to say *hope*. It's all about promoting hope—hope for a better tomorrow that springs from the lessons, the tears and the joys of what has gone before. It's a hope that grows from understanding and from truth—and from the power of love.

And I thank Jesus Christ, because he takes all our meager efforts and turns them into a real and true hope that

sees past all the challenges of the present and into a future where his love binds all people together, all people of all backgrounds and races and histories all bound together as one in him. 🦋

For more information about Black History Month please see the following:

### Books

*Divided by Faith*, by Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith.

*United by Faith*, by Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancy and Karen Chai Kim.

*Mending Broken Relationships*, by John Paul Eddy, Curtiss May and Neil Earle.

*Beyond Rhetoric*, by Curtiss DeYoung.

*Let's Get to Know Each Other*, by Tony Evans.

### Videos

*Reconciliation: A Move of God*.

*Masters of Invention: Making it Happen*.

*Mighty Times: The Life of Rosa Parks*.

### Web sites

[atimetoreconcile.org](http://atimetoreconcile.org)  
[reconcile.org](http://reconcile.org)



**CURTIS MAY INTERVIEW**—From left: John McKenna, Mike Feazell, Paul Kroll, Curtis May and Mike Morrison. [Photo by Tom Hanson]



# Tsunami report—an insider's view

By Randal Dick

Greetings from Singapore, where I have just had a meeting with one of the senior leaders of the body of Christ in Indonesia.

Earlier in the day more than 90,000 Christians assembled in the National Stadium in Jakarta, Indonesia, to pray for God's intervention and blessing for their beleaguered nation. They also prayed that God be glorified in the aftermath of this tragedy, and for some eternal gospel value to come from the terrible loss of life in their country.

This Indonesian pastor has also been drawn into the epicenter of the relief effort for the tsunami survivors. The next day he was to escort officials from nine major international aid agencies on a helicopter inspection of the hardest hit areas of Aceh.

When asked about the degree of cooperation among aid agencies, he said that they seemed to be talking at this point, but that it was too early to tell. He went on to say that up to the present, the most effective lifesaving effort had been the military helicopters of the U.S. and Australian navies, which had dropped medical personnel and supplies into otherwise inaccessible areas.

I found it ironic that an article in a major Asian newspaper the previous day quoted the Secretary General of the United Nation's call upon the United States

to cease its independent operations and "take a back seat and cooperate as part of a U.N. led effort."

Aceh is also the epicenter of fun-



damentalist Islam in Indonesia—so much so that rebel elements have been trying to create an independent Islamic country. The people of Aceh are some of the least educated and most repressed people in Indonesia.

You can imagine what they have been told about the United States and Christian "infidels." Then, in the moment of total meltdown of life—with no way to continue to survive, American, Australian and other Christian soldiers appear out of the sky wanting nothing but to give food and medicine to the needy with no charge, asking nothing in return. He said that the impact among the people is enormous.

Sometimes we hear more of the negative in the press about our military. I am thankful that in this instance our soldiers are doing kingdom work.

We might also pray that in an atmosphere where opportunities for corruption and oppression abound, that God would protect the helpless ones—taking action against those who would seek personal gain at the expense of the lives of those in desperate straits.

The West in general has been incredibly generous in its response to the tsunami disaster. The WCG has also responded with heart and substance. The Indonesian pastor made some astute observations

that I believe can help us make the most effective use of future resources we might give.

The pastor told me that the immediate post-tsunami survival needs were being met. He said that the aid agencies are well-funded and effective, and the local governments are re-asserting control. I can confirm this from articles in the *Bangkok Post* and *Singapore Straits Times* and others, saying that the relief

process is under control to the point where expatriate-led efforts are being taken over by the respective governments. More and more foreign rescue and intervention teams are packing up and heading home.

My pastor friend went on to say that in Aceh the immediate recovery needed to sustain life should be complete by about April. He also envisions that the Western press will grow bored, and the tsunami-caused

crises will become old news. He went on to say that the devastation was so complete that the infrastructure for sustaining life has been destroyed in the immediate areas.

No commerce is functioning from which to earn money to rebuild homes and businesses. The pastor said that the church in Indonesia is preparing to go beyond saving lives, to that of rebuilding lives. He feels that this is when the body of Christ needs to be there for the maximum kingdom benefit. He and other Christian groups are planning for this service, are gathering resources and setting up efficient mechanisms for their use so they are not wasted. 🦋

**The devastation was so complete that the infrastructure for sustaining life has been destroyed in the immediate areas.**

**The West has been incredibly generous in response to the tsunami disaster.**

Exclusive interview with

# Robert Farrar Capon, author of *Genesis: the Movie*

In 2004, Pastor Tim Brassell (New Creation Community Church, a WCG congregation in Portsmouth, Virginia) interviewed Christian author Robert Farrar Capon in the Capons' home in Shelter Island, New York. Here is part two of that interview.

## An interview with Robert Farrar Capon

Part Two

### Good News!

**Tim Brassell:** You have characterized the judgment parables of Jesus as telling us, "Nobody is left out who wasn't already invited." Would you elaborate on that?

**Robert Capon:** Well, that's what I got out of reading the judgment parables. In the way Jesus presents them, people were not denied an invitation to the party; instead, they were kicked out of a party they were already at.

Even in the parable of the prodigal son, nothing was stopping the elder brother from joining the party where his younger brother was being received and honored, nothing but his own resentment. He isn't kicked out; he refuses to go in. But that parable brilliantly ends with a standoff.

The elder brother refuses to join the party, but the father won't leave it like that. He goes out to the elder brother, and Jesus ends the parable with the father and

the elder brother standing out in the courtyard—forever—at least for 2,000 years now. And there it is. It's all done in the presence of the redeemer. Even the obstinacy of the older brother. The father doesn't give up. He's right there with the elder brother, aching for him as much as he ached for the younger one, the prodigal.

**TB:** Does this tie in, would you say, with Romans, where Paul says, "Nothing separates us from the love of God?"

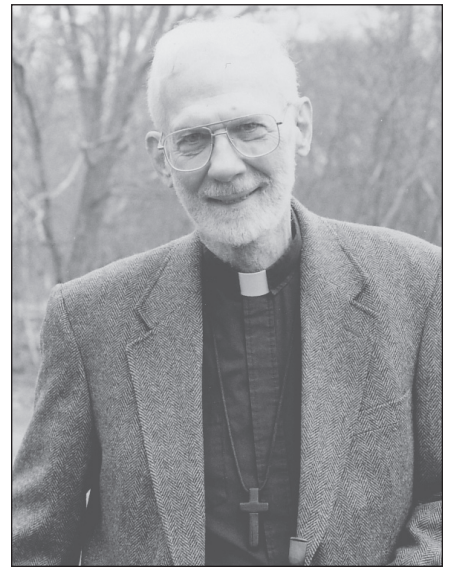


Tim Brassell

**RC:** Of course. It's very hard for the human race to accept that cold: "Nothing separates us from the love of God." We think there must be some breaking point where God would give up on us. "Well, what about if we...?"

Sin is not a problem with God. God solved all his problems with sin before the foundation of the world, in the beginning—and it's done. The iceberg that lies under the surface of history is the Son of God; redemption is the mystery behind all history. Sin is a permanent irrelevancy. And God is the one to say, "Look, I have taken away the handwriting that was against you."

I like the translation in Matthew, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." What do we do when we don't forgive somebody else's debts, or literally, their sins? We carp on what they owe us. We look at the chits that we have saved. This is what you owe



Robert F. Capon

me and you haven't given it to me. There is an IOU I hold against you, and I gotta have this.... Well, it's not that way with God. With God, *it's done*—there is no handwriting against us. It's done. He's not holding IOUs.

**TB:** So why do we have such a love affair with legalism?

**RC:** It's something that's afflicted the church from the start. Humans have a hard time believing that God doesn't hold IOUs. But Paul says the law cannot save. He says, "He has made him to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him."

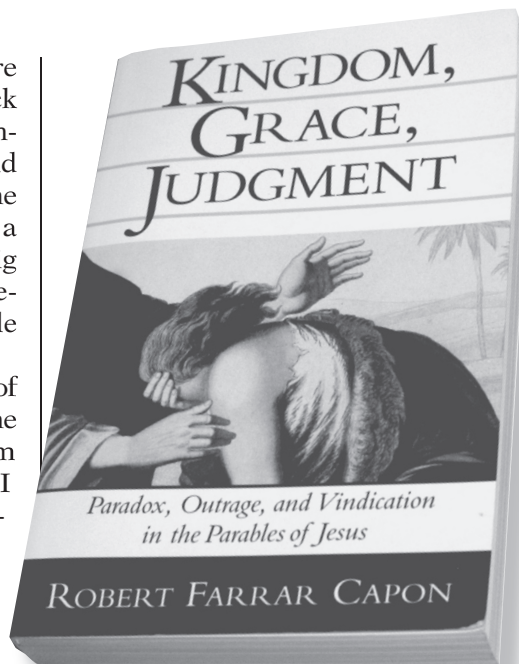
**TB:** Have you found an effective way to present the gospel to a legalist?

**RC:** No (laughter). The reason

I say no is because all that you're going to do is present it and shock them. If you try to do it in a win-some way, which I always do, and try to do it to show them the freedom of it, then you've got a chance. A small chance, not a big one, but you've got a chance—because, when it happens—people go, "Wow!"

I was made visiting professor of something or other in religion at the University of Tulsa for the fall term back in, whenever, '80s or '90s. I had two classes. One was a 39-week beginning course. I taught the parables, and I had, I would say, everybody against me.

All these youngsters were against me because what I was saying was against everything they had ever heard. I pounded and



pounded and pounded for 39 weeks. I went through every parable.

One young lady came up to me at the end and said: "You know, when I first came here I didn't like anything you said, because it contradicted everything I knew. But, you have done something. For the first time in my life I see that it really is *good news*" (laughter).

They thought the gospel was bad news! That's what legalism does to people. 🦋

### Robert Capon Books

Autographed copies of Robert Farrar Capon's books are available from the author by clicking on the Amazon.com "used and new" button and going to seller "quietchina" for your purchase.

## Do You Have Time for a Happier Marriage?

Dexter H. Faulkner

To spend time with someone is to say: "I value you and value being with you. I love you and respect you."

One of our most important possessions in today's fast-paced society is time. Time, therefore, can be one of the most precious gifts we can give to another.

Somehow we have convinced ourselves that we must do a multitude of things and all in a hurry.

Statistics indicate that after a peak in the divorce rate during the first five years of marriage, the next peak comes around 15 to 20 years.

The children leave home; the nest is empty. Two people sit down to breakfast and realize they have nothing to discuss.

The amount of time spent with another, of course, does not by itself indicate the quality of the relationship, but it is used frequently as a measurement of love. Time



together is a crucial ingredient if a relationship is going to develop and grow.

Time together need not be spent only in talking. It may be spent just being together. I can think back to times on vacation when I enjoyed being with my wife, Shirley, sharing the same experiences, yet talking little.

We enjoyed the same rushing mountain stream and the solitude without constant discussion. One of our favorite times is walking along the beach holding hands even after 45 years of marriage.

Just being with each other, being aware of the other's presence, is often as meaningful as a verbal interchange.

Isn't it amazing that before marriage a couple can't find enough hours to share their thoughts, and afterward they can't find enough words to fill the minutes?

And does anybody doubt the extent to which television is a barrier to time and communication? (Like

the husband with his hand on the television remote who says, "Dear, do you want to say anything before football season starts?")

Husbands, do you want to see if your wife might enjoy a little more time just with you? Why not call her and make a date to take her out for a leisurely dinner somewhere where you can talk without interruption. Then note her response. 🦋

### A few questions

Husbands and wives, ask yourselves:

- Does my use of free time help or get in the way of my marriage relationship?
- Do I seek out activities or duties that prevent me being with my spouse?
- Do I tend to give my spouse only leftover time?
- Do I use television, newspapers or hobbies, as excuses to avoid dealing with my feelings about our relationship?

# A Lesson About Measurement

Mark 4:21-25

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

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

By Mike Feazell



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

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

I wish I could say this phenomenon only pertained to driving. But the truth is, I find it far easier to forgive myself for just about anything than to forgive the same mistakes in others.

Jesus casts the spotlight on this all too human tendency when he says, “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.”

At first glance, this might seem to be a simple matter of cause and effect: you forgive and then your act of forgiveness will merit forgiveness for you. But to understand Jesus’ statement on those legalistic terms would be a mistake.

Jesus makes a similar point in Matthew 18:35, when he says, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

It might be easy to assume from this statement that God forgives us on the basis of our forgiveness of others. But that would be a false assumption. God forgives us on the basis of Jesus’ perfect sacrifice on our behalf and in our place.

In these statements, Jesus is not prescribing a new form of legalism; he is describing the nature of hearts that trust in him. For example, when we trust in Christ, we no longer have anything to hide. The day will come, of course, when nothing remains hidden (verses 21-23), and that is true whether we trust in Christ or not. But for those who do trust him, that day is in effect already here—they have nothing to hide from him.

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

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

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

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

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



# Divided by Faith—

Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith

By Terry Akers

As a new century emerges in black-white relations in America, sociologists Michael O. Emerson of Rice University and Christian Smith of the University of North Carolina have written a book examining evangelicalism's role in this 300-year-old American dilemma.

*Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, published by Oxford University Press in 2000, is not a theological book, but it seeks to expose certain theological weaknesses in American evangelicalism.

The purpose of this study is to educate American evangelicals toward a deeper thinking regarding race relations—beyond the cultural tools and what they view as simplistic solutions that have shaped a mostly one-dimensional worldview over the last several centuries.

Emerson and Smith discuss how evangelical preconceptions cause them to miss the fuller picture in the multifaceted and complex nature of this sociological condition that exists despite government's and religion's best intentions and efforts to heal it.

Their analysis argues that certain weaknesses in evangelical thought actually cause, to some extent, the perpetuation of the very racial divisions they minister against and oppose.

As stated in the front flap, "despite their good intentions, evangelicals may actually be preserving America's racial chasm." It goes on to say that "most white evangelicals see no systematic discrimina-



tion against blacks; indeed, they deny the existence of any ongoing racial problem in the United States."

Evangelicals blame such things as the liberal media, the black culture, unethical black leaders and the inability of African Americans to get over the past. The authors argue, however, that these attitudes are the natural outgrowth of their theological worldview rooted in individualism, free will, personal relationships, anti-structuralism and pre-millennial eschatology—the belief that world conditions will only worsen until Christ returns—so there is no need to bother with social issues.


This, along with the isolation experienced in their mostly segregated churches and neighborhoods, makes it difficult for white evangelicals to see the pervasive and systematic injustice that perpetuates inequality, going on every day in the real world of Black America.

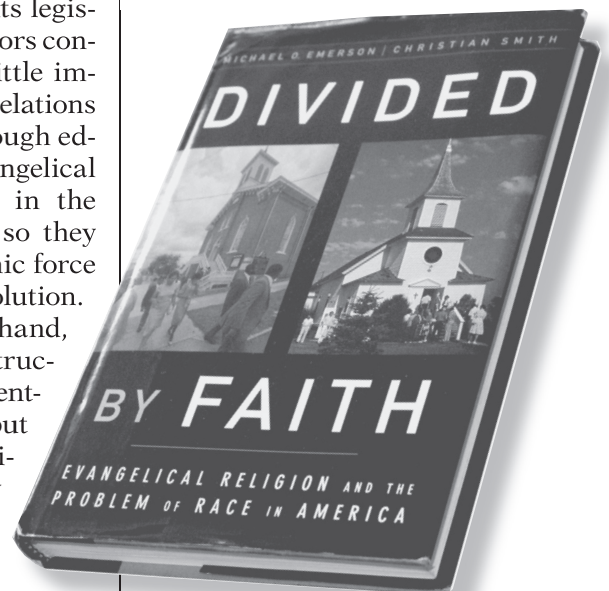
Since the great civil rights legislation of the 1960s, the authors contend that there has been little improvement in black-white relations in America. They seek, through education, to engage the evangelical community sociologically, in the issue of race in America, so they will become a more dynamic force toward an eventual real solution. They point out, on the one hand, the ineffectiveness of the structural remedies of government-administered programs, but also the incomplete spiritual resolutions offered by evangelicals.

This, they claim, is the result of their honest but

simplistic, one-dimensional thinking. The professors suggest that evangelicals incorporate the sociological dimension into their spiritual faith, and begin challenging the social systems that promote discrimination and racialization.

The authors recognize the importance of racial reconciliation (repentance and forgiveness) as a critical first step to improving race relations in America. They go on to demonstrate that the real healing and peace that occur beyond initial reconciliation can come only through the internal healing that is provided in the gospel of grace.

For evangelicals, this means moving beyond a mere identification of the gospel to its internalization. For secular society, it means realizing that all human-based efforts will fail and the pain of racialization can only be relieved through the cross of Christ. After conversion, the old ways no longer work—true racial healing comes only through God's redemptive work in new creation. 



# Plan for spiritual success

A study of 2 Peter 1

By Michael Morrison



The second letter of Peter is written **“to those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours”** (v. 1, TNIV throughout). This could apply to Christians anywhere, so Peter’s letter is called a general epistle (sometimes called a catholic epistle, after the Greek word *katholikos*, meaning general), because it was not written to a specific church.

We are familiar with Paul’s teaching that we receive righteousness by faith in Christ. Peter has turned this around to say that we receive faith through the righteousness of Christ. Because Christ is good, he has given us the faith that we need to accept him. We have a relationship with God only because of his mercy.

Peter then greets the readers: **“Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord”** (v. 2). Peace comes from knowing God, as he is revealed to us in Jesus.

## Making sure

Peter begins the next verse by saying, **“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life.”** All of salvation is a gift, through knowing Christ—**“through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness”** (v. 3).

Through God’s glory and goodness, Peter says, **“he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires”** (v. 4). The gift of salvation not only shows the goodness of God, it also shows his glory—it shows that he is worthy of worship.

What aspects of the divine nature may we participate in? Love, joy, peace, goodness, holiness and eternal life. Salvation involves not just future life, but also power in the present to escape the sinful desires that used to control us. This self-control is not a requirement for salvation, but

a benefit of salvation. In Christ we are freed from sin so we can walk in his righteousness.

Since God has given us his power, Peter advises us to **“make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love”** (vv. 5-7). These do not necessarily come in this sequence, of course—we grow in all of these areas at the same time without ever reaching perfection in any.

Then Peter gives us this promise: **“For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (v. 8). Yes, if we are growing spiritually, the knowledge that God gives us will not go to waste. He teaches us and strengthens us so that it will make a difference in our lives.

**“But if any of you do not have them, you are nearsighted and blind, and have forgotten that you have been cleansed from your past sins”** (v. 9). If we aren’t trying to improve, then we will be unproductive. The knowledge of God’s grace and mercy should cause us to want spiritual growth and to want to please the one who saves us.

Since God has saved us and given us spiritual strength, Peter exhorts us: **“Make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”** (vv. 10-11). Peter does not say what will happen if we fail—he simply exhorts us to be diligent. Our effort will be richly rewarded.

Peter knows our weaknesses and the need for frequent reminders. Yet, he does not want his exhortation to come across as an insult, so he comments: **“I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think**

**it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body”** (vv. 12-13). Paul also uses the metaphor of a tent as a body (2 Cor. 5:1-10); the idea is

**Salvation involves not just future life, but also power in the present to escape the sinful desires that used to control us. This self-control is not a requirement for salvation, but a benefit of salvation.**

that a person's physical body is a temporary housing for a spiritual life. The body will be resurrected (1 Cor. 15) and God will give us an eternal home (1 Cor. 15:53; 2 Cor. 5:1). Peter doesn't tell us as much as we'd like to know on this topic (nor does Paul), because he has a different purpose: exhorting Christian growth.

He uses the metaphor of tent to describe his own death: **"I know that I will soon put it [the tent] aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things"** (2 Pet. 1:14-15). As Peter sees that his time of departure draws near (tradition says that Nero had him killed in A.D. 64), he puts his exhortations into writing so that we will have a regular reminder that our Savior wants us to continue to grow.

### The basis of authority

Peter also reminds the readers of his basis of authority: **"For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty"** (v. 16). We didn't just make up the stories in an elaborate hoax, he says. Nor are they myths (like Aesop's fables) designed to teach truth through imaginative events. No, these things about Jesus really happened—we were there, and we saw it.

He then uses the Transfiguration as an example: **"He [Jesus] received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased' [Matt. 17:5]. We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain"** (2 Pet. 1:17-18).

Out of all the stories that Peter could have told, why did he pick the Transfiguration, rather than the resurrection or ascension? Perhaps this was the most eye-opening event for Peter—when he heard a distinct voice from God himself. The Transfiguration shows that Jesus had divine glory even before his resurrection; and the glory that Peter saw then made it easier for him to understand and believe Jesus

when he promised to return in power and glory.

Peter seems to refer to the Second Coming in the next verses, too: **"We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts"**

(v. 19). Peter points us to the Old Testament prophecies of the Day of the Lord, and we need to live with the knowledge that the day of reward will come.

The prophecies are trustworthy not just because we have seen many of them fulfilled—they are reliable because God caused them to be written. **"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit"** (vv. 20-21).

The prophets did not make up their stories, either, and they didn't always understand how the predictions would be fulfilled. But the prophecies came from God as the Holy Spirit caused them to be written. This does not mean that God dictated the exact spelling of every word, or the precise choice of

every word. But the meaning came from God, and the message can be trusted. 🦋



The Transfiguration shows that Jesus had divine glory even before his resurrection; and the glory that Peter saw then made it easier for him to understand and believe Jesus when he promised to return in power and glory.

### Questions for discussion

- How does spiritual strength come from knowledge about Christ? (v. 3)
- What aspects of the divine nature do I desire the most? (v. 4)
- Do my imperfections make me try harder, or make me quit trying?
- Am I annoyed when preachers remind me of things I already know? (v. 12)
- What story in the Gospels do I find most compelling? (v. 17)
- How well did the prophets understand their own prophecies? (v. 20)

## Lectionary Readings for February 2005

Most of February is in the season called Lent, which is a period of self-examination and discipline before Easter. It begins on Ash Wednesday, which falls this year on Feb. 9. In Roman Catholic churches, ashes are placed on the forehead of each person as a reminder that we will all die and return to dust.

Feb. 6  
Transfiguration Sunday  
Ex. 24:12-18  
Psalm 2 or 99  
2 Peter 1:16-21  
Matt. 17:1-9

Feb. 9  
Ash Wednesday  
Joel 2 or Isaiah 58  
Psalm 51  
2 Cor. 5:20-6:10  
Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Feb. 13  
Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-7  
Psalm 32  
Rom. 5:12-19  
Matt. 4:1-11

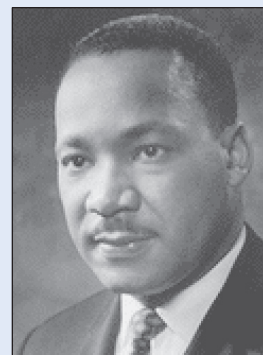
Feb. 20  
Gen. 12:1-4  
Psalm 121  
Rom. 4:1-5, 13-17  
John 3:1-17

Feb. 27  
Ex. 17:1-7  
Psalm 95  
Rom. 5:1-11  
John 4:5-42

## Church History Corner

### The Life and Times of Martin Luther King Jr. 1929-1968

It's fitting during Black History Month in February that we remember the work and vision of Martin Luther King Jr., a major leader of the civil rights movement beginning in the mid-1950s. Americans celebrate his birthday as a national holiday each January, recalling the struggle to end racism and bigotry in America. King was an eloquent Baptist minister who advocated and participated in nonviolent means to achieve civil right for blacks and equality for all.



Martin Luther King, Jr.

King received a bachelor of divinity degree from Crozier Theological Seminary in 1951 and earned a doctor of philosophy degree from Boston University in 1955. He came from a long line of Baptist ministers. His father was pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, and in 1960, King moved to the city to pastor his father's congregation. King was chosen as the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957.

In 1963, he was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, after a nonviolent protest that led to a confrontation with Public Safety Commissioner "Bull" Connor and municipal authorities. While in jail, King was criticized by a group of white clergymen who blamed him for inciting the violence and who voiced concerns about his civil rights strategy. It was then that he penned his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail."

King ended his letter with these words: "I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."

Then in August 1963 came King's most soaring and hopeful civil rights rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Here he delivered his rallying "I Have a Dream" speech.

For his work to end segregation and discrimination, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. King was only 35 years old when he accepted the prize in December of that year on behalf of all who participated in the Civil Rights Movement, making him the youngest recipient of the award in history.

But the seeds of human hatred and bitterness cut short King's life less than four years later. On April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, he was shot to death by James Earl Ray. King was only 39 years old. Though he never wavered from his position and practice that nonviolence must remain the approach of the civil rights movement, he died a martyr's death from an assassin's bullet. 🦋