

When they saw
the star,

they rejoiced with
exceedingly great joy.

Matthew 2:10

ET

Est. 1967

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From Premier League to the church pulpit

By Gavin Peacock

I was brought up in a footballing family. My dad, Keith, played for Charlton Athletic for 17 years in the 1960s and 70s, and I grew up at the Valley watching him. All I ever thought about doing was following in my dad's footsteps. That was the goal for me.

Like a lot of schoolboys, that was the dream for me. Of course, I had the great privilege of having a dad who could be a hands-on coach from an early age.

So we were a footballing family, but I was not brought up in a Christian home and never heard the gospel preached. Sunday school gave way to Sunday soccer. The most biblical form of instruction I received was in assemblies at the Church of England school that I attended. I was a kid who intensely wanted to achieve in the classroom and on the field. And my father taught me the necessary self-control, discipline, and skills to succeed in education and in the professional sports arena.

At age 16, I left school and signed a professional contract with Queens Park Rangers (QPR), who were in the top-flight with Terry Venables as manager.

I had achieved the goal. I was playing for the England

Youth National Team, and it wasn't long before I broke into the first team starting eleven at QPR aged 19.

However, shortly before my full debut the most important thing in my life happened. I became a Christian.

I'd been increasingly thinking about life and its great purpose. I mean, I had everything, didn't I? I had achieved the schoolboy dream. I had money in my pocket at a young age. I potentially had a good future. I had relative fame compared to many of my contemporaries who had left Bexley Grammar School.

These are all the things that are meant to give ultimate satisfaction – all the things the magazines and newspapers promote to young people: the fame, the popularity, the money, the career. But for some reason I wasn't really that satisfied.

This is because football was my god: if I played well then I was up, and if I played badly then I was down. My sense of well-being depended entirely on my performance.

I loved football, but I soon realised that achieving this ambition wasn't all it was cracked up to be. I was still struggling to find purpose, so I decided to attend a local Methodist church one Sunday evening.



Continued on page 2 **Gavin Peacock in his playing days** (Source: Shutterstock)

Can there ever really be peace on this earth?

By Jeremy Walker

It has hardly been a year of peace. Further afield and closer to home, there is turmoil politically, socially, and domestically. War in Eastern Europe, an economic crisis and rising prices at home, a threatened 'twindemic', and three different Prime Ministers in Downing Street. Where do we begin? Do our hearts not ache for it to end?

How close has it come to you? What dangers and distresses have troubled you over the past year? What griefs and fears have unsettled your life and your heart?

Perhaps, even now, there are troubles looming in your life. Perhaps, even now, there are terrors which hover over you. Perhaps, even now, there are trials which you do not know how to avoid or escape. Do we not long for true peace?

So is God mocking you? When you read in Luke's

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Testimonies

From Premier League to the church pulpit

(Continued from page 1)

Truthfully, I only went because my mum decided to go along to check it out, and I thought I'd keep her company. I don't remember exactly what the Revd Alistair Bolt said in his sermon that night, but after the service he invited me to his house, where he and his wife, Jane, hosted a weekly youth Bible study.

That evening I walked into a room full of young people as the one with money, career, and fame. I even rolled up in the car I had bought, a 1980s icon, the Ford Escort XR3i. I was part of the 'in crowd', and they were not.

Yet when they spoke about Jesus, they displayed a life and joy that I did not have. They talked about sin as if it had consequences and about God as if they knew him.

I thought that God – if he existed – was simply there to help me with my difficulties and make me happy, and that if I were a good person I'd go to heaven.

I decided to return to the Bible study the following week and the next, and I began to hear the gospel for the first time.

I realised that my biggest problem wasn't whether I met the disapproval of a 20,000-strong crowd on Saturday; my biggest problem was my sin and the disapproval (in biblical terms, 'wrath' or 'judgment') of a righteous God, who had made me and owned me.

I learned that the biggest obstacle to my happiness was that football was king instead



of Jesus, who through his death on the cross provided forgiveness of sins, release from the judgment of God, eternal life, and the promise of heaven.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God had done for me what I could never do for myself. I realised that Jesus, fully God and fully man, had alone made the way for me to be right with God. He also made the way for God to be my loving Heavenly Father and by the power of the Holy Spirit I could now live as a child of God.

In other words, Jesus answers the problem of our guilty consciences and also fulfils our desire to be perfectly loved.

Over the next few weeks my eyes were opened through those Sunday meetings, and I turned and believed the gospel. And everything changed.

Life wasn't ultimately about me anymore: it was about God and his purposes. His purposes involved me, but they didn't end with me.

'My heart still burned for football, but now it burned for Jesus Christ more.'

I was open with my QPR team-mates and immediately told them I had become a Christian.

Their reaction was a mixture of mockery and intrigue. Then they watched to see if my life matched my profession of faith.

Subsequently over the years at QPR, Newcastle, and Chelsea I had many opportunities to tell players about Jesus. My wife Amanda and I even ran a London Christian footballer's Bible study in our home for several years.

But it was back at the age of 18 that I first found my centre and my purpose. I could now enjoy football for what it was. My heart still burned for football, but now it burned for Jesus Christ more. It was he who ultimately shaped my life from then on.

It isn't easy to follow Jesus. And it doesn't immunise a person against suffering. In fact, Christians experience many trials. It's just that those trials have purpose as they deepen our faith along the way.

This brings up the question: What is the meaning and purpose of life? The common response is, 'Just live each day to the full and make the most of loved ones around you.' But that offers no lasting hope, purpose, or pleasure. The background assumption is that you're born, you live, and you die – that's it. So eat, drink, and be merry. Get what you can out of it. But that's selfish, and it is hopeless.

I have mixed with some of the most wealthy and talented sportsmen of a generation, and I've seen firsthand how none finds true satisfaction in that way of thinking or living. It has only led to futility, addiction, divorce, and frustration time and again. Even the highs are only high for a moment. Then they crash back down to earth.

But once you know that God made you and that you were made for him; once you know that sin is the root problem in your life; once you know what the solution to the problem is – the good news about Jesus who came to save sinners (Matthew 1:21); once you know what you need to do – turn from the direction you are going in and believe in him – then your world begins to make sense.

Millions of victory-seeking football fans down the years will have seen banners at World Cups and major events with John 3:16 written on them: 'For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.'

I wonder how many of those fans realised that this is the best news in the world, and that the only way to a glory that never fades. But the free offer remains, even today. You just need to trust in Jesus.

Read Gavin's full story in his autobiography, *A Greater Glory* (Christian Focus Publications).

Can there ever really be peace on this earth?

(Continued from page 1)

Gospel, chapter 2, the host of angels from heaven singing, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!' (verse 14) does it sound like an ugly joke? Where is this peace? Where is this goodwill toward men?

To answer those questions, we need to remember who is speaking, to whom

they are speaking, and what they are actually saying.

The angels of God are speaking. They have a unique insight as those who have come from heaven, sent by God to rejoice over the arrival of salvation in the person of the baby, Jesus, who was born in 'the city of David – a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord' (verse 11).

They are speaking to the shepherds – ordinary people like us, people who need a Saviour from their sins. They are people who need to know what true peace is and where to find it. They are speaking about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

His coming means salvation from sin, accomplished by Jesus himself, who would live a life of obedience to God, die in the place of his people on the cross, and rise again in triumph over sin and death and hell.

The angels first declare that the coming of the Son of God brings glory to God on high who has granted such blessing to sinners like us. Then the angels tell us that Immanuel – God with us in the person of Jesus – means 'Peace on earth, and mercy mild, / God and sinners reconciled!'

The angels trace this blessing back to its source: God's goodwill toward mankind, his undeserved favour toward

you and me. They say, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'

God is not mocking us with these words. God is not playing an ugly joke. God is graciously offering us salvation from sin, peace with him through his Son, Jesus Christ, and all the joy of knowing and serving this God now and always.

This is peace that lasts through all terrors, troubles, and trials. This is peace that conquers dangers, disasters, diseases, and even death itself.

What will you do with God's glorious goodwill toward you? Will you believe in Christ Jesus, and so receive God's peace?

A father lost; a Father found

By Noémie Foster

My name is Noémie and I live in Swindon with my husband, where we attend Swindon Evangelical Church.

I can already imagine a few raised eyebrows as you try to pronounce my name! Noémie is a French name, and France is where I was born and spent the first eighteen years of my life, surrounded by the vast fields and red-brick villages of the Flemish countryside.

My parents came to France in the 1990s as missionaries; my father was asked to take on the leadership of a small but growing French-speaking evangelical church.

Standing out

Living in a humble, rural town, our family stood out! For starters, we were British (foreigners were a rarity at the time). I was one of four girls (our little clan was easily recognisable in the streets), and we belonged to a strange 'cult' – or so most Protestants were perceived by the French.

Society around us was, it seemed, deeply conflicted in its beliefs. On the one hand, rampant atheism, stemming from centuries of secular social philosophy, permeated our literature, arts, and politics.

On the other hand there were stringent Catholic rituals, fulfilled in the worship of Mary and of the saints, prayers for the dead, and other superstitious practices.

In contrast, our house was always full of joyful family prayers, animated bedtime Bible stories, and fascinating missionary stories from Asia and Africa.

It was a happy childhood filled with laughter, music, the outdoors, and even a golden retriever!

My sisters and I attended a private Catholic school, and most of my friends dutifully performed the expected stages of catechism, communion, and confirmation.

We clearly stood out and from an early age I had to explain and justify my family's faith.

Every week I could hear my father teach from the Bible, lifting Jesus' words as a beacon of truth against the confusion and darkness around us.



As I grew older and began to read the Bible by myself, I became aware of my own heart, my tendencies to rebel, my selfishness, and the anger and guilt I would then feel.

I listened to what was said in church, and to the Christian CDs that would be played in the car during long drives.

I remember occasionally breaking down in tears, overwhelmed by my sin and by what the Bible claimed God had done for me.

Finally, when I was thirteen, I approached my parents and said I wanted to get baptised. I began a small baptism course with my father, thinking about different questions to get me ready.

Alpine tragedy

Suddenly, at the age of 49, my father died in a mountaineering accident in the Alps. He was fit, healthy, and relatively young. We'd only completed one session of the baptism course together.

The trauma of his death wrecked me. It felt as though I had lost my anchor – my father, my pastor. For many months I experienced total denial. I

hadn't begun to process the death and would often wait for him to come back from work every evening.

Eventually the denial turned into realisation and horror. I went through cycles of grief which shaped what I believed, going from disbelief and anger against God, to bargaining with God to prove his existence, to finally, and for a long time, complete despair and brokenness.

The depths of my sadness consumed me and I was swallowed up in dark depression. I was numb and broken. I felt old and totally empty.

Slowly, and after several failed attempts to take my life over the course of four years, I reluctantly surrendered to the acceptance that I was 'doomed' to live.

Searching for meaning

I now needed to find meaning. It was obvious my sadness and existential anguish were not giving me life, so I started listening in church again.

I researched different religions, and quickly realised that the Christian God was the

only one who came close to providing substantial answers to life and death.

God slowly and gently healed my heart to hear his voice, and I tentatively started to move towards him.

When I arrived in the UK for university at the age of eighteen, I was overwhelmed by the Christian Union and the student church I went to. I had no idea that there were so many Christians my age in England – I'd never seen anything like it!

Those years fuelled me and embedded the foundational roots of my faith. Though still prone to frequent doubts and pangs of melancholy, I gladly became the CU rep for my college and steadily grew in my faith – amid a rocky start and many mistakes.

After two happy years in Cambridge, I lived in Germany for a year to study abroad. Though I joined a church and made Christian friends there, I succumbed once more to frequent and lengthy periods of spiritual doubt and existential questioning.

Being far from the hype and popularity of student events, I was forced to recognise that I

needed to keep up my faith by myself. I realised I was living two separate lives depending on whether I was surrounded by believers or not.

When I came back to England for my final year, I was weakened and discouraged. I never quite felt I had reconciled my cynical awareness of our fleeting human condition with the joy and 'positivity' which the Bible taught.

I felt like a hypocrite, tormented and pulled in different directions. I decided to give up my faith once and for all.

New life

As I readied myself to announce my decision to my friends, my church simultaneously launched a sermon series on Ecclesiastes.

In his perfect timing, God allowed this series to speak directly into my heart, into my experience. While my friends came out of the sermon deflated by what they'd heard, I came out rejoicing.

Everything suddenly made sense – the scales had fallen from my eyes. I no longer had to park my existential (and what I thought to be sinful) ponderings – they were right there in the Bible, and I could rejoice!

It felt like physical chains breaking off – my heart was lifted. Life only made sense *with* God. I was free at last.

I realised that it was precisely my brokenness and the futility of my life (as I knew full well) which pointed to my desperate need for a Saviour. Christ died to give me life, hope, and meaning.

The Lord my Rock rescued me from the depths of despair, from death! He filled me with his Spirit and I knew I was his. My doubts were gone.

Since that moment, I've seen God at work in my life. I've seen him change my heart, my nature, my inclinations. I can look back throughout my whole life and testify that he is good.

Life has taken me to various places since – I've lived in Ireland, and now I'm in Swindon, but I know that God called me out of darkness and he has restored me.

'Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart. He is mine forever' (Psalm 73:25-26).

Features

God contracted to a span: Five contrasts at Christmas



By Alan Hill
Pastor of Lausanne Free Church, Switzerland.

One of the greatest hymn writers of all time is Charles Wesley. He was the younger brother of John Wesley, the great gospel preacher of the 18th century. We see Charles's greatness in a Christmas hymn that he wrote. Here are the lyrics of the first verse.

*Let earth and heaven
combine,
Angels and men agree,
To praise in songs divine
The incarnate Deity,
Our God contracted to a
span,
Incomprehensibly made
man.*

What is Charles getting at here? To human minds, it is truly beyond our understanding how God became a man, yet remained God: *contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.*

The Son of God is all-powerful, almighty, all-knowing, and all-seeing. The Son of God was there before time began in all eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He was there at creation, speaking the universe into being. Since then, he has upheld the world by his power.

Yet within the time and space he created, and without giving up his deity, he fully and completely became a man.

C. S. Lewis captured something of this in his book, *The Last Battle*. And at one point he has one of the main characters saying, 'A stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.'

This is a paradox, a striking contrast. G. K. Chesterton said, 'A paradox is a truth standing on its head shouting for attention.'



Source: Shutterstock

The coming of the Son of God into the world should shout at us for our attention! I want to focus on five other paradoxes or contrasts connected with the birth of Christ.

1 Christ had a physical birth to give us a spiritual birth.

'For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger' (Luke 2:11).

'As many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:12).

When Christ was born into this world, he did not do so to give us a nice story to tell our children. He took on *physical* life to give us *spiritual* life. The birth of Jesus the Son of God as a baby was a miracle. But

so is the new birth that every Christian experiences.

We must be born again to see the kingdom of God. In order to be born from heaven above, Christ had to be born from earth below.

There is more in this contrast. Christ was born to die; we are born again to live! He came into the world to save us, and that required him dying on the cross for our sins. It required him to come back from the dead on the third day to show that God accepted his sacrifice for our sins.

When you read the beautiful story of the birth of the Lord Jesus with the angels singing, shepherds visiting, the wise men giving, think that this was just the beginning. 33 years later there were no angels singing, no shepherds visiting, and no wise men bowing down to worship when Jesus died on the cross. Yet he died so that we might live.

Have you been born again? The evidence is that you now love the Lord Jesus more than any other, and trust him more than any other. Christ is all.

2

He was born homeless so that we might have a home.

'And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn' (Luke 2:7).

'Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know' (John 14:1-3).

Jesus lived a homeless life. The homelessness of Jesus began at his birth. There was no room for him in the inn, so he was born outside.

Later on, we read that he had nowhere to lay his head. As far as we know he never owned a home and, in that sense, never had a home. The Lord of the universe relied

on the kindness of others to provide him with food and lodging during his three years of ministry.

He did this all so that we might have an eternal home. And our eternal home is there ready and waiting for us. Jesus has gone to prepare the rooms. Can you grasp that? Jesus the Lord of glory acting as a housemaid? Such is his love for us.

In one sense becoming a Christian is coming home – coming back to where we were meant to be. We find this beautifully illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. A young man demands his share of the inheritance and leaves home. He wastes all the money on riotous living. He finishes up feeding pigs. Then he comes to his senses. He says, 'I will arise and go to my father.' He's going home. And what does his father do when he sees him coming back? He welcomes him with open arms.

One of the consequences of the Covid pandemic was that it has put many people on edge. It was unsettling, wasn't it? We worried about where we could

go. We did not feel safe. We were not sure of the future.

Yet Christ gives us comfort. Christ the homeless one says to us, 'I have a home for you. The home fires are burning. The door is open. The food is on the table. Your room is ready. I will bring you home when it is the right time.'

3

He had an earthly mother so that we might have a heavenly father.

'And when they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshiped him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh' (Matthew 2:11).

'When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ' (Galatians 4:4-7).

Why did Christ need an earthly mother? It was to show he is fully human. Every human being is born of a woman. Every human being is born in the same way. Christ was no different.

Christ also did this so that we will be able to call God our father. The Bible tells us that Christians may address God as 'Abba, Father'. 'Abba' is an Aramaic word similar to 'Dad' in English. What a privilege! What closeness! Becoming a Christian means being adopted into God's family and never needing to feel alone again.

4

He gave up his glory so that we might have glory.

'Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men' (Philippians 2:6-7).

'Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love him' (James 1:12).



Source: Shutterstock

Just as we cannot grasp how God could become man, so I believe we cannot grasp what it meant for Christ to give up his glory. Imagine for a moment that you suddenly lost the use of your hands and your feet, that you could not hear, or speak. Imagine that you could not see and feel and touch.

These are all things that are part of being a human being. And if we lost them all overnight it would be a terrible burden. Now if you can, imagine Christ leaving his father's side, the glories of heaven, the perfections of heaven, the joy of perfect communion and union with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

And then imagine what it was like for the Lord to come down to this world full of sin and rebellion. To come into this world and be restricted not just as a human being but as a helpless baby. As far as we know, Jesus (like any other baby when first born) could not feed himself, could not talk, and could not even lift his head.

Like every other child, he would have to learn how to walk and talk and feed himself

and dress himself. We know this is true because in all the accounts of the birth of Jesus, we never read of him speaking.

What glory he gave up! And yet he did this that we who are living in the dirt of this world might one day live in glory, that we might be taken from this sin-filled world and taken to a sin-free world.

In that sin-free world will be the fullness of life forevermore. We will live like kings in heaven. We will know the joy of happiness that an Olympic gold medalist knows, except that the joy will last forever. All the trials and troubles of life will fade away after one minute in heaven.

Yet none of this is what we deserve. We don't deserve glory but shame. Yet the one who deserves all glory endured all shame for us on the cross. What a Saviour!

5

He became poor so that we might become rich.

'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through

this glory. There were no angels surrounding him covering their faces. There were no angels crying out 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts!' Instead, there was Joseph, Mary, and a manger.

Why did Christ leave so glorious a heaven? Why did he become poor? He did so that we might go to heaven and be rich. Rich not materially speaking, but spiritually. Christians are spiritually rich already in this life, but we will be rich beyond comparison in the world to come. We are the Sons of God, heirs to eternity. What glory and splendour awaits us!

A wonderful picture

When we put these five contrasts together, we see a wonderful picture. Jesus went through a human birth to give us a new spiritual birth. Jesus was born without a home to give us a home. He occupied a stable that we might occupy a mansion. He had an earthly mother so that we might have a heavenly father. He was humbled so that we might be glorified. He became poor so that we might become rich.

How should we respond? First, we should be humbled and thankful that God the Son so loved us that he gave up all his glory for us. The only reason Christ came into the world was to save people like you and me. He did not come into the world just for the experience of seeing what it was like to live in the world. Christ was born to die for sinners.

Second, we should be lifted up. God loves people like you, and his love was such that he was willing to do what was necessary to save people like you. His people are precious in his sight, he cares for them, and he will one day take them home.

Third, we should rejoice. If the angels rejoiced on the day Jesus was born, if they sang 'glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men', then how much more should we. Those angels were not saved by Christ's coming into the world. But we are if we believe in him.

As we come to the end of 2022, we need some good news, don't we? We need some bright news to lift the gloom of war and the cost of living. And here is the good news. Here is the great news. Here is the best news ever: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Before the incarnation the Son of God was rich. Rich not in the sense of physical wealth, but rich in blessings, rich in glory, rich in majesty. Before the incarnation, his whole being would have radiated divine glory.

We have a glimpse of this in Isaiah 6. Here we read that the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord. God is a spirit, so the person that Isaiah saw was the Son of God in a pre-incarnate appearance as a man.

'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke' (Isaiah 6:1-4).

When Christ came to earth and was born he gave up all

Testimonies

Not all paths lead to God – a Sikh's journey to the Saviour

By Paramjit Kaur

I was born into a Sikh family in West Yorkshire, and was surrounded by an extended family who practised their faith whether devoutly or nominally.

I was brought up with a vague belief that all paths led to God and, therefore, the religion that you were born into would be the one that you would stick with because that's what God had planned for you.

My primary years were spent learning to read parts of the *Guru Granth Sahib* (the central religious scripture of Sikhism), saying prayers at appointed times, and attending the *Gudwara* (the Sikh place of worship) regularly with my parents.

It wasn't until my teenage years that I started to ask questions and challenge the beliefs of Sikhism. For me, there were too many things we practised which couldn't be justified.

When I asked my parents to explain more about why we did certain things, they struggled to answer and they would often give the response, 'This is our religion and this is what we do.'

Eventually, the discrepancies between what the religion spoke about and what people practised, along with my studies in Sociology and Marxism, led me to the conclusion that all religion was a man-made concept and therefore God must also be a man-made concept (for the advancement of men). It was at that point I decided to ditch religion altogether.

A sister's challenge

It was later, when I was about nineteen, that my viewpoint about how to live life was challenged.

My sister, during her time at university, had converted to Christianity. Witnessing the transformation within her shook me and scared me. We had grown up being very tight as two girls in a strict Sikh household where certain privileges were afforded to males only. But becoming a Christian meant that she no longer needed me in the same way. I could sense that her



safety and security in who she was no longer rested in her family relations. She had found God.

Overspilling with joy, she would just talk of him who had saved her and had called her into a relationship with him. It was hard not to ask questions about the God she had discovered.

Over the next few years began a personal journey of emotional ups and downs. She often challenged my beliefs and waywardness and faithfully spoke about a God she knew in a personal way. She was able to describe his character, what he was like, how much he loved

'I look to God to give me the grace to follow him whatever happens.'

those he had made, and that he wanted to be in a relationship with us.

It was when she referred to him as her Heavenly Father that I would be moved. This was something I'd never heard of before and it was warm and loving. I had never known of God to be spoken of in this way.

Three questions

While I am more of an emotional person than a logical one, something within me began to think about the truths my sister was proclaiming. I remember thinking very clearly that if I was going to throw God away, then I needed to at

least look into it once and for all before making an informed decision based on actual evidence.

There were three questions I wanted to find answers to. These were: Does God actually exist? If so, how do you get to know him? Finally, who is this Jesus person and how does he fit in?

Having been given a Bible by my sister, I started by reading from the beginning, Genesis, and there for the first time I heard how God had created the heavens and the earth, everything in it. I saw how he had created mankind to rule over everything on the earth.

For me, it was the first time I heard this; it was like he had revealed his blueprint for how we were supposed to live and how we were supposed to relate to one another. It sounded just perfect.

But I still had a niggling question: if he had created all of this, surely he had created all of the religions so that all of these paths and people can get to him in the end? And if this is the case, why would I want to swap out Sikhism for Christianity? Surely my parents were right from the start?

Though troubled and conflicted by this, I had thoroughly loved hearing about God's blueprint for the world and mankind, and I felt like I was making headway and making sense of myself as a creature, and of him as my God. But I couldn't let the thought of all paths leading to God rest.

Jesus is the way, truth, and life

Upset by this, I remember making a journey to see my sister. It was then that I received an answer for my troubled mind. As the train pulled into the platform, there I saw out of the window a poster on a billboard which read: *'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' - John 14:6.*

God had heard my internal wrestling and graciously revealed his words to me.

Hungry to know more, that summer I began attending the local Baptist Church where I started to realise I wanted to be in a relationship with God.

I needed to understand that verse more.

Who was the 'me' of that verse? Why was he so significant? It was through the faithful preaching of the minister that I came to realise that not only did I need to be forgiven, but I needed to ask for this forgiveness from God for the wrong I had done in

rejecting his rule and authority in my life. The only way I could do this was to simply accept the fact that Jesus had died on the cross for me, and that it is through him I could come into a living relationship with God.

Jesus' death in my place on the cross had taken God's past, present, and future judgment away.

I had never heard of such a clear path to eternal life being presented. It seemed so simple – and it was. All I needed to do was trust in it and that is what I did.

The amazing amount of relief, peace, and assurance that I felt was instant and affirming. Don't get me wrong: it's not to say that life hasn't

had its difficulties – it certainly has – or that my decision to put my trust in Jesus hasn't caused upset – it has. But my Heavenly Father, as promised, strengthens me and keeps me.

Twenty-eight years later, I don't regret asking questions, being challenged, and being the challenger to seek what is absolute truth. I'm totally sure

of this: I will meet my Heavenly Father. I know who I am, where I am going, what I have been saved from and what I have been saved for – my eternal life with him – and this has got nothing to do with me; it is all to do with the fact that Jesus has done that on my behalf. Why would I walk away from someone who loves me that much?

I took my problems to the Cross

By Eunice Smith

My name is Eunice and I live in Birmingham with my husband Josh. I grew up in Accrington, Lancashire, and I went to church with my family.

When I was eleven I went to a Christian camp. These usually happen over the school summer holidays and are opportunities for groups of children to engage in outdoor activities and learn more about God.

I remember being so nervous that I tried to get out of going by making every excuse I could think of. As it happened, my experience on camp turned out to be the greatest week of my life!

I made new friends (still in my life today), enjoyed outdoor activities I never knew even existed, and began to understand and be drawn to Jesus for the first time.

I heard the gospel preached in a way I could really understand. Put simply, the gospel is the good news that Jesus died in the place of sinners like me, taking the punishment I deserved.

Through his sacrifice, God's anger was satisfied and I could receive forgiveness and eternal life if I trusted in Jesus and turned from my sin.

When I left camp and went back home, I thought that I was going to maintain my new-found excitement and commitment to praying, Bible reading, and living for Jesus each and every day.

In reality, I was a typical teenager with sleeping-in a high priority! All the things I had learnt seemed to slip to the back of my mind.

Nevertheless, over the next few years I kept going back to that Christian camp, and I also attended youth clubs at my local church to learn more about who Jesus is.



Eunice & Josh Smith

One summer, the last message that was preached on camp drove me to make the decision to personally commit to following Jesus, but I didn't tell anybody.

A few weeks later, I found myself sitting in a youth service and beginning to cry. The minister came to pray with me. As we prayed and chatted, I told him that I needed to get baptised, but I was scared because I wasn't sure I always lived like a Christian.

'Following Jesus is not the easy way to live – it presents many challenges in daily life.'

How could I be baptised when I didn't know all the answers, and when I didn't read my bible everyday – or even understand it?!

My minister told me that he had seen changes in me that could only be because of Jesus, and that baptism isn't the end of our Christian journey, but more of the start.

I was then baptised on an Easter Sunday when I was fifteen. I was still a teenager facing normal teenage problems, but I knew that I

could take those to the cross and leave them with Jesus.

When I was eighteen I took a gap year with the Baptist Missionary Society World Mission. I went into it naively thinking, 'I am going to save the world' – well at least Kathmandu where I was based. But in reality, it was the world that saved me.

I was pushed out of my comfort zone and forced to rely on God for everything – for health, for food, for relationships with teammates.

I saw the simplicity of lives that were truly happy. I saw that material things were not that important – that even the most deprived and marginalised people could have hope and faith in God, and that this was all they needed to live a truly joy-filled life.

I now work for an amazing Christian charity called Safe Families which supports families who are overwhelmed by their circumstances. We provide volunteers to befriend these families and to bring them out of isolation and back into the community.

My adult life has not always been easy. I have faced many challenges, and there have been times when I have questioned my faith. But during this time, my husband and I have had incredible friends surrounding us in prayer when we did not feel able even to pray for ourselves.

Although there has not always been a happy ending to every trial, we have seen time and time again that there is a faithful God who does more than we could ask or ever imagine.

Following Jesus is not the easy way to live – it presents many challenges in daily life, but when we hand the reins over to him, we can rest in the peace that only he provides.

From riches to rags



By Mark Richards
Mark is pastor of
Newtown Baptist
Church, Chesham.

There are great disparities in wealth in the world today. If you were to fill a minibus with the world's richest men (and they are generally men), their wealth would equal that of the poorest half of the world's population.

Wealthy people dominate our magazines and screens but, right now, most people in the UK are finding it hard to pay the bills. Many are dependent on government benefits and perhaps food banks or other charities. Though some people will spend thousands of pounds upon food, drink, and presents this Christmas, for others Christmas is a financial nightmare.

Still, in the eyes of billions of people in the world, we are almost all rich in the West. At least we're rich materially. But surely, whoever we are, we recognise that it is possible to be rich materially and yet poor in other ways?

In a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in Greece, there is a sentence that is especially relevant to us at this time. It summarises the Christian message in a simple and beautiful way. Paul writes, 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for your sake, he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9). Let's consider these amazing words.

1

He was rich

Jesus Christ was rich in being God. All of us were born somewhere and conceived about nine months earlier. That was when we began. But Bethlehem was not



the beginning of Jesus Christ. No, even before his conception, Jesus Christ *was*. When time began he was already there and he made everything out of nothing. He is the eternal Son of God.

He had the universe to enjoy. It was all his – the burning stars and orbiting planets, the oceans and mountains, the trees and flowers, birds and animals. He was rich in possessions and pleasures and, if he wanted to, he could make new and wonderful worlds.

But the Lord Jesus Christ was rich in another very important way too: he was rich in love. Relationships are often key to determining how happy our Christmas (and life) will be. Every week we hear that the relationship of some wealthy star has broken up. Are they really so rich?

But the Son of God had a perfect relationship with God his Father – a relationship of infinite love, joy, and peace. There was absolute harmony. It was, you could say, the happiest of families.

Jesus Christ enjoyed a blissful existence before he came into this world. His life was free from worry and sorrow, full of love, beauty, goodness, and joy. He was rich.

2

He became poor

No one feels the pinch of poverty like those who've once been rich.

Jesus was rich but he chose to become poor. The Son of God became a man.

He knew what it was to be hungry and thirsty and tired. He knew temptation, disappointment, grief, fear, and pain. It would have been a great act of condescension to become a king or Prime Minister but, when the Son of God became a man, he did not become someone rich and powerful.

He was laid by Mary in a manger, and the entire life of Jesus Christ was characterised by poverty. During Jesus' infancy he and his parents were asylum-seekers in Egypt. Later they settled in the obscure northern Israeli town of Nazareth.

When Jesus grew up he became a carpenter or builder like Joseph. Jesus worked with his hands. He sweated and ached. If the saw slipped, he bled. The one who created the heavens and the earth made tables and mended chairs.

At the age of thirty he left even the security of the workshop to travel around healing the sick and preaching the good news. He depended for

about three years on the charity of others. He drove himself on, doing good, helping others, rising early in the morning, and working late into the night.

He had poor companions: not billionaires or celebrities, but men who'd been fishermen and despised tax-collectors. There were ex-prostitutes and former beggars among his followers. As the carol says, 'With the poor and mean and lowly, lived on earth our Saviour holy.'

The Bible says, 'A good name is more desirable than great riches,' but Jesus had a poor reputation. He was derided as a backward northerner. He was called crazy and demon-possessed. He was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard.

Jesus upset the religious authorities and was eventually convicted by a corrupt court and sentenced to be crucified. Before he was nailed to the cross, the soldiers stripped him and later gambled for his clothes. Thus he died naked, without even the clothes he'd worn.

He became poor. 'How poor,' wondered one writer? 'Ask Mary, ask the shepherds, ask the wise men. He rode on another man's donkey. He sailed in another man's boat. He was buried in another man's tomb.' He was rich. He became poor. That was his birth, his life, his death.

3

For your sake

'For your sake,' the apostle Paul goes on, 'so that you through his poverty might become rich.'

Do you see the contrast in this verse? He became poor to make us rich. It's a theme that runs through the Bible. We read elsewhere, 'He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed' (Isaiah 53:5).

He was impoverished so that we might be enriched. He came down to lift us up. He suffered so that we might have peace.

Through Jesus Christ, God offers us many things. He offers forgiveness. The Bible likens it to being declared not guilty or to having a massive debt cleared. Psychologically it's like having a huge burden lifted off your shoulders.

He offers adoption into his family and a loving relationship with him. Then we can really pray, 'Our Father in heaven', and enter the year ahead confident of God's love and help through thick and thin.

God's Spirit also empowers us to change and become more like Jesus, bit by bit. There's the church, too. A community, a family, who will love and encourage us. And an inheritance – eternal life. Life in its fullness and life that lasts forever so that, truly, 'The best is yet to come.'

To put our verse in its context, it also means God offering us the richness of knowing that it is more blessed to give than to receive. These words come in chapters exhorting Christians to give generously to famine-stricken brothers and sisters overseas.

There is more to life than the baubles and toys of this world. There are treasures that money can't buy. To know God is more precious than anything else.

Note Paul begins our verse, 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Do you know his grace? If you do, then treasure Jesus. If not, put your trust in him this Christmas. *Though he was rich, he became poor, all for your sake, that you through his poverty might become rich.*

The challenges and blessings of coming to Jesus in a Jewish home

By Joseph Steinberg

I was raised in a Jewish home in the United States. My great grandfather fled to the US following persecution during pogroms in Eastern Europe in the late 1800s. Like most Jewish children, I was raised against a backdrop of fear – fear of persecution, especially from those who call themselves Christians.

For 2,000 years my Jewish people had been widely ostracised and smeared as those who had rejected Jesus and stood responsible for his cruel death, resulting in 2000 years of persecution as ‘Christ killers’.

This backdrop caused me to become very anti-Jesus. I would go so far as to say that I despised Jesus growing up. One of the first things I’d say to anyone who enquired into my Jewish beliefs would be, as my parents taught me, ‘I’m Jewish. I don’t believe in Jesus!’

Persistent witness

When I was thirteen, my family moved to a new neighbourhood. Here I became friends with another teenager named Mark. He was a committed Christian who loved Jesus. The first time Mark came to my house, he tried to share his faith with my father in the front garden. My father promptly kicked him off our property!

My friend didn’t give up, though. Another day he returned, knocked on the door and this time tried to speak to my mother. She also dismissed him with a door slammed in his face. Mark tried a third time with my sister, who also rejected his attempts to share Jesus with her.

However, he had another opportunity the first time he met me one-to-one. Mark shared his testimony of God’s love and forgiveness changing his life. He also challenged me to read the Bible to find out what God expected from me as a Jewish person. I agreed to this challenge as I had a fear of death and wanted to know God.



Discovering holiness, sin, and forgiveness

I went home and read the Tenach (Old Testament). I decided to read it every day and as I read, I prayed to God, as Mark recommended. I asked that if this was his Word, he would speak to me through it.

During that year the Bible really helped me understand the holiness of God and the depths of my sin and separation from him. I had so many questions and so I asked my Christian friend Mark for answers, as well as asking my parents.

Mark’s answers made more sense to me. Mark always shared Jesus as the answer to the issue of sin and forgiveness. I struggled with him as we talked about the New Covenant and having a new heart and a new life. New, new, new – what was wrong with the old covenant?!

After a year of reading, I got to the book of the prophet Jeremiah. When I got to chapter 33, the words in verse 31 and following jumped off the page at me! They foretell God’s promise to make a new covenant with his people, because the current covenant had been continually broken through my people’s disobedience.

God says that through this new covenant, ‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people... They will all know me because I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.’

This was the answer to my question about ‘Why a new covenant?’ I was now ready and keen to find out more about Jesus. I knew from what Mark had told me that the New Testament would tell me all I needed to know about Jesus and God’s new covenant.

I started at the beginning, with the book of Matthew and his firsthand account of Jesus’ life and teachings. As I read, I quickly realised how wrong I had been about Jesus! Reading Matthew, I saw how Jesus fulfilled the predictions about the Messiah found in my Jewish Bible. I saw that if God became a man, he would do the things that Jesus did. I felt challenged and convicted.

By the time I finished Matthew’s Gospel, I knew that either Jesus was the Messiah or he wasn’t. If he was, then the most Jewish thing I could do would be to believe in him. I could resist Jesus no longer!

Convinced that Jesus was indeed the Messiah that my people have been waiting for, I got down on my knees and asked God to forgive me for my sins on the basis that Jesus took the punishment for them in my place when he died on the cross. I then committed myself to trust

and follow Jesus as Lord and Messiah. As I finished praying I knew that my life was absolutely transformed.

Following Jesus

It took me six months to tell my family about my new faith in Jesus. When I did, they were incredibly upset. They felt ashamed and betrayed. I was forbidden to go to church; I had to hide my Bible in a slit in a mattress so it wouldn’t be thrown away. Any Christian teaching I received was via cassette tapes which were snuck to me by my friends at school and which I hid in my socks. I was secretly baptised in a forest stream after school.

It was a very difficult time; but it was also a wonderful time. Because of the difficulties, I was forced to press in close to God and so I grew much in my relationship with him through reading the Bible and prayer.

During that time I also discovered the power of prayer when I met Nancy, the mother of Mark’s Christian friend. Nancy had prayed for me every day for the year I searched the Old Testament for God. I realised it was her prayers that God used to soften my heart and open my eyes to Jesus. Prayer changes things!

When I turned 18 I joined a mission to evangelise other Jewish people. After that I went to Bible college. Then I came to the UK as a missionary to the Jewish people. It has been 40 years since I started missionary service.

I am now blessed to be the leader of one of the world’s oldest missions to the Jewish people, called International Mission to Jewish People. We raise up missionaries to tell Jewish people about Jesus and are blessed to see many Jewish people brought to faith in Jesus just like I was.

We want Christians to be like the watchman in Ezekiel 33:7 – and ‘warn Israel’ that they, as Jewish people, need Jesus too. To find out more about how you can help reach Jewish people with the good news of Jesus visit us at www.imjp.org/watchman.



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Where is the Lamb?



By Dr Warren Gage
Dr Gage is a seminary professor based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Christmas is the season to reflect upon the greatest gift of all, indeed, the only gift that matters: the gift of God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

As the apostle Paul assures us, God spared not his own Son, but gave him up for us all in order that he might also with him freely give us all things (Romans 8:32). No gift from a father's heart could be more costly than to surrender the life of his only son.

The testing of Abraham, reported in Genesis 22, memorialises for all time the price of our redemption through the grieving yet faithful heart of a father and the obedient heart of his son. It is a human drama that invites all of us into a deeper appreciation of the priceless cost of free grace.

It expresses the abstract theology of substitutionary atonement in flesh and blood reality. Redemption is portrayed in terms so striking that any parent and any child can comprehend the love of a father for his son or a son for his father.

A gospel preview

The binding of Isaac for the sacrifice is a dramatic preview of the whole gospel. And Isaac's question, 'But where is the Lamb for a burnt offering?' is only fully answered in Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

God drives a double-edged sword through the very heart of Abraham when he demands the sacrifice of Isaac in terms that accentuate the preciousness of the son God requires: "Take



Source: Shutterstock

your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and... offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'

Abraham's instant and complete obedience to God's demand does not mask the faith that was required of him, for his pain is betrayed by his 'lifting up' his eyes to see the mountain as they approached on the third day.

The hope of resurrection

Abraham fully expected to lose his beloved son to death, but there is something curious about his statement to the two young men who accompanied Isaac but who were instructed to stay behind with the donkey.

Abraham assures them that after the sacrifice, we will 'come again to you'. The author of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament tells us that Abraham expected to sacrifice his son and to receive him back from death (Hebrews 11:19). That is, by faith Abraham expected to receive his son through a resurrection 'on the third day' of his journey.

The sacrifice of Isaac is the foretelling of the gospel, all in unmistakable detail. Isaac is the 'unique' son of Abraham. He is the son who was the heir of the 'everlasting covenant' and who was promised a 'seed' after him (Genesis 17:19).

'God drives a double-edged sword through the very heart of Abraham when he demands the sacrifice of Isaac.'

Abraham's faith could reason that Isaac could not perish without a seed, that God would give him 'back from death' in order to fulfil his covenant. And so Abraham determined to obey the Lord. He took the wood for the sacrifice and laid it on the back of his son.

From this we may reasonably infer that Isaac was now the stronger of the two and that he would have to willingly submit to his father's will that he should be bound for the sacrifice.

The picture of Isaac carrying the wood of his own sacrifice up the mountain of Moriah, which we later learn is in the region of Jerusalem, and then willingly permitting himself to be bound and put upon the wood in obedience to his father, all in the hope of defeating death, is the gospel in miniature.

Jesus, the Lamb of God

But God, who spared not his own Jesus, did spare Isaac. God provided instead a ram for Abraham to substitute for his son. The careful reader will note that before Isaac had been made aware of God's command that he be sacrificed, he had asked his father, 'Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' (Genesis 22:7).

We are told, however, that God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. It is as though Moses, the author of

Genesis, deliberately leaves Isaac's question unanswered. The reader is left to wonder about the lamb for the burnt offering, until John the Baptist finally answers Isaac's question for all time when he sees Jesus, proclaiming: 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29).

Jesus is God's unique and beloved Son, who, like Isaac, walked up Moriah's mountain carrying his cross on his back (John 19:17), and in obedience to his Father's will submitted to be bound and made a sacrifice (John 18:12). Unlike Isaac, Jesus' life was not spared, but like Abraham, God the Father received his Son back from death on the third day.

This is God's precious gift to us: he has provided a substitute in his Son! And if God so loved us when we were in our sin that he gave us his precious Son, what will be the measure of his love to us in eternity, when we are forever delivered from sin and made perfectly complete in the full righteousness of Jesus! That will be our everlasting Christmas indeed!

This article was first published in Tabletalk, the Bible study magazine of Ligonier Ministries. Find out more at TabletalkMagazine.co.uk or try it free for three months today at TryTabletalk.co.uk.

Testimonies

Rebellious biker finds the Romans road to eternal life

By Heather Bryan

Church was a requirement for me to carry the Brownie flag up the aisle. Once this was achieved, Mum suggested we didn't bother any more since we fought to stay awake through meaningless services, where I'd decided that, if God was real, he wasn't there. Besides, he wouldn't want anything to do with me. He was unreachable.

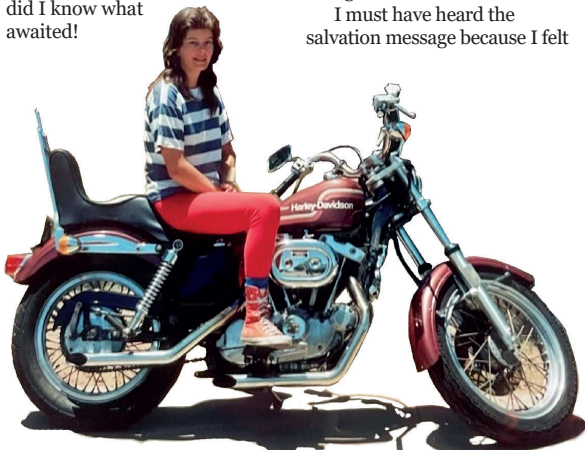
That said, I do remember that once when I was about 10 years old and lying in bed, I had the feeling that something was missing in my life, but not knowing what.

Fast-forward several years, and I was growing up pretty rebellious and within the biker culture. I tried to impress people with my Harley Davidson, and lived a selfish but hopeless, meaningless existence. I made bad decisions and lived from one party to the next. Nothing really satisfied me and I trusted no one. I felt pretty depressed and with little to look forward to.

From Australia to Texas

One day, while hitchhiking with a friend in Australia, I had a strange thought as I looked at a beautiful sunset. *God made that.* Since I despised Christians and mocked them, it struck me as a very odd idea to contemplate God.

Upon returning to England I had a letter from a pen pal in Texas. It was one of a few that came about following an article I'd written in an American women's motorcycle magazine. With nothing better to do I decided Texas would be my next destination. Little did I know what awaited!



Being far away from the influence of my friends, with plenty of time to think, I befriended a Christian biker lady, Claretta, who kept inviting me to church after every ride we took together. It was unfortunate because otherwise she was a lovely lady!

I went once, having been lured in with an invitation to dinner with her and her family, and was impressed how the visiting preacher, who was a missionary to Korea, was happy to give up his easy life in America to share this message with foreigners.

I must have heard the salvation message because I felt

uneasy and unable to sleep for three days. I vowed not to return to a church that made me feel that way. Besides, there was a very solid wall between me and these Christians, built by me. But the Lord had other plans.

Bereavement and the Bible

My beloved grandma passed away in England. I was so distraught that I couldn't sleep for days. Out of desperation I rang Claretta and asked if someone could pray for me. She said her pastor would and that she'd pick me up in fifteen minutes for the Wednesday night service. After the service I was introduced to another lady, Lynn, who asked me if I went to church in England.

I bragged about a spiritualist 'church' I'd been attending, looking for some hope for the future from so-called messages from deceased people. Lynn asked me if they used a Bible and taught about Jesus there. I arrogantly replied that Jesus was a spirit guide (because that's what I'd read in a book!) and that they didn't use a Bible.

She then asked me if I believed the Bible was God's true Word. I'd always thought my little white Bible received

from a godparent was special so maybe that influenced me to respond that I *did* believe it was God's true Word.

The Romans road

Having said that, Lynn asked if she could show me some verses from it. I sat down with her on one side, Claretta on the other and the pastor's wife standing in front of me, while Lynn took me down the 'Romans Road', sharing Scriptures that finally explained why Jesus died on a cross.

She asked me if I agreed that I had sinned against God (Romans 3:10, 23), to which I wholeheartedly agreed, thinking, *this is the word that sums up my whole 29 years.*

She showed me in Romans 6:23 that my sin separates me from God now and forever, but that Jesus had died on a cross to pay the huge debt I owed for all my evil deeds. Heaven was a free gift if I accepted it!

All my life I'd been terrified of dying. Lynn asked me if I'd like to pray to accept this most valuable of gifts. I felt the devil really trying to stop me; thoughts of 'Don't get involved with all this! Just say no! You don't know what this'll lead to!' came to mind.

But the Lord countered as I also thought, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to know you'll go to heaven when you die?' and I chose to pray a prayer, led by Lynn, asking the Lord to forgive me and to come into my heart, and thanking him for dying for me.

First love

I felt like I'd float away with the heavy weight of my wrongdoing lifted from my shoulders. I immediately sensed God's peace and presence and also realised how real the devil is and how he'd tried to destroy me. I was still trying to be cool, but wanted to cry.

Once I thought I'd stopped the tears from spilling out of my eyes, I looked at Claretta who was herself crying! I felt such a connection to these people now!

When she dropped me off at home, Claretta said, 'I love you. You're my sister now.' I told her I loved her too and felt so excited to be her 'sister'. That was the first time I told someone I loved them and meant it and truly felt loved back.

The Lord immediately gave me new desires and I went straight to my clothes and threw out the miniskirts. I threw out all my old, depressing music, and stopped drinking alcohol and smoking. No one made me do that, I just had no more desire for the self-destruction that characterised my previous life.

Four months later my mum came to visit me and I took her to my church. After hearing the gospel for the first time she said she wanted to get saved. I am most blessed to say my beloved mum was my first convert. She went to Crofton Baptist Church for the rest of her life and is now with the Lord.

I've been saved nearly 31 years now, and the Lord has given me a kind, Christian husband (which was another big 'God thing') and a lovely son, and has allowed me to lead Sunday School classes, witness to many people and serve him in our present fellowship, Downham Baptist Church.

He has brought me through highs and lows and I'm so grateful for his truth and the ones who prayed for me and led me to him. I am free and full of hope and look forward to the day I'm with him!

No silent night



By Sarah Ivill

Sarah is a member of Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina.



As a mother of four children, I well remember many nights that were anything but silent. The cries of a newborn suddenly awakened by pangs of hunger. The moans of a sick child who needed another dose of paracetamol. More recently, the voices of teenagers telling me about their day when they arrive home late at night.

During these nights I needed something else to break through the silence, and sometimes my fear, than the sounds of my children. I needed the good news of the gospel.

This same good news broke the silence of another mother's night about two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, bringing great joy to all people.

Silent night?

Shortly after John the Baptist's birth, Caesar Augustus pronounced a decree 'that all the world should be registered' for the purpose of taxation (Luke 2:1).

It was under Augustus's rule that the phrase *Pax Romana* ('Roman Peace') was coined. But sadly, for all the peace that Augustus seemed to bring to the Roman Empire, he led the people away from true peace. He wanted others to see how great *he* was, not how great *God* is.

Although Augustus believed he was ordering a decree that would elevate his status, God was using him to reveal the true king.

Remarkably, this was the first time that the Roman Empire had been at peace under one ruler. God had orchestrated a time of peace to bring the King of peace into the world.

God had foretold that Jesus's birth would be in Bethlehem through the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2). Through Augustus's decree, God was putting the right people in the right place at the right time to fulfil his Word.

Significantly, Joseph (of the house and lineage of David) left Nazareth for Bethlehem, the city of David. While there, the time came for Mary to give birth. Since the usual lodging place for travellers was full, Mary and Joseph had to stay in a stable.

There has never been a greater and more humble birth than Jesus's birth in Bethlehem. We sing about it as a 'silent night', but it was anything but silent.

Think of Mary's cries of pain as she gave birth for the first time, and yet cries of joy as she saw her son, the Saviour of the world.

Think of Jesus's cries, as he was 'born in the likeness of men' (Philippians 2:7). His cries would reach their climax on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46).

Jesus died and was raised again so that you and I can be saved from sin, death, and Satan. Dear reader, have you cried out to him, trusting in him alone for your salvation?

Shepherd's fright

There was another reason the night of Christ's birth was not silent. God chose to announce his Son's birth to shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock. The hillside became holy ground as the glory of the Lord shone around them.

As they were filled with fear, the angel of the Lord quickly told them not to be afraid. 'Good news of great joy that will be for all the people' had come (Luke 2:10). 'The great shepherd of the sheep' had come to make complete and final atonement for God's people (Hebrews 13:20). The Saviour, Christ the Lord, had been born. The greatest prophet, priest, and king had arrived!

To confirm his word through the angels, God gave the shepherds a sign. They would find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in

a manger. Before they could ponder this, their quiet night on the hillside was interrupted again by a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!' (Luke 2:14). This was a moment they would never forget and a message they could not hide.

The shepherds hurried and found Mary and Joseph, and baby Jesus lying in a manger (Luke 2:16). They told the new parents what the angels had revealed to them about their son.

How comforting this must have been to Mary and Joseph. God had not forgotten his word to them: 'He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end' (Luke 1:32-33).

These humble beginnings were leading to something greater than anyone could have imagined. God had come in the likeness of man to bring peace between God and man. Glory to God indeed!

Perhaps right now your nights are anything but silent. Sleep is hard to come by as you care for children, or you lie awake thinking about a strained relationship, marital discord, or a child's rebellious heart, or you endure physical pain. Maybe you are frightened that you won't be able to endure another day of it, much less a month, or a year.

Be encouraged, because the Lord is with all those who truly believe in him. Because of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, we who are following him have better days ahead.

The good news of great joy will echo throughout all eternity as we worship the Son of Man, who is now seated at the right hand of God the Father and is coming again to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. On that day the last trumpet will break any silence and we will finally behold our beloved Saviour face to face.

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Testimonies

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity

By Dan Pickering

My story, while upsetting, shows that through God's love and power, nobody is beyond saving.

I grew up attending church and believed myself to be a Christian. However, I didn't really know what being a Christian meant.

I stopped attending church as soon as I was old enough, and until 2020 the extent of my faith was believing that God existed and created the universe, and occasionally praying or attending church. I thought this was enough and that I was 'good with God'.

I lived by my own rules, believing I could pick which parts of the Bible to follow. I didn't look to pursue a relationship with Jesus or allow him to have any part in my life.

God was my genie – I only spoke to him when I wanted something (mostly very shallow things).

Dangerous paths

Throughout school I wasn't popular and was bullied, which led me to chase after love and acceptance from peers to attain a sense of satisfaction.

School shaped my teenage and adult life, leading me down a dangerous path seeking love, enjoyment, and fulfilment in all the wrong places.

I started making lots of bad choices that are considered 'normal' for people my age; partying, casual relationships, and wanting to be 'cool'. But my heart started to harden.

I prayed to a God I didn't know, for things broadly consisting of looks, money, and women. I was driven by an underlying need for validation.

As I grew, memories of school stuck with me, continuing to impact my choices and self-esteem. I wanted to prove those people wrong by attaining worldly success (as if those children from my school days ever gave me a second thought).

There's a saying that God works in mysterious ways. In the Bible, Romans 1:24-32 shows that one of these ways is to give us exactly what we want.



Broken

Ultimately God showed me my need for him and how broken I was without him by doing just this.

Galatians 6:7-9 states, 'Do not be deceived, God is not mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh reaps destruction; whoever sows to please the Holy Spirit, from the Spirit reaps eternal life.'

In my case, my 'destruction' became very visible – but destruction will ultimately become visible for all who live without Jesus.

As the years passed, I became more brash and erratic, looking for ways to show off. I worked hard, rising through the ranks of my profession

'Ultimately God showed me my need for him and how broken I was without him.'

in banking. With the money and success came arrogance. I started to think I was better than other people.

Around this time my appearance also improved following significant weight loss and an increased fitness regime. This led to the wrong kinds of attention, feeding my sense of self-importance, vanity, and pridefulness.

These feelings grew when I started working as a naked butler at hen parties, pushing boundaries further and desensitising me more to the godless life I was living.

I felt untouchable, impressive, and someone to be envied, but in actuality I was a slave ruled by the desires of my body.

My weeks consisted of partying, gambling, women – living an utterly immoral life, seeking feelings of gratification I so desperately needed.

I was cold-hearted, arrogant, greedy, obsessed with money, selfish, and I mistreated people I claimed to love.

All the while I still claimed to be a Christian if anyone asked, quickly changing the subject if I could.

On the surface I thought I had everything anyone could want, but something was always missing.

Toxic relationship

In 2019 my lifestyle caught up with me in a way I couldn't ignore when a girl I'd met became pregnant. I wanted to run from my responsibilities and end the situation as quickly as possible.

Being in a situation I never thought I'd be in, saying things I never thought I'd say, doing things I never thought I'd do – the baby ended up being aborted.

I became more lost than I even realised. I attempted cutting contact with the girl but was blackmailed into a relationship, as she threatened to expose what had happened, and moreover lied about me in a way that would have significant personal and professional consequences.

I continued my godless life, but fortunately for me, God had a plan! Evidently, he had decided I'd been left to my own devices for long enough. He was ready to bring me home with open arms and deliver me from the mess I'd created.

A few months into this toxic relationship, my self-worth was destroyed as my insecurities and self-doubts were constantly played upon.

The first part of God's plan was using this girl. Throughout the relationship, particularly towards the end, she challenged the morality of my actions, choices I'd made, things I'd said, and situations I'd orchestrated. This was despite her not knowing anything of the Christian faith.

I knew my life had something missing and I needed more.

'If you died today...'

Driving home one evening, I was trawling for a new radio station, and for some reason I picked the Christian station UCB. I thought the music was great so I left it on. It also broadcasted some Bible verses.

I started attending church more, hearing God's Word and the good news of the gospel. My conscience began to be challenged. During one memorable service the preacher asked, 'If you died today, would you be right with God?'

Feeling the crushing weight of my conscience, I knew my answer was 'no'. I realised the only way to be acceptable in God's presence and to experience true belonging was by turning from sin and giving my life to Jesus.

I learned that regardless of my past transgressions, nothing can put me beyond God's reach; no sin is too great to be forgiven if I turn from it. I understood that Jesus had paid the price for my sins through his death on the cross.

In the following weeks I looked at my life, the choices I'd made, and the very visible picture of what a life without Jesus leads to. By March 2020 I knew I needed to change but feared the consequences.

I started praying more deeply, feeling God's presence working in my life. In May, this girl and I had another argument. I knew this was my chance to end the relationship and change. If I didn't take it now, I felt I never would.

I left the relationship and experienced the most challenging time I'd been through, only possible to endure through God's love and favour.

My former partner's threats began materialising and I lived in fear as I was harassed and threatened. I received hours of abuse via social media, phone calls, and texts every day with no end in sight.

After a few weeks, I broke down and ended up moving back to my parents' home, unable to function at times. I was diagnosed with PTSD.

Joy through suffering

Desperate for a way out and needing a Saviour, I put my trust in God, and God protected me each day. He spoke to and encouraged me in different ways throughout my ordeal.

Initially I was thinking this situation wouldn't end, but I turned on the radio and UCB

were running a segment on trusting God to see your trials to completion.

The week after, thinking I'd never find joy while this was happening, I turned on UCB which was explaining James 1:2-4: 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.'

That week I attended my first church 'men's breakfast'. Unbeknown to me, the topic of the breakfast was also on joy through suffering.

This was God speaking to me, showing that he's aware of my struggles, was with me, and would sustain me.

The harassment from my ex escalated to police involvement. But by God's grace, they heard my distress and took the matter seriously. Two officers arrived, one of whom was a Christian.

Despite explaining my sinful actions leading to the situation, he said he felt called by God to share Isaiah 26:3, 'You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you', and Genesis 50:20, 'You meant it for evil, but God used it for good.'

After they left I looked into these verses, seeing how God delivered his people from worse situations than mine, and that I should trust him to deliver me.

God uses situations and people in our life when we choose to listen to him. Looking back, there'd been many occasions where God spoke to me, but I chose to ignore him. But now I was 'coming home'.

God has transformed me. I now hate the things I used to love and love the things I used to hate. I have been taken into membership at Swindon Evangelical Church and seek to live in the light of God.

I have to fight temptation on a daily basis and often fail, but these failures are met with God's grace and a renewed love for Jesus.

Despite the scars and damage, Jesus healed me. He has washed me clean in his blood and given me a desire to grow close to him, to understand his Word and explain and share it with the Christians and non-Christians around me.



The unbroken promises of Jesus

By Edna Williams

I came from a very traditional Roman Catholic family in the Philippines before moving to the UK. As a child I followed all the customs of our religion, but growing up I began to be curious about other beliefs.

One day I had the opportunity to visit another church in the Philippines. From then on there was the first glimmer of doubt about what I had been taught concerning Catholicism, and questions arose in my mind. I started to read my Bible.

Another turning point came when my marriage broke down because of infidelity. I was absolutely devastated and felt totally broken. On top of being an orphan, I was living in a foreign country and I felt so alone and hopeless.

In my desperation I cried my heart out to God and submitted to him. I found comfort in Jesus Christ through praying, Bible reading, and listening to worship songs.

Jesus gave me hope and peace that I couldn't find anywhere else. Jesus did not leave me nor forsake me even though others around me did; Jesus's promises were not broken while the promises of others were.

I will always remember Romans 8:28, 'For we know all things work together for good to those who love him, who have

been called according to his purpose.'

I went back to the Philippines on my own and ready to face a new life, but after a few months I got a phone call from a lawyer informing me that my estranged husband had passed away on the day that he was supposed to file for our divorce. It was a very sad moment and a reminder that life can be cut short.

I am now a Christian living in the UK with my own family. I am a baptised member of a church in Swindon, which I have attended for fourteen years now.

I am growing as a Christian and I am learning a lot about the Word of God through this church and by going to the Bible study group.

My life has changed immensely by accepting Jesus Christ as my Saviour. He truly is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him.

And because I am passionate about Jesus, I helped organise a small Filipina Bible study group in our area which meets every week.

God has also answered my prayers in that I am able to disciple my niece who is living in the Philippines.

I am Edna Williams; I once was lost but now am found through the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. All honour and glory to him in the highest.

'Jesus gave me hope and peace that I couldn't find anywhere else.'

Features

Our monarch's Christmas broadcast



By Timothy Cross

He has written many Christian books and articles and has an honorary doctorate from Christian Bible College, Rocky Mount, NC.

Having been born and bred in Great Britain, and being something of a patriot, I would not have missed our late Queen's Christmas broadcast at 3.00 p.m. on Christmas afternoon for all the world. I like the feeling of being united with the nation, the Commonwealth, and our British troops abroad. I was always impressed by our monarch's gravitas and anticipated eagerly what Her Majesty had to say.

This year (2022), however, will be something of a first, in that it will be given by King Charles III. Charles has gone on record as saying that he would rather be the 'Defender of Faiths' as opposed to 'Defender of the Faith', as seen on our coins (the 'FD' stands for the Latin term, *Fidei Defensor* – Defender of the Faith).

Whether this will transpire remains to be seen, but from our late Queen's Christmas messages, it is evident that she identified with the Christian faith: 'Beliefs are of fundamental importance. For me, the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life' (Christmas 2000).

During her Christmas 2011 address, the Queen said, 'God sent into the world a unique person – neither a philosopher nor a general, important though they are, but a Saviour, with the power to forgive... It is my prayer that on this Christmas Day we might all find room in our lives for the message of the



The Queen's Christmas message 2020 (Source: royal.uk)

angels, and for the love of God through Christ our Lord.'

'Jesus – a man whose teachings have been handed down from generation to generation, and have been the bedrock of my faith' (Christmas 2021).

Interestingly, the first televised Christmas broadcast was given by our late Queen back in 1957. But the tradition of our reigning monarch giving a Christmas Day message to the nation goes back to 1932, with a radio message by King George V.

Seven years later, King George VI included in his message these wonderful words for those tumultuous times at the start of World War 2: 'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, *Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.* And he replied, *Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be better than light and safer than a known way.*'

The first Christmas broadcast

The first ever Christmas broadcast predates the 20th century by two millennia. It occurred on the first Christmas night. It was beamed from heaven to earth by an angel – a messenger of God – to some frightened shepherds in a field near Bethlehem.

The message of the angel – the message of Christmas – was succinct. It went: 'Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:10-11).

The message of the angel, we note, focused on the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, and alluded to both his *being* and his *blessing*.

Consider his being

Who is Jesus? He is 'Christ the Lord.' 'Christ' is a title, not a name. It means 'the Anointed One' or 'Messiah'. In Old Testament times, God promised to send his own agent of redemption – One who would undo the ravages caused by sin; One who would heal the rift between us and our Maker.

In Jesus, the longed-for Messiah arrived and the promises of God were most wonderfully fulfilled. He is the Christ. He is the Anointed One. He fulfils the threefold role of prophet, priest, and king in one person.

But Jesus is also 'Christ the Lord.' 'Lord' is a title of deity. It is a title given to God himself in the Old Testament. The deity of Christ is part of the fabric of the New Testament.

The Bible reveals Jesus to be the Son of God, and God the Son.

He is the God-man – Emmanuel, meaning 'God with us'. He is God in the flesh, 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Colossians 2:9).

As such, he is an almighty redeemer. As such, he is to be worshipped, honoured, and adored. The wise men set the right precedent when 'they fell down and worshipped him' (Matthew 2:11).

Consider then the incomparable being of the One who was born at Bethlehem. The uniqueness of the Christian faith stems from the uniqueness of the Christ at its heart.

Consider his blessing

The One born in Bethlehem is described as a 'Saviour who is Christ the Lord'. What is a Saviour? It is a rescuer or deliverer. From what does Jesus save us? He saves us from our sins. He saves us from the judgment of God that we deserve for our sins.

You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21); 'The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10). Salvation – the forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation to God for time and eternity – is the greatest blessing of all.

It is a blessing which transcends Christmas and even transcends our earthly

life. Salvation was procured by Christ, the only Saviour of sinners. It was procured not by his birth but by his death – not by his cradle but by his cross.

Jesus was born to die. He was born to pay the price of sins not his own. He was born to pay the wages of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23). He lived a sinless life and then offered up that sinless life as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of others, that whoever believes in him may know eternal salvation.

The message of Christmas therefore concerns a 'Saviour who is Christ the Lord' – One incomparable in his being, and One incomparable in his blessing. The message of Christmas is nothing less than the message of the gospel, that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

*O holy child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter
in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas
angels
The great glad tidings
tell;
O come to us, abide with
us,
Our Lord, Emmanuel.*