



Comic Relief

Illustrator Javier Saltares explains why it is time to take comics seriously.



I think God hates me!

A cry for help that we just could not resist.

OCHRISTIANdysssey

December 2006/January 2007

Exploring Life and Faith



What does Jesus want for Christmas?

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Letters to the Editor

I love the format of the new *Christian Odyssey*. The articles are great and it is a very attractive magazine.

SA, email

Mike Feazell's thoughts on eternal punishment in "Let God be God" brought desperately needed logic to the subject. I wish every Christian and non-Christian alike could benefit from reading it. The concept that God would cast those who had never heard of Jesus into an eternal hellfire is probably the most destructive belief in all Christendom. It is no doubt responsible for great anguish among Christians who fear for their loved ones, and for many potential converts rejecting Christianity because some of its followers are spreading such a cruel and illogical notion.

MC, email

I serve as a volunteer at a McAlester, OK, non-profit organization called "Oklahomans for Independent Living." O.I.L. provides instruction, encouragement, transportation and other special services to assist physically challenged people to live their lives as independently as possible. This is a wonderful, loving, caring organization that is seriously concerned about the welfare of the people it serves.

When I showed the director of O.I.L. April Hottle's "Making Friends with the Disabled" in the October/November issue, he expressed his appreciation. What a blessing it would be if everyone who enjoys good health could read this article.

Mr. Mike Ward, our director, has asked me to seek your permission to copy and distribute copies of the article to the public at our community activities. Would you please grant us permission to do so?

RN, email

Yes, of course. We are glad it helped. (Requests for permission to reprint articles from Christian Odyssey should be directed to the Managing Editor, michael.morrison@wcg.org.)

The association of our Lord Jesus Christ after in his resurrected body being compared in the same sentence with Harry Potter at the railroad station (August-September p6) was degrading. I understand you are trying to make a point or somehow bring it into today's perspective. But, frankly I was insulted that those two names could appear in the same sentence.

LS email

J. Halford responds: I assure you no insult was intended, or ever will be. But I think you will agree that it is important to teach the Bible in away that is understood in contemporary culture. Remember the story in Acts when Paul was in Athens. Looking around for a way to attract attention, he saw an altar to an 'unknown God'. (Acts 17:22) There is no question that the Athenians had dedicated this altar to a pagan deity who they did not know, but were afraid to leave out. Paul used the pagan god to begin to introduce them to the one true God. How is that any different to the way I used Harry Potter?

Thank you for sending me *Christian Odyssey*. I am enjoying reading it from cover to cover.

DG, Rushville, PA

Letters for this section should be addressed to "Letters to the Editor." Send your letters to Worldwide Church of God, PO Box 5005, Glendora, CA 91740-5005, or by electronic mail to john.halford@wcg.org.

The editor reserves the right to use letters so addressed in whole or in part, and to include your name and edit the letter for clarity and space. We welcome your comments.

I've Been Reading...

Classic Christianity, by Bob George

Reviewed by Alfred Nelson

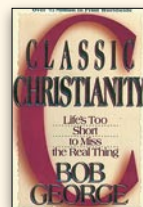
Bob George says this book is about his search for classic Christianity—one man's journey to rediscover "the real thing."

Having given up his quest to become a millionaire at age 36 and going into Christian service full time, he was "doing all the right things," but felt his life was more bogged down than the freeway traffic he was stuck in.

He found the answer in God's unconditional grace. With grace as the foundation of the Christian life, one can begin to understand the difference between punishment and discipline. Punishment is a penalty imposed on an offender for a crime or wrongdoing. It looks backward to the offense, and is impersonal and automatic, with a goal of administering justice. Discipline is training that develops self-control, character and ability—looking forward to a ben-

eficial result. It is a personal and continuous experience (growing in grace and knowledge).

The author also has some thought-provoking ideas about what causes complacency in a Christian's life. He explains, "It is an emphasis on the cross and forgiveness of sins to the exclusion of teaching people about sharing Christ's resurrected life that really leads to complacency." Throughout the New Testament, the dominant motivation for godly living is the love and grace of God. Paul talks about our motivation and behavior in Ephesians 4:1: "As a prisoner for the Lord, thus, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." We are now in the process of becoming what we already are—perfect in God's sight!



Classic Christianity, by Bob George. Softcover from Harvest House Publishers; retail price \$11.99.

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While we were talking about it, a little girl showed us how it is done.

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If you knew Susie...

By John Halford

A dear old friend died recently. It was sad, but not tragic, because she was well into her 90s, and was enjoying life until the day she decided it was time to “go home.” All my memories of Susie Stevens are happy ones.

At her funeral, her son explained that she was a great-great-grandmother, and she remembered in her youth knowing her great-great-grandmother. That matriarch died in 1918, aged at least 107. So she had been born before the battle of Waterloo (1815), and while some of America’s Founding Fathers were still alive. To know Susie Stevens was to have touched the past.

Makes you think, doesn’t it?

So let’s project this forward. I am in my mid 60s and I have clear memories of the Second World War, Winston Churchill, the first Sputnik satellites and the first jet airplanes. My youngest granddaughter is nearly three. Supposing she lives to be 100, which is entirely possible. Life expectancy is increasing, at least in the developed world. So little Nikki might still be around in 2107. And she may remember old “Pop pop”—who was alive “way back when we first landed on the moon.”

must now be confronted before they overwhelm us. The future is going to need people who can think generously, act decisively and put the needs of others on the same level as their own. Either that, or life will not be worth living.

Our children and grandchildren need not be burdened with these issues just yet. But it is not too soon for them to become aware of them. There are solutions, but only if future generations can learn to live and think less selfishly than we have done.

So let’s get them started. Every child looks forward to being asked “What do you want for your birthday?” So, this year, why not ask them “What do you think Jesus wants for his birthday?” And then help them give him what he wants. (Our article beginning on page 5 will give you some ideas about how to do this.)

Never underestimate the spirituality of children. You will find them very willing to share with those less fortunate than themselves, if only they know how. One of my first memories is of my mother taking my brother and me to the local orphanage on a cold and bleak war-time Christmas Eve. We were going to give the orphans a big box of candy that we had saved up. This was sacrifice indeed, because

in wartime Britain (I told you I remember the war) all candy was strictly rationed. I still remember how good I felt as we trudged home through the snow. I had shared my blessings, such as they

were, with some kids who had even less than I did.

So this year I am going to ask my grandchildren, “What does Jesus want for Christmas?” I’ll get them something for themselves as well, of course, because I love them. But I am going to suggest that we put some of the “Christmas money” to work to make a difference in the lives of people less fortunate than we are. I am fairly sure they will be excited about the opportunity. And perhaps begin to think in a way that will make an even bigger difference as they take their place in the world.

Maybe, 100 years from now, in a world that I hope and pray is a better one than this, they will remember old Pop-pop and his rather unusual Christmas present. If so, I have touched the future. ●

“The future will need people who can think generously, act decisively and put the needs of others on the same level as their own.”



What sort of a world will it be then? What sort of a person will she be? Well, Jesus Christ may have returned, but we can’t count on that. So we had better do all we can to prepare the coming generations for their future. For those of us reading this magazine, we hope that means their future as Christians.

Through no fault of their own, our children and grandchildren are about to inherit some rather nasty problems. It looks as if we are the last generation to have the luxury of interminable “consultations,” inconsequential “conferences,” dithering “protocols” and fudged “bi-lateral agreements.” The chickens that we have been waving off are coming home to roost. The questions of pollution, climate change, over-population, food shortages, poverty and so on

What does Jesus want for Christmas?

Shortly after Jesus was born, wise men brought him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These were quite valuable—presents that were traditionally offered to a king.

Perhaps they came in handy, because Joseph and Mary, with their infant son, were shortly to flee from Herod and spend several years in Egypt as refugees.

Those days are long gone. Jesus, resurrected and glorified, is restored to his position at the Father's right hand. He wants for nothing; he is the Lord of all Creation. But he tells us that he does still have "needs." Jesus died for us, and he lives for us. And in a parable in Matthew's Gospel he reminds us that he still suffers with us.

"When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why:

*"I was hungry and you fed me
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.'*

"Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'"
Matthew 25:31—40, *Message Bible*



“Suppose we use the Christmas season to identify what is important to Jesus and share our blessings with those living in poverty and loneliness?”

Jesus is telling us that his kingdom—which will eventually bring salvation and justice to all—is even now concerned with the poor and the underprivileged. He expects those he has called and commissioned to represent that kingdom on earth to share his concern.

Getting on Jesus' right side

To celebrate Jesus' birthday has become a firmly entrenched Christian tradition, typically marked by the exchange of gifts with our loved ones, acquaintances and perhaps even people we simply want to impress. But suppose we let Christmas take on an even deeper meaning this year? Suppose we use the Christmas giving season to identify with what is important to Jesus—forgiveness, freedom, peace of mind, restored hope and a new way of life?

There are ways we can do this. In the next few pages, let's take a look at several ideas that might help us share our blessings with those who live in poverty and loneliness, some simple and practical opportunities to help us reach out to our fellow human beings who are frequently overlooked and ignored. Some of these people are in other parts of the world, far out of our view. Others are close to home; almost 36 million people in America live in poverty! In fact, wherever we live, there are people nearby who need help.

This Christmas, what if we were to reach out to these people in a practical way, confident in the knowledge that "whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me"? After all, isn't that what Jesus would want for Christmas?

Charity gift catalogs

"I'd like to help, but where do I start?"

Why not send for a gift catalog from one of the organizations that specialize in changing lives in practical ways. Just to browse through the pages of the catalogs from World Vision or Church World Service gets the imagination going.

Just \$25 provides an underprivileged American with desperately needed school supplies for a year. Or how about \$40 for a warm winter kit, which buys a warm shirt, a thick sweater, gloves, a hat, a coat and some good shoes for a poor child facing one of Eastern Europe's bitter winters?

A slightly larger investment can literally transform the lives of the members of a poor family. Just \$100 can provide a loan for an impoverished mother in Africa or Asia to start a small business and \$150 buys a treadle pump, saving a peasant farmer hundreds of hours of backbreaking labor.

Even something as simple as a hoe is beyond the means of some families. You might not appreciate a hoe as a Christmas present. But there are many people for whom it would make a real difference in their ability to garden and farm.

These charity gift catalogs are colorful and inspiring. They will show you what has been done and what needs to be done.

CONTACT INFO

Church World Service

- 1-800-297-1518
- www.churchworldservice.org

World Vision

- 1-888-511-6511
- www.worldvisiongifts.org

Be an "angel" to a soldier

By Paul Kroll

Would you like to support an American soldier in Afghanistan and Iraq, some of whom have been wounded, sometimes severely? Now you can, through "Soldiers' Angels," whose motto is "May no soldier go unloved."

In the summer of 2003, Sgt. Brandon Varn wrote home from Iraq about the plight of some of his fellow soldiers who were getting little, if any, moral support from home. His mom, Patti Patton-Bader, great-niece of Gen. George S. Patton, was greatly saddened to hear his story. She had been sending him letters each week and large packages filled with toiletries, snacks and other goodies, which he was sharing with other soldiers who received nothing.



When Brandon told his mom about the soldiers' plight, she asked her friends and extended family if they would care to write to a soldier or two. That was just the beginning. Within a few months Patti was coordinating an Internet support community, and "Soldiers' Angels" was born.

Through the efforts of Patti's small army of volunteers, thousands of people began donating money and sending cards, letters and care packages to deployed and wounded military personnel in military hospitals. Merchants began donating services, money and items for mailing,

Soldier's Angels is now a 501(c)(3) non-profit orga-

nization incorporated in the state of Nevada, accepting tax-deductible contributions. Staffed by volunteers, Angels supports thousands of American servicemen and servicewomen.

Soldiers' Angels has been featured in local and national newspapers, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, and mentioned on radio and television programs. Its operations are many and varied, including its Holidays for Heroes program, Hero Packs, First Response Backpacks, Guardian Angels for Soldier's Pets, Cool and Sand Scarves, Sewing for Heroes, Blankets of Hope, Saving Soles and many others.

The Saving Soles project provides extra boots to soldiers because the military issues only two pairs. Boots are easily ruined by the sand, heat and rough terrain of Iraq and Afghanistan. Project Valour-IT provides voice-controlled software and voice-activated laptop computers to severely wounded soldiers at military hospitals, especially those recovering from hand or arm injuries and amputations.

Through its "Holiday for Heroes" program, Soldier's Angels distributes tens of thousands of Christmas stockings or bags filled with various treats, such as phone cards so that troops can call home, and provides blankets for wounded soldiers with a note that says, "Dear Wounded Hero, this was made for you." Volunteers help by packing Christmas bags, sending money to buy stocking items and sending out flyers or donating items.

You can adopt an individual soldier, sailor, airman or marine as that soldier's "angel." In this program, you send a specific soldier letters on a weekly basis and packages each month—including such items as snacks, games, books, CDs and DVDs, and selected toiletries. Soldiers' Angels provides full instruction and guidance on how to adopt a serviceman or woman.

You can also donate frequent flier miles so that troops can be quickly reunited with loved ones—and Soldiers' Angels takes care of all the coordinating details. You can even donate a car you are no longer using.

CONTACT INFO

For information about the many possible ways you can help, contact Soldiers' Angels

- www.soldiersangels.org
- 615-676-0239—Voicemail.

(They promise to call you back within 24 hours.)

- email: soldiersangels@gmail.com.

Remember that before you make any donations or send any items, you need to visit their website at www.soldiersangels.org or contact them by e-mail or telephone for necessary information and instructions.

Get their goat

By Roger Lippross

Let me introduce you to Dina, a poor widow with two small children who lives in one of the thousands of villages on the flood plains in Bangladesh. Since her husband died, she works long days in the rice fields. She could never make ends meet, and did not expect to ever get out of debt. Then something happened to change her life, the life of her children and their children to come. She was given a goat.



Just an ordinary goat. But it showed the way out of poverty. The goat gives as much as four quarts of fresh milk every day, an unimaginable luxury for Dina's family. And as goats often do, it produced twins, increasing the little family's wealth even more. Looking after the baby goats is teaching them about livestock care, creating a future job opportunity for Dina's children. And Dina was able to give a goat to her poor neighbor, thus passing on the love she received.

What a difference a goat made. It opened a door called hope, and carried a powerful message of God's love for her, all because someone in a land far away cared about her plight.

You can start a chain reaction that will stretch across the world and keep on giving for many years to come. When you give a goat to a family, you don't lie awake at night thinking, "OK, I fed them today, but what will happen to them tomorrow?"

Just \$40 will purchase a goat from a breeder in Bangladesh, which will then be given to a well-deserving family.

CONTACT INFO

You can send the gift that keeps on giving to The Bengali Evangelical Association.

- P.O. Box 776, Bryn Mawr, Ca., 92318.
- (They will do the rest.)
- www.bengalimission.org

I was in prison and you visited me

By Rannie Childress

Do you, or does someone you know, have a friend or loved one in prison?

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, one in every 136 U.S. residents is in prison or jail.

This stunning statistic should concern us as Christians. The Bible plainly teaches us to have compassion for prisoners (Matt. 25:36-46). That does not mean we must condone their crimes. But Jesus is in the life-changing business, and most men and women in prison need to make some serious life changes. They also need something so many people in prison have never experienced—unconditional love. They need to know they have a Savior who loves them unconditionally, and who died, for *them*.

A display of Christian love toward a prisoner may bear fruit in a way you would never dream of! I know what I am talking about here. You see, I spent just short of 15 years in prison. If it had not been for some Christian people who befriended me, I would still be there. My sentence was 50 years!

I became a Christian while in prison, where I experienced the life-changing event of Jesus Christ entering my life. I have never been the same! I had visits from pastors and their wives, as well as from lay members, and at times I was overwhelmed with the concern and love displayed toward me. I received letters and packages (when allowed by the warden), which provided just that little touch of home that I missed so much. The Christian friends that I made during those years are still my friends today.

Prison is a lonely place. The dreariness of day-to-day existence can be tormenting. Go into your walk-in closet, dim the light and sit down. Now, stay there until meal



time, then go eat something you really do not care for, go back to your closet and sit down, take a shower (with several other people present), go back to your closet and sit down. Do this for several days, weeks, months, maybe years, and you will begin to get some idea of what it is like to be incarcerated!

Prison is also frightening and at times dangerous. But then, it is not designed to be a “nice” place. However, with the help of Jesus Christ and some of his people, time spent behind bars *can* become a positive training ground for future life, rather than negative, wasted years.

I am now the executive director of a residential substance abuse program, and I am involved in a prison ministry. I have a Master’s Degree in Counseling and am a National Certified Addiction Counselor, Level II. Not bad for a high school drop-out who was sentenced to 50 years in prison. I share this not to boast, but to give honor and glory to the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and all that he has done in my life. I owe this new life to him. He came to me in that awful place where I thought I would end my days, and he did it through the lives of Christians and through their acts of Christian mercy and love.

Our acts of Christian love toward inmates and their families can and do bear fruit!

Obviously, not everyone has the inclination or the temperament to become directly involved with a prison ministry. But what better way to show Christian love than by helping family members of inmates, especially their children and spouses?

The Christmas season can be especially lonely and stressful for inmates and their family members. First, the pain of separation is intense. Added to that is the knowledge that you cannot provide the gifts and greetings that make Christmas so memorable for children. But there are organizations that exist for the express purpose of filling that gap. Through them you can play a part in bringing some seasonal joy and warmth to a lonely prisoner and his or her family. Believe me, as one who knows, it makes a much bigger difference than you might think.

CONTACT INFO

If you would like to help, you can access a wealth of information by contacting:

• **Family & Corrections Network**

32 Oak Grove Road
Palmyra, VA 22963

- Phone: 434-589-3036
- Fax: 434-589-6520
- email: fcn@fcnetwork.org
- www.fcnetwork.org

This organization lists numerous groups that are dedicated to helping inmates and their families, such as Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship and their Angel Tree program, which is dedicated to supplying Christmas presents to inmates' children.

So, I challenge you to not forget the prisoners and their families this Christmas season. Remember "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matt. 25:40, NIV).

Rannie Childress, MS, NCAC II, is Executive Director of CED Fellowship House, in Gadsden, Alabama. If you have questions on how to help prison inmates, he would be glad to help. e-mail: cedfsh@bellsouth.net.

Fair's fair

By Brenda Plonis

When I was a child, a "fair trade" meant that I swapped a pony sticker for a jelly bracelet.

I heard stories about "sweat shops" in other parts of the world, where children my age were forced to sit at sewing machines all day to produce the jeans I loved so much. I enjoyed sewing, so I didn't really understand



why that was so bad—until I discovered how little money those children made. I was shocked to learn that I made more money with my allowance for helping out in the garden than those kids made working all day and half the night.

I have spent the last ten years living in and traveling through places like Ukraine and West Africa. I have seen the poverty firsthand, and I am acutely aware of how the

products filling our shelves and closets are made.

Most of us take the plentiful supply of affordable consumer goods for granted. We are concerned about getting a "good deal," but do we ever ask if a fair percentage of that money reaches the hands that made them? That is the goal of the Fair Trade Organization (FTO).

The FTO has made a commitment to social justice in which employees and farmers are treated and paid fairly, sustainable environmental practices are followed and long-term trade relationships are fostered. The FTO website explains that its goal is to benefit the artisans they work with, not maximize profits. By reducing the number of middlemen and minimizing overhead costs, they can return up to 40 percent of the retail price of an item to the people who make it. Working conditions—and workers—can then become safer and more dignified. Many producers who work with the FTO have committed time and money to build health clinics and support other community projects in their villages.

The FTO markets its products under the distinctive "Fair Trade" logo. These products are not always easy to find in behemoth one-stop megastores, although I have noticed the occasional product stocked on their shelves. I have also seen Fair Trade coffee in Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks. But just imagine the impact if we all, as we celebrate Jesus' birthday in our richly blessed nations, began to ask, "Do you have anything that is 'Fair Trade'?"

Here is a list of businesses that I know distribute Fair Trade products in the USA.

CONTACT INFO

Fair Indigo:

Women's and men's clothing, gifts, accessories and coffee.

- www.fairindigo.com

Starbucks:

North America's largest purchaser of Fair Trade Certified coffee.

- www.starbucks.com

The Body Shop:

In August 2006, The Body Shop announced a new range of preservative-free aloe skin and body products—the first in the world to feature fair trade aloe, by paying a fair price to aloe farmers in the El Progreso region of Guatemala. Other products include: toiletries, makeup and body items for men, women and children. Buy a prepackaged gift basket or create your own, or purchase a gift card.

- www.thebodyshop.com

Ten Thousand Villages:

The largest fair trade organization in the United States. They carry unique housewares and gifts from around the world.

- www.tenthousandvillages.com

The Tree

By Mike Feazell

The evergreen tree symbolizes the faithfulness of God,
remaining forever the same,
even during the darkness and cold of winter.

The lights or candles on the tree symbolize our Savior Jesus Christ,
whose life was the Light of all people,
the Light that shines in the darkness
and which enlightens everyone.

Some people put red bows on the tree,
symbolizing the shed blood of our Savior,
by which our sins are forgiven.

Ornaments symbolize fruit,
which in turn symbolizes the gracious gifts and provision
of God for his people.

Just as the Cross of Christ
was a tree stripped of its greenery and dignity
and made into a dead post,
so our sin has stripped us of beauty and dignity
and resulted in death.

Through the death of the Son of God on the dead tree,
and by his resurrection and life,
salvation and true life have come to the whole creation,
especially to us,
whose dignity and value and beauty has been restored
through faith in him.

The splendor of the Christmas tree,
decorated with light and color and beauty,
symbolizes our restored and reconciled state by the grace of God.

Our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ love us,
and have made us beautiful
by the good things they have done for us.

The gifts under the tree
symbolize the dignity and value God has given to human beings
through Jesus' saving work.

We give gifts to one another on this day for one reason only:
God sent his Son into the world to save us
and make us his children,
and has placed his love into us
that we might love one another, even as he loves us.

That's what Christmas is about—the love of God.
And that's the story the Christmas tree tells us during this Christmas season. ●



Prayer:

Does it make any difference?

A discussion with Philip Yancey

Multi-award winning writer Philip Yancey has written books that have explored many of the mysteries and wonders of spiritual life.

Christian Odyssey's Editor John Halford recently met with Yancey in London to discuss his latest book, *Prayer: Does it make any difference?*

Christian Odyssey: This new book on prayer seems different in tone to your previous ones. It seems more—well, pastoral. *Am I right?*

Philip Yancey: My natural instinct is to be a pilgrim, wandering around and seeing what I can honestly say about a subject. But I learned so much that I became more than just a pilgrim. I became someone who wanted to share, and so there are parts that are more pastoral than anything I have written before. I felt different as I was writing this.

CO: The book seems not so much about how to pray as why to pray.

Yancey: Right. I do talk about various techniques, but what I am not trying to do is to put forth a formula that everyone should buy into and follow my rules. Some of them I find quite helpful, but not everybody will. The important thing about prayer is to lower the uptightness about it and encourage people to be straightforward and honest and to cultivate a relationship with God. The more I set forth some sort of formula the more I encourage the feeling of “I am inferior and I am not doing it right.”

CO: This is quite a long and comprehensive book. If there is one thing you would want the reader to learn from reading it, what would it be?

Yancey: To see prayer not so much as a discipline and more of a privilege. It is for our benefit in every way. So much of what we are asked to do as Christians is often presented as a legalistic works-oriented way—do this and God will like you more. But I can't think of anything in a Christian life that is not meant to enhance our lives. God



“The more we feel guilt about something, the less we are going to do it. God is inviting us to do something good!”

is not trying to make us small. He is trying to encourage us to be larger than we are. And we can't really do that without a deep connection with God, and that connection is prayer.

So I would want my reader to emerge from the book not feeling guilty, but that prayer makes me feel good. Someone has told me, “Finally we have a book on prayer that does not make me feel guilty.” I like that comment. The more we feel guilty about something, the less we are

going to do it. God is not forcing us to do something onerous. He is inviting us to do something that is good for us.

CO: How would you help someone who said “That is OK for religious people, but I am not the sort of person God wants to listen to?”

Yancey: Jesus told a story about two people who prayed. One was a religious professional, theologically trained, and the other was a person who said, “I am not the kind of person God wants to hear from. Have mercy on me, a sinner.” God listened to him, and not the other. The one had words but not the heart, and the other had nothing but his heart. He simply said, “God, I need help.” Often the only prayer we have is “help,” and I think

he later said, “In Christ there is no male or female, no gentile or slave,” it was a radical change, and it takes someone who had prayed that way for 30 years to truly appreciate what a dramatic freedom—a leveling—it was.

So I am sure I missed out on a lot of fun things because I lived in a very rule-oriented environment. Although it probably stopped me doing a lot of things I should not have been doing anyway.

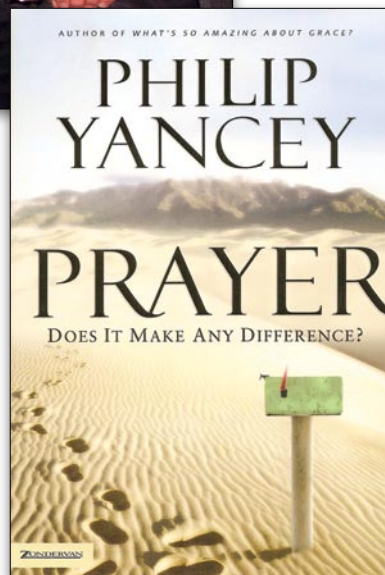
I do things now that the church I grew up in would certainly frown on. It is freedom won the hard way. I wrote a book called *What’s So Amazing about Grace?* It is amazing.

CO: You have written a very practical and positive book.

While researching it, did you come up with anything that is so toxic to effective prayer that you could say, “Whatever else you do, you must not do that”?

Yancey: Don’t fake it. A lot of us are like children playing “peek-a-boo,” hiding their faces in their hands so you can’t see them. They are the only ones being fooled. But a lot of us do that in prayer. We come to God, put on a smile and make ourselves look good, but we aren’t fooling God. God knows the secrets.

The more we put on a mask, the more we misrepresent ourselves. I heard a great sermon about Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. You don’t hear much about them, except in sermons on Stewardship Sunday. But this preacher asked what it was that they did wrong. It was not that they did not give their money away. Peter said they didn’t have to. But they misrepresented themselves to God.



Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006).



God listens to those prayers more than the “Thee’s” and “Thou’s,” and all the eloquent things we say.

CO: Many of our readers come from a legalistic background, similar to yours. This can have a negative effect on prayer. Have you any advice for people struggling with this?

Yancey: I am actually grateful for my [legalistic] background even though it is not something I would want to repeat. I once wrote an article called, “What I learned from Fundamentalism.” One of the things I learned was a built-in discipline. I learned all the books of the Bible, and all the kings of the Bible, and I am grateful for that.

I have a friend who talks about the Harlem Globetrotters team. She says you have to be really good to be that bad! The way they play, they must really know what they are doing. You have to be disciplined to be free. Not only that, you have to have been a legalist to really appreciate what it means to be free.

Even God started with law and brought us to grace. The apostle Paul prayed every day for 30 years, “Thank you that I am not a woman, a Gentile or a slave.” When

is full of what God puts up with from us—complaints, anger, remorse, repentance. But if you pretend to be something you are not, he can’t work with you. ●

Elizabeth

By Joyce Catherwood

(Luke 1:5–8)

Mary danced across our threshold. Even after several days of mountainous travel, her lovely dark eyes sparkled and she was full of smiles as she greeted us. Her tunic was tattered and dusty from traveling and her sandals were worn thin. Stones and thorns had etched deep scratches into her feet, but Mary didn't notice as she moved about lightly with the ease of youth. My little cousin was accustomed to trekking up and down narrow hillside footpaths tending sheep or carrying water.

And now she was carrying greatness, the Son of God, supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit. I was also with child, miraculously conceiving in my old age after spending many barren years of disappointment and disgrace. At the sound of Mary's voice, the babe in my womb leapt with great gladness as though he knew his Lord had entered our home. Exhilarated, I shouted: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" As we embraced, Mary burst into song, glorifying God, thrilled that she had been chosen to be the mother of Messiah—the longstanding dream of every young Jewish girl.

Over the next three months, it became clear why Mary came to me. In spite of our age difference, we had much in common. We talked about how we would both bear our firstborn child. We both knew in advance we would have sons and knew their names. We shared the same angel messenger, Gabriel, who told us our sons would be great men. We pondered the angel's words and wondered what it would be like for Mary to be mother of the Son of the Most High. We mused over how John would turn hearts back to God, preparing the way for Jesus. We wept as we realized that I, because of my age, would probably not live to see all this come about.

We shared apprehension of the birth process, having seen many a sister deliver a bundle of wrinkled newborn flesh, encircled by women, supporting and soothing the moaning mother. Women's work, it's called, while the men sit in silence in the courtyard. Little did we know that Mary would have to bring her baby into the world without feminine support, and only Joseph at her side.

My John was born as expected, with family and neighbors sharing in the festivities. And my husband, Zechariah, a priest, who was struck dumb by the angel Gabriel prior to my pregnancy, finally spoke again. He prophesied even more wondrous things about John and Jesus. John's birth was an answer to our prayer, but Gabriel said it would also strengthen Mary, showing her that nothing is impossible with God. She returned home refreshed and ready to face the cruel slander of her neighbors and dismay of her family as it became obvious that she, though not yet married, was with child.

Six months later, Mary bore her holy infant in the most humble of circumstances, unnoticed by the rest of the world. But in celestial realms, the day of Jesus' birth was cause for jubilant celebration! Shepherds in a nearby field described how the heavens opened and an angel appeared in a blaze of glory, terrifying them. The angel said: "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Messiah and Lord!" The shepherds recounted how suddenly a massive angelic choir appeared around the angel. They sang as though they were bursting with delight and amazement as they praised God in the highest, proclaiming peace on earth.

Heaven erupted in joy that day; Earth had finally received her King! ●

Quotes from *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*

- Like the people who write me letters, Jesus knows the heartbreak of unanswered prayers. His longest prayer, after all, centers in a request for unity, "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." The slightest acquaintance with church history (at recent count 34,000 distinct denominations and sects) shows how far that prayer remains from being answered. (p. 81)

A lot of us are like children playing "peek-a-boo," hiding their faces in their hands so you can't see them. But we aren't fooling God. God knows the secrets.

- Prayer is cooperation with God, a consent that opens the way for grace to work. Most of the time the Counselor communicates subtly: feeding ideas into my mind, bringing to awareness a caustic comment I just made, inspiring me to choose better than I would have done otherwise, shedding light on the hidden dangers of temptation, sensitizing me to another's needs. God's Spirit whispers rather than shouts, and brings peace not turmoil. (p. 103)

- The question that obsesses modern thinkers, "Why do bad things happen?" gets little systematic treatment in the Bible because Bible writers believed they knew why bad things happen: we live on a planet ruled by powers intent on blocking and perverting the will of God. The New Testament openly describes Satan as "the god of this age" and "the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." On a planet ruled by the Evil One we should expect to see violence, deception, disease, and all manner of opposition to the reign of God. (pp. 117-118)

- Real power rests in those who perceive history as God's own drama, who tap into a power accessible only to those who ask and seek and knock. Prayer sets God loose. As we revolt against the world's disorder in our actions and in our prayers, refusing to resign ourselves to evil, we demonstrate that there remains, in Jesus' phrase, "faith on the earth." (p. 150)

- Jesus did not waste miracles; I doubt he would have provided food for the five thousand if food stalls had been readily available nearby. (p. 256)

Comic Relief

By Javier Saltares

I have been a professional comic-book illustrator for over 20 years. I started with DC comics in 1983. The work was sporadic at first, so I kept my day jobs. In 1986, I was offered an in-house job with Marvel Comics in their production department. That's when things began to get serious for me. It didn't pay much and I wasn't doing the kind of work I wanted, but I was "in."

That experience still holds many fond memories for me. Editors began taking an interest in my work and started offering me real freelance work. Since then I have had the opportunity to work on numerous projects for many well-established companies. You may have seen my work in, say, Spiderman comics. About the same time that my comics career started, I also began my Christian career. I began attending a local congregation of the Worldwide Church of God back in 1984.

My ambition is to combine my talent as a storyteller and illustrator with my desire to share God's word, and make the comic book a useful vehicle for spreading the gospel message. Don't underestimate comics. They are an art form, and can inspire us just like music, art or poetry. The comic book is ingenious in its simplicity; pictures combined with words to convey ideas. That is why children gravitate to comics. Whenever they might get stuck on the words, they have the pictures to help them. And did you realize that comics are the most read form of literature in the world? That fact alone should make us consider them a serious means of communication. A comic book, like any book, is a tool to communicate ideas. And like any tool, it can be used to break or build.

The Dark Side

When the concept of "superhero" comics first appeared, the heroes were always represented as individuals with great moral fortitude. They had a great sense of "right" and "wrong." They sacrificed to defend what was "right" at all costs. That's what made them "superheroes."

They also had special abilities and neat gadgets to get the job done. I believe that's what struck a chord in the readers; a fantasy world where we could escape to where we could right wrongs if only we had those special abilities or gadgets. We want to believe people will do the "right" thing. Unfortunately, we're ordinary people with shortcomings. Individuals, communities and governments will let us down. I believe that inner frustration leads us to feel we should take matters into our own



hands. We become more like vigilantes than "superheroes."

Art imitates life, and so now you have the "vigilante-hero." "Consequences be damned, you'll come around to my way of thinking or else!" No due process. Unfortunately again, this resonates with us because we are frustrated with our society. But vigilantism is wrong. We have all these "heroes" dispensing *their* judgment on us instead of defending what is "right."

Not alone

When the idea of creating a Christian-based comic first came to me, I thought I was the first. "What an ingenious man I am to have this spectacular idea!" Oh boy, pride really does come before the fall. As I shared the idea with others, I quickly learned that there are literally hundreds of fine individuals working to make Christian com-



ics a reality: Jack Chick and Nate Butler, just to name a couple.

I decided to join in.

As I researched the possibilities, I came across a little studio, Community Comics, a small group of individuals who were working toward the same goals I had. What really impressed me was the

Christian worldview, but they also feel it is done without offence to personal sensibilities. Bottom line, they feel it was a fun and entertaining read. That's exactly what I am aiming for. I want kids to understand how "cool" God is. They say you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. I like this "sweet approach" because it demonstrates God's tenderness.

What next?

David's Mighty Men is selling slowly but surely, which is encouraging. I have only produced this one graphic novel with Community Comics so far, but I am hoping to do more. I have many more stories running through my head that I would love to get on paper. I go to various comic conventions and greet the fans of my secular projects, like Spiderman. But it is always a special treat when someone comes up and tells me they've read *David's Mighty Men* and how much they've enjoyed it.

I have learned very quickly that drawing the comic is merely the tip of the iceberg as far as getting it into the hands of the public. There is also marketing, advertising and promotion. You can have the greatest idea in the world, but what good is it if people don't even know it exists? That's one big obstacle many of us face in this business of Christian comics. We have to convince investors that this is a viable product.

Many parents feel that most of the comics out there are too mature for their 8-year-old. We have to gain their trust and prove to them we are capable of producing a family-friendly product (what is now being dubbed an "all-ages" comic).

As for the future, I would love to do more about *David's Mighty Men*. I have come to love those guys. It's as though they have taken on a life of their own and they are crying out to me to tell their stories. I have one other project bouncing around in my head called "Secret Agents." It is like *Highway to Heaven* with an attitude. It's about a group of angels and how they will help believers in the end times. This is going to rock. ●



Javier Saltares lives with his wife Robyn, three children, three horses, three dogs, and one cat, in Ozark, Mo.

“They say you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. I like this 'sweet approach' because it demonstrates God's tenderness.”

quality of the work they were producing. I say in all humility that Sherwin Schwartzrock, Ben Avery, and Bud Rogers are incredible professionals in what they do and fine examples of what it means to be a Christian.

Community Comics are just one studio among many trying to do this work. We share stories of encouragement and even our discouragement by phone and e-mail. It is an interesting group of people to be involved with, and I am spiritually richer for being a part of it.

David's Mighty Men

My first Christian comic, *David's Mighty Men*, is very personal for me. As much as I enjoy my regular work, and I do, it's still work. It is how I make my living. *David's Mighty Men* goes a few steps deeper for me. I love the Old Testament stories, especially the stories of David. I remember when I first learned of David's mighty men in a sermon. As soon as the preacher mentioned them, my face lit up and I thought, "What a great title for a comic. Superheroes straight out of the Bible!" So I began to develop the idea of a Christian-based comic book.

The reviews on *David's Mighty Men* have been extremely positive. We artists are always happy when our work is well received. I've had reviews from secular and Christian sources. They understand the comic has a

The Great Awakening— A “Work of God”

By Paul Kroll



In 1734, Northampton village in the colony of Massachusetts experienced a remarkable revival that became the catalyst for revivals throughout the Colonies and in England, Scotland and Germany. By the early 1740s, revival events dominated Colonial newspaper headlines from Boston to Charleston. They reported on itinerant preachers thundering out messages of eternal damnation and salvation to frightened, wailing and repentant crowds on city streets, in parks and at meetinghouses.

This series of revivals was later dubbed the “Great Awakening.” Pro-revivalists considered it a rare but “mighty work of God” equal to the Holy Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost and an echo of the Protestant Reformation.

Edwards and Whitefield

Northampton’s pastor was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), one of Colonial America’s best-known Christian theologians. Deeply involved in the Great Awakening from beginning to end, he preached, promoted and defended revival events through his many writings and contacts with other evangelicals.

In 1736 he wrote “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God.” This article soon became a popular book relating how hundreds of Northampton citizens and people in surrounding communities had been converted and saved. It became a script for spotting, staging and reporting revivals throughout Colonial America.

The young evangelical preacher, George Whitefield (1714-1770), known as the “Great Itinerant,” provided the Great Awakening with its strongest momentum. The most notable of his three evangelistic tours through the Colonies lasted between November 1739 and January 1741. During one month crowds of 8,000 or more heard Whitefield speak nearly every day. An estimated 20,000 listened to his sermons in Philadelphia and Boston. “That tour may have been the most sensational event in the history of American religion,” observed Mark A. Noll, professor of history at Wheaton College.

Jonathan Edwards’ July 8, 1741, sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” was a quintessential example of Great Awakening hell-fire and brimstone

preaching. “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire,” Edwards warned his frightened congregation.

Hell-fire message

He defended this kind of typical “scare tactic” as necessary to wake up unconverted people from their spiritual lethargy. Edwards’ grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in a 1713 sermon had said: “The misery of many Men is that they do not fear Hell...so they take a great liberty to Sin.... If they were afraid of Hell, they would be afraid of Sin.”

Revival sermons caused people in the audience to weep and scream in a frenzy of spiritual ecstasy. This rampant emotionalism was at the heart of a bitter dispute between “Old Lights” and “New Lights.” Charles Chauncy, pastor of the First Church in Boston, Massachusetts, was one of the revival’s most ardent critics. His sermon title, “Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against,” an attack on the revivalists’ manipulation of listeners’ emotions, speaks for itself.

To counter Antirevivalist arguments and to defend the authenticity of conversions, Edwards wrote his “The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God” in 1741. He sincerely believed that the Great Awakening was a “work of God” and had resulted in many genuine conversions. While admitting that excesses had occurred, he defended the Colonies-wide revival as a special outpouring of the Spirit.

Then as suddenly as it began, the Great Awakening began to weaken. In a December 12, 1743, letter, Jonathan Edwards complained to Thomas Prince that a “very lamentable decay of religious affections” was beginning to creep back into Colonial society. By 1749, the Church had returned to “its ordinary State” and according to Gilbert Tennent, another well-known revivalist, the Great Awakening was dead. ●

Stars of Wonder

By Sue Berger

I recently spent a warm summer evening in the country reclining on a friend's deck. I was amazed to be able to see the Milky Way, a rare treat for this city girl. As easy conversation ebbed and flowed we managed to identify the Big Dipper and the North Star, the sum total of our acumen about astronomy. We also spotted what must have been a satellite moving across the sky and gasped when we caught sight of a falling star.



Stretched out beneath that sparkling velvet canopy I felt very small, humbled by the vastness, yet at the same time, somehow very safe. Our deck conversation took on hushed tones as a sense of awe and reverence descended on us. We whispered and pointed late into the night.

My appetite whetted, I dragged my husband to an astronomy party at a lakeside park several weeks later. Astronomy club enthusiasts had telescopes pointing skyward and trained on points of interest. We admired star clusters and the moons of Jupiter. Members consulted star wheels, and foreign-sounding constellation names rolled off their tongues. They knew their way around the heavens like I know my way around the mall. As we stumbled back to our car in the dark, I was impressed with how much they knew and how much I didn't. The contrast suddenly hit me. I'd gone from awe and wonder to ignorance and inadequacy.

What had happened to my childhood sense of wonder? Could it be that children experience wonder because they don't yet understand how their world works? Waves on the seashore provide a fascinating playground until someone explains the rotation of the earth and the gravitational pull of the moon.

Now I can predict when the tides go in and out and exactly how many hours I have to build a sandcastle. Handy information, but the wonder and adventure have been jeopardized. Suddenly I'm more calculating about my shell-hunting walks and sand art projects.

Ancient cultures worshipped the uncontrollable nature that existed around them—fire, wind, rain. We're more sophisticated. We understand global weather patterns and can

track severe weather, tornados and hurricanes. We don't just admire birds in flight; we design and build jets that fly us coast to coast in a matter of hours. From the comfort of my couch I can tour the Earth and the heavens on an electronic screen. At a push of a button I can listen to a symphony orchestra or "read" a book while strolling along my park's walking trail.

Progress? Undoubtedly. I'm thankful that we can improve and save lives via science and chemistry. But as we focus on details and reduce everything to its basic elements, I fear we too easily strip life of some of its mystery and wonder. How often do I allow myself to revel in the power of rain pounding on my patio roof, to be enchanted by wind sculpting dunes or mesmerized by the flames of a late night campfire? I never want to come to a point where I won't see past scientific facts and figures and explanations to the astounding beauty that is all around me.

Now if you'll excuse me, there's a sunset out back that's begging to be admired. I'm not going to think about the rotation of the earth, water droplets in the clouds and air-borne dust particles refracting light. I'm just going to enjoy the spectacle and allow God to wow me. ●



Sue Berger is a massage therapist and a pastor's wife. She enjoys nature, naps and writing. Interrupt her at Sue@OnePilgrimsMusings.com

I think *God Hates Me!*

By Keith Hartrick

I am a trustee of a British Christian magazine. We are not a church, nor a counseling agency, but often people do write to us for help. We are not equipped to answer every letter, but there are some we just can't ignore. The managing editor sent one such letter to me recently, and asked me to pray about it.

Let me quote a few excerpts.

"Will you please pray for me and my family? Last week I was told I have cancer again, the second time in 20 years.... Last year I was told I was a diabetic.

"I am frightened. I cannot pray, as I don't know how.... Many bad thoughts are running through my mind.... My husband is worried sick.

"I have no friends I can trust... friends have failed me in the past. One even cursed me.... Now I think these bad things have happened because of her curse. Since Mum died it has been one thing after another.... I think God hates me. I can't blame him—I hate myself."

This letter affected me deeply. I read it with tears in my eyes, feeling this person's sadness and sorrow in every line. She was so obviously worn out, discouraged and suffering from depression. I am not qualified to offer help in those areas, although I knew enough to suggest that she seek professional help.

"I think God hates me. I can't blame him—I hate myself."

The disturbing line of her letter, the one that stood out, that shrieked at me, was this: *"I think God hates me. I can't blame him—I hate myself."*

Well, as a minister, and as a Christian who has had his share of ups and downs, I *am* qualified to offer her some advice about this. There is no one—*no one*—whom God hates.

But so many of us feel that way at times, don't we? We may not reach the depths of despair that this reader felt. But we do feel unworthy of God's love and care, and may even be afraid to pray to him because of



the unworthiness we feel.

Unfortunately, some may see this woman's statement as a lack of faith and wonder how anyone who calls herself a "Christian" can think that God hates her. Their advice might be, "Stop that nonsense. Pull yourself together. You should be ashamed of making such a statement about God." They may point to some upbeat scriptures to show there is no excuse for a Christian to ever be so depressed.

Well, they are wrong.

Doesn't need criticism

And even if they were right, it is not what this lady needs to hear right now. She doesn't need criticism or correction. She needs someone to listen and to share her problems without any judgment or "fast-fix instant solution." Society can grind people down and make them feel emotionally drained. Add to that the pressure of a life-threatening illness and the comparatively recent loss of a parent and it's easy to understand why they may feel God has cursed them. It can happen even to the greatest of God's servants—like Elijah.

Few people ever worked as hard, or risked as much in God's service as Elijah did. But, almost immediately after one of his greatest triumphs (you can read the story in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings, chapter

18), we find him exhausted, frightened, depressed and ready to end it all.

The Bible tells us that he ran off into the desert wilderness, lay down under a tree and told God, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” 1 Kings 19:4-5. Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

That was probably the best thing he could have done. It’s hard to see things straight when you are exhausted. So God let him rest a while. And then, instead of criticizing him for his lack of faith, God began to carefully refocus him on doing the work he had been called to do.

God understands

God does not throw people away when they break down. His love for us does not depend on our love for him. The Psalms remind us:

“As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.” Psalm 103:11-14.

God’s love for us does not depend on our state of mind or adherence to a set of rules and regulations. Neither does it depend on whether we are fit and well or struggling or sick, on whether we are fat or thin, tall or short, young or old, nor on the color of our skin, our job, financial position or our family.

God loves us so much that in John 3:16 we are told that he gave his one and only Son for us.

As Paul reminded the Christians at Rome, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6-8.

You are not alone

I know that this is hard to understand. We are tempted to think, “Yes, that’s maybe true for most people, but not for me.” I empathize because I too have had some of life’s ups and downs. My parents divorced when I was 8 years old. In fact there have been in my family of two brothers and one sister, and my wife’s family of one sister—including our parents—a total of 12 divorces.

My sister died when she was 29, leaving two small children. One of my brothers was killed in a car accident 12 years ago. My father and one of my brothers were both alcoholics, my father dying at 58 as a result, while both spent time in prison. My own business collapsed and it took ten years to pay off the debts. And as a result of doctrinal changes in our church I lost close friends of many years standing.

So I have some understanding of what the writer felt during this troubled period of her life. Through it all I’ve come to know that God loves me and I can confidently assure her that God loves her, too. Just as he does you.

There are no quick and easy answers in times of severe trial and difficulty. Sometimes we have to endure through the pain. Only in retrospect can we take a more balanced and calmer look at our trials, but even then we naturally ask the question, “Why me?”

Don’t be afraid to ask for help

We don’t always know the answers. In fact, we rarely do. Life is seldom fair, and, as Elijah had to learn, walking with God does not put you in an insulated bubble and guarantee you freedom from trials and problems, not even from the private hell of depression. So don’t be afraid to get some professional help when you need it. And don’t be afraid to ask for prayers and support.

Before I finish, may I remind you of something else Paul wrote?

“So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn’t hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn’t gladly and freely do for us?”

“And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God’s chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us.”

“Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture.” Romans 8:31-35, *The Message Bible*. ●



Keith Hartrick is a trustee of the UK Plain Truth magazine. He lives in Bradford, England.

Ev-Angela's Sermon



By Jeffrey Broadnax

Angela showed us an amazing example of evangelism. She invited seven members of the same family to church last month, and they all seemed to enjoy themselves. While most Christians would rather take up bullfighting than evangelize, six-year-old Angela made it look easy.

“Living and sharing the gospel” is the motto of our denomination, and I have been encouraging my congregation to commit to this great commission. It is what Christians are supposed to do, isn't it?

Well, because this thing called “evangelism”

be an overcomplicated concept.

Earlier in the year, I asked our local members to seek out one person per year with whom they could cultivate a relationship and learn his or her life story. I asked if they would also share their own life journey and maybe even invite one person to join us for worship. These simple steps seemed to be at the heart of living out the meaning of our church motto by sharing genuine love and hope through authentic relationships.

Evangelicals, it seems, often concentrate on “bringing people to Christ,” but our focus has been more on “bringing Christ to the people” by extending to them his love as we get to know them. To that end, our little “*Ev-Angela*” blessed us with an example of pure and undefiled commission work.

During a discipleship class we saw in high definition our Lord's message of Matt. 18:1-4. Jesus said, “Unless we change and become like little children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Wow, what a way to see what the kingdom is like.

As I led the discipleship class, I noticed Mr. and Mrs. Toy and their five children in the front pew.

“If your heart is to share what new life, true freedom and transformed thinking feels like, then Christ be praised, you have shared the gospel!”

scares the life out of most Christians, Angela's example paints a beautifully simple portrait of what can

They had come for the third visit at Angela's invitation. They sat impeccably dressed and seemed to be soaking in every word.

I noticed that during the hymn singing they stood up, during the prayer time and sermon they sat, and following the service the Toys enjoyed being surrounded in fellowship as Angela introduced us to each family member.

It seems little Angela had invited them to join her family on the front row and had dutifully shared with them what to do next as the service unfolded. The beauty of her actions mesmerized me. Questions flooded my mind. Has this six-year-old been listening all these weeks? Has she understood what I have been preaching about?

The answer is probably more revealing than I care to acknowledge. Frankly, I don't think Angela ever considered evangelism to be a problem. These were the people she played with and talked to on a regular basis. These are the people she spends her free time with. Sure, they were a "toy" family, but does it really make a difference to her? Angela wanted to share her worship experience with friends.



It was so easy, so natural, for Angela to invite the Toys to church and patiently walk them through what to do. Could this thing that often breaks adults out into a cold sweat really feel easy and natural? If meeting the Toys is an indication, I have to say yes!

George Barna reports that 99 percent of all evangelical

Christians have *never* shared the gospel with an unbeliever. Could it be that many believers have really been evangelizing all along but just didn't know that is what it was officially called? When we take the time to genuinely listen to another's story, share our own life story or seek to leave behind a piece of spiritual fruit for a hungry acquaintance, aren't we evangelizing? If your heart is to share what new life, true freedom and transformed thinking feels like, then Christ be praised, you have shared the gospel!

So, thank you Ev-Angela for the sermon you gave our congregation. You set a useful and inspiring example for everyone in speech, in life, in love, in faith and purity. May we all approach the good news with such simplicity and grace. •



Jeff Broadnax is a pastor of three congregations in New York, Director of the New Heights Summer Camp in Connecticut, a National Board Certified Counselor and father of two.

In Other Words

A Timely Gift

By James R. Henderson

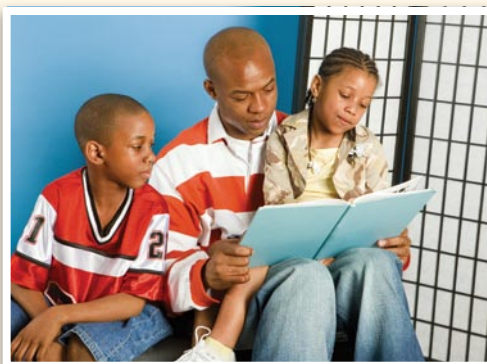
African time" is a standard joke among black and whites in Africa. It refers to a lack of punctuality.

Once I conducted a wedding in Nairobi to which the bride was three hours late! Some of the guests got rather irritated, but most took it in stride. By way of explanation, my friend, Wainaina, quoted to me a common African saying, "The white man has the clock, but the African has the time."

Time is such a precious gift. The Bible says we have to redeem the time, meaning that we have to use it wisely for Christ's sake (Ephesians 5:16, NKJ).

A new convert in Malawi read a magazine about Christmas. Gifts, tinsel, excess of food and drink, brightly decorated trees. He felt it was his Christian duty to provide such things for his family. So he decided to spend his wage and borrow more for a merry Christmas.

He spoke to me first. Most days he struggled to put food on the table and yet here he was about to blow all he had on Christmas.



I told him that putting his family in financial jeopardy did not represent the spirit of the child in the manger. That the white man's Christmas did not have to be celebrated in an African village.

Sure, I explained, rejoice that our Savior

was born, have a special meal if you can. Worship together. But if buying gifts takes up all your money or puts you into debt, don't do it. Africans can give their children one of the best gifts—time. Time spent sharing, playing and laughing. Time enriching family relationships.

Why not give your family something extra special this Christmas? Be like the African—give your family the gift of time. •

Learning to live like Jesus

A study of Philippians 2

By Mike Morrison

Paul may have done more good in prison than he did in visiting his churches. That's because he used his jail time to write some letters that have served the church for nearly 2,000 years. One of those "prison epistles" is Philippians.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi (northern Greece) to thank them for some gifts they sent, to encourage them as they faced their own difficulties, and to give them pastoral advice to help them deal with some petty disagreements.

Being considerate

In chapter 2, Paul reminds them of blessings they have been given by Christ: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion..."—he assumes that they have enjoyed all of these—"then make my joy complete by being *like-minded*, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil. 2:1-2).



“If we follow the way of the world, we’ll have nothing to offer it. But if we become more like Jesus, we’ll make the gospel attractive.”

How can the congregation be "like-minded"? As Paul will soon explain, they should think *like Christ*—to be encouraging, comforting, sharing, tender and compassionate (v. 1). Paul wants them to have the *love* of Christ. That is the only sure way to be united in spirit and purpose.

The key, he says, is to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" (v. 3). Selfishness and pride weaken unity, so we need the opposite: "in humility consider others better than yourselves." Paul does not say that others *are* better—only that we consider them more worthy of honor.

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (v. 4). We can have interests of our own, but we should also look out for others. This is the way of Christ.

Humility

"Your attitude should be the same as that of

Christ Jesus," Paul writes. Then he describes that attitude: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (vv. 5-7).

Scholars call this passage "the Philippian hymn," because its style and rhythm in Greek are like a song, perhaps a hymn the Christians sang to praise their Savior. Paul uses these words to remind his readers of the example they should follow: As the divine Word of God, Jesus had the greatest of honor, yet he did not cling to his rights and privileges. He gave up his advantages and humbly became a human to serve our needs.

The Word of God became flesh, as John 1:14 says. Since the Latin word for flesh is *carnis*, theologians call this the Incarnation. A classic Christmas carol describes it this way: "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the Incarnate Deity."

The Word's willingness to give up his privileges was not a temporary change—it is the way God is all the time. God is love, and love means a devotion to serving others, to putting their needs above one's own. As the Holy

Spirit works within us to make us more like Christ, we follow his example of humility.

Paul saw in Jesus the solution to the petty disagreements that were going on in Philippi. Even today, the Christmas story reminds us that we have a Savior only because he was humble enough to be born as a helpless baby. For those who claim to follow Jesus, humility is the answer to relationship problems, the best way to deal with disagreements.

Jesus' humility did not stop with his birth. Paul tells the next step in the story: "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (v. 8). He endured the most painful and most shameful form of death, just to serve us.

Eternal glory

The story does not stop with the crucifixion, either. Jesus was raised from the dead and given great

glory: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 9-11).

What is the name above all other names? The name of God. In Isaiah 45:23, God says, “Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.” Paul is saying that Jesus should be given the same honors as God. When we bow to Jesus, God gets the glory.

Jesus is in the highest place, worthy of worship, worthy of the name “Lord.” Because he was humble, he is now exalted. The reward will come for us, too, but it begins now with following the example of Jesus.

Contentment

How should we respond to Jesus’ humility and service? Paul pleads for action: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12).

The Philippians have been responsive, eager to do what is good. Paul is asking them to take one more step, applying the humility of Christ to their interpersonal relationships. They are united with Christ, so they work not to *get* salvation (salvation is a gift they already have), but to live out its meaning in their lives.

We work because Christ lives in us, which means we are not working alone: “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (v. 13). When we put aside our selfish ambition and conceit, we can trust God fully to do his work in us, and we give him all the credit.

This applies to all aspects of Christian behavior, but Paul’s concern at this point is the squabbling that is disrupting the church in Philippi (see 4:2). So he writes, “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure” (vv. 14-15).

The results will extend beyond their own congregation: “In a crooked and depraved generation...you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (vv. 15-16). In other words, as you share the gospel, your example says a lot. If you are content and peaceable, you will be seen as points of light.

People are looking for the key to peace and contentment, and Christ offers it—but how will people know that he does, unless they see it in our lives? If we follow the way of the world, we will have nothing to offer it. But if we become more like Jesus, we will make the gospel attractive.

Timothy

In the first century, behavior was commonly taught

by example. Paul has just pointed them to the example of Jesus, and Paul sets a good example even in prison. Now he refers to someone else the Philippians know: “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you” (v. 19). Paul hopes to send a friend to them, who will (if we read between the lines) report on whether the Philippians put Paul’s exhortations into practice.

Timothy is already doing what Paul wants—he “takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (vv. 20-21). Timothy does not act from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility he looks to the interests of others, of Jesus and the gospel. He is a good example.

“Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (v. 22). He is living the way that Paul wants, so the Christians in Philippi should look to him, and listen to what he says. “I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me” (v. 23)—that is, as soon as I find out whether I will get out of prison, I will send him to help you. “And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon” (v. 24).

Epaphroditus

But Paul did not wait. He sent his letter with someone else: “But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs” (v. 25). Epaphroditus, apparently one of the leaders in Philippi, had come to help Paul in prison. Now Paul is sending him back with special praise:

“He longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill” (v. 26). In other words, he is looking out for your interests. He is distressed not because he was sick, but because he doesn’t want you to be worried about him.

“Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him” (v. 29). He is setting a great example, and if you honor people who serve, more people will serve. Humble yourself for Christ, and he will exalt you! ●

Questions for discussion

1. In my own experience, what role does self-interest play in squabbles?
2. What rights and privileges do I have? Can I give them up to help others?
3. If I can’t complain (v. 14), what can I say about things that are wrong?
4. Can I trust God to do his work within me? Does he sometimes seem to work too slowly?
5. What examples of humility do I know locally? Do I honor them?

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Hmm...

A Christian is not a Christian simply because she agrees to conform her life to some set of external principles or dogmas, or because at a particular moment in her life, she experienced a rupture and changed herself entirely. She is a Christian primarily because she acts like one. She loves and forgives; she listens and prays; she contemplates and befriends; her faith and her life fuse into an unself-conscious unity that affirms a tradition of moral life and yet also makes it her own. In that nonfundamentalist understanding of faith, practice is more important than theory, love is more important than law, and mystery is seen as an insight into truth rather than an obstacle.

Andrew Sullivan,
TIME, Oct. 9, 2006

The 9/11 attacks had no lasting impact on Americans' faith according to research from the Barna Group. Initially there was a spike in church attendance, and many Americans said that their faith had helped them cope with the trauma caused by the atrocities. But by January 2002 churchgoing was back to normal levels. Religious beliefs stabilized even more quickly and are now identical to those held before the attacks. In a footnote, the authors also note that the number of Muslims in the US is unchanged from the number before 9/11.

www.barna.org

Confidence that one is of value and significance as a unique individual is one of the most precious possessions which anyone can have.

Anthony Storr

Poverty is not natural. It is man made and can be overcome by the actions of human beings.

Nelson Mandela

Cats



- Cats have more than 100 vocal sounds, while dogs only have about ten.
- Cats do not have a collarbone, which allows them to fit through any opening the size of their head.
- Their field of vision doesn't extend directly below their nose, and that's why it's sometimes hard for cats to find tidbits on the floor.
- Meowing is reserved for humans. A cat will almost never meow at another cat.
- A frightened cat can run at speeds of up to 31 m.p.h., slightly faster than a human sprinter.
- A group of cats is called a clowder.
- Like humans, cats can be either left or right-pawed.
- Cats purr at 26 cycles per second, about the same pace as an idling diesel engine.

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