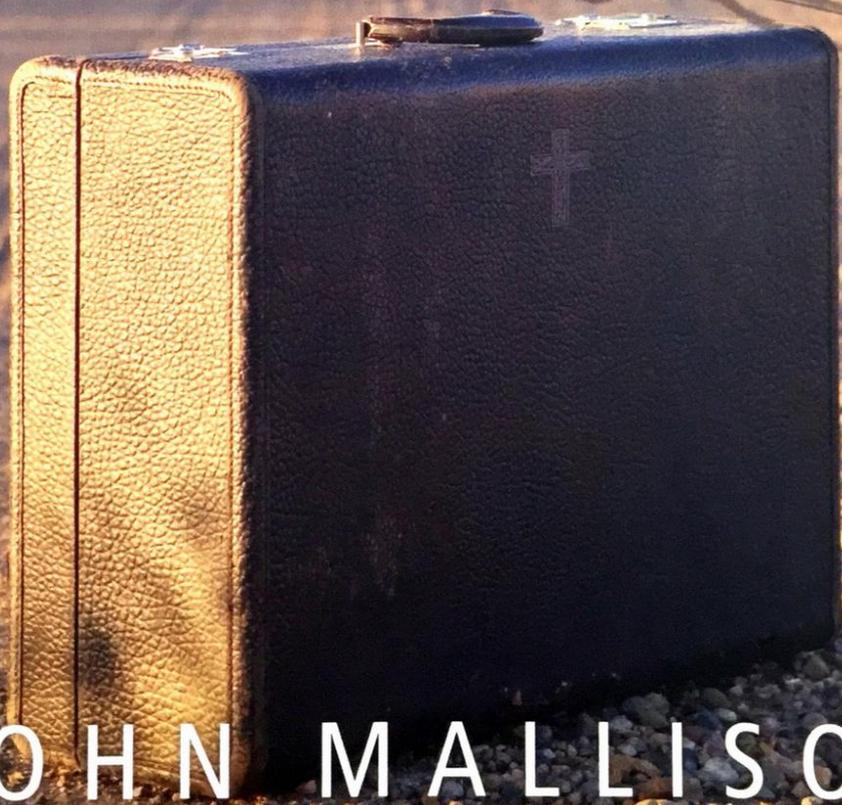


POSTCARDS ON A JOURNEY

Reflections of a Christ Follower



JOHN MALLISON

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To my wife, June.

(See Epilogue.)

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

How to Commence Christian Cells in the Local Church (1954)

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Many Models One Aim (1994)

Australian Stories of the Heart (2002)

Australian Stories of the Spirit (2003)

Australian Stories for Teens (2006)

"POSTCARDS ..." REVIEWS

"Here we have a man of God trying continuously to be God's man. Steeped in Scripture, and with refreshing honesty, John Mallison reflects on lessons learned in a long-lived and very productive discipleship under Christ. Such reflections often suffer from either fake humility or a triumphalism which glosses over the lows which go with the highs of Christian life. Mallison's account is reassuringly human and for that reason validly helpful. It's one for the road, a must for every Christian leader."

Emeritus Professor Brian V. Hill. Murdoch University, Western Australia

"John Mallison displays a transparency and honesty in this book that is consistent with the life observed. If you want helpful insights for you own Christian journey - read this book. If you want encouragement to live an exciting life serving God's agenda - this is a book for you also."

Neville Cox. Chairman, John Mallison Ministries and Focus on the Family Australia. Conference President, Churches of Christ in NSW, Australia

John Mallison has been remarkably used by God. Here he distils truth for living and shares lessons learned from the crucible of life's experiences. I can personally testify that he preaches what he practices. There is an honesty, an authenticity and a relevance about this book that will bring hope and refreshment to many. John's tribute to his wife June and their family underlines the commitment he has to learning from others and doing life together. As John suggests in the Introduction, it will be an excellent mentoring resource.

Bill Brown. Senior Pastor, Syndal Baptist Church, Melbourne, Australia

John Mallison's pastoral, teaching and writing gifts have touched profoundly men and women in many churches and countries. A great number have also been greatly enriched by his mentoring skills. This book opens the window on a journey of both joy and pain that he and his wife have taken together and how God used them to bring many to maturity in Christ.

John R Reid, bishop, Sydney Diocese

John Mallison has influenced many hundreds of men and women across the world. His name is a synonym for “mentor.” Now this book helps us to understand why. Some of these stories are dramatic. Many are ordinary happenings in life and ministry. But John has set ordinary things in the light of Scripture, and the extraordinary call of God. John Mallison’s memories will help many more to meet him as an inspiring guide and friend on our own journeys.

Leighton Ford. *President, Leighton Ford Ministries, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA*

This book will bring hope and encouragement to people of all ages. In it John Mallison has chosen to share with readers some of the notable experiences of his long and varied ministry as preacher, pastor, educator and mentor and invites us to reflect with him on the lessons these events have taught him and may also teach us.

John’s prayerful reliance on the Scriptures is an example for all Christians to follow. Particularly striking is the way in which he gives the glory entirely to God for the fruits of his ministry.

While the experiences John shares with us have arisen mainly in the context of ministry, they touch on many aspects of the Christian life that are common to all believers. Written simply and clearly, the book will be of value to people in all walks of life. We can see it being used for many purposes: for private devotions, small group devotions and discussions and even as a resource in mentoring.

Ruth Dicker, *former lecturer in New Testament Greek at Sydney University, and*
Gordon Dicker, *former Principal of United Theological College, Sydney*

“Always the teacher! This is a remarkable work from a godly man. John has shared his Christian journey in a most encouraging manner. His choice of Bible verses reflect his steadfast daily work with his Master. I found myself using the book as a daily devotional.”

Professor Trevor Waring, *Clinical Psychologist and Chancellor
of the University of Newcastle, Australia.*

The wisest person who ever lived said, "Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom." (Proverbs 4:7a) These are non-negotiable words for any serious follower of Jesus Christ. To do this, we need mentors who can teach us vicariously in order that we might learn from their lives and minimise our mistakes in our emergence as disciples.

For 25 years John Mallison has been such a person in my life and I commend his book *Postcards on a Journey* in order that he might serve as a mentor to you. He writes, "The history of one's faith journey should not only be recalled, reflected on and learnt from by oneself, but also be retold to others for their benefit..." This John Mallison skilfully achieves in his book to help those of us who are passionate to go to the next level, get wisdom.

Rod Denton, Senior Pastor, Clovercrest Baptist Church, Adelaide

"This is an encouraging book anchored in the reality of the daily struggles and joys of walking with Jesus. John's experiences and insights, along with his sensitivity to people's internal conflicts and everyday life situations, enables him to bring hope to those who wonder where God is in the midst of trials. The book contains many memorable examples of dealing with difficulties and of the grace and beauty that Christ bestows."

Carol & David Bussau, Founders of Maranatha Trust and Opportunity International Aust.- Microenterprise Development.

INTRODUCING JOHN MALLISON

As an internationally known Christian educator, John Mallison is a specialist in enabling Christian leaders to develop personally and spiritually, and in equipping them for service. A key aspect of this is mentoring, which John is passionate about. He mentors a wide cross-section of Christian leaders, nationally and internationally.

John's broad parish ministry in Australia spanned 17 years full-time in rural, industrial and developing urban areas, and three years part-time in an experimental inner-city parish. Balancing evangelism and social concern were characteristic of this ministry.

For 14 years he was a full-time Christian educator for the Uniting Church in NSW, during which he founded and directed the U.C.A. lay training centre in Sydney.

Since 1986 he has directed his own Christian leadership development organisation, John Mallison Ministries Inc., serving all sections of the Christian church both nationally and internationally. Mentoring, equipping others to mentor, teaching and the preparation of leadership resources are the main thrusts of this ministry.

John has special skills and wide experience in cross-cultural ministry, having conducted leadership training events in 30 different countries.

He has made a major contribution to the small-group movement across Australia through his extensive and creative use of small groups, his writings and training of thousands of leaders.

John is a prolific writer having written 23 books and numerous articles, largely concerning developing Christian disciples and leaders. A number of these are published in various languages.

His service to the church at large was recognised in 2003 by the Australian College of Theology awarding him an honorary doctorate. The same year he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal, a national award, for his services to the community and church.

He is married to June. They have five children and nine grandchildren. John enjoys walking, drinking cappuccinos (especially with his wife), fixing things and the maintenance of his own and his family's houses.

John believes that the secret of his ministry is the amazing grace of God, the health and opportunities God has given him, the power of prayer and a godly wife and family.

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My dedicated and skilled secretary of 20 years, Mary Butler, typed and made frequent helpful suggestions regarding the manuscript. She also suggested the book's title.

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Gordon Dicker skilfully edited the biblical and theological content, and John Pfitzner (who edited some of my previous books) generously undertook the final edit.

A number of others, including Hope Cassidy and Earl Hingston, also made helpful suggestions.

My thanks to the publisher for his willingness to undertake the publication and distribution, and for his cooperation.

I also acknowledge Bill Hybell of Willow Creek, USA. It was while reading his inspiring book, *Just Walk across the Room*, that I learnt he does much of his preparation in coffee shops! Following his lead, I wrote almost all this book at different tables in the large food court at Carlingford Court shopping centre, fifteen minutes from our home. It was an ideal location with cooperative cleaning staff and a great Muffin Break store!

Finally I acknowledge the patience and prayers of my wife, June, especially during the six weeks that I set aside to complete this project. The Epilogue says more.

Note that some aspects of three of the chapters appeared in *Australian Stories for the Heart* (2002), *Australian Stories for the Spirit* (2003) and *Australian Stories for Teens* (2006), published by Strand Publishing, but I hold the copyright for the original content which is included in this book. A few other aspects of

some chapters have also appeared before, mostly in a different format in the Newsbrief of my ministry.

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INTRODUCTION: WHY 'POSTCARDS'?

We usually receive postcards from friends who are travelling. These are not detailed daily logs. The size of the cards limits a friend's communication to just some highlights of their journey. They usually share both enjoyable experiences and some difficulties encountered. Occasionally the friend may make room on the postcard to briefly share reflections on these experiences. When our friends return, they are of course able to more fully share such things. Often we can learn from their analysis and evaluation of their experiences.

Like writing postcards, I believe it is important to share with others our experiences, our reflections on them and the resultant lessons that we have learnt. Having been encouraged to do so, I have decided to share some of my more significant experiences in this book.

Each chapter in this book has, like a postcard, been limited in size. However, I do have the room to include some of my reflections on my experiences and what I have learnt from them.

The Christian life is an ongoing, challenging journey. It was never meant to be static. We are meant to be continually learning and becoming more like our Lord – to seek to live and serve like him.

In doing so it is imperative that we do not forget or overlook what we have experienced in our spiritual journey. Time and again the Israelites in the Old Testament were instructed to keep recalling their past, especially their exodus from slavery in Egypt and their wilderness experiences. "Remember the wonders he [the LORD] has done, his miracles and the judgments he pronounced..." (1 Chronicles 16:12). In a like-vein the psalmist said, "I remember the days of long ago: I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done" (Psalms 143:5).

Many great leaders have reminded us of the importance of reflection on history: "The further backward you look, the further forward you can see" (Winston Churchill); and "Those who choose to ignore the lessons of the past are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past" (Spanish philosopher, Madalarga). It is equally true that if we fail to recall and reflect upon our own past experiences, we will not only repeat the mistakes of the past but

deny ourselves the encouragement of God's faithfulness, his mercy and his provision evident in our story.

Those I have taught will know I often try to help others see the importance of Experienced Based Learning in which reflection plays a major role in order for us to begin to learn from our experiences. (I deal with this briefly in my book on mentoring¹.) Without such reflection it is so easy to miss the lessons God wants us to learn, from both our successes and failures as well as from the apparently ordinary happenings in our everyday lives.

The history of one's faith journey should not only be recalled, reflected on and learnt from by oneself, but also be retold to others for their benefit – as the psalmist exhorts us by his example:

I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, O Sovereign LORD ... Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvellous deeds. Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come. (Psalms 71:16a, 17–18)

The four gospels are like a series of postcards on Jesus' journey, intended to allow God to address us and draw us into an intimate relationship with him as our heavenly Father, through all he has done through his beloved Son. While the stories I share obviously do not "hold a candle" to the brilliant light of Christ's journey, my hope is that they too will strengthen and deepen each reader's relationship to God.

The messages on the postcards we receive all bear the signature of someone with whom we have a close relationship. My prayer is that you will become aware of not only my signature but that of my Lord Jesus Christ on each of the stories I share, for I believe he has been with me in all my experiences. It is because of his companionship in and influence on my experiences that each story is one of my precious possessions. He is my closest friend and, without the transforming influence he has had on my life, I would not have had the experiences I share.

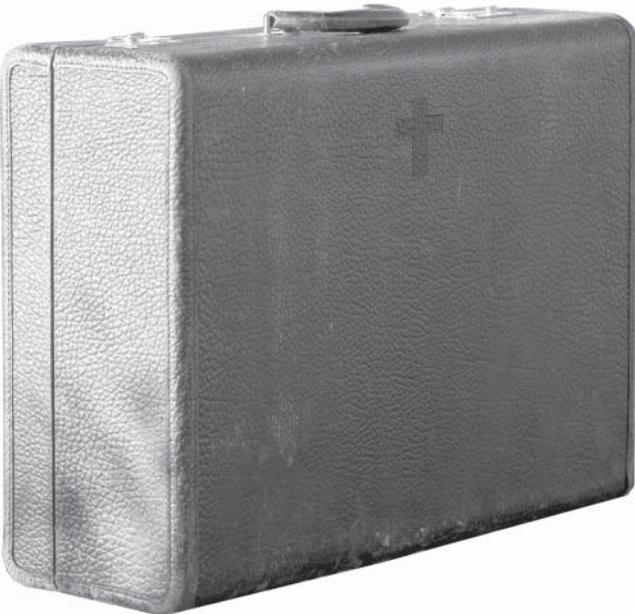
1 *Mentoring to Develop Disciples and Leaders*, John Mallison, Openbook Publishers (2003 – revised).

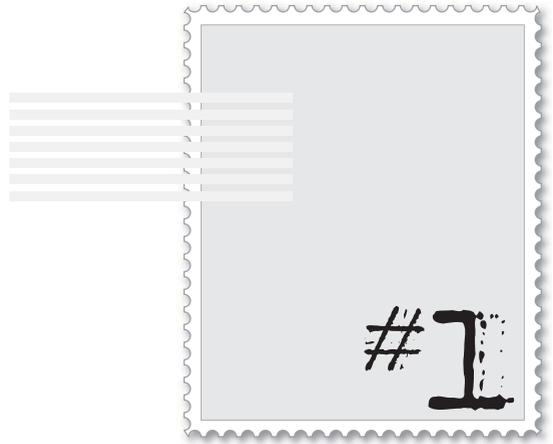
I have limited the length of each chapter so that they can be read in a few minutes. They are meant to be read in the spare short time slots during one's busy day, while taking a "breather".

I have also written them in order that they can be used either as a starter for some time alone with God, as a devotional to commence a meeting, or for useful experiences in a small group. Additionally, I am confident each of the chapters would make an excellent practical resource for mentoring sessions. Both mentors and mentorees could read a chapter beforehand and use any appropriate insight as a part of their reflection together. (See *Appendix: A Guide to Engaging with Each Chapter.*)



POSTCARDS ON:
A Wondrous God





AN ADEQUATE IDEA OF GOD

I clearly recall my first idea of God. I was three or four years of age, playing in the front garden of our family home in Rhodes, a suburb of Sydney.

Back in those days, it was a common practice for items of food and other household needs to be sold door-to-door by the various vendors. One day as I was playing in the garden, the baker was walking up the front path when there was a loud clap of thunder. Seeing the terrified look on my face he said, "Don't worry, that's just God moving the furniture around upstairs."

I was impressed. "Wow! God must be strong," I thought. "My dad is strong, but he needs someone to help him move large pieces of furniture." From then on, I believed God was stronger than the human beings with whom I was closely acquainted.

As a young child, I clearly remember later my Sunday School teacher telling the class that God knows everything, as she pointed to her hair and said Jesus taught that God knows even the number of hairs on our heads. Again I was impressed.

God was important to my parents. They talked to him and talked about him often, read to me from the Bible which they themselves read, and taught me

to pray to God. They went to church twice on Sundays, and my father led the Sunday School that we attended each Sunday afternoon.

In church, my father sang the hymns heartily and with deep conviction. One hymn seemed to be especially meaningful to him. In it the author captured a broad overview of the nature of God. The first verse reads:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days.
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.²

The other four verses elaborate on the “big picture” of God, referring to his majesty, eternity, justice, glory, holiness, goodness and love. They also point to the fact that he is all-sufficient, the creator and sustainer of life, ever-present and all knowing. (It is amazing that so much theology is packed into one hymn.) Although I did not grasp all this in my early teens, my father’s faith in a big God left a deep impression on me.

Elsewhere in this book I tell of the dramatic change in my life at 16 years of age, when my life was transformed as I accepted Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord. From then on God was to me a God with whom I had a personal, growing relationship – although my understanding of the nature of God still needed to grow.

There have been some high points in this growth of my understanding of God’s nature. Let me briefly mention some of these and a few insights.

The beauty, grandeur and order of creation always inspires me, whether it be the birds, animals, flowers, panoramic views of mountains or the ocean, cloud formations, sunrises and sunsets, the seasons, the potential of a small, seemingly lifeless seed – or any of the other varied aspects of nature. I identify with the psalmists when they write of creation exhibiting God’s great majesty and glory: “LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Psalms 8:1); and “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalms 19:1).

Christians believe that God can only be known as he makes himself known. This God does partly through creation, but the Scriptures – God’s word – are

2 Folliott Sandford Pierpoint

the main way in which God makes himself known. While creation gives us some measure of understanding of God, the Scriptures provide our prime source with their revelation of who God is.

Travelling with Jesus through the gospels gave me my clearest picture of God, as prior to Christ's earthly existence the revelation of God was somewhat fragmentary and partial.

Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Through Jesus I began to understand God's grace (or kindness to the undeserving) and his extravagant love for both the lovely and the unlovely. My idea of God grew stronger and more complete as I learnt of Jesus' miraculous power to heal and transform lives, and of his hatred and condemnation of hypocrisy and all that prevents us from living a life of love. A "bright light" shone in my mind as I came to understand from Jesus that in his name I could address the sovereign God of the universe as my heavenly Father.

It is also through Jesus Christ that we have the greatest demonstration of God's love. This is in Christ's death on Calvary: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

I will never forget reading for the first time the sixth chapter of Isaiah. The prophet had an awesome vision of the majesty, the glory and the holiness of God. He became acutely aware of his own unworthiness in the presence of such a God. Out of that amazing experience came his clear sense of call to serve God. The chapter begins:

I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple ... And they [angels] were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory. (Isaiah 6:1-3)

Then in verse 5 the prophet indicates his awareness of his unworthiness in the presence of such holiness: "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." This is soon followed by Isaiah's ready commitment to serve God: "Here am I, send me!" (v. 8).

Isaiah's vision and response helped me seek to balance God's unbounded love and his awesome holiness in the way I relate to him. Yes! "God is love", but lest I become presumptuous or overly familiar in the way I relate to him, I must always remember that he is "holy love". So along with cherishing God's great love for me, I have learnt that I need to bear in mind his holiness. As such, God loathes all that spoils his purposes, all that prevents us from experiencing what is good, true and beautiful. Consequently he deals severely with the disease of sin and its crippling consequences.

Thus our perspective of God as loving, gracious and kind needs to be balanced with the perspective given by Isaiah's vision of God. I was overawed when I read it as a young believer in Christ and had a similar reaction to Isaiah. I felt so unworthy in the presence of God's majesty and holiness. God is my loving heavenly Father, but he loathes my pride, lust, selfishness, impatience, critical spirit, dishonesty, lack of love and so much more that is not Christ-like.

However, there is nothing I can say or do that will stop him loving me, no matter how disappointed he is with my attitudes or behaviour. As such, he patiently waits for me to repent – to not only say "I'm sorry" but to seek grace to be different, to be more like Christ.

Robert Hillman, my soul mate and close friend, often said that most of our problems in the church grow out of an inadequate idea of God. All too often people try to imagine what God is like without the guidance of Scripture and therefore arrive at a relatively small and distorted concept of who God really is. Our limited time-space minds do not have the capacity to fully comprehend the eternal.

Those with small insufficient ideas of God are hesitant in their prayers lest they ask too much. If we have a sufficient, adequate, truly biblical idea of God, our faith can be bold and adventurous in asking for great things from God, with confidence and expectancy.

Never underestimate the infinite power, the astonishing kindness, the magnanimous forgiveness, the inexhaustible mercy of our gracious God who, out of his great heart of love, gave his Son to die upon a cross to set us free.

Do not be duped into thinking God is less than he is. Do not underestimate God. Have a robust, big idea of our truly wondrous God – based on his self-revelation in the Bible and supremely in Jesus Christ.



THE WONDERS OF CREATION

While I was ministering at Port Kembla, a busy port town south of Sydney, a ship's engineer called at our house to say he needed help with a family problem.

During our conversation he told me he was an atheist, so I asked why he had come to seek help from one who so obviously believed in God. He said, "I'm desperate. No one else has been able to help me."

I replied that my best guidance would have a God-dimension, so I suggested that because his ship would be in port for a week, he should first go away and pray, "If there is a God, reveal yourself to me." He agreed.

Two days later, he reappeared, relaxed and with a smile on his face. He said, "I prayed that prayer, and I'm no longer an atheist!"

He went on to tell how late one afternoon he was driving along a road on the eastern side of Lake Illawarra as a magnificent sunset lit up the western sky, wonderfully reflected in the still waters of the lake. He said he was transfixed and stopped the car. "I can no longer believe there is not some awesome being behind that exquisite order and beauty. Please introduce me to him!" he pleaded.

He went back to his ship with a personal faith in Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord, also saying he felt he had already found the answer to the issue he had initially come to discuss with me. That rugged marine engineer identified with the psalmist who certainly experienced God revealing himself through the creation when he said, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalms 19:1).

I never cease to be inspired by the grandeur and wonders of God’s creative handiwork. As a theological student, I was posted to preach each weekend in a small cluster of townships on the higher part of the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. I got into the habit of arriving well before the appointed time on Sundays, so I could stand on different lookouts viewing the tree-covered mountains and valleys, with their rocky outcrops illuminated by the morning sun. As I prayed and sang hymns, I identified with the psalmist as he wrote, “I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalms 121:1–2).

While standing at a lookout overlooking the awesome Grand Canyon in the United States, I saw a plaque in a prominent position which read, “How manifold are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your riches” (Psalms 104:24). It is followed by this prayer: “Father Almighty, wonderful Lord, wondrous Creator, be ever adored, wonders of nature sing praise to you. Wonder of wonders – I may praise you too!” Being in such a position, I found these words most applicable.

When, in conjunction with other pastors, I operated the patrol area of the Methodist Mission in the north-west of our state of New South Wales, we covered long distances between the sheep and wheat properties at which we made pastoral calls. Only a few trees hindered our clear view of the horizon on those flat plains. The smog-free air, with a scattering of fleecy clouds, resulted in many awesome sunrises and sunsets as we drove along those rough gravel and black or red-soil roads. God was very evident and near to us.

While ministering at Port Kembla, I learnt to spend time with God at lookouts on the top of cliffs giving an unhindered view of the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Time and again I sang and meditated upon the song we often sang in Sunday school:

Wide, wide as the ocean, high as the heaven above,
Deep, deep as the deepest sea is my Saviour’s love.

I, though so unworthy still am a child of his care
For his word teaches me that his love reaches me
... Everywhere!³

There I met with a personal, ever-present heavenly Father – profoundly evident in his stunning creation.

What an awesome world our creator God and heavenly Father has made and daily sustains! And the wonders of this creation reflect the wonder of its creator. How almost unbelievable that he, the creator and sovereign Lord of this world and the universe should passionately love us enough to send his Son to make possible an intimate relationship with him – both now and in eternity, when the relationship will become something beyond our present ability to comprehend.



GREAT IS GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

During my time of service at Port Kembla, the old church and hall were in great need of upgrading to meet the needs of a rapidly growing congregation of adults, young people and children. When a large national manufacturing business made an attractive offer to lease the site long-term, we engaged an architect to prepare a proposal for a new complex on a nearby site.

Most of the congregation were workers in the local metal processing industries and unused to making decisions involving large expenditure to the degree entailed in this proposed project. I well remember the meeting of the committee whose task it was to decide whether we should proceed or not. The immensity of the responsibility weighed heavily upon us and was clearly reflected in the thoughtful discussion as we sought to discern God's will. One of the main concerns was whether we could meet the repayments on the loan required.

The meeting was held in our lounge room. On the wall hung a picture with this verse of Scripture:

This I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of God never ceases, his mercies are new every morning – GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS. (Lamentations 3:21–23 RSV)

At a point when there was an air of hesitancy about making such a long-term commitment, one of those present pointed to the text and said, “Can’t we take this verse of Scripture seriously and trust God to supply our needs?” The meeting felt mildly rebuked for its lack of faith in God, and then made the decision to proceed. Eighteen months later the new, low-cost, attractive church and hall were opened!

The old song “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” – based on the above Scripture – became the theme song for the church.

These verses in the Old Testament book of Lamentations have personally become an ongoing inspiration, especially when I have been faced with tough decisions. I try to keep before me the big picture of God’s nature revealed here and in the whole of the Bible. His love is not fickle, it is constant. His mercy and his compassion never fail – they are sufficient for every day. Our God is utterly faithful and unchanging.

Traditionally the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah has been considered the author of Lamentations, the book in which the above verses appear. It is not written like the prophecy which bears his name, but it certainly has Jeremiah’s spirit.

This book is a series of laments flowing from a broken heart. The writer is standing in the ashes of Jerusalem – the jewel of the Jewish nation. It is a picture of devastation brought about by a ruthless invading army. All hope seems to have vanished.

But amidst this darkness and despair a brilliant light of hope is switched on which focuses on Israel’s ever-present, faithful, all-powerful, loving God.

Instead of simply dwelling on the gloom of the devastation engulfing them, the prophet assures his hearers that God’s love is steadfast, immovable, rock solid, unceasing. It never runs dry. It is never out of stock!

He further encourages them by assuring them that God’s mercies, his loving-kindness, his pity, his compassion and his grace are unending – inexhaustible! “They are new every morning” – they never wilt, never go stale. They are fresh and abundantly available to meet each day’s needs.

Jeremiah's God, indeed the God whose record of self-revelation is found in all Scripture and supremely in his Son, is utterly faithful. He never lets us down, runs late, or forgets. He is thoroughly reliable.

Time and again when I am faced with tough decisions, these verses come to mind and often result in my singing the hymn based upon them. They are an ongoing inspiration. "Great Is God's Faithfulness"!



MY MOST SOBERING EXPERIENCES

The wonder of God could hardly be more apparent than when contrasted with the depravity of human nature. I have had two experiences which have brought home to me the extent to which human nature can stoop. These two grim experiences were while working in Poland and Cambodia – and they have left a lasting impression on me.

During a break in a conference I was conducting in Poland, I was driven to visit Auschwitz Concentration Camp, a grim memorial to the Holocaust victims.

Auschwitz originally was comprised of three separate sites relatively close to each other. Inmates were brought from as far away as France, Greece and Norway. They included Jews, political prisoners, intellectuals, resistance members, gypsies and, later, Russian prisoners of war. During the occupation of Poland by the Nazis, a total of over 3 million Jews, and a comparable number of Poles, were killed in concentration camps.

We visited row upon row of wooden barracks built to a German army stable design, intended to house 52 horses. Each of these housed 800 prisoners, sleeping on 3-tier platforms. My most sobering memories include: standing in the gas chamber, where each day up to a thousand prisoners were killed before being incinerated; punishment cells one metre square, each housing

four prisoners; the torture room; the enclosed death yard where prisoners were shot or tortured; and the public hanging area. I also clearly remember seeing the separate long glassed-in areas which contained tons of human hair, thousands of shoes, many children's clothes and personal items.

The long access area next to rail tracks in the largest camp was where Nazi doctors sorted those who could work from the aged, the infirm and children. The infirm and the children who were too young to work were taken straight to the gas chambers. Pictures abounded of the indescribable suffering. I was especially moved by those of children and adults used in medical experiments.

Yes, a sobering experience indeed. The depravity and sadism of members of one of the world's most cultured nations was almost unbelievable.

While there I learned of an inspirational act that occurred amidst these horrors. One of my companions told of how after an escape from the camp, the authorities lined up all the internees then systematically selected an equal number to those who had escaped, to be shot in reprisal. A priest standing next to one of the condemned, a young father who was distraught that he would never see his children again, swapped places with him. His church and his country have never forgotten this heroism.

While working in Cambodia, I was taken to the Tuol Sleng Museum. In 1975, Tuol Sleng Preparatory High School was taken over by Pol Pot's security forces and turned into a prison known as Security Prison 21 (S21). It soon became the largest centre of detention and torture in the country. The museum included hundreds of photographs of inmates and tortured corpses. Hideous torture equipment was on display and pictures showed more methods of torture. Glass cases were filled with skulls. It was a sombre experience, and also showed how depraved human nature can become. I think it affected me more than my visit to Auschwitz.

From there we drove 18 km to the Killing Fields (Choeung Ek) where 17,000 men, women, children and infants (including 9 westerners, a couple of them from Australia) from S21 prison were executed. They were bludgeoned to death to avoid wasting precious ammunition and were buried in mass graves.

Certainly a very sobering afternoon, but one I would not have missed in an effort to better understand this nation and also for its insight into unredeemed human nature.

But there is more to this story. Kang Ket Ieu (Comrade Duch), the relatively young man who commanded the S21 torture and detention centre, eluded capture at the end of the Khmer Rouge regime. Twenty years later, a man in tears sat at the back of a church congregation at the end of the service. The minister went to inquire about his distress. He confessed that he had been the commandant of S21, Comrade Duch. With overwhelming conviction he repented, and was led to faith in Christ's redeeming death. He is now in jail, still awaiting trial, after giving himself up.

I have been assured that Duch is indeed a transformed follower of Jesus Christ. That must be one of the most remarkable conversions of which I have heard. Indeed, life can begin again!

In many ways it is a mystery how human beings can behave in such a depraved manner. Reputable theologians have struggled with this issue. Space prevents me trying to deal with it in depth here. Suffice to say that the Westminster Confession enshrines the notion that all are born corrupt; we have an inherited inner disposition to sin. As someone has said, "People are not sinners because they sin; they sin because they are sinners." According to the Reformers, every aspect of a person's nature has been corrupted.

The doctrine of total depravity is not intended to imply that corrupt humanity is incapable of doing good. For as many theologians would agree, the image of God – in which we are all created – cannot be fully erased. But equally, human beings are capable of horrendous behaviour because sin separates us from the holy God who is the source of perfect love – of all that is good, true and beautiful.

In the cross of Christ is demonstrated not only the utter vileness of sin, but the contrasting wondrous grace of our great God – his undeserved kindness in doing for us what we cannot accomplish ourselves. God in his grace made it possible for all to not only find forgiveness but also to experience an about-turn in the direction of our lives, as manifested in the complete turnaround in Comrade Duch.

God's grace not only effects a release from bondage to one's corrupted sinful nature, but enables one to grow into the likeness of his Son. This is seen in the love and self-sacrifice of the priest at Auschwitz. Many other godly people in the two grim situations I spoke of above no doubt also showed evidence in exemplary ways of Christ-likeness, of lives transformed and empowered by grace.

Whatever good we do and whatever we accomplish in life that is honouring to God, we ought to acknowledge the role of God's wondrous grace. And when confronted with examples of the depravity of human nature, we should identify with John Wesley and his words on seeing a criminal being led to the gallows, "*But for the grace of God, there go I.*"



POSTCARDS ON:
Spiritual Growth





SAVED BY A SHARK!

God used a close call with a shark in no uncertain manner to get my attention. After dozing spiritually for nearly sixteen years, in a flash I was wide awake.

I was brought up in a Christian home with parents who lived what they believed and who were deeply committed to the ministry of the church. I was constantly in their prayers and they taught me to pray. They talked wisely and freely about God. Our local church, the only one in the small village of Rhodes, now a thriving suburb of Sydney, was a focal point of our family life. As well as attending Sunday School in the afternoon, we also went to church worship services both morning and evening.

With no resident pastor, my father (a busy engineer) was our church's very active layman – leading the Sunday School, Bible study class, youth group and overseeing the property maintenance. He visited people in the community in times of need, whether or not they had connections with our church. My mother was a prayerful woman and in later life ran a prayer group in our home for 25 years. Her plaque at the crematorium concludes with the words, "A woman of prayer."

Sadly, it all meant very little to me until I was 16 years old. During the school holidays, my older sister attended a girls' camp conducted by the Scripture Union movement. There she had a very real experience of Christ and returned

with her faith truly alive. Having no doubt that her kid brother desperately needed what she had found, she strongly urged me to attend a similar camp for young men at Collaroy, one of Sydney's northern beaches. However, the camp was for those who were already Christ-followers. So when I attended along with a mate, we both tried hard to appear like the others. I am sure we were not very convincing!

While surfing together one day we suddenly noticed that not only was the water deserted, but on the beach some distance away the other campers were waving wildly and obviously shouting warnings to us. Realising something was amiss, we quickly swam to shore. On arrival, the concerned campers told us that a shark was patrolling the deep channel close to the shore and had swum away from where we crossed the channel only just beforehand!

Their announcement was like a bolt of lightning to me. I immediately thought, "Where would I have spent eternity if I had been killed by that shark?" I had no doubt I was unprepared to meet my Maker.

I tried a number of times to meet with the camp leader, Alex Brown, without success, but phoned him when I returned home to make an appointment with him. Unfortunately he was not available for three days, so trying to keep myself alive for that period became a huge priority!

When we met, he was surprised that I did not already consider myself a true Christian. He then explained the following verse from the apostle Paul's letter to the Roman Christians to lead me to faith in Christ: "...if you declare with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

After that life-changing meeting, I did not recall much of his explanation of the meaning of the verse. I know I believed that Jesus Christ had done something by his death and resurrection that I could not do for myself, to make me right with God, no matter how hard I tried or how "religious" I might endeavour to be.

God offered me, and I accepted, an entirely undeserved gift of forgiveness and a new quality of life – spiritual life – that I can experience here and now and to a far fuller degree in eternity.

Living out his “Lordship” – his authority over my life – has been an ongoing, challenging experience. I need to keep working at it as a love response to his grace – as opposed to begrudgingly following commands – and by the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit.

One of the first things I did after making that commitment to Jesus Christ was to tell my father. He was thrilled! He prayed for me and continued to encourage me in my efforts to follow Christ. Probably his greatest encouragement to me occurred many months later when he said, “Son, you really needn’t have told me of your decision to follow Christ – it is so evident in the change in your attitude and behaviour ... you are so different!”

I laughed in disbelief, but he reassured me that the transformation was most obvious, particularly in my loss of self-centredness and new concern for others. That affirmation of the Holy Spirit’s renewing work in my life, of which I was not aware, was a tremendous encouragement.

I am one of those followers of Jesus Christ who can remember the exact time and place when I was converted. But there are others like my wife, June, who cannot remember when she first believed in Jesus. From an early age she had faith in Christ, although there have certainly been significant moments along the way when that experience has deepened or become clearer.

Debate will continue around when the life of a Christian believer begins, but essentially it begins with a choice. We must choose to turn away from trying to make it on our own, and to turn to Christ to live the way he taught and lived. The word that describes this change is “repentance” which in the Greek essentially means “to turn”, to change direction, to abandon our own way and turn to Christ. It involves genuine sorrow for how we have lived and asking for and accepting the forgiveness that is offered freely to all because of Christ’s death on our behalf.

Another key aspect of being a Christian is having an inner assurance or certainty of one’s relationship with God, undergirded by scriptural promises of Christ’s gospel and nurtured by the indwelling Holy Spirit. As the apostle Paul says, “The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16).

I thank God for the wake-up call of that shark miraculously changing my life. Back then I thought of eternal life as a “pie on the sky when you die” – an

“insurance policy”. Now I see this spiritual life as the quality of life that Jesus lived out amongst us and one which – by God’s grace through the Holy Spirit who indwells me – I can experience here and now, to honour my amazing God and to bless others. In eternity I will know it fully.



A LESSON IN SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Just three years after making my personal commitment to Jesus Christ following my attendance at a Christian camp conducted by Scripture Union, I was overwhelmed to be included in the leadership team for a similar camp. Various responsibilities were assigned to each leader at the first team preparation meeting. I was appointed Health and Hygiene Officer!

I did not think to ask what was involved, as it seemed to be assumed that everyone understood what each role entailed. My impression from the high-sounding title was that I had been assigned a most responsible position. When I told my parents, I must have conveyed this idea to them. They were most impressed that their son had received such an honourable task in his very first Christian leadership experience.

Some time after arriving at the camp, I eventually asked the Camp Leader what was involved. He explained that each camp-site needed to be kept clean and tidy. I was to organise daily “Emu Parades” of the campers on each of the playing fields and around the camp to pick up litter.

Then came the unexpected. The sanitation at the camp consisted of “bush toilets”. (For the uninitiated, these were pits dug in the ground and accessorised with elevated toilet seats. The walls were comprised of hessian attached to poles surrounding the facility.) I was informed that my job entailed cleaning

the toilets each morning. I made no comment but thought that people should be employed to perform menial tasks such as this.

The next morning, very reluctantly, I gathered a bucket of hot soapy water and a scrubbing brush. To my horror, the seat of the first toilet I encountered was covered with filth accompanied by a nauseating smell! That was the last straw. I dumped my cleaning apparatus and quit.

Later that afternoon, I saw the camp leader walking away from the toilets carrying the bucket. I crept in and found no evidence of the morning's disaster – everything had been cleaned up. Was I moved to “take up my cross”? Not at all! I continued to organise the daily Emu Parades, but nothing more.

Over a decade later, I was organising and leading my own camps for children. Capable teams worked with me in these outreach ventures. I chose not to include a “Health and Hygiene Officer” among the team's responsibilities, electing to fulfil this role myself – not because I was working off a guilt complex, but because in the intervening period I had learnt something about servant leadership.

I now understood and wanted to practise the model of Jesus' leadership style. His awesome example in the Upper Room had left an indelible impression on me.

During the disciples' last meal together with Jesus, before the horrendous events of the following day, it seems almost unbelievable that they were arguing among themselves about who should be counted as the greatest. Their debate about precedence and prestige was totally inappropriate. Then followed what is hard to conceive.

To grasp the significance of what followed we need to understand the customs of that culture. The sandals people wore would give no protection from the dust and mud that would accumulate on travellers' feet as they travelled unsealed roads. Therefore servants met guests at the entrance of a house to wash and dry their feet.

With no one on hand to offer such service to Jesus and his disciples, the expectation was that this would come from within the group. But such was the spirit of pride amongst the disciples, none of them stepped forward to perform the task.

Then occurred perhaps the greatest example of humility and servanthood as Jesus – the Lord of all – took the bowl and a towel and performed the duty of a slave. He willingly and lovingly did what none of the disciples was prepared to do.

John's account of what Jesus taught them from his example is as follows:

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet you should also wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly, servants are not greater than their master, nor the messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” (John 13:12b–17)

During sessions on leadership that I conducted for the senior national leadership of a denomination in an area of the Pacific, we dealt with Christ's example in washing the disciples' feet, and other related passages. In groups the participants explored the relevance for their culture. In the plenary sessions most groups reported a moving experience. One report summed up most of the thinking: “Our women are like slaves. They cook our meals and we eat first, leaving them to eat the leftovers. They work hard all day, and when we come home, we sit like a chief, never offering to help. We must begin following Christ's example of servanthood in our homes.” The organisers and other leaders readily affirmed the deep significance of work done in this session.

How often as Christ-followers, because of our position or our pride, we fail to respond when humble acts of service are necessary. Sometimes it may be because we are so preoccupied with other things that we fail to notice an immediate need for humble service. It does not mean that we should always be the one to perform these lowly tasks, but we always need to be prepared to do so.

Those of us who are leaders in particular need to willingly and lovingly model servant leadership, to follow the supreme example that our Lord and leader has set for us.

As Paul exhorts us, “In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had...” (Philippians 2:5; cf. vv. 6–11).



DISCARDING THE MASKS

While serving at Wesley Church, Hamilton, a suburb of Newcastle NSW, I read Keith Miller's book *A Taste of New Wine*. It made a significant impact on my life and ministry. His second chapter, "A New Kind of Honesty", especially got my attention. It essentially deals with wearing masks. He tells how for the first four years as an active churchman, he was constantly frustrated by an amazing lack of basic honesty.

Here are some excerpts from that chapter:

It wasn't so much that people lied. We just had an unspoken agreement not to press the truth – when it seemed that the truth might hurt the leaders or someone else's feelings – or really rock the boat. We evidently felt that being honest in such cases would be cruel or tactless. Consequently we lived in a world of subtle duplicity of which we Christians were the contributing cause...I have talked to so many laymen and leaders in the various denominations about this that I am convinced it is almost universally true.

Although I had always tried desperately to be honest and to have integrity, even in the meetings I mentioned, I have only recently

realised that true honesty has a very deceptive and elusive quality – especially among those of us who call ourselves Christians.⁴

After reading Miller's book and reflecting on certain Scriptures, I decided to endeavour to be more honest and open. At the large church in which I served at that time – with its huge pipe organ, robed choir, central elevated pulpit and large congregation (including many drawn from the top echelon of that area's society) – I was expected to wear a clerical collar and robes. But, the following Sunday, I mounted the pulpit in a business suit and tie. There was a shocked air of silence, so I explained my actions. I told how God had got my attention regarding my mask-wearing and I wanted to be more honest in my preaching and my dealings with the congregation and others. I explained that I would not be airing all my doubts, fears and "dirty washing" in my preaching, but that I would try to tell how God had got my attention in my preparation. I said I intended to be more open with individuals who I trusted would keep confidential what I shared.

The response from the congregation, as far as I could gauge, was accepting. I was not questioned about my attire in the pulpit, and some affirmed my commitment to a new openness. Indeed, one woman told me some months later that she was receiving more help from my preaching. She said that she had always appreciated my Bible-based messages through which her knowledge of Scripture was growing, "but now I can relate more fully to what you are saying, as you share how God gets your attention and the changes to which you are committed."

One important way to combat mask-wearing is to confess our sin to other believers, a practice which is evident in the New Testament. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus Christ with his forthright call to repentance and faith. Matthew (3:6) records that people came from all over Judea and responded by openly confessing their sins and being baptised. In Acts (19:18) we learn that those who responded to Paul's proclamation of the good news of Christ in Ephesus "came and openly confessed their sins". In the section of his epistle dealing with healing the sick, James emphasises the need for confession to other Christian followers – "confess your sins to each other" (5:16).

4

Taste of New Wine, Keith Miller, 1968, Word Books.

Since the Reformation, Protestants have dispensed with “the confessional” where people confessed their sins to a priest who prayed for them and proclaimed forgiveness in Christ’s name. Those of us who are Protestants have emphasised that an intermediary is not needed because each person can confess directly to God and personally claim the wonderful promise of absolution in John’s first epistle (1:9). However, though this response is very biblical, many Protestants have lost the emphasis upon open confession to fellow believers who we trust will keep confidences and who will be positive from a gospel perspective in their response.

Having such a view, I have endeavoured to follow this practice myself. Some time after my years at Hamilton Wesley Church, God guided me to meet with a colleague who spoke frequently of the positive impact I had had on his life and ministry. He looked up to me as a more mature Christian, so it was especially humbling to ask him to hear my long and detailed confession. We met in the original Wesley Chapel on the ground floor of the then Methodist offices in Pitt Street, Sydney, where I had been ordained. I knelt at the communion rail in the same place where the hands of the church president and other significant leaders were laid on me a decade before, to acknowledge my call to the ordained ministry of the church.

During this time I was also blessed with a prayer partner and friend with whom I developed the closest and most open relationship of my Christian pilgrimage. Over eleven years he struggled with cancer, in which time we shared and prayed together each week. We unreservedly confessed our doubts and fears, our weakness and struggles, as well as our joys and Christian walk.

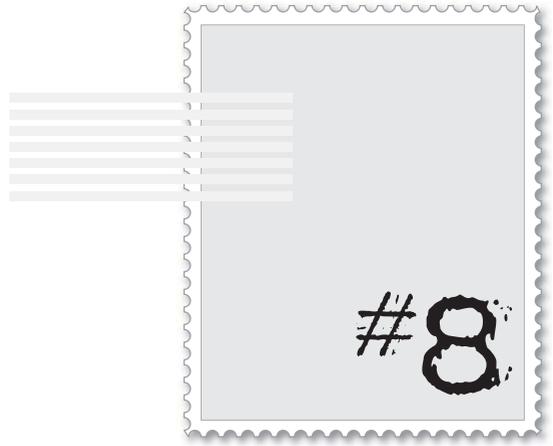
I continue to have some close friends with whom I walk the road, and find that a blessing. In my preaching, teaching and mentoring I do not consciously wear masks. Some of my mentorees and those I teach often say they are impressed with how honest I am at times. I often say others can learn a lot as I openly share my reflection on my mistakes.

I also encourage those I mentor and teach – including leaders – to find an ongoing peer mentoring relationship in which they can confess their failings and be open about all aspects of their life and ministry. Such a relationship helps keep us accountable and provides support and encouragement – helping us to finish well.

I certainly have not arrived at the final destination on this journey of transparency. Self-adulation creeps in from time to time, especially when I feel insecure and want to try to make a good impression. Quite unconsciously at times I exaggerate, which means I misrepresent the truth. Lust is not a problem but it is always present “in the wings”. Occasionally I break the “Matthew 18 Principle”⁵ and talk behind people’s back rather than confronting them face to face. I easily get impatient when things are not going as I think they should. I get irritated when I feel I am not being treated correctly. Grace (undeserved kindness) can at times be lacking in me, and my love can be absent or very thin. My wife has a refrigerator magnet which reads, “Sometimes I wake up grumpy. Other times I let him sleep.” Sometimes I could possibly qualify to play a supporting role in another “Grumpy Old Men” movie! It is obvious that I have not made it yet. I am a learner, a follower of Jesus Christ, still with a distance to go.

Join me on the journey of this “new kind of honesty”, with its commitment to step out from behind our masks and seek to be more transparent.

5 Matthew 18:15–17



TO BE LIKE JESUS

My book *Mentoring to Develop Disciples and Leaders* was translated into Polish in preparation for a conference to equip mentors that I conducted in Poland, and then for use in a continuing national development program for future Christian leaders. The main line in the title on the front page read, “Bj Jak Jezus”. Its English translation is: “To Be Like Jesus”. The rest of the title roughly translates as “The Ability to Mentor Disciples and Leaders”.

That main title line continues to inspire me. The translator had caught the spirit of the book which Bishop John R Reid identified in the Foreword when he said, “The book is clear as crystal that Jesus Christ is the model and goal of personal growth and ministry. Everything in the book seeks to be related to this fundamental biblical principle.”

Christian mentoring should be centred on enabling mentorees to understand and practise the pattern of life and ministry that Jesus displayed during his time on earth. I seek to facilitate this with the Christian leaders that I mentor. I believe that enabling them to reflect the life and mission of Jesus Christ is foundational to all that is involved in nurturing and equipping Christian leaders, and all believers.

My mentorees tell me that they benefit from the knowledge, understanding and experience I have accumulated from a diverse ministry as a pastor, Christian

educator and author – spanning over fifty years. Yet all this background will not enable them to be effective from an eternal perspective unless I help them become like Jesus in the way they live and labour. To this end I encourage them to develop the habit of asking, “What would Jesus do?”

I also impress on my mentorees that the development and maintenance of one’s relationship to the Lord is fundamental to one’s life reflecting the life and mission of Jesus Christ. From my personal experience, I know that seeking to sustain my relationship with my Lord is the most important thing I do in preparing myself to relate to and serve others as he did. Consequently, when I am close to Jesus, I am the most effective.

Jesus Christ’s life is the one and only perfect model of how we as his servants should live and relate to others. Probably what the disciples remembered best from being constantly with Jesus would have been who he was as a person – his character, his integrity, his credibility, his uniqueness. They observed his genuine compassion for the poor, the sick, the weak, the despised, the marginalised and indeed all in need. They must have been almost overcome by his servant leadership and great humility (cf. Matthew 9:10; Luke 22:27; John 13:5–17) *and stunned by the vehemence of his righteous indignation at all forms of hypocrisy* (cf. Matthew 23:1–36) *and injustice* (cf. Mark 11:15–18).

Additionally, Jesus’ teachings – modelled by his life – give all his followers clear directions on how to be like him. He spoke plainly so all could understand, with many a practical application (e.g. Matthew chs 5–7).

In his teaching Jesus plainly stated that the distinguishing mark of a true follower of his is that they love as he loved (cf. John 13:34–35). To be like Jesus is to love without exception both those who are easy to love and those who are not.

Paul’s magnificent definition of “agape” love in the 13th chapter of his first letter to the young church in Corinth is an excellent description of the character of Jesus. Patience, kindness, no envy, humility, unselfishness, self-control – to mention but a few aspects of Christ-like love – is “the most excellent way” to relate to others. What a model seeking to emulate Jesus presents to all who truly endeavour to follow him!

But, thank God, we do not have to achieve this by understanding all the above, and then gritting our teeth to try harder in our own efforts to climb

to these great heights. Jesus also stressed to his disciples the indispensability of the empowerment of the indwelling divine enabler, the Holy Spirit, for the sanctifying of their being, words and deeds (cf. John 14:15–17, 25–26; 15:26; 16:5–15; Acts 1:4–5, 8).

To be like Jesus – what a challenge for us personally, and for those we try to help mature in their discipleship and leadership. Let us persistently endeavour to be living demonstrations – before both other believers and non-believers – of the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God give us the grace each day to model that which otherwise can be difficult to grasp.



FINISHING WELL

I tell later (cf. “Who, Me, Lord?”, p.31) how God called me to give myself fully to him, resulting in me leaving my occupation and entering the ordained ministry. Nearly 45 years later, my wife and I were vacationing in the same town where God had spoken to me. As I passed the church where I received that call, I noticed that the church door was open. So I took the opportunity to enter and kneel at the communion rail in the same place where I had knelt so many years before. As I spent some unhurried time in reflection and prayer, it was as though a voice spoke the words Paul said to King Agrippa, “I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven” (Acts 26:19).

Though I have not always been as obedient as I could have been, I have continued over all these years to seek to fulfil God’s call in all its varied forms. However, I have not finished the course yet. I am well aware that at any time I could slip and not finish well.

At different times I have been made very much aware of how often people of God do not finish well – and consequently how we all need to be focused on finishing well ourselves. A sizeable portion of leaders in the Old Testament did not finish well, and the same is the case today.

Gideon has always been an inspiration to me in the way he trusted God’s perception of him, obeyed God’s call after checking it out and trusted God’s

limitless power when his resources were limited. (After Gideon started out with an army of 32,000 against an army of 135,000, God kept pruning his force until eventually Gideon defeated the enemy with 300 men – which was only about one for every 450 enemies.) But this amazingly competent leader, when faced with the pressure of success, appears to have succumbed to greed and even led Israel into false worship.

(Judges chapters 6–8 should be studied by all leaders who want to serve God faithfully – trusting his sovereignty and, when they are successful, remembering that, like Gideon, it is easy to “lose the plot”.)

There were, of course, many in the Old Testament who did finish well. During his tour of the “Hall of Fame” of the Old Testament giants of the faith in Hebrews 11, the writer reflects, “All these people were still living by faith when they died” (v. 13). As such, I find them a great example and encouragement to me. Though I do have a strong faith in my great God, I pray that it will deepen and remain to the end of this life’s journey.

In addition to bearing in mind the above examples – which should warn and encourage us – there are some other insights I would like to mention regarding finishing well (to which I know many others could be added).

During my many seminars on mentoring I have asked participants to list the major areas where they can stray in their relationship with God and/or in their effectiveness in their service of him. Here is a collation of the feedback: lack of accountability; self-adulation; excessive intimacy; greed; neglect of spouse and family; not maintaining friendships; absence of a servant spirit; misuse of authority; poor management of time; and uncontrolled (or overly restricted) availability.

From my wide experience in mentoring leaders I concur with this list, as often I need to deal with one or more of these with my mentorees. I have also personally found that I have had to set boundaries or take other action in some of these areas to help me take control of my life. I also think that lack of accountability is of particular note. Accountability to another person we trust – who can both encourage and rebuke in a spirit of grace – is a great aid in ensuring one finishes well.

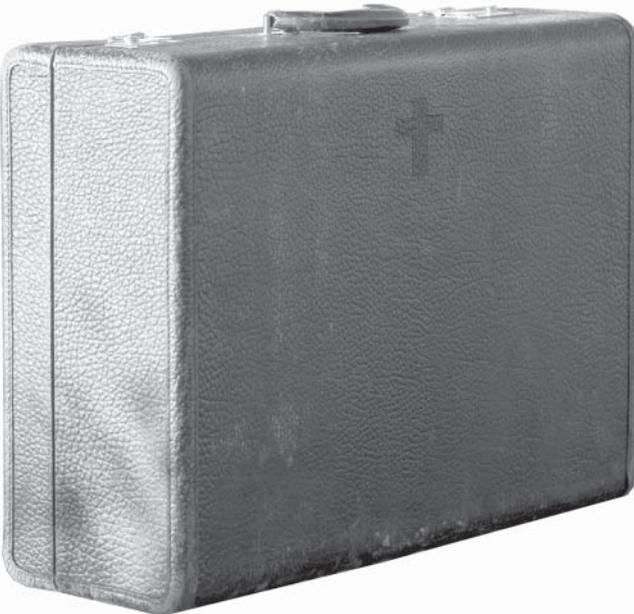
All of the above is very important if we are going to avoid straying off course in our lives and service. However, for me the key factor to maintaining a

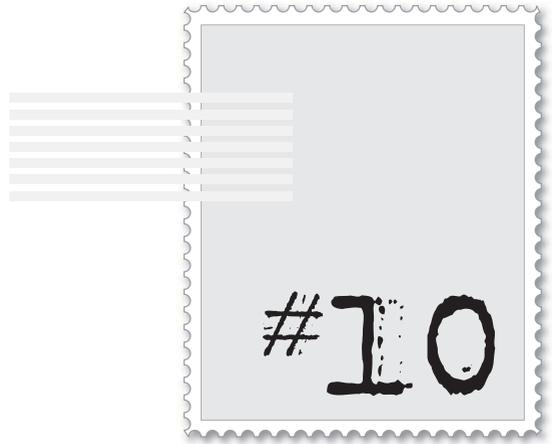
relationship with God and finishing well, is the imperative need to spend time alone with God.

The most important times for me in any day are those in which I meet with my Lord. I learnt early the wisdom of Ben Patterson's words, and how applying them could help me to finish well, faithfully serving God till the end: "The greatest thing we have to offer others is not our education. It is not good ideas. It isn't even our gifts and abilities. It is the fruit of the time we have spent with the Saviour, the utterly unique and unparalleled thing that happens to us when we are simply in his presence." As Oswald Sanders says, "Prayer does not fit us for the greater work. Prayer is the greater work."



POSTCARDS ON:
God's Plan





GOD'S IMPROBABLE CHOICES

One of the most remarkable aspects of God's plans is his often surprising choices of people for tasks that seem beyond them. The Bible contains many accounts of God choosing the most unexpected people to do outstanding things for him. Moses apparently had a speech impediment but became the liberator and leader of a nation. David was the youngest in a large family and a lowly shepherd boy when he was chosen as a future king. Gideon was the least in his family but led Israel to victory over their oppressors despite overwhelming odds.

Jeremiah, the Old Testament prophet, certainly appears as one of God's surprising choices. Sensitive, reticent and introspective, he had a deep sense of personal inadequacy. Yet God called and empowered this unlikely person to warn a nation of his impending judgment. This Jeremiah did faithfully and with amazing courage for forty years, with no apparent positive response from the vast majority of the people.

For much of my childhood and teenage years, I was a very shy person. When I was a small child, my older sister often said, as I hid behind her in the presence of strangers, "He doesn't speak; I speak for him." Well into my teens I shunned any situation where I had to face a large group of people unknown to me.

However, after I committed my life to Jesus Christ at the age of sixteen, there was a marked change in my self-confidence. At nineteen I was preaching without any sense of nervousness. Indeed, the minister of my church, who had a hunch about my gifts and gave me my first opportunity to preach, was quite overwhelmed by the assurance of my manner and the impact on the congregation. Since that time I have conducted training events with up to 1,500 people participating in each session and preached to gatherings as large as 11,000 without once feeling apprehensive.

Although I have always been creative with my hands and did very well at high school in technical subjects, as I explain in the following chapter, English was my “weakest link”. Now many books dealing with practical aspects of Christian ministry bear my name, with some being best-sellers and even being translated into other languages.

My life and work is a testimony to what God can do with a most unlikely person. Occasionally my wife has lovingly said to me, “You are an ordinary person to whom God has given extraordinary opportunities.” I heartily agree.

Jesus chose a most improbable group to be his disciples. Mark, in his gospel, depicts them in a surprisingly unfavourable light. In Jesus’ band there were seemingly irreconcilable elements and a great variety of temperaments and dispositions. His followers were of modest means and limited schooling, virtually unknown to all but those in their immediate community. Yet to these people Jesus confidently committed the future of his message and mission, after they had been mentored by him for a comparatively short period. Jesus helps us understand that God can use anyone – and often the most unlikely.

The same was true in the Corinthian church, a church that was strategically placed geographically to do significant things for God. The majority who made up the congregation were from the edges of society – intellectually, culturally and socially. They were simple, humble people. (Having said this, some did hold prominent positions in the community.)

Paul reminds them: ‘Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don’t see many of “the brightest and the best” among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn’t it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these “nobodies” to expose the hollow pretensions

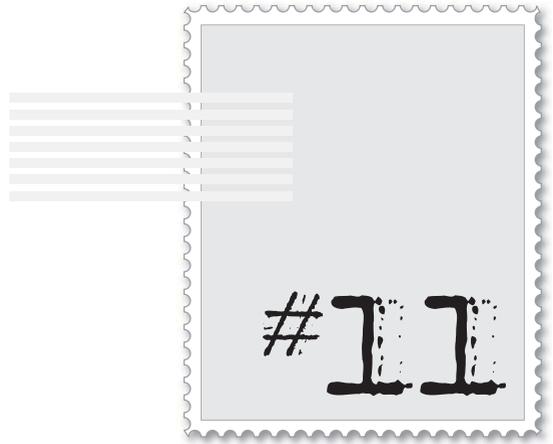
of the “somebodies”? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have – right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start – comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That’s why we have the saying, “If you’re going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God” (1 Corinthians 1:26–31, *The Message*).

As well as recognising that God uses unlikely people, we should also bear in mind that those he uses are typically humble people.

Someone has said, “Moses spent forty years as a prince in Pharaoh’s court thinking he was a somebody. He spent forty years as a hired hand in a harsh desert, learning he was a nobody. He then spent forty years leading the children of Israel, discovering what God can do with a person who has realised they are a nobody without him.”

I have worked closely with some of the world’s best-known Christian leaders. All have been extremely competent in their specific fields of ministry. But frequently I have found on closer acquaintance that those who have impressed me most have been very modest and unassuming. Their whole attitude and demeanour has reflected the apostle Paul’s testimony: “I am what I am by the grace of God” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

God has to keep teaching me the painful and often humbling lesson that I am not essentially an outstanding person, a prince in Pharaoh’s court, but an “improbable choice” – someone whom God, in his love and grace, chooses to use, often in quite unexpected ways. We all need to bear in mind that to fulfil God’s plans for us, we need to be open to God choosing us for tasks that we may consider way beyond us, while also humbly acknowledging our inadequacy before him.



MOST UNLIKELY AUTHOR

At the commencement of my ministry, one of the last things that I would have thought I would be involved with was writing books. And one of the subjects furthest from my mind as a young minister – believe it or not – was small groups run by laity.

During my time in high school, I seldom passed any English tests or exams. I am somewhat ashamed to tell the reason. Those years were during World War II, when retired women teachers came back into the workforce to fill the huge gaps left when most male teachers were required to serve in the defence forces. For two years my English class was taught by an elderly woman teacher. She was a really fine person who I later learnt was a committed Christian. However, a mate and I (both seated at the back of the class) relentlessly disrupted the class with our disorderly behaviour. Our elderly teacher found the situation impossible so, after some weeks, she handled the situation by telling us both at the commencement of each class to leave the room for the whole period. No wonder I did not exactly shine in the subject.

This accounted in part for my negative response when my principal mentor, Dr Gloster Udy, encouraged me to reflect on and write a book about some innovations I was implementing in one of my parishes with small groups. Without any reading or training on the subject, I had caught the vision of the role small groups could play in developing Christian disciples, resulting in a

network of dynamic small groups. And as there was no material written on the subject, Gloster was keen for me to document what I had discovered for others to catch on.

Again, I am somewhat embarrassed to share the following, which is what resulted in me gaining this vision of the potential of small groups in Christian communities of faith.

An outstanding evangelist in my denomination asked me to conduct a one-week mission for him in a large church in the Brisbane area, as he was unwell. I was overwhelmed at the thought of deputising for such a well-respected person and went into retreat for a couple of days to prepare myself. The response during the week of mission at which I was the preacher was astounding. Thirty-seven adults came to faith.

In discussing with the local pastor how he intended to nurture them, I suggested that he do as I had done over the previous couple of years in following up fifty referrals to our church from the first Billy Graham Crusade in Sydney. As part of the follow-up program that I have mentioned elsewhere, I had them all attend a weekly meeting over a period of six months, during which I taught the basics of discipleship. This had been a most successful program, resulting in all except a couple (who had moved to a church interstate) coming into full membership of the church.

The pastor, however, rejected the idea saying, “No! As a Methodist, I have planned to follow Wesley’s example and form them into five small Class Meetings, which were the key to conserving the outstanding results of the great Wesleyan Revival in the 17th century.”

I replied, “But you are too busy to lead five weekly small groups yourself.” His response was, “Oh, I’m not going to lead them. Like Wesley, I have trained lay people to do this and I’ll give overall supervision.”

Now, here is my embarrassment. I said, “Surely you aren’t going to use biblically and theologically illiterate lay people in this critical role.” He assured me he was. I returned home, saddened that no doubt most of the fruit of that mission would never reach maturity.

Those who know me well will find it hard to believe this, especially because of the strong lead I have given over many decades in affirming the ministry of

the so called “laity” and the varied educational opportunities I have provided for them across our nation and overseas.

Fortunately, God got me thinking through that pastor’s plans, and within a few months the continuing gathering of new believers in my own church (to which I referred earlier) was divided into small groups. With many others also becoming interested, this grew almost immediately into twelve groups, with a total of 120 members.

Gloster Udy, my mentor, was an authority on the Wesleyan Class Meeting, it being the subject of his doctoral thesis. He said our small groups reflected many aspects of Wesley’s groups. He persisted in persuading me to write an account of this work and then extensively edited my poor manuscript. The book was called *How to Commence Christian Cells in the Local Church*. Gloster arranged for its publication in 1964 and for wide distribution. It was probably the first book on the subject written in our country. Gloster then organised many lecturing opportunities for me, which resulted in my quickly becoming well known nationally.

In the following years, Gloster encouraged me to write on other subjects many times. Though he has since gone to be with the Lord, Gloster’s influence on my writing has not stopped. For indeed this book may well not have been written if he had not kept urging me in this direction. I have three letters in my files written by him, referring to this.

One says, “Write a book of short stories, ‘cameos’, telling of significant events in your widespread ministry.” Another reads, “I have just read the report of another of your overseas ministries. The thought occurred to me that you need to share some of these amazing stories to encourage others. Start each saying...”

Gloster also wrote, “Don’t let your age deter you. Augustine was 76 years old when, while experiencing the destruction of the Roman Empire, he wrote *The City of God*. Stanley Jones was still writing at 86.” Gloster went on to quote other senior authors, before concluding with a reference to Caleb being ready for fresh challenges in his eighties (cf. Joshua 14:6–15): “Now what does the Lord lead the brother of Caleb to do?” ... WRITE!

I am convinced that God is a God of serendipity. He enjoys creating unexpected, happy surprises – including assigning tasks to people who would not appear to

have suitable abilities or even suitable interests! Over the years I have written many books dealing with small groups and various other subjects – some becoming best-sellers, and some being translated into different languages.

God is not bound in his purposes by our abilities or our perception of them, nor our interests. In fact, one could be excused for thinking that he enjoys assigning unlikely tasks to unlikely people.



WHO, ME, LORD?

A number of leaders who appear in the Bible were initially reluctant or unwilling when God called them to undertake an important task. They are, of course, not the only ones. I myself have held membership of that “club” from time to time.

In my early twenties, I preached at a church in a suburb of Sydney on the Sunday after Christmas. After the service, Bernard Deane, a godly retired minister who was present asked me, “Young man, have you ever considered going into the full-time ministry of the church?” I laughed, and dismissed his sincere challenge. My occupation was very fulfilling and I was in love – and did not intend letting anything stand in the way of the possibility of my getting married.

A few months later, my girlfriend (now my wife) and her family went on an extended visit to Ireland, her parents’ homeland. A few weeks after they had departed, I attended an Easter church youth camp held at Bowral, south-west of Sydney. At the Sunday evening service, the chief speaker, Robert Page, urged all present to give their lives unreservedly to Jesus Christ as a love response to all he had done for us. Robert explained that this could lead to God calling us to serve him in unexpected ways. God got my attention in no uncertain manner and I joined others kneeling at the communion rail at the

front of the church, where we were prayed for and afterwards counselled by the camp's leaders.

Soon after returning home, I arranged to meet Bernard Deane, who I mentioned above. When we met I discussed with him the possibility that God was calling me to full-time service, which I thought may be ministry with young people. He advised me to undertake theological studies, during which the exact nature of my ministry would become clear. Soon afterwards, I began the entry process and the next year resigned from my position as a licensed electrical fitter (which I had enjoyed immensely) and commenced my three years of full-time studies. I was ordained as a minister of our denomination after a further three years part-time study while a probationary minister.

Not once have I ever regretted taking that step fifty-six years ago. It opened the door to what has been a varied and most satisfying ministry.

The second time I recall being hesitant when faced with a call of God to change direction in my work came while I was ministering in my third parish. The position of State Youth Director became vacant, and a number of my colleagues encouraged me to apply. I had no interest in the position as I was very happy in my current work. Then I received a phone call from another pastor of our denomination who held a completely different theological position and ministry focus to mine and whom I had debated against in some of our district church councils. He asked if he could nominate me. I responded by joking with him, clearly indicating my lack of interest. However, he was most insistent that my experience in many forms of innovative work with youth would greatly benefit the wider church in this role. Finally I consented. My wife was shocked at my quick change of mind, but I had a strange sense that God was getting my attention through this brother.

At the next church Annual State Conference – following a compelling speech of support by Dr Alan Walker, the then superintendent of the large Wesley Central Mission – my nomination was endorsed almost unanimously. This led to remarkable opportunities in the Board of Education – state and nationwide – as State Youth Director for five years, Director of Adult Education for another five years and the founding director of our state's lay education centre for a further four years.

The third major occasion that I can recall being hesitant when God called me to a new area of responsibility was when my wife and I opened a letter together

from a district body of our church, asking if I would accept nomination for the role of State Moderator. We looked at each other in disbelief, laughed and put it to one side, as neither of us ever had any inclination for me to seek this role.

At that time I was a member of a weekly breakfast prayer group, comprised of politicians and leading businessmen. I casually told of the approach I had received and my outright rejection of it. A member of that group was the Hon Jim Cameron, Speaker of the Upper House of the NSW State Parliament. He soundly rebuked me for not seriously considering what could well have been God's call.

The week following, I received three more approaches from relevant bodies, so I allowed my name to go forward. However, I still had no personal desire for this position, or any sense that I might be elected – in part because I thought I had no chance against the other nominees, who appeared formidable candidates. In fact, I had not even prepared an acceptance speech when the Annual State Conference endorsed my nomination, appointing me to the position.

As with previous experiences, this position also led to remarkable openings to serve God and his people.

There have also been other times where I have initially shown hesitancy or reluctance when God has called me, but the above will suffice.

To each of the leaders in the Bible who were slow to respond to his call, God gave a firm assurance that they would not have to try to make it on their own.

At the burning bush, Moses heard God calling him: "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). Then follows Moses' hesitancy: "Who am I?" (v. 11); "Suppose they ask me your name?" (vv. 13,14); and "I have never been eloquent" (4:10). But in God's response his firm assurance is apparent: "I will be with you" (3:12); and "I will help you speak and will teach you what to say" (4:12). God gives similar assuring promises to Jeremiah: "I am with you" (1:8); and "I have put my words in your mouth" (1:9; cf. 17–19; 20:11; 15:20–21).

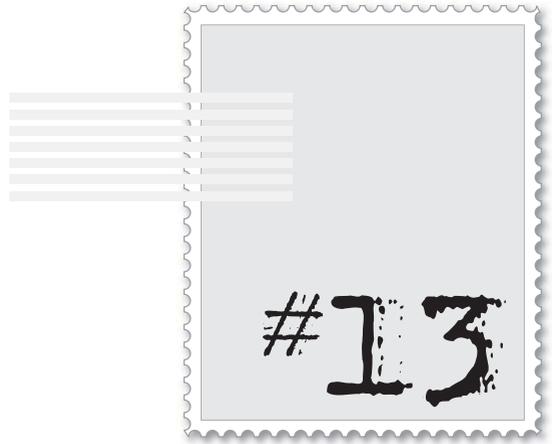
A further example of God's firm assurance is his direction and promise to the slow starter, Gideon. God says to him, "Go in the strength you have ... Am I not sending you"; and "I will be with you" (Judges 6:14, 16). These words come to my mind time and again, when facing something that is especially demanding.

Another key promise that we should hold on to when we are about God's business is in our Lord's Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18–20).

God calls his followers to many different tasks, some seemingly insignificant and some that are very demanding. More often than not, they are nudges to write a letter, to make a phone call, to make a visit, to offer hospitality, to act in a certain way or to say an appropriate word at the right time. Frequently, in responding to even such seemingly insignificant "calls", there is some cost in terms of the time we could have otherwise spent to benefit ourselves or our loved ones.

Occasionally God's call tests us to the limit. It may involve wrenching us from all that is familiar and friendly – a clear break with the past and a new direction. It can even involve uncertainty and hardships. But while there inevitably will be some cost, there will also be blessing for us and for others.

We need to bear in mind that those whom God calls he promises to be with and also to enable, as they fulfil his call. When called by God to a particular task, we need to draw on promises such as those above and faithfully respond in the face of both self-doubt and awareness of the cost involved.



'I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU'

In the previous chapter I tell of God calling me out of a workplace situation into the full-time Christian ministry. God gave me a number of confirmations of his call. The following experience was one of these, a divine seal.

Telling my father of God's call is something that I shall never forget. My father had his own business as a consulting engineer, and together we were in the early stages of developing a manufacturing division. I had designed and built a machine which was proving very profitable. Dad and I had high hopes for this new venture. Unaware of how he may react because of his commitment to our future together, I hesitatingly told him of God's call one night while we were working in our workshop together. He turned, looked me in the eye and said with emotion, "I'm jealous!"

Then he told me a story he had never shared with anyone, not even my mother. Dad came from Sheffield in England. His father worked in the steel works. When Dad was in his late teens, some workmates of my grandfather played a joke on him and threw over him what they thought was a bucket of water – but it was sulphuric acid. He was hospitalised for many months, unable to work. Dad became the breadwinner. Prior to this, Dad had received what he understood to be a clear call to full-time ministry, but this turn of events meant that he had to cancel his entry into theological college. Although later he became a very dynamic lay preacher and lay leader, in his eyes it was not

fulfilling his original call. He prayed that one day God would give him a son to take his place in the ministry.

When I was born, my mother wanted to name me John, after the doctor who brought me into the world. Dad agreed to the name, but for another reason. He had always prayed for a son to name John, in the hope that the son would become like the apostle John, a disciple of Christ and committed to serving him fully.

In view of this, God could say to me something like what he said to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). Similarly, I identify with Isaiah’s statement: “Before I was born, the LORD called me; from my birth he made mention of my name” (Isaiah 49:1).

Paul similarly speaks of being set apart from birth: “...God ... set me apart from birth and called me by his grace ...” (Galatians 1:15). Paul then goes on to indicate that God gave him a clear confirmation of his call, not through other Christian leaders, as God did with me, but when he went into an extended retreat in Arabia (cf. v. 17) where God revealed so much to him, building a strong foundation for his life and message.

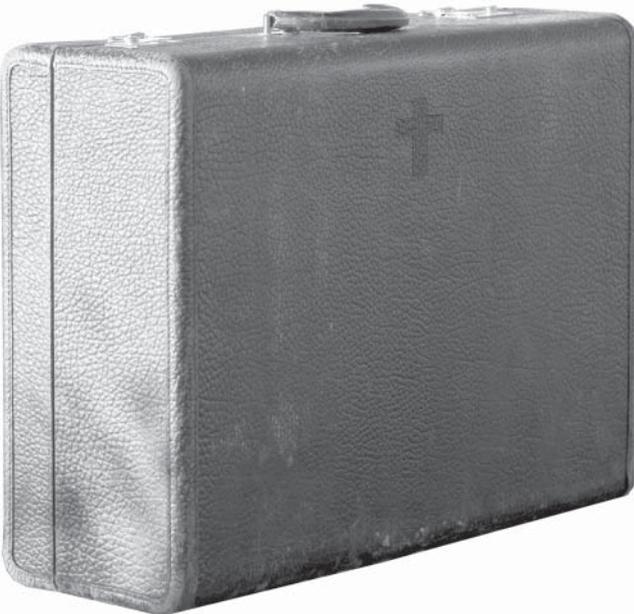
In the previous chapter I write about my unexpected election to the position of State Moderator. Although this appointment was the decision of our state governing body, I felt I not only needed a further confirmation from God but also his guidance regarding what should be my emphasis in that role. So, like Paul, I went into retreat, but for a much shorter period. During what was five days in the Blue Mountains (west of Sydney), along with confirming my call, God made it clear to me that my theme for the year I would be moderator should be “Jesus Christ is Lord” and that I should give a high priority to running short retreats for groups of clergy and “laity”. I also understood that God wanted me to endeavour to spend time pastorally with every key leader, even if only by phone.

It is important that we receive God’s confirmation of what may appear to be his calls upon our lives. For we can so easily dismiss the call or mistake something else for it and become involved in “good” things that are not always the “best”. It is also important that we seek his guidance in fulfilling what he has called us to do.

The whole of God's creation speaks of his order and design. That is no less true of our lives. For each of us God has a plan and purpose for our life and work – and he has ways of revealing and confirming this to us. Indeed, God's encouraging words to the nation of Israel in Jeremiah 29:11 are applicable to each of his people: "I know the plans I have for you".



POSTCARDS ON:
God's Power





THE MESSAGE FOR TODAY . . .

The day in March, 1958, on which my wife June and I arrived at my new appointment as the pastor of Port Kembla Methodist Circuit, south of Sydney, we received a telegram from our previous parish. It simply read, “Deuteronomy 31:8. Narrabri Prayer Group.” This verse reads, “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

These are the words Moses spoke to his successor Joshua in the presence of all the Israelites, as he handed to him the mantle of leadership.

They came alive for me as I spent time unpacking them more fully. The word for “LORD” here in the Hebrew text is “Yahweh”. It declares God’s greatness, power, boundless knowledge and timeless presence. This great God is the key to the promises that follow.

“[He] goes before you...” assures us of God’s providence. Although often we may not be aware of it, we have a divinely prepared way to pursue. God prepares it well in advance. As such, our way is largely determined by “divine initiatives”.

“[He] will be with you; he will never leave you...” is a guarantee of the divine presence. We can have the confidence that when we walk in God’s ways

we never walk alone. When life's challenges seem beyond us, when we are confused or at the point of despair, in our joys and our sorrows, God is always there – whether we are aware of him or not.

The verse goes on to point out that trust in such a mighty God, who is also our heavenly Father, helps us handle fear and discouragement. This encouraging message kept coming to mind time and again during the challenging and rewarding years that followed.

After 17 years pastoring local churches, I was appointed to the Board of Education of our denomination. On my first day, in February 1972, I was feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the responsibility of my new role as State Youth Director.

The popular (non-religious) desk calendar on my office desk had a page for each day with the day and date clearly displayed as well as a “thought for the day”. Each Sunday there was a verse of Scripture (when most offices were closed). After dusting each desk, the cleaners were expected to turn the page for each new day. Although it was Monday, the calendar was open at the previous day, with a quotation from Scripture displayed. It read, “No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous...” (Joshua 1:5–6).

This further word to Joshua came directly from God after Moses' death. At this point Joshua was to begin leading Israel to claim the “promised land” – a massive, long-term, demanding task. He needed this additional word of hope. (You can read the complete message of assurance in vv. 5–9.)

That verse seldom left me for the next fourteen challenging years, with their almost endless opportunities, as I served in different roles in the Board of Education.

Prior to leaving for a demanding 13-day program in Poland (my first to that country), I received a telephone call from a prayer partner. She said that during her prayer time, she felt God had given her a message for me and quoted Deuteronomy 31:8! Another prayerful friend phoned to give me Judges 18:6, which says, “Go in peace, the mission you are on has the LORD's approval.”

A special feature of this time in Poland was the unplanned ministry to numerous individuals. Each aspect of my equipping of leaders in learning events was so obviously undergirded by prayer, as evidenced in the enthusiastic response of the participants.

I was especially conscious of God's presence and protection while travelling in Poland, as a third of my time was spent in travel, some of it with a degree of risk. The unusually mild weather helped in terms of safety and lack of delays. (Poland usually experiences temperatures as low as -30 degrees Celsius at that time of the year, but the lowest at the time of my visit was only -6 degrees Celsius.)

I have lost count of the number of times I have passed the above Scripture promises on to leaders facing new situations which would require more than they were capable of without the Lord's guidance and enabling grace.

Time and again I have to keep coming back to them to be constantly reminded of the inexhaustible rich resources I have to draw upon because of God's greatness, his infinite power, his limitless knowledge and his abundant provision and loving presence.

As John Wesley said, "*The best of all is ... God is with us.*"



FLOATING ON A RAFT OF PRAYER

Over the years I have become increasingly convinced of the power of intercessory prayer and have learnt to be mindful of the need to ask others to pray for me. I never ask lightly – I am always wholehearted when I ask others to make such a specific commitment.

I now have over 400 people who have committed themselves to pray for me, together with many who have made this commitment without my being aware of it. In my quarterly News Brief I include a page of prayer notes for the following three months. Because many needs for prayer arise after each despatch, 60 of these people receive monthly updates by email and a small number by post. One of my friends says that my ministry “floats on a raft of prayer”. The following gives some indication of how that “raft” was assembled and how I encourage others to also seek to build their own support base of prayer, as they seek to serve God and live to please him.

This awareness of my need to specifically ask others to pray for me commenced when, after theological training, I was appointed as a probationary pastor to Narrabri, in the rural north-west of New South Wales. The senior pastor supervising me was located over 100 kilometres away. I was very conscious of my youth and inexperience, and had only a very limited idea of the challenges facing me.

The first Sunday I led worship was quite awesome for me. The church was filled with many people, mostly farmers, who were old enough to be my parents or grandparents. I am sure I could not have been more sincere when I asked the congregation to pray for me!

A decade later, when I commenced ministering in a large city church which presented my greatest challenge and almost limitless opportunities, I was deeply aware of my need for the congregation to pray for me regularly. After making an appeal from the pulpit for their personal prayers in the first week or so, a woman came to me after the service and said, "I would never have thought of praying for you!" When I asked why, she said, "You're ordained!" I assured her that the burden of the responsibility upon me moved me to make this request. Without hesitation, she said, "Alright, I'll include you in my daily prayers," for which I thanked her.

Seventeen years later, I returned to that church to speak at a special gathering of church and community members associated with the detached Youth Service I had initiated while ministering there. The woman who made that commitment asked me if I recalled her promise. I assured her it had remained clearly in my mind. Her response was, "I have prayed for you every day since then!" A calculation of the number of her prayers is astounding – 17 years times 365 days equals 6,105 prayers (plus four extra for leap years)!

If that sounds astounding, it gets better. Fifty-one years after making that request for prayer in my first church, I returned to preach and conduct training for the leaders. A woman, now in her nineties, who had led the prayer group in my day, said she had prayed for me every day since that earnest request for prayer support I had made on my first Sunday there. Again, an amazing calculation – 51 times 365 equals 18,615 (plus 12 for leap years). All because I admitted my need and asked quite intentionally for prayer.

One of my most faithful long-term intercessors tells of the "return" to her personally on her "investment" in prayer for my ministry. She writes, "God has given me great joy through my prayers, as I see the results of this valuable work."

Paul sets us a fine role model in asking for prayer for himself (as well as in praying for others). In most of his letters to the young churches he says, "Pray for me." Sometimes his request is in general terms, but on many occasions it is quite specific, "Pray for me that..." (cf. Ephesians 6:19–20; Colossians 4:3–

4; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1–2; Colossians 4:18). Although he had great gifts and held an eminent place in the early church, Paul was dependent on the prayers of others, many of whom he had led to Christ. His requests for prayer give a strong example of personal humility and also reflect the mutuality of Christian community, which should be a community of interdependence.

A key component in establishing a personal support base of prayer is to have prayer partners, where each partner is committed to praying for the other. This is something I encourage in my training sessions. It has been my practice, when conducting training events of one or more days, to commence by having the participants divide into pairs with someone they have not previously met. Using a set of prepared questions, they then become acquainted and pray for each other. I encourage them to pray separately for each other as often as they remember during the sessions. At the conclusion, they share any significant learning for them and pray together. I also ask them to covenant to pray for each other for at least the following 28 days and, if possible, to contact each other a couple of times during that period.

Once, when I was working with a prominent group of church leaders in Kiribati, a cluster of islands in the central Pacific Ocean, we followed the above procedure. When I returned a few years later to work with a wider group of leaders, including most of the original participants, many said they had continued to maintain their prayer partnerships.

Because of my experience in working in different cultures, a number of times I have been asked to teach volunteers preparing to work overseas. On one occasion, as I introduced the concept of prayer in pairs mentioned above, one person said that five years previously she had attended a similar event of mine. The prayer partnership she formed then had continued ever since, although she and her prayer partner worked in different countries.

I encourage not only leaders to seek this support but all who are Christ followers. There is always someone with whom we could partner in prayer. Often it is a Christian friendship that can become more focused and regular in this regard, with the two friends praying both when together and apart.

When my wife and I married, we covenanted to pray together each day. This we have done with few exceptions over the past 50 years when we are together.

God usually facilitates an extension of these one-on-one prayer relationships to include others. Sometimes it is a small prayer triad of three, which is so easy to organise and tremendously effective, as many could testify. Small groups of three or more with a specific prayer focus have changed the course of history, according to some church historians.

The supreme prayer “partners” are those referred to in Romans 8, where we are assured that the Spirit of God “intercedes for us ... in accordance with God’s will” (vv. 26–27), and that Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of God “... is also interceding for us” (v. 34; cf. Hebrews 7:25).

We are never without a divine covering of prayer! Let’s live with this confidence that nothing can separate us from this divine love relationship while still building our “visual” prayer partnership bases. These are a key aspect of accessing God’s power and guidance, in our service of him and in our everyday lives.



EMPTY THE 'TOO HARD' BASKET

Some years ago I conducted a Leadership Conference in the mountains outside Budapest in Hungary. At that time, the country was under Communist domination. I had never previously worked in a Communist country, and I had a degree of trepidation about the undertaking. This increased somewhat when I was told that, as a foreign Christian leader, I would be under the surveillance of the Secret Police. Others who gathered from a number of countries in the Eastern Communist Bloc were also at some risk. The conference was held in a Christian centre in the mountains, which we knew could be raided and the proceedings terminated, as such gatherings of Christian leaders were frowned upon by the authorities.

Prior to flying into Budapest, I was leading workshops at an international conference of evangelists in Amsterdam. On the morning of my departure, my devotions focused on a verse in Genesis from which I received immense assurance. It simply said, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Genesis 18:14a). It is worth noting that the Hebrew word used here for "LORD" is "El-Shaddai" – meaning the All-Sufficient, the Almighty.

The conference in Hungary was an outstanding time. The organisers frequently said, "You are placing before us a smorgasbord of teaching and resources to encourage us personally and enrich our ministries." And it was

a rare privilege to work amongst such dedicated leaders, many of whom had been jailed on a number of occasions because of their faith and ministries.

When I returned home, I found that our daughter had to make a major decision regarding her future and, due to her suffering chronic fatigue syndrome, there was every possibility that she would not be able to proceed. Amidst all of this, at almost the same time I was opening my Bible in Amsterdam, she and my wife were reading the passage containing Genesis 18:14, the verse that had been influencing me. From it they had similarly received encouragement to move ahead in faith in the way that they felt God was leading.

In Genesis 18:10–15, we read that God promised Abraham at ninety years of age that he and Sarah would have a son. Can you blame Sarah for laughing to herself? But, by the limitless power of God, the impossible became true (cf. Genesis 21:1–2).

This word of hope concerning God’s all-sufficient power, runs like a golden thread throughout Scripture.

At the end of his time of testing, Job states, “I know you can do all things. No purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2).

To comfort his people Israel, God had Isaiah prophesy that he is the eternal, all-powerful Creator, with limitless knowledge and power – and therefore well able to strengthen, uphold and give hope in every situation – and to perform miracles! (cf. Isaiah 40:9b–31).

When Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonian army, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, “I am the LORD, the God of the whole human race. Is anything too hard for me?” (Jeremiah 32:27).

The rich young ruler, who had faithfully kept the Jewish Law, chose his riches rather than surrendering them to follow Christ. In response to Jesus’ insight on how difficult it is for the rich to enter God’s kingdom, the disciples were dumbfounded and asked, “Who then can be saved?” To this Jesus replied, “With humans this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

Note the absolute “all” occurring in this verse. In both our service of God and our lives generally, there is no situation beyond God’s ability to perform a

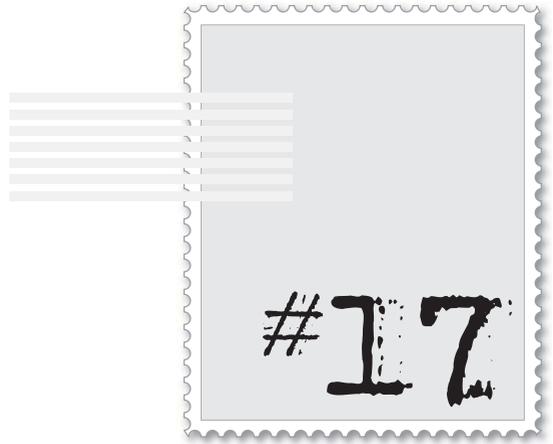
miracle. Not always will God rescue us from unwanted situations, but he will empower us through the Holy Spirit to cope with that which could otherwise traumatise or destroy.

Quite often I work with members of Christ's family who are living evidence of the divine transforming power enabling them to live positively through what all too often destroys those with no faith in the God on whom we are focusing here. My wife and family are members of this illustrious group! The way five of them, my wife included, have managed chronic fatigue syndrome for 21 years (as I write), bears witness to our God who specialises in things thought impossible. On the other hand, unlike my family and others who, like the apostle Paul, have unremoved "thorns in the flesh", many others of my brothers and sisters in Christ have been miraculously freed from the bondage of suffering.

I have had an almost unbelievably challenging and fulfilling life and ministry. Time and again, particularly in my service of God, I have faced what seemed beyond the bounds of possibility. God often intervened directly, but at other times he worked through a large number of his faithful followers to enable what through faithless eyes would seem impossible. He gives grace to those who keep trusting him to manage what they would not choose for themselves or others.

One of my main aims in introducing readers to the experiences I relate in this book is to seek to uplift our amazing creator God and heavenly Father, so that his name will be more fully honoured and so that the reader's personal faith will be deepened in our all-sufficient, almighty God – to whom nothing is impossible.

We need to have a deep faith in God – which, in light of who God is, is not unrealistic. By such faith we can avoid limiting God's power in our lives through unwillingness to believe that he can accomplish the seemingly impossible. So, God being who he is, never write-off any God-given task or other situation as being "too hard". Never consign anything to the "too hard" basket – for *"Is anything too hard for the LORD?"*



IT ONLY TAKES A SPARK

During my ministry in a fast-growing developmental area, with streets of new homes springing up like mushrooms, the church leadership team and I decided to do a community survey. Our intention was to make calls street by street in order to identify people of various denominations who may wish to link themselves and/or their children to a local church. This information was then passed on to the respective churches.

We also distributed free copies of the latest modern translation of the New Testament to those who promised to read them. Along with these, we gave a small booklet explaining how to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

One evening some years later, after having moved from that area, I received a phone call from a woman asking if I recalled visiting a particular home one Sunday afternoon in my previous parish and leaving the two pieces of literature mentioned above. To my surprise, a clear picture came to my mind of this brief encounter amongst the hundreds I had made along with our visiting team.

My caller then went on to tell the following remarkable story, and I have no reason to doubt its authenticity – remarkable though it may seem.

At that time, her marriage relationship had completely broken down. It was not until some days after my visit when, alone in the house, she picked up the booklet and read it. God addressed her personally, and she was moved to pray and to put her faith in all God had done for her through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. For the first time God became real to her in her everyday life.

In the days following, her husband could not help but notice the marked change in her attitude and behaviour, especially towards him!

When he asked her what had made the difference, she gave him the booklet to read. It impacted him in the same way and he too made a faith-commitment to Jesus Christ. Their relationship took a dramatic change for the better. In fact, in their own words: "They fell in love all over again!"

An elderly aunt who had been living with them for some time witnessed the transformation and asked about the reason for the change. She too was given the booklet, and life began again for her also!

The change in their entire household did not pass unnoticed by their neighbours who said, "Things are so different now. You used to be shouting and arguing with each other and now you speak so lovingly and sing hymns!" They too were given the booklet. And by now you have no doubt guessed the outcome. Yes! Their lives were also changed!

My caller then went on to explain the purpose of her phone call on this particular occasion. She and her husband had that day been accepted by a Christian organisation for full-time work. Indeed, how often does it only take a spark to start a fire.

Often I give a suitable book to someone and am frequently told that it not only changed the receiver's perspective on issues they were dealing with, but that through reading it they found hope and, in some cases, their lives were transformed.

The powerful potential of sound Christian literature was further impressed on me years after conducting one of my leaders' conferences in Eastern Europe. Key leaders, all with a good grasp of English, had attended from many countries in that region. At the conference, all had been given a copy of one of my books for small-group leaders as the main text for the training.

One of those who had attended was from Poland. Years later I learnt that he had had my book translated into Polish and had distributed it free to over a thousand leaders. The next year a further large quantity was published. I have received feedback that the distribution of these books has been quite productive, having a significant impact on Christian small groups in Poland.

I will never know this side of eternity what has been the full impact of these and many of my other books, some now in different languages – all bathed in the prayers of my faithful prayer supporters.

I have seen God use other ways of making “a spark to start a fire”, producing fruit for his kingdom. A good example was God’s use of my teaching on leadership of effective small groups at a course I conducted in Lautoka, Fiji. Its effect was evident at another event I ran in Suva the next year. There the majority of participants had attended in Lautoka. Much of the first evening was spent with individuals sharing some inspiring stories of how they had applied what they had learnt from the course in Lautoka. A bright-faced young pastor told how his church now had twelve groups, some with prayer ministries which were amazing. A woman reported on a dynamic prayer group she now led. Another told of a prayer group she commenced to cover young people having difficulties with school work, all of whom had now been successful in their examinations. Others spoke of creative forms of evangelism through their new groups.

Christ uses the metaphor of a “seed” rather than a “spark” in illustrating what God can produce from small beginnings. In one of his parables (Mark 4:3–20) the seed scattered by the sower fell on four kinds of soil. The seed sown was “the word” of God. The four kinds of soil into which it fell represents different ways in which it is received and responded to. The seed sown on good soil produces a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown. The stories I relate above speak of such a “crop” – which came as an encouraging surprise! Often, however, no results are apparent – or not until much later.

Each believer’s task essentially is to sow, pray, follow up where possible, nurture positive responses and then leave the rest to God. In another parable, similarly to the one above, Jesus talked about the kingdom of God being like a seed. “A man scatters seed on the ground ... the seed sprouts and grows,

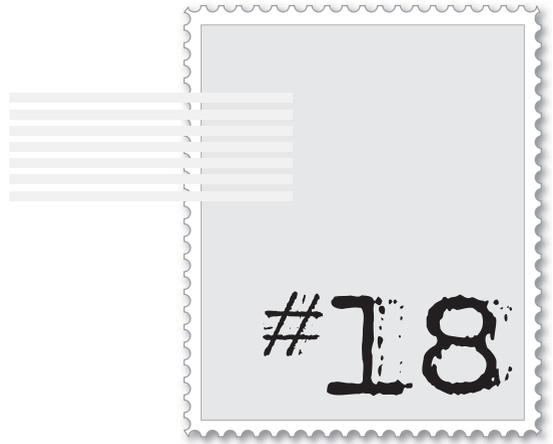
though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain ... As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:28–29). This illustrates that the "harvest" or "crop" from sowing God's word is due to God rather than our own efforts.

Frequently in my ministry I have been reminded that we only plant and water the seed, the miracle of growth is the work of God. Paul wisely reminds us of this in his letter to the young church in Corinth: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow ... we are God's co-workers..." (1 Corinthians 3:6–9).

When I left one parish where we saw God move mightily in many people's lives, I had some degree of sadness, as it was like leaving a spiritual family, many of whom I had nurtured since their spiritual birth. Paul's words were reassuring. I had to leave what we had sown for others to "water" and trust God to continue his work of development. I frequently prayed a prayer from the Psalms then and since: "May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work of our hands" (Psalms 90:17).

We plant and water, but the "harvest" is in God's hands!

We may never know the outcome of a "spark" in the form of acts of kindness, a listening ear, caring concern, words of encouragement, a piece of literature sensitively given, an appropriate book or a word of personal testimony to God's gracious kindness in our own lives, or the sharing of the Christian gospel of promise and hope, in whatever form. For any such acts can be like a seed planted – which through God has the potential to grow and produce an unexpected harvest!



'GOD IS OUR HELPER'

Once I stopped at a heraldry stand at a show to inquire if my family had a family crest. It was quickly identified. Knowing that my birthday was close, I placed an order and told the family I had bought myself a birthday present, but kept what it was a secret. To keep it a surprise, I had it mailed to my office. When I opened it, the motto under the crest was in Latin, but on the back was the translation: "God Is Our Helper".

I could not have thought of a more appropriate motto for our family.

God's help was very evident in my father's life. He grew up in a poor area of Sheffield, England. There someone invited him to attend a boy's club in the then very prestigious Victoria Wesley Church, which was attended by the upper echelons of that society. He came to faith in Christ there, was faithfully disciplined and eventually became the leader of that church's strong youth work. It is evident that through this church God intervened in my father's life and helped him in unexpected ways through many in that church who accepted him, nurtured him and enabled him to develop as a leader.

When my father and mother emigrated to Australia from England in 1926, they had only five pounds in cash and few contacts here. My father, a man of strong faith, said to God, "If you give me the health and opportunities, I will do the rest." I am sure God, maybe with a smile, concurred with my highly

motivated father! Certainly this was apparent in my father's working years. His achievements were outstanding – but he always gave the praise to God, acknowledging God's help.

Whenever I have received special recognition in various ways, I have sought to acknowledge that I have been able to accomplish what I have done only by the grace of God. He has given me the health and the opportunities – and has been my constant helper. God is the one who deserves any honours.

When I was nominated for a national award, two verses of Scripture immediately came to mind. I typed them onto an A4 sheet and placed them on the pin-board in my office at home, in a position where I could readily see them. They are:

- “Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.” (Psalms 115:1)
- “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer saying, ‘The LORD has helped us to this point.’” (1 Samuel 7:12)

These verses reflect how I hoped this award would be viewed – as a tribute to God's grace and help. It is he who has graciously given me the varied opportunities to serve him and provided the help I needed.

I wrote much of the chapter in this book called “God's Improbable Choices” while knowing of the possibility of this award. At the heart of that chapter is the thought that: “My life and work are a testimony to what God can do with a most unlikely person.”

I fully identify with the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid” (Hebrews 13:6); and with the psalmist, “Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth” (Psalms 124:8).

I think that my wife and family are also living testimonies to how God helps his people daily in their life and work, particularly the family members who have struggled with the long-term medical condition mentioned elsewhere in this book. The way God assists them in their role as parents is an inspiration. Their perseverance with and completion of demanding projects God has assigned them points to resources not their own. Their consistent relationship

with their Lord, their ready availability to be part of God's mission and their servant spirit are a living witness to the fact that their heavenly Father is their constant companion and helper.

Jesus clearly taught that his followers would have an unseen helper in the person of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:15–17). The Greek word “paraclete” used here is untranslatable; no single word in English can adequately express its rich, powerful meaning. Essentially the word indicates that the Holy Spirit stands alongside us, to walk with us and help us keep on track. In this connection Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit is our “counsellor”, to help us think through issues and to bring new perspectives to situations. Other teachings of our Lord recorded in John's Gospel (cf. 14:15–17; 15:26 and 16:4–15) speak further of the Holy Spirit's help, referring to our divine Helper as our “teacher”, “advocate”, and empowerer – amongst other things.

So very often God has helped us through the love, the concern, the attentive listening, the encouragement and the prayers of many of God's family. For all this divine help mediated through Christ-like friends we are so thankful to God.

My family, present and past, can testify to the reality of all that is written here. We have not always drawn on all the divine resources available, but we have done it often enough to be witness as to the reality of God's help of his people.

How privileged we are that the true Christianity as taught and modelled by our Lord and his early disciples is not a “try harder” religion. As we maintain that daily intimacy with our Lord, his Spirit enables us to live and work in a way that honours him. We never have to try to make it on our own. God is present in every situation without exception – whether we are aware of it or not – to assist, support, uphold, renew and encourage: GOD IS OUR HELPER!



POSTCARDS ON:
Serving God





GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE

In the field work that was part of our pastoral care studies in theological college, I had some bad experiences which undermined my confidence in relating to people I met.

Later, during a vacation appointment in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, to develop my skills the pastor in charge, Herbert Green, required me to undertake pastoral visitation of people in their homes. I did this a few times but felt a failure.

Then in one of our debriefing times, Herbert gave me advice which transformed not only this aspect of my work but indeed my whole ministry. He said, with great conviction, that in whatever I sought to do for God, I was God's personal representative!

Herbert advised me to reinforce this fact by doing the following. He said, "When you groom yourself in front of a mirror in the morning, look yourself in the eye and say: 'I am a child of God and I am his representative in all I do for him today!'" Knowing my weakness in home visitation, he added, "And as you visit each home, open the front gate firmly and walk down the path confidently, saying the same words. Again, when you knock on the front door, repeat: 'I am a child of God and I am his representative to this home for this hour.'"

That completely changed my attitude! From then on I have found this aspect of my ministry very effective and most fulfilling. Some may call the advice I was given auto-suggestion – but I found it to be an empowering word from God.

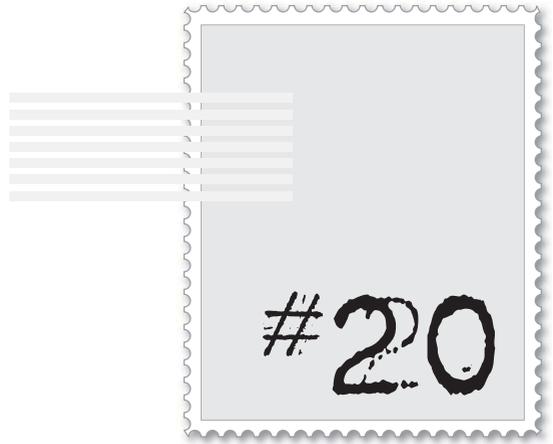
The term “God’s representative”, which helped me see my pastoral ministry from a new perspective, led me to two striking word-pictures that the apostle Paul uses in his second letter to the Corinthian church (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20 – 6:1). He says that all believers are “Christ’s ambassadors” – Christ’s diplomatic representatives – and “God’s co-workers”. What a tremendous privilege and an awesome responsibility to personally represent God to others!

Like all ambassadors representing their countries diplomatically, not only what we say but our whole lives – including our attitudes and our behaviour – convey who God is (correctly or incorrectly) to those who do not know him.

As fellow workers and partners, working together with God, we not only have a considerable privilege but we are enabled to serve by his divine power. What an encouragement that our competence to do the work of God is not dependent upon our own resources, but comes from our partnership with God – not as equals, but as his dependent servants and representatives.

However, all this needs to be seen in the context of this passage from 2 Corinthians. While the above can be applied to all our service for God, including our pastoring of others, in the passage it specifically applies to our evangelistic duty. We are entrusted with indispensable news for people in desperate need of what God in his mercy and grace has done through Christ – which was the essence of Paul’s preaching (cf. Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20–22).

What a great privilege and responsibility we have as God’s representatives. Bearing this in mind as we seek to serve God and in all our interaction with others should both encourage us and exhort us to act accordingly, in partnership with and dependence on him.



OPEN DOORS

It has been my practice towards the end of each year to seek a promise from Scripture for the coming year. In 1961, Revelation 3:8 got my attention. It reads: “See I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” So I took it as a word of promise and hope for the new year, having no idea what God had in mind for me that year.

At that time I was serving in the Port Kembla area, south of Sydney. As I have said previously, during that year in quite a remarkable way I caught the vision of the role that small groups can play in creating authentic Christian community and fulfilling our call to mission. By the end of that year, we had 120 people in 12 groups!

Among the things that transpired during that year was a new thrust in outreach to the community evangelistically, by holding our evening services in a local cinema with the messages translated simultaneously into three languages, as our area was multicultural. Many came to faith in Christ. Our outreach also included street witness, Scripture distribution and special events for young people in the community.

We also reached out socially through the commencement of a mobile nursing service with trained staff serving people in their homes. This still continues today! Indeed, the Lord did open surprising doors that year.

After Port Kembla I was appointed to the then large Hamilton Wesley Church in Newcastle, north of Sydney. Never had they had a minister as young and inexperienced as me. I was somewhat overwhelmed by the manner in which I was appointed and the magnitude of the challenge it presented.

After I was appointed, I was sent a copy of the church's monthly paper, on the cover of which was a picture of the entrance to the church. The door was open, and underneath was the verse, "Behold I set before you an open door"!

My ministry at Hamilton opened doors to me nationally and internationally. I was sent overseas to nine countries to observe projects working with anti-social young people and innovative lay education. This resulted in the establishment of the Newcastle Youth Service, a detached youth worker project, outreaching to youth in the places where they normally gathered out of school or work hours. Various new initiatives in equipping lay people for leadership in the church and mission were also commenced. My overseas experience also resulted in the development of a network of contacts with international leaders and insights that were to mould my thinking and ministry for years to come.

Years later, in 1985, I was facing the strong possibility of retirement due to the onset of blepharospasm, a form of dystonia. The muscles in my eyelids were uncontrollable, leaving me functionally blind. (See the chapter, "Release from Prison".) I wondered what the future held after having had such an active ministry. But, praise God, I was able to receive a treatment available then in London which proved effective and which soon after became available in Australia. On the return journey from England, June and I made a brief stopover in Hong Kong. One morning while there, I awoke to find my Bible open at Revelation 3:8! After facing the probability of the closure of my life of ministry, I was now looking forward to the opening of another "door".

Due to the guidance of my senior mentors, significant national and state leaders and a number of close friends, soon afterwards I was guided to my present ministry of equipping leaders across Australia and overseas through training events, writing and mentoring. And what an "open door" it has been.

An awesome picture of the risen, glorified Christ is given in Revelation 1:14–18. Each of the seven letters to the churches which follow, with one exception, open with a description of the risen Christ taken from this passage. The letter

to the church in Philadelphia begins with the tremendous claim that Jesus Christ is the one who holds “the key of David”, the authority to unlock the door to God’s kingdom – and so also to the opportunities to serve him.

Revelation 3:8 is contained in the message for this first-century church, established by Paul. The church in Philadelphia was not the most impressive or prestigious of the first-century churches. It experienced intense opposition from the local Jewish synagogue, which it endured with faith and grace. Situated in a strategic frontier position in the Roman Empire at an important highway junction, the church had great opportunity for mission to the hitherto unreached tribal people in the interior of Asia Minor. Through John, God challenges them to “see” this “open door” – to catch the vision of this door of opportunity which he had unlocked and swung open for them.

While with some open doors on our life’s journey it is “as clear as day” what lies ahead, more often than not what lies before us is unknown.

As I look back over my ministry, the fact that at times God was opening to me a door of opportunity was clear – but what lay beyond was not. Often there was daunting uncertainty.

Abraham is an inspiration in regard to entering through a “door” opened by God. In Genesis 12 (and Hebrews 11:8) we read of God calling Abraham to leave behind a prosperous city with security and a high standard of living to migrate to unknown territory. The consequences of this simple beginning were to spread like ripples on the pond of history. As a direct result, a new nation was born and, in the course of time, the whole world reaped the benefits.

Like Abraham, we need not only to see “the open door” but to act – to be obedient. To step out with a confidence grounded in the one who has called us.

One emphasis in the apocalyptic book of Revelation is that no one can thwart God and Jesus Christ’s purposes. “What he opens, no one can shut.” All too often when we step out in faith to seek to fulfil what we and others are thoroughly convinced is a God-given call, there are forces who directly or indirectly seek to thwart our efforts. How essential it is that we keep our eyes and ears focused on God and not the opposition.

As someone has said, “A pessimist sees difficulties in every opportunity. An optimist sees opportunities in every difficulty.” Christian visionaries who seek to walk close to their God are both realists and optimists, focused on who God is and the Christ who opens what no one can shut.

I have always been encouraged by the latter half of Revelation 3:8: “I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” I am not a giant physically nor spiritually. I would not win a spiritual weight-lifting contest or a Christian discipleship sprint. I have a fairly clear idea of my limitations as a follower of Jesus Christ. But I have come to believe that, although God does use the spiritually strong, he must get a lot of pleasure out of using those who are “weak” but who seek to be faithful to his word and to honour his name.

Yes, I have walked through many “open doors” of opportunity that God has opened for me on my fulfilling journey, but it is the sovereign Lord of the universe who has given the resources necessary to achieve what have been the possibilities of each opening. This he does for all who seek to faithfully serve and follow him.

The pages of Christian history are strewn with missed opportunities. History reveals many people who were not willing to move out of their comfort zones, or who were focused on themselves and only the meagre resources that were immediately obvious to sustain what may lie ahead. How critical it is that we respond to God’s call to begin a new venture by focusing on the one who “opens the door”.



PLAYING OUR 'HUNCHES'

I was making final preparations to conduct a weekend conference in a country centre some distance from Sydney when I felt compelled to phone the minister organising the event to make a last-minute check on the arrangements. My secretary assured me that I had planned thoroughly, had been in constant contact with the organiser and that a further call was probably unnecessary. However, in spite of this advice I went ahead, as I had an overwhelming compulsion to phone.

The phone was unanswered for some time. When the minister finally picked up the phone, I began by asking, "Is everything O.K.?" There was a pause. Then, in a broken voice, he answered, "No, no, it's not – my wife and I have just come from the hospital morgue where we were called to identify our son's body. He's been killed in a horrific car smash!"

I was overcome at this appalling news. What could I say? Any words of comfort seemed so trite in the face of such suffering. For some time, he poured out his grief. Then as his tears abated, we prayed together.

As soon I got off the phone, I rang the other leaders in the church to enlist their support for the family. I extended these contacts to fellow ministers in that town and officers of our denominational district organisation. At the minister's request, we still went ahead with the conference, but the activities

of the whole weekend were pervaded by a spirit of deep compassion and support for the grieving family.

Over the years I have learnt to act upon these hunches or nudges and not to procrastinate or dismiss them.

While teaching in Papua New Guinea recently, a friend who heads up a large denomination in that country told me of a timely, unexpected phone call I had once made to him – which I recalled was prompted by a “hunch” I had to contact him. He said the day I rang had been “the darkest day in his life”. The national church office had faced a crisis unlike anything ever previously experienced. He and all his staff were devastated. That night, he returned home in a state of total disillusionment. On entering his house he spoke to no one, but went to his bedroom and collapsed on the bed.

While lying there, my phone call reached him. As I listened intently, he was able to unburden himself. In recalling what happened, he told me that following my words of encouragement and our prayer together, immediately the cloud lifted and a deep peace flooded his mind and spirit. The following day he returned to his office, revitalised and ready to lead his church with renewed confidence and hope.

How important to respond to those inner promptings and not defer acting on them. After the death of my senior mentor of many years, a friend confided in me his deep sadness that he had not acted on a “nudge” to phone this man a week before to express his gratitude for the input he had made into his life. Opportunities to encourage and support one another can so easily be missed.

“Playing our hunches” is a not a very spiritual way of describing what I am talking about. The New Testament makes it clear that those who trust in Jesus Christ are indwelt by the Spirit of God. Jesus calls him “the Counsellor” (John 15:16, 26; 16:13) – the one who is always with his followers to guide, to advise, to teach and to empower.

I have learnt to not always act immediately on the hunches I get. I am not someone who always “keeps in step with the Spirit”, to use Paul’s words (Galatians 5:25). So most times I wait to receive similar further prompting.

Also I do not rely solely on my own inner nudges. God's directions often come through others I trust and respect. My wife is often such a channel. (She will probably be surprised to read that!)

These "messages" most often come during my times of prayer, so I make a note of them in order to not overlook them. I then refer to these in following times with the Lord.

The Scriptures are another fertile source of God's directions as I seek to recognise how God may be endeavouring to get my attention regarding my personal life and my relationships with others.

Although essentially addressing our relationships with others, James has a wise word which is also applicable to our attentiveness to the voice of the Holy Spirit. "Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak..." (James 1:19). This is a good word also for the way we pray.

Like Samuel, we need to keep tuned-in to God and when we have a hunch about his will for us, no matter how seemingly insignificant, we need to respond as he did: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9).

So when next you feel prompted to post a card, write a letter, make a phone call, send an email or visit someone, act on it! You could be a channel of God's love and grace to someone in great need of support or encouragement.



PERSEVERANCE IN PRAYER

Intercessory prayer is an important aspect of our service of God – and of others. However, often when we intercede for others – or pray for ourselves – we see no apparent answer, or not until much later. It has been said that all prayers are answered by God; sometimes he says “No”, sometimes “Yes” and at other times “Wait”. Here is a remarkable “Wait” story. I hope it will encourage you to keep praying and trusting. It clearly illustrates the often unexpected, joyful surprises of prayer, when we persevere.

As part of my daily study of the Bible I have been reading Scripture Union’s daily Bible reading notes for 61 years, since someone who disciplined me after I made a commitment to Christ at a SU camp encouraged me to read the Bible daily, using these notes.

The insightful notes for late January and early February 2006 were written by Nigel Hopper in the UK, then Managing Editor of Bible Resources with Scripture Union. In the brief introduction of him, it was mentioned that his wife is Nudrat and that he studied at London Bible College. That immediately got my attention – as the following explains.

In 1987 I was guest speaker at the 100th-anniversary celebrations of the opening of the Lahore Cathedral in Pakistan. It was also the 17th anniversary of the inauguration of the Church of Pakistan, which united Anglicans,

Methodists, Churches of Christ and Lutherans. I preached at a number of huge gatherings, having a freedom and authority like I had never previously experienced. Hundreds responded to the appeals! I also taught at a number of leaders' seminars.

I stayed with the then Bishop of Lahore, Rt Rev Dr Alexander Malik, his wife Shamim and their 4 delightful, very intelligent, fun-loving children, aged 4 to 13.

One of these children was named Nudrat.

Some years later, Dr Malik and Nudrat corresponded with me regarding suitable Bible Colleges in the UK at which Nudrat could study. She chose London Bible College! Later, correspondence continued with Nudrat, which included her asking me to pray for a suitable Christian husband. For years I kept her on my prayer list, but never heard the outcome.

You do not have to be very bright to know what comes next. I emailed Nigel and included the following: "If your wife came from Lahore, Pakistan, and her maiden name was Malik, then I have a very interesting story to share with you both."

His reply read, "My wife is indeed the Nudrat Malik of Lahore! She was delighted to know I'd been in contact with you, as she remembers your time in Pakistan and subsequent correspondence with her with much appreciation."

Nudrat's email followed, "I am still in shock! Once Nigel started telling me about you, I remembered immediately. I am really pleased to make contact with you again.

"Thanks to your prayers, and I'm sure those of my grandparents, I have found the perfect husband! Ten years down the line we are very happy, and God has blessed us with a happy family and strong relationships.

"I'm wondering if I can make it back on your prayer list please. I would really value your prayers and God's guidance as to our future ministry. I intend to keep in touch! Nudrat."

Obviously Nudrat's name, and her husband's, are back on my long list of those for whom I pray regularly.

As the last line of the old Alexander hymn goes, “Don’t stop praying, but have more trust; Don’t stop praying! For pray you must! Faith will banish a mount of care; Don’t stop praying! God answers prayer!”⁶

A poor widow, in Jesus’ parable, persevered in her pleas for justice from a judge who was neither God-fearing nor concerned about the needy. He finally acted because of the woman’s persistence. Luke says Jesus told the parable to encourage his followers to keep praying. He was calling for tenacity, for steadfastness in prayer from us.

Because God is our loving heavenly Father, any delay in him answering our prayers is not because of indifference. True love is totally incapable of unconcern or apathy. God is passionate about all his children. God is love. He cannot relate to us unlovingly. But he desires to develop and deepen our faith, which often involves not making life easy. The best in followers of Christ emerges not from an easy, undemanding existence, but from the ability to handle the demands, the trials, the disappointments and the apparent delays – with both perseverance and faith in who God is. Scripture encourages us in this, as shown in the following verses.

- “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.” (Psalms 27:14)
- “But these things I [the LORD] plan won’t happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, do not despair, for these things will surely come to pass. Just be patient! They will not be overdue a single day!” (Habakkuk 2:3, LB)

So let us keep hanging in there, praying for our own and others’ needs. God’s answer for the present might be “Wait” – but bear in mind that his timing is always perfect.



A MESSAGE IN GILDED SKIES

In 1976 I was invited for five weeks to conduct a series of four-day conferences to equip leaders in strategic centres across India. Intensive courses were held at Yeotmal and Allahabad Biblical Seminaries. Shorter sessions and special meetings were held in other centres. The training was designed to help local pastors and other key leaders grasp the relevance and possibilities of small groups for nurture in and outreach through the Christian community.

A small number of key Indian leaders were selected to share in a number of the training events, with a view to them becoming continuing trainers in this field.

Many people across Australia provided gifts and prayer support.

A few weeks before I left for India, I was captivated by an unusually magnificent sunrise that emblazoned the fleecy cloud cover with the golden-red rays of the dawn.

As I sat in my study drinking in this splendour, the words of a hymn helped me make some effort at an adequate response:

When morning gilds the skies,
my heart awaking cries,

May Jesus Christ be praised.⁷

“May Jesus Christ be praised” ... those words ran through my mind again and again as I sat in a spirit of prayer. There came a new dawn for me personally, as I anticipated the great challenge and responsibility of my imminent visit to India. In that time of reflection, the purpose of my trip was refined and clarified.

Although the contract I had from the church in India was to pass on insights concerning the role of small groups within the Christian church, I now saw the purpose as being far higher than a sharing of techniques or strategies. My prayer now was that during each conference, and in whatever eventuated following these learning experiences, the name of our Lord might be praised.

As I commenced each of the conferences in India, I related this experience and wrote the third line of this hymn across the top of the large chalkboards provided in order to emphasise our central purpose.

During these conferences there was a spirit of praise unlike any I had ever previously experienced.

My secretary at that time, Brenda Ohey, and her sister Maureen sang and recorded new songs to use in these courses. The songs proved very popular and enriched our praise of Jesus Christ.

Some indication of how God bountifully answered the prayers of many and brought praise to our Lord Jesus Christ was found in responses from the hundreds of participants. Here are a few, from those in senior Christian leadership positions across that nation:

- The national organiser of my program: “God sent John to us at a crucial time. In these small groups lies the answer to the church in India. The Spirit of God moved at all conferences. All appreciated the emphasis upon applying Scripture to everyday life situations.”
- A bishop: “This teaching will really bring renewal and strengthen all our churches.”

7 “When Morning Gilds the Skies” – Text: Katholisches Gesangbuch; Music: Joseph Barnby, 1838–1896.

- A seminary principal: “You have introduced us to a whole new perspective of Christian community life which will bring us into far deeper fellowship – an inspiring experience. It will change seminary life and the wider Christian community life here.”

As my return flight entered Australian airspace, flying at 38,000 feet, there was a magnificent sunrise. It filled the whole sky and the interior of the aircraft with rich gold and crimson rays. You can imagine my thoughts. “As this morning gilds the skies, my heart rejoicing cries, Jesus Christ has indeed been praised!”

God undertook in miraculous ways, doing a real work of grace despite this being my first experience working cross culturally, a couple of bouts of food poisoning, and an extremely demanding schedule. In so many ways, God answered prayer that the Lord’s name would be honoured.

Praise must not be limited to our times of worship, collectively or individually. The way we live, what we say and what we do should all bring praise to God if we are living and walking in the Spirit. Most times we will not be aware of the praise God is receiving, as indeed, quite often, I was not while on this assignment in India, especially when I was not well or was exhausted.

Peter says: “If you serve, you should do so with the strength God provides so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever” (1 Peter 4:11). Paul puts it so succinctly, “So ... whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Anything we say or do – notably in serving God – should not be to display our competency, nor even primarily to bless others. Rather the aim should essentially be that God and Jesus Christ be praised.

Fine days beginning with beautiful sunrises can inspire us to commence each day by praying, “Father, whatever this day may hold for me, may Jesus Christ be praised by my words, my attitudes, my thoughts, my actions – ‘to the praise of your glorious grace.’”



ANGELS IN AFGHANISTAN

When my wife and I were set to have sabbatical leave early in 1996, an urgent request came from Bishop John Reid (who was chairman of my council for many years). He asked me to join a group of five people to work in Afghanistan with Christian aid workers, who for years had been working under traumatic conditions in that troubled country. My wife, June, did not hesitate to say that she thought I should go.

The International Assistance Mission (IAM), with whom we worked, was a private voluntary agency incorporating 26 Christian organisations of different nationalities and denominations. At that time there were 90 expatriates associated with IAM.

We worked in three teams because the IAM folk were scattered in three main centres. Two of us worked in the capital, Kabul; one in Harat, near the Iranian border; and another and myself in the north, at Mazar-i-Sharif. Each team had one member to provide skilled counselling for individuals and also training. John Reid and I conducted Bible studies related to the unique needs of the IAM team and gave general pastoral support. I also led a number of seminars.

This proved to be the most demanding overseas assignment I had undertaken.

However, I returned with tremendous admiration for those we sought to help. They worked in most difficult and often high-risk situations at great cost to themselves and their young families. But they did so with a deep sense of call from God and Christ-like compassion for the poor and needy whom they helped. The title I have chosen for this chapter seeks to indicate the deep respect and esteem I have for these servants of Christ.

For nearly 20 years prior to our arrival, political and military upheavals had caused havoc in this south Asian country. Afghanistan was a 1980s “Vietnam”, the outcome of which was humiliation for the Russian occupying forces, which finally withdrew in February 1989. Since the Russian withdrawal, sadly the country had been involved in a civil war. Five or six factions were fighting for leadership of the country. As a result, in some locations the intensity of warfare had not abated since the Russians left. In fact, in some places it had increased.

People’s lives had been devastated by war. There were very few whose families had not been affected in some way by the fighting. Most families had had at least one family member killed or seriously injured. There were already at least 2 million amputees, mainly as a result of the countless landmines.

We were told unprintable stories of the horrendous experiences many Afghans had suffered. These involved murder, physical abuse, rapes, ransacked and burnt homes, long-term chronic stress from living in a war zone, rockets and bombs landing next to their houses, cars blown up in front of them, bullets passing through their houses, night watchmen beheaded, bandits robbing on the roads – and more.

As I lived and moved around the city of Mazar-i-Sharif and its surrounds, in which I worked for two and a half weeks, I became aware first-hand of some of the difficulties and dreadful situations which these expatriate aid workers had to deal with daily.

Travel on roads outside the city was often a nightmare. It included encountering vehicles on the wrong side of the road, often with steep drops away from the verges, frequent near misses, and passing bad smashes. On some roads, we passed wrecks of all sorts of armed vehicles, trucks and tanks. On one road we were shot at twice. Armed militiamen manned posts along many roads. We were warned of landmines in some areas.

One day during our stay, there was a fresh outbreak of fighting 3 hours south of the city. Another day, it was reported that 26 rockets had been fired into the capital, Kabul, where one of our teams was working.

Living for a few days in the homes of the aid workers made me aware of the erratic electricity supply, often available for only a few hours on alternate days, necessitating the use of candles and kerosene lamps for lighting. Keeping food cool was a problem. The telephone was disconnected for much of the time. There were also no showers, so washing was with a ladle and bucket.

The city of Mazar-i-Sharif was also one of great weather extremes – snow and much rain in winter and dry, dusty conditions in summer, with temperatures reaching highs of 50 degrees Celsius. During our stay, heavy rain had turned the streets into a quagmire of mud and pools of water.

Despite all these difficulties, the aid workers performed exemplary services.

A number of nurses travelled separately to outlying villages to help mothers adequately care for their babies and to maintain healthy homes. Others taught midwifery courses in country areas. Often these workers lived in very primitive conditions.

Some were teachers. Another made and taught others to make artificial limbs. Some travelled long distances to help in the establishment and maintenance of development projects in villages.

When I visited the IAM hospital, 50 people were in the clinic, with a number of doctors on duty. In the operating theatre, three cataract operations were taking place simultaneously. Next door was the Visual Impairment Services Unit. Two classes were in progress, teaching children through to adults how to read and write Braille.

One can only try to imagine the stress of living and working in this country. Prior to our departure for Afghanistan, we were informed of the help these workers needed to cope. After our arrival, we sought to discover their real needs. These they listed as: improving pastoral care, coping with overload, better communication, awareness of each other's needs, openness to seeking help, opportunities to restore energy emotionally and spiritually – to name just a few! Supporting and encouraging one another better seemed to be the priority for our work among them.

The person working with me received very positive feedback for her counselling as well as her teaching on some of the areas of expressed need. My seminars, preaching and Bible studies were also valued. I personally very much appreciated the opportunities to pastor individuals and couples.

One need that especially stood out for me personally in working with them was their need for more support from the churches that had sent them, something to which they frequently referred. Most reported that their churches or sending agencies supported them regularly in prayer. One reported receiving sermons, conference addresses and an occasional church weekly news-brief photocopied onto an air-letter with handwritten notes on it. But in addition to this support, they all longed for more personal letters, good magazines and small practical gifts.

As I have said, I was full of admiration for these wonderful expatriates working in most unstable situations, who daily had to deal with almost limitless demands and psychological pressures resulting from being surrounded by desperately poor, disabled, war-injured, war-traumatized, needy people. Added to this was dealing with the stresses of interpersonal relationships in a small team that was in great demand and working under such difficulties.

I pray that God will bless the “angels” who continue to work in this and other similar situations, at great cost to themselves and to their loved ones. We should all be challenged by their example, in devoting their lives to such sacrificial ministry, and also by the need and responsibility to help support those who do such work.



POSTCARDS ON:
Christian Community





DISCIPLING NEW BELIEVERS

A friend who was a Christian educator totally committed to discipling followers of Jesus Christ, once wrote me a letter in which he said:

In seminars I have conducted over the years, I have asked who was disciplined by another Christian in the early days of their pilgrimage; seldom is it more than 10%!

The people of God and their leaders need to hear the mentoring/discipline emphasis which you have brought in the wisdom given by the Holy Spirit. Churches need to keep hearing a strong and urgent plea to put in place a mentoring structure of accountability and of, preferably, one-on-one discipleship based on Christ's life and teachings.

Some years ago I had a strange and puzzling vivid dream, which continued as the Lord speaking after I woke. I went to my study to write it up and, as I sat down at my desk, these words came clearly and strongly, **“And you have not been obedient to my final commission; you have not made disciples.** You have put them in classes and instructed them, but you have not disciplined them.” Then it ended. The “you” I did not think was me personally, but the church as a whole. What do you do with a dream/vision like that?

I spoke to my pastor about it, and he basically dismissed it, and I have seldom shared it but felt constrained to do so with you. The point seems to me that, because we have so few people who have been disciplined, there are not many who would know what to do if God gave an abundant harvest of souls – a flood of converts would overwhelm us!

I guess my main disappointment is that I know of no place in Australia where what I have shared with you has been taken seriously. Perhaps you do! Many acknowledge its importance but do not change their structural arrangements to achieve it – possibly because our leaders themselves were not disciplined one-on-one – or even in a small group!

So, in so far as I am able, I will pray that your challenge to mentor will keep on having a powerful impact.

Early in my ministry, the Lord taught me an unforgettable lesson about the priority of discipling new believers. In 1959, while I was at Port Kembla, the steel city south of Sydney, the combined churches participated wholeheartedly in the first Billy Graham Crusade in Sydney. We combined with other churches to organise buses to take two thousand people to the meetings over the three weeks.

Afterwards our parish developed a comprehensive orientation program for fifty people associated with our parish who had registered their names as inquirers at the Crusade. Our discipling of them included three key components. These were: small short-term orientation groups; a six-month discipleship program; and one-to-one relationships with mature Christians. This discipling resulted in almost all of the fifty becoming ongoing members of our church. Most of them are still deeply involved in churches across our country. Following are just a few more details and insights about these measures. (I go into further detail in my books for small-group leaders and mentors.)

The orientation groups were held in homes for four weeks and were bridges into the wider fellowship of the church. New believers were invited and accompanied to these groups by the mature Christians who had been linked with them. It was a fairly informal time of getting to know each other, helping newcomers to feel wanted and accepted, sharing Christian experiences and introducing some basics for growing as disciples.

The six-month weekly intensive discipleship program commenced after the short-term groups finished. It involved weekly sessions consisting of teaching/lectures, group discussion and plenary times for questions and further discussion.

The pairing of each new believer in a one-to-one relationship with another who was more mature in the faith was to me a most significant aspect of our simple and very effective strategy. They nurtured the new disciples by: making them feel wanted; personally introducing them to other church members when the church gathered; listening attentively to them so as to be aware of their joys and needs; helping them with any difficulties; praying for them; and discipling them. A key part of the last point involved helping the new believer take their first steps in following Jesus by using a simple Bible-based resource.

A good example of this bonding with a new believer was Norm Harriman, a carpenter who had a pastor's heart. We assigned him to follow up a couple who were converted. He frequently shared meals with them in his home and brought them to church, where he sat with them, introduced them to others and made them feel comfortable. To help this couple develop their devotional life, he met with them for breakfast once a week, during which time they read the Scriptures and prayed together.

Since the Port Kembla experience, I have believed that Christian fellowships which take seriously their care of new Christians should equip and then assign sensitive, mature persons as “under shepherds” or helpers to take a special interest individually in the new disciples. Moreover, it was probably seeing the effectiveness of this one-to-one approach to help believers mature in Christ – including helping them discover their gifts and supporting them in the development of their service roles – that eventually led me into my own extensive one-to-one mentoring ministry.

The apostle Paul is an inspiration in the way he took seriously his discipling of individual new disciples. He said to his friends in Thessalonica, “You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with **each of you** as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:10–12). Additionally, in his speech before the elders of

Ephesus, Paul recalls: “Remember that for three years I never stopped warning **each of you** night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31).

A new believer growing to become the person God wants them to be is a long-term process, requiring all the help available both through the Holy Spirit working directly with them and through other Christians. My hope is that those who read this chapter will seek to ensure that their fellowship is effectively discipling and mentoring new believers – and will themselves be a part of this.⁸

8 For further reading on mentoring new Christians, see pages 48, 147–149 of *Mentoring to Develop Disciples and Leaders* by John Mallison, published by Openbook, revised 2003.



THE POWER OF BELIEVING IN PEOPLE

In May 2004, Professor Trevor Waring was installed as the Chancellor of Newcastle University, climaxing an illustrious career that also included his involvement in an ongoing variety of influential roles locally and nationally.

I first met Trevor in 1959 while I was serving in Port Kembla. He joined our church youth group following his attendance at a Billy Graham Crusade in Sydney that dramatically changed the focus of his life.

In the mid-60s I commenced the Newcastle Youth Service, a “detached youth worker” project working mainly with antisocial young people in the places they frequented in the evenings and early mornings. It was based on what I had observed of the New York City Youth Board while overseas. (I found out sometime later that there was a similar work already functioning in Adelaide, but unlike ours, it had no links with the Christian church for funding and oversight.)

I chose Trevor for this groundbreaking role of contacting young people from mid-evening through to the early hours of the morning, which he did with most significant outcomes for individuals and the community generally. He greatly benefited from the wise guidance and support he received from a very competent management committee and professional advisory panel.

The lives of many that he contacted were transformed because of his wise, caring, dedicated and friendly service through the Agency. Not once did I ever question my decision to appoint him to that responsible position.

A condition of his employment was that he undertook academic studies to ensure he had a future beyond the Youth Service. He fulfilled this requirement at great cost to himself and his wonderful wife Helen. He had a young family, and meeting the fees for his studies was difficult. Undertaking his studies also required him to attend day-time lectures after his night-time work schedule.

During the years when I had close contact with Trevor, I sought to support and encourage him in a variety of ways. Later I followed his career at a distance, always seeking to affirm him and to be there for him when needed.

Attending his installation as Chancellor was an honour I shall treasure as one of my life's special moments. I am justly proud of this remarkable man and his wonderful wife.

Soon after the announcement of his appointment to his position as Chancellor, amidst various media interviews, he was interviewed on local ABC radio. Along with the usual personal history and philosophical musings that make up such a program, he was asked what influenced his life in terms of its ultimate direction. Aside from his faith, he mentioned me as a person who, at various times and in various ways, had shaped his thoughts and motivated him to consider directions he would not have considered if it were not for my belief in him at crucial times.

My own life has been markedly shaped by the many people who have believed in me. As a child my parents showed this by their attitude and frequent affirmations of who I was and what I did.

When I was only nineteen years old, just three years after meeting Jesus Christ, my local pastor (Walter Willey) asked me to preach. I was a shy, not up-front person, but his obvious faith in me led me to accept the challenge. I surprised myself, and all who heard me preach, with the confidence I displayed.

While filling a 3-month appointment during a theological college vacation, the local pastor (Herbert Green) trusted me with big responsibilities, allowing me to experiment with some innovative outreach, which went well. The same was the case during my appointment as a probationary pastor. My

supervisor (Roy Bedford) continually showed his belief in me by allowing me great freedom in the way I went about my ministry.

I was blessed to have had senior colleagues who were secure in themselves and therefore did not try to overly control or restrict me. This meant I was able to “spread my wings”, to try new ideas, to pursue my dreams. But I knew I was never on my own – they were always available to me and were great encouragers. I also always had a strong sense for the need to be accountable, so I kept them regularly informed of what I did and discussed issues with them.

I must also acknowledge the belief that the councils of my churches, state boards and my present ministry have shown in me. These controlling bodies of my Christian work have allowed me to serve outside my normal area of responsibilities. They knew I worked hard and would not neglect my immediate obligations. For example, in each church in which I have served, I had an agreement to serve other churches of my own or other denominations for up to four weeks each year, without seeking approval for each activity. My denomination’s state board, in which I served for fourteen years, gave me their blessing to work across denominations and overseas. All of this was a demonstration of their belief in me.

Bishop Jack Dain of the Sydney Anglican Diocese showed great faith in me by opening up many opportunities nationally and internationally. He constantly endorsed my gifts and work. His was a close mentoring friendship that I treasured.

However, the mentor who had the greatest effect on me – in no small part through his belief in me – was Dr Gloster Udy, who took a deep interest in me for nearly fifty years, helping me in numerous ways. He constantly encouraged me when we were together, and by letter. He also introduced me to his worldwide contacts, which resulted in varied opportunities and a large list of resource people to draw upon. As I have said elsewhere, I would probably never have become an author without his strong belief in me and his editing and publication of my first book.

The model that the apostle Paul provides for us in caring for new Christians and helping them mature illustrates clearly Paul’s commitment to them and how he believed in them.

In the second chapter of his letter to the young church in Thessalonica, he expresses this belief in and commitment to them:

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well ... you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God ... (1 Thessalonians 2:7–8, 10–12).

Paul obviously was a great encourager. Even when he had to be firm, it was with grace, helping to ensure that those he believed in would persevere with hope.

Encouragement is such an essential expression of our belief in others. It suggests supporting, assisting, inspiring, consoling, comforting, fostering hope and urging on. Believing in people is evidenced by our always being there for them, by our attitude towards them, but especially by verbalising that belief – as in encouraging them. Failure to speak our belief can cause discouragement. As the sage says in Proverbs, “Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.” (Proverbs 12:25). When we truly believe in someone, let us show it in various ways, but especially by telling them!

We all flourish in the presence of those who believe in us and exhibit this belief. So we ourselves – especially those of us who are leaders – should always be ready to express our belief in those God has called us to work with.



CARRYING THE LOAD TOGETHER

While fulfilling a brief teaching assignment at the Counselling Centre of the Christian University, Satya Wacana, Salatiga, in Indonesia, I was introduced to the phrase “Gotong Royong”, which expresses an important characteristic of that society. It means “carrying a load together”. It is most evident in the village community during certain farming operations, when building a house or at weddings and funerals – times when the community combines to support a family in a demanding task or at a time of great joy or sorrow. However, Indonesians readily admit that the motivation for this commitment to mutual support often deteriorates into a sense of obligation or expectation of reciprocal action.

The high ideal of “Gotong Royong” reflects what the New Testament teaches should be characteristic of an authentic Christian community of faith and love. As Paul says to the Galatian church, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

The New Testament Greek word “koinonia” describes the quality of corporate life created and maintained by God, through his Holy Spirit within the body of Christian disciples. This word is translated as “fellowship” and speaks of participation. Believers participate in Christ and church activities – and in each other’s lives. This involves: the maintenance of a oneness in Christ; open,

honest sharing; and deep commitment to and love for each other, whereby believers “carry each other’s burdens”.

Many people have their deepest experience of this genuine Christian fellowship in what have been the basic building blocks of the church since its inception – small groups (cf. Acts 2:46 – note the house church activity).

Let me share with you something of the role that four small groups have played in my own faith journey. As will be apparent from what I say, all of these groups reflected the concept of fellowship described above. As such, they included the element of carrying each other’s burdens or loads together, with members caring for and supporting each other.

For a number of years, every Wednesday morning I met with eight men for breakfast from 7.00 am to 8.30 am. The group was held in the home of one member. We belonged to six different denominations, two of our number were politicians, the others were engineers, businessmen and one a radiologist. The purpose of the group was to support and encourage each other in our continuing spiritual growth and ministry. We also had a special ministry to politicians and leaders in the business community. Further aspects of the group’s serving dimension were a work among prisoners and the holding of retreats for a wider group so as to facilitate spiritual renewal among community leaders. We also sought to encourage the formation of new groups similar to ours.

Open and honest sharing began while we ate breakfast. This was followed by a brief Bible study, with discussion related to an aspect of the sharing. Group prayer then focused on the specific issues raised. The whole meeting took place around the breakfast table.

Between meetings there were many phone calls and personal interaction, as the group continued to care for one another. Each member was encouraged to find one other Christian brother, not necessarily from the group, with whom he could enter into an in-depth covenant relationship.

The wives of the group members also met regularly for a similar type of meeting, and the same caring took place between meetings. A number of social gatherings with our wives – and sometimes including our families – were also held.

The group was a closed group, with only one new member being added each year, permitting the growth of deep relationships.

This was the most significant group to which I have belonged. The level of commitment to one another – carrying each other's loads – and the serving dimension was something I have not previously or since experienced to the same degree. If every church had even a couple of groups of this quality, new life would inevitably permeate the whole church.

It is worth noting here some important principles which this group demonstrated. Group life will be enriched if the members are in a close relationship with another person, either within or outside the group. Fellowship should not be limited to those of our own denomination or peer group. Serving together as a group keeps the group life vital. Pastoring each other should continue when the group is not together. Where significant personal and spiritual growth is an aim of a group, it should remain closed to new members for at least twelve months.

The second group involved twelve people, comprised of couples and two single women, from three denominations. This group met weekly in different homes. It continued for about eighteen months and then concluded, due to other commitments of the group and an agreement that it had fulfilled its purpose.

This was also a group where deep sharing and caring took place, but the study and prayer aspect were more structured. Again, participants were pastored by each other outside the group gatherings. This concern continued for over two years after the group concluded. For the quality of life developed during its regular meetings was such that when it disbursed the bond of commitment to carry each other's load together continued.

The third group is a breakfast group of clergy from the Uniting Church to which I continue to belong. It began meeting monthly over twenty years ago in the restaurant of a large motel, and now meets bi-weekly in the homes of the members. One purpose of the group is to support each other in our varied ministries. Sharing and prayer takes place and, again, the caring aspect of Christian fellowship is evident between meetings. This has been particularly evident in some crises.

The group also seeks to facilitate ways of bringing renewal to the body of Christ and to support fellow clergy. The latter means that we try not only to together carry each other's loads, but also the loads of others outside of the group.

An example of the early outward focus of the group was its organising of an informal prayer breakfast, mainly for clergy from country areas, at the Annual State Synod gatherings. At the first of these Synod Prayer Breakfasts, I shared the concept of each Christian disciple needing another person with whom they could enter into a covenant relationship, and the value of support groups. This was recorded and cassette copies sent to over a hundred clergy, resulting in the formation of a number of clergy cells and some one-to-one covenant relationships.

The fourth group met less frequently. It comprised fellow clergy from most states in Australia who shared a common vision for the church. We met for sharing and prayer every few months by means of a conference telephone hook-up which linked over ten telephones together for the period of our meeting. The cost per person was minimal. This opened up some new possibilities for those in isolated areas and for those living more closely who were unable to meet face to face for such gatherings.

The time together was carefully planned in advance to make the best use of the time. A prearranged order for sharing and prayer was followed, with each person giving their name before they spoke. Again there was frequent supportive contact between these meetings, mainly by phone and letter. (Emails were not around then!)

All of these groups, which have been an important part of my spiritual journey, had similar functions in caring for each other and facilitating personal and spiritual growth in an atmosphere of Christian love. This quality of fellowship is one of the church's most urgent needs. Unfortunately, many find more care and concern in their secular associations outside the church.

The earliest church enjoyed this wonderful experience of fellowship (cf. Acts 2:42–47). They were magnetic – daily people joined them because of the quality of their relationships with each other and with God.

To commence a group initially requires finding only one other person who shares the same sense of need or vision which reflects this quality of relationship. Others will link in with the group as the group members remain sensitive to what are often veiled cries for the care and hope which such a group can give, as members carry the load (or loads) together. Such groups provide the genuine fellowship which only the Holy Spirit can create and maintain.



CHRIST-LIKE LOVE IN ACTION

Christ-like love is the key component to relating to those within our Christian community and to reaching out to others. Moreover, sincerely befriending people who are different from us and showing them this love can have long-term outcomes.

I begin with a story of a Christian community receiving into their fellowship someone who was at the opposite end of the social spectrum to themselves, and how their genuine love, acceptance, prayers and witness changed his life and, through him, the lives of many others in later years.

My father, Edwin Mallison, was born into an extremely poor area of Sheffield, in England. As a teenager he was invited to attend Victoria Methodist Church in that city, by a godly man named Mr Wilson who had befriended him. In those days, Victoria Methodist Church was an upper-class church. But despite the vast social gap, he was warmly welcomed. He felt so accepted and loved that he attended regularly and finally made his commitment to Jesus Christ. The leaders of the church faithfully nurtured his new-found faith and helped him develop as a leader. They also readily gave him opportunities for Christian service. Eventually he became the leader of the Boys' Brigade youth group.

At the time of attending that church, my father was an electrician. He married Lily Copley from Hillsborough Baptist Church, and they immediately emigrated to Australia. My father was a young man with great initiative. He extended his studies and eventually became a well-known engineer in Sydney. His commitment to Christ grew stronger year by year and he became a prominent Methodist lay preacher. A number of the members of the Bible class he led entered the Christian ministry. He was also a consistent witness to Christ in the business world, leading many prominent business people to faith in Jesus Christ. I myself was enriched by his life and witness, both in our home and through his leadership in our local church. My family and I were also blessed by his wisdom, encouragement and prayers. The Christ-like love of that authentic Christian fellowship in Sheffield early in the last century, which blessed my father, had a far-reaching effect.

Jesus did not say others would know we are his disciples by our regular attendance at church, our heavy involvement in Christian activities, our generous giving, what we abstain from or even what we say we believe, but essentially by our Christ-like love. The quality of love so fully described by Paul in his “love chapter” (1 Corinthians 13) is what Christ had in view when he said, “A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35).

Christ exemplified this love by how he went out of his way to make friends with people whom the rest of the community excluded. He treated them not as “clients” nor with a condescending sense of duty, but as real people, even as friends. He found hearts that were hungry for love, like Zacchaeus – the scorned, renegade tax-collector (Luke 19:1–9), and the ostracised immoral woman whom he treated with dignity and courtesy (Luke 7:37–50).

Christ’s loving actions affirmed the essential dignity and worth of all humans. People who live on the street often refer to themselves as “the glass people” because other people do not notice them or take no notice of them. But this was not so with Jesus! He saw in everyone something of the image of God. We need the eyes and heart of Jesus to mightily inspire love towards everyone we meet.

Many years ago I befriended the leader of a motorbike gang which was frequently in conflict with the police. We talked often about the major issues

with which he was struggling. His language was not what “nice” people use, but that never fazed me. I was given grace and love to look behind the facade and communicate with the real person. A strong bond developed and, after some time, in his heavy riding gear, he knelt with me in my office to surrender his life to Jesus Christ. This resulted in a radical change in him and eventually leadership in significant Christian outreach.

Here is another story, but this time one about how my attitude needed to be radically changed in order to seek to show love which reflected my Lord’s.

An office of mine was located near to where a woman had established her first small business. I advised and encouraged her in the organisation of this new business, which she greatly appreciated. We formed an amicable relationship.

However, after some months I learnt that she was in a same-sex relationship. Because I do not agree with such a lifestyle, I immediately felt a distance between us. Although I think I did not show my reaction, a harsh, censorious spirit nevertheless lay beneath the surface. But God convicted me about this negative change in attitude. I repented and sought the grace to love her as Christ would have done.

Within a few days she experienced the death of a close relative, and God gave me a genuine compassion as I helped her work through her deep bereavement. Later she sent me a card in which she said, “You are the most caring man I have ever met. Thank you so much for all your care in helping me in my heartbreak.”

Our contact with each other continued for a few years until she left the area. Later she wrote me a letter which included these words: “Over the last few years, more than anyone else, you have helped me professionally, emotionally and spiritually. I am deeply grateful and I never want to lose contact with you.” The love I showed and continue to have for this woman has been divinely generated.

Loveless religion of a censorious “holier than thou” spirit reflects that of the Pharisees, who would not lovingly engage with those who did not obey the religious laws. It is bereft of any redeeming power – powerless to set people free and bring them into Christ’s kingdom. It effectively excludes them from fellowship with God and from Christian community. Such lifeless religiosity

needs to be dissolved. The loveless desert needs to be abandoned for the rich green pastures of the love Jesus taught and consistently showed to others without exception.

This does not mean that we should downplay the Bible's moral teachings. Jesus never taught an easy-going indifference to moral values. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matthew 7:1) does not mean we ought to disregard our analytical faculty. Although Jesus was understanding of others and saw the best in them, he did not discard his moral stringency. On rescuing the woman caught in adultery, he warned her: "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

In the opening chapter of his gospel, John states, "The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, full of grace and truth" (v. 14), and "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (v. 17). Those words "grace and truth" always claim my attention. They help me appreciate the balance in Christ's life and work that I need to emulate in my relationships. With God's help I need to uphold the truth as revealed in Scripture – including aspects disregarded by others – and I need to do so, like Jesus, with grace. Accordingly, I need to relate with Christ-like love and kindness, and to treat others with honour and dignity.

Let us look at showing Christ-like love in another setting. Most countries today are multicultural. There is a diversity of racial backgrounds. In the middle-class suburb of Sydney where I live our close neighbours represent twelve nationalities. To proficiently relate to and love people from different racial backgrounds to our own, it is important to understand their customs and lifestyle, and to respect cultural sensitivities.

With diversity in racial backgrounds there is also diversity in religion. Major world religions are well represented in our community and country. We need to be able to communicate across these religious boundaries in loving, sensitive and respectful ways. To do so we need sound, practical advice on the historical background of these religions and their central beliefs and practices.

In seeking to reach out in Christ-like love, I find that listening to others in friendly non-confrontational conversation is essential. I initially ask them to tell me things about themselves and their backgrounds, then later about their beliefs and how these affect their behaviour. With Muslims I can, among

other things, affirm their disciplined prayer life and their commitment to fasting. They are then more open to me sharing my faith and what it means to me in a wise, loving, biblical and Christ-like manner. The same applies to Buddhists or Hindus.

However, we need to begin by intentionally befriending these people. Friendship is possible for everyone. It helps keep our society wholesome and is an essential aspect of “loving our neighbour”. It can also lead to others finding what we have found in Jesus Christ.

In his book *Just Walk across the Room*, Bill Hybels introduces an uncomplicated, natural relational approach to our encounters with others. It follows Christ’s own example, which can produce astounding outcomes. It basically involves reaching out with a smile and genuine interest, as shown by sensitive questions accompanied by good listening, transparency, encouragement and friendship. Christ-like love shown in this way can have long-term outcomes in terms of the other person’s relation to God.

What I have written could give the impression that we should only be concerned with reaching out to give Christ-like love to others. We must, however, also be open to receiving love ourselves. And often those who become channels of this love to us may be the most unlikely people.

The quality of love of which is the theme of this chapter is not idealistic, impracticable or impossible. It transcends human possibilities, in both itself and its outcomes. It is made possible only by God the Holy Spirit flooding our hearts. As Paul says, “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given us” (Romans 5:5).

As we daily spend unhurried time opening our lives to God, the love of Christ will more and more flood our hearts. It will come not by our own effort but by God’s grace. Then we will not only become loving but others will become lovable to us. God supplies the power to do what in our own strength is impossible, *to love as Christ loved* – a love which produces far-reaching outcomes, for others and for God’s kingdom.



PASSING THE BATON

Effective leaders see leadership selection and development, with ongoing resourcing and support, as a prime function. This involves passing on to others such things as: what has been life-changing for them personally; what has proved effective in their sphere of ministry; lessons learnt from their failures and what have been governing principles for their leadership.

Jesus is our prime example in equipping future leaders to continue his ministry and, by the Holy Spirit's empowerment, to proclaim his kingdom. We read, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons" (Mark 3:14–15). Jesus provided his disciples with a daily close encounter with him, for them to learn by his words and example. Reflection together played an important role, as the gospel records clearly indicate. The disciples asked questions of their teacher and discussed issues together.

The development of new leaders was also important to Paul. This is shown by his letters to his understudy Timothy, which aided Timothy's development as a leader. Moreover, Paul also teaches Timothy to likewise make developing new leaders a priority himself, telling him: "The things you have heard me say ... entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Those who know me well are aware that I am passionate about equipping and supporting Christian leaders.

From the commencement of my present organisation, John Mallison Ministries, my council and I have felt clearly guided to make an integral part of this ministry the equipping of others – both nationally and internationally – to act as trainers in their local situations. This has been accomplished through my leadership of a wide variety of seminars, and preparation of textbooks and other resources for trainers.

I have trained thousands of leaders in how to facilitate small groups and how to mentor. This teaching has also included how to prepare others for these important roles. There have also been a number of times when I have specifically aimed to equip leaders who would have opportunities to train others at a national or international level.

The first of the numerous occasions when I have enabled leaders in other countries to develop others for leadership roles was during my first overseas teaching experience in India. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, a small number of especially selected pastors attended all my conferences, spread over five weeks, with the expressed intention of them becoming regional and national trainers. Their learning included me spending time with just them.

Probably my most concentrated effort in equipping experienced leaders to develop emerging leaders was due to requests received from a number of prominent Christian educators. In response I organised a two-day “training of trainers” conference in Sydney.

It was a time of “passing the baton” – handing over major aspects of my small-group ministry to a group of 40 selected leaders, men and women, from seven denominations across Australia who shared the vision of the role small groups could play in bringing renewal to the church and our nation. A number of these leaders coordinated some of the largest local church small-group networks in Australia. A leading minister of the Methodist Church in Malaysia also participated, in preparation for a similar national training event to be led by me the following year in Malaysia.

The participants in this two-day “Passing the Baton” conference received an extensive kit of resources which in effect covered the sum total of my 35 years work in the field of small groups. Its preparation involved a team of seventeen

volunteers and myself in a huge amount of work over many months, revising and cataloguing 1,100 printed handouts, session outlines, lecture notes and overhead projector transparency masters. This kit also included: two folders with sixteen cassettes of lectures by myself and others; a 60-page “Guide to Organising and Promoting a Successful Training Event”; and copies of relevant books of my own and others.

Over the years I have tried to pass on what I have learnt from experiences of many kinds of ministry in a number of “how to” books. These books are training texts with questions linked to each chapter, most including a trainer’s guide designed to help leaders equip emerging leaders. I have no idea how many copies of these books have been circulated, but God has seen fit to send the 23 titles, translated into five or more languages, into many places.

More recently, I made available the resources I have accumulated over the years for equipping mentors by releasing a CD-ROM “Mentoring Trainers’ Pack”. This was designed to be a companion resource for my book *Mentoring to Develop Disciples and Leaders*. My hope and prayer is that its content (which includes PowerPoint slides, session designs and worksheets) will prove helpful to many trainers.

The church is dependent upon an unbroken chain of those who teach the faith and equip others to live and lead in various ways. Deuteronomy (11:19), the Psalmist (71:16–18) and Isaiah (38:19) all instruct us to pass on our knowledge and experience of God to the next generation. Such “passing the baton” commences in our homes, then extends to our church families as we share our faith and what we have learnt about living for and serving God.

There is a never-ending need in Christian community to keep helping others grow as true followers of Jesus Christ. At every life stage or stage of Christian growth, people – both young and old, single and married, followers or leaders – need others who are more experienced, good listeners and full of grace to invest their lives in them as mentors. An important part of this is that older leaders help enable younger leaders to mature and finish well.

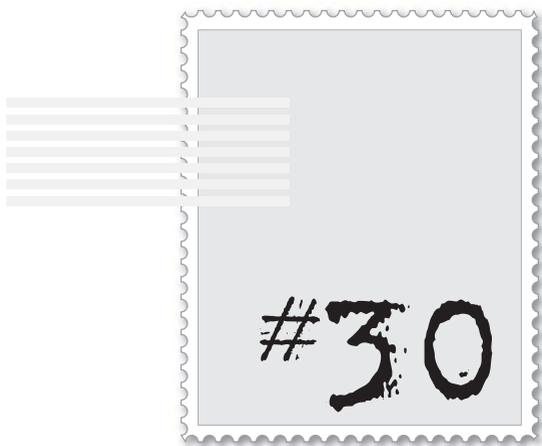
Many believers as they cross “the finish line” will be holding “batons” that we or others have passed to them. No doubt the “race’s” Divine Judge will be heard to say to many we taught, mentored, coached, resourced and ran with: “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord.”



POSTCARDS ON:

Hope





RELEASE FROM PRISON

Twenty-two years ago I was suffering with a deteriorating sight problem, which involved uncontrollable, spasmodic closure of my eyelids. It meant that despite good general condition of my eyes, I was functionally blind for a good percentage of the time.

I had ceased driving for two and a half years. When walking by myself, I often collided with people or objects. My work requires extensive reading and writing, which I could do only by physically holding my eyelids open until the discomfort and pain were unbearable. I would then relax and continue later. If I awoke in the middle of the night, my eyelids operated normally for a couple of hours, and I wrote a couple of my books during these timeslots! My work also involves lecturing and counselling, which were also being adversely affected.

Over a six-year period, I had been to a number of physicians, four ophthalmologists, three neurologists (including a Professor of Neurology) and a psychologist. I also had several courses of acupuncture, numerous treatments from a general practitioner practising homeopathy, and chiropractic treatment. But these gave no release or even clear diagnosis of my problem.

At 55 years of age, despite boundless energy and very good general health, I began to face the inevitability of retirement on medical grounds from a

ministry in which I had found tremendous fulfilment and ever-increasing opportunities.

Then came a ray of hope. A colleague studying in the United States sent me a clipping from a popular magazine relating an experimental treatment for what appeared to be a condition similar to my own. I was surprised to read that the treatment involved the world's strongest toxin – botulin, now widely known as Botox!

Unfortunately, it was not available in Australia at that time. However, enquiries by a friend in the medical profession led to me making a visit to London's Moorfield Eye Hospital. There I received, from a Harley Street ophthalmologist, injections of this toxin into the offending muscles surrounding my eyes. Within four days I was functioning normally again!

While in London for a week after receiving such an excellent result, the ophthalmologist who treated me asked me to accompany him to an international conference of ophthalmologists to briefly tell of the outcome. I commenced by saying, "I feel I have been released from prison", and then briefly described my condition before and after treatment.

I suffer from a form of dystonia. Though it is possibly as common as multiple sclerosis, at that time it was a little-known illness – and one which had been widely undiagnosed or wrongly diagnosed. My form of dystonia is called "benign essential blepharospasm".

The now widely available treatment is fairly simple, being administered in the surgery of an ophthalmologist. It involves a number of injections into the offending muscles around each eye with a small-gauge needle, giving little discomfort, and is completed in less than a minute. I was the first person in Australia to receive this treatment, after my ophthalmologist and I lobbied the government to allow the highly potent toxin to be imported into the country.

As I have indicated, it is nearly twenty-two years since I first received the treatment, and I continue to have an excellent response. As often as I remember, I thank God for the availability of this treatment, and for the great privilege of being able to continue my fulfilling ministry.

Before I left for my eye treatment in London in October 1985, I read Psalm 77. It begins with the writer expressing his deep distress and his heartfelt cries to

God for help. The turning point comes in verse 10, when he recalls God's past faithfulness. Then in verse 13 he declares his faith in his all-powerful God, "What god is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles."

However, the verse that especially got my attention before I left for London was verse 4: "You kept my eyelids from closing" (RSV). The psalmist is referring to his sleeplessness. However, despite this being a different context, I took it as a promise of God's divine intervention to prevent my eyelid muscles from uncontrollably closing. And how wonderfully God has intervened in my debilitating condition. He is "the God who performs miracles!" The twenty-one years since I first received my treatment have been unbelievably productive. I have written many books and have had a multiplicity of diverse opportunities for ministry.

God's power is not always seen in the release from something that puts limitations upon us. While we should never underestimate God's miraculous power and his boundless love, there are times when we may remain "imprisoned" in various ways. Paul is a notable example of one who was greatly burdened – by a condition that he describes as his "thorn in the flesh" – but in whose life God's power was evident in spite of this. Paul gives an inspiring testimony in his second letter to the Corinthian church (12:7–10) to how Jesus Christ's power in fact worked through his weakened condition and enabled him to not only cope but to have a remarkably effective ministry.

I have many close friends, most of them aging, who are "imprisoned" like Paul, with different forms of suffering. Each of them has a strong faith in Christ and all have been used mightily by God over many years to bless others through their life and ministry. They do not seek to discuss the "why" of their condition, for they are well aware that it is unproductive. However, there is often a bewilderment regarding why their own pain cannot be controlled, among other issues with which they have to cope.

One younger person I know who has a firm commitment to Jesus Christ struggles with emotional issues. When I was pastoring this person, he said that he wanted to express his anger to God but felt that was not what a person of faith should do. I pointed him to some of the psalms to help him understand it is appropriate to express our feelings openly and honestly to God, because God is already aware of how we think and feel. For example: "My soul is in deep anguish. How long, LORD, how long? Turn, LORD and deliver me; save

me because of your unfailing love” (Psalms 6:3–4). Such honesty can bring a release, especially if it can be followed by an affirmation of our faith in God, no matter how weak it is.

Job is also a model of frankness with God and his so-called comforters. Psalms 22 and 38 are further notable examples of honesty before God about one’s feelings.

I never pretend to have slick, smart answers in such pastoral situations. I seek to “stand in their shoes”, to empathise, to share my own inability to understand God’s ways – while gently affirming the “big picture” of God that we have in Scripture.

I have been down another painful path with my family’s health that does not have the same outcome I have experienced with my eye condition. Twenty-one years ago, my wife and four of our five children were diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome. Although they have received various forms of treatment for this condition, none has been effective.

When first they contracted CFS, we followed James’s exhortation (5:14–15) and called the prayerful, godly elders of our church to pray for them. Hundreds of my prayer partners also prayed. Others with a special gift of healing also came and prayed. However, these family members have not been healed, although all of my children have managed their condition and all have held responsible positions. To add to our trial, we even received unsigned letters in which we were told that we did not have enough faith, or that there was some unconfessed sin. We have searched our hearts before the Lord and believe we have confessed all known sin.

So why the ongoing suffering? It is a mystery. However, I know that my family have a strong faith in Christ and are used by God in various ways. Elsewhere in this book I also tell of close friends who experienced ongoing debilitating conditions, but went on to be remarkably used by God.

The experiences of myself and others have left me with unanswered questions. But these experiences – along with Scripture – have also left me with the belief that God is the God who performs miracles, sometimes releasing from a “prison”, other times making his servants bright shining lights within their “prison”! Such a belief is a persistent source of strength and hope to all who have faith in our all-powerful God whose love endures forever.



STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

As I mentioned earlier in this book, in 1987 I was invited to be the guest preacher at a week of celebrations for the centenary of Lahore Cathedral in Pakistan. As well as preaching each evening, I was to conduct leaders' seminars each weekday morning.

I caught a Sydney-to-London flight that went via New Delhi, where I changed to a flight that went from New Delhi to Lahore. Unfortunately, all my booked-in luggage went direct to London and, despite many phone calls, I was not reunited with it until two weeks after I returned home. Fortunately, I always take as carry-on baggage all my notes and resources, plus a change of clothes.

I arrived a few days before the celebrations. However, on the second day I was stricken with such a serious case of food poisoning that my hosts, the Bishop and his wife, set up a special room in their residence where I was attended by doctors and placed on an intravenous drip, as well as having a nurse appointed to "special" me during the night. Someone filled in for me as preacher for the first evening. Not wanting to disappoint the hundred or more leaders who had come long distances for the morning seminars, I had myself taken in a wheelchair into the first of the five sessions and, with difficulty, I lectured sitting down. I also preached at the next four evening sessions and the closing Sunday services.

Although I was still greatly weakened by my illness in the early sessions, in all my ministry I have never seen such a response! The organisers asked me to make all my messages evangelistic and to call people to publicly receive Christ. They also asked me to invite those in need of healing to come forward and go to a special hall where intercessors would pray for them.

Approximately eleven hundred attended each evening meeting, and I stood in amazement as during most of these meetings up to five hundred people publicly made a confession of faith in Christ, with hundreds seeking prayer for healing. I could take no credit for the responses – it was a divine intervention – a miracle!

In this, one of my first trips to minister in Asia, I learnt in these situations to eat only cooked food and to drink only fluid that has been boiled. But my far greater learning experience was that God often chooses to work wonders through those who are weak physically, emotionally and spiritually.

The apostle Paul is a striking example of a servant of Christ who suffered greatly in being obedient to God's call, and was no doubt weakened as a result. His letters to the Corinthian believers contain a number of accounts of the hardships he experienced in his groundbreaking ministry. Time and time again he was brutally treated, faced many forms of danger, was deprived of the basic necessities of life, was criticised and was rejected (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:3; 4:10–13; 2 Corinthians 1:3–8; 6:3–10; 11:23–28).

Amazingly, he shows no bitterness, hatred or loss of faith – and even speaks of one lot of hardships as being intended to help him not to rely on himself but on God (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:9). The effectiveness of his continuing ministry was a demonstration of the Spirit's power (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:4). As Paul himself states (in a more general context): "The Spirit helps us in our weaknesses" (Romans 8:26).

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Paul also had a personal weakness – his "thorn in the flesh" – which persisted despite his earnest prayer for deliverance (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7–8). There is no indication of exactly what plagued him. It may have been an eye problem, ongoing criticism or one of a host of other possibilities. Amidst his suffering and his desire to be set free, he receives a wonderful word of promise and hope from Christ: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Remarkably, Paul then testifies, “When I am weak then I am strong” (v. 10). He ministered in Christ’s power, not his own. All Christ-followers need to learn the truth of what Paul testifies to and to follow his example, especially those of us in leadership positions.

I have in fact found that many of the “greats” in Christian ministry have a “thorn in the flesh”, which would weaken their ministries or cause them to resign and seek an easier lifestyle if they did not daily draw on the supernatural resources available through faith in God’s divine power. Of course, this does not mean that they find life easy. I walk closely with some of these wonderful servants of Christ who have ongoing heartaches and struggles which are generally not obvious to others. (How important it is to have at least one or two friends who listen carefully and do not come up with superficial responses, with whom we can unburden ourselves.)

No matter who we are and what are our weaknesses, we all need to take to heart the example of Paul and others in persistently looking to God’s limitless power to enable us to live a life that pleases and glorifies him. For God’s grace and power are sufficient, more than enough to meet all our needs and to empower us to accomplish all he has planned for us, even though we may serve with emotional or physical pain.



LIFE CAN BEGIN AGAIN!

My good friend and former colleague, Lester James, had to retire from a very successful pastoral ministry at a relatively early age, due to the onset of Parkinson's disease. Along with many others, I was mystified that such a faithful servant of Jesus Christ suffered with a debilitating condition which necessitated his withdrawal from a ministry that had blessed so many. Lester's faithful pastoral work, preaching, teaching and Christian role model were exemplary.

He asked me to preach at his retirement service. I struggled in seeking to discover what was God's intention for the message I should deliver on that sad occasion. I made pages of notes, mainly dealing with the problem of innocent suffering and the mystery of God's will. Then, one morning, I tore up all the pages I had written and wrote on the top of my note pad: "The Christian Life Is Meant to Be a Series of New Beginnings!" I had recalled a powerful message by that title delivered by Carmelo Terranova from South America at the Lausanne II Congress on World Evangelisation – a worldwide conference of Christian leaders held in Manila in 1989.

I took as my Scripture text for that message, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and

streams in the wasteland ... to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise" (Isaiah 43:19–20).

This was a great word of hope for the Jews when they were in exile. It prophesied a new beginning, of freedom and new life. After being separated from their beloved homeland and being in bondage to a foreign power, they would emerge as a renewed nation – chastened, humbled and with a new clarity of purpose and commitment.

And how true that prophetic word became in Lester James's life. As I write this, over twenty years following his retirement, his health has significantly deteriorated, but his spirit is as strong as ever! His doctor expected his demise long before this, but has said the secret is Lester's positive attitude. Almost every time we meet, Lester says, "It is grace upon grace!" His wonderful wife, Nancy, has been a constant channel of that divine grace.

Moreover, Lester has had a tremendous influence in the lives of his family and of many in his new local church, in the golf club where he was able to play for a number of years since his retirement, and in his community. It is always an inspiration to meet with him face to face or to talk by phone.

As I write, I too am facing a new, unwanted beginning. At times I struggle, for, like most, I would rather things remain as they have been for so long – much of which I took for granted.

At times I have not handled it well. Grace on my part has often been absent. But, after one particularly poor showing on my part, I repented and, in a following time with the Lord, I read Ezekiel's prophecy "to the Mountains in Israel" (ch. 36). One commentator at least understands this as speaking of participating in the divine nature so that the Lord's character and ways will be revealed to the world. The following words especially caught my attention and have given me encouragement, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will give you a clean heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Often it is through or in the midst of unwanted change that God spiritually renews his people.

As I have said a few times in this book, I am always inspired by a sunrise or sunset that sets the sky aglow. Life will inevitably involve both sunsets and sunrises. Sunsets announce a conclusion of daylight and oncoming darkness.

Sunrises, on the other hand, hail a new beginning – the dawn of a new day of light and often unexpected new possibilities. As followers of Christ, we are essentially “sunrise people”. We are people of the resurrection, inheriting all the power of Christ’s resurrection to apply to everyday situations, whether they be expected or unexpected, wanted or unwanted, short-term or ongoing.

In reflecting on God’s actions, Isaiah wrote, “You have done amazing things we did not expect” (Isaiah 64:3). While God’s nature is unchanging, there is a refreshing newness and unpredictability about what he does. Although all God’s actions are completely consistent with his unchanging nature – his “steadfast love”, his mercy, his holiness – what he does in his involvement in the ongoing drama of humanity is impossible to predict and often to understand, particularly with our limited time-space minds.

In his book, *When God Interrupts: Finding New Life through Unwanted Change*, M. Craig Barnes deals in a most helpful way with unwanted change. He says, “The human spirit can withstand almost any tragedy if at least we believe that God is in control. No interruption is greater than our God. He can bring hope into inexplicable loss. Each day we have to make a choice to continue. Our faith needs to be in the character and love of God. God does not give us explanations. He gives us himself. We need to never lose sight of Jesus and to keep getting closer to him.”⁹

Let us not fight with change, attempting to live in the past – to try in vain to turn back the clock. Instead, like Lester, let us choose to go forward with “that blessed hope” that Christ alone can give, experiencing “grace upon grace” and therefore “finding new life in unexpected change”.

9 *When God Interrupts: Finding New Life through Unwanted Change*, M. Craig Barnes, 1996, IVP.



OVERCOMING THE COSMIC OPPOSITION

Once, when I was on a flight from Adelaide to Sydney, a delicious meal was served. The man sitting next to me refused his meal, and I felt somewhat self-conscious as I ate while he abstained. Later, while we chatted, I casually enquired why he was not eating that day.

He replied, "I'm fasting." Thinking he was a disciplined follower of Christ, I complimented him and asked why. He replied, "I'm a Satanist, and all the members of my coven have agreed to fast and pray to Satan for a month for the demise of the clergy marriages in Adelaide."

I was shocked and speechless, never having encountered a similar situation. For the remainder of the trip, I sat in silence praying against such evil and claiming the Lord's protection over myself, my wife and family.

Later, I was disturbed to hear of similar activity in another state. One of the staff at a large church – whose senior pastor was once in my mentoring network – told me that, while in conversation with a young man who never attended church, he was asked what he did. After he replied, the young man said that he knew the name of the senior pastor and added, "My sister prays for him every day!"

“Really”, the staff person responded. The young man explained, “Yes, she is a Satanist, and her coven prays against him, his ministry, marriage and family.”

Rowland Croucher says, “The devil has a clear strategy to destroy us personally, our relationship to God, our marriages, our families, our ministry, our church, our community and our nation. There is never a moment when Satan lets up on us.”

I never cease to be amazed at the way the leaders with whom I work are continually attacked by Satan through criticism, misrepresentation, insensitivity, unrealistic demands and a range of subtle temptations. Many also suffer because of health problems personally and in their families. Discouragement in many forms is continually confronting them.

Many today would want to make light of the idea of Satan. Some say that Paul and other New Testament writers, and even Jesus, when referring to Satan were speaking in language and ideas of their culture. But to watch the news on TV or read newspapers or to reflect on life experiences of our own and of others, who could disagree that there is a powerful evil force which is at work in our world. We have all suffered by the impact of this evil force upon our own lives in a great variety of ways.

We cannot fully understand the Christian gospel if we do not accept that there is an evil force in this world totally opposed to all that is good, true and beautiful – opposed to God and all who seek to follow Jesus Christ. Being fully aware of this spiritual conflict is essential if we are going to make a success of our Christian life.

The Bible teaches that Satan is a malignant reality who is always hostile to God and God’s people. It tells of Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness and being a persistent threat thereafter (cf. Luke 4:1–13). The Bible also says that Satan looks to destroy God’s people (cf. 1 Peter 5:8), that he accuses (cf. Revelation 12:10), and that he deceives and seeks to lead astray (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:14). In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul warns that along with Satan there are invisible, evil cosmic spiritual forces which seek to disrupt and destroy our faith (cf. Ephesians 6:10–18). Those in close relationship with us are also under threat.

While the Bible shows Satan to be a strong force – and that evil is alive and well in our world – it never implies that there is a dualism in our world, i.e. two equal supernatural powers. God is all-powerful – no one is equal to God.

The Bible also gives us some reassuring words that I seek to live by: “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them” (Psalms 34:7). Many other psalms also reassure us that God is our refuge, our shield, our fortress, etc. (cf. Psalms 17:8; 18:2; 32:10; 37:40; 59:16; 91:11–12; 125:2; 144:2).

Some have suggested that we must claim such promises daily. I find that hard to agree with because of the big image of God that Scripture presents – i.e. a God who is almighty, all-knowing, ever-present and abounding in love. I believe and live by the fact that this great God is my loving heavenly Father.

I was fortunate to have caring, loving parents. As a child I never felt the need to each day plead with my father to look after me. I knew he would. I trusted his fatherly care and he never failed me. In the same way, I trust God to be watching over me in every situation. The above verses from psalms assure me of this. However, there are some very difficult or threatening circumstances which arise, for which I do quite specifically ask for God’s protection and help, as I did as a child with my father.

Bear in mind that Psalm 34:7 sets a condition for God’s protection – “fear” of God. This is a strong word which is not easy to define. It implies reverence, knowing our place in his awesome presence, and having a sense of our unworthiness before a holy God – something like Isaiah’s response to God’s majesty and holiness in chapter 6 of his prophecy.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul instructs Christ’s followers to do their part in combating powerful evil forces. He directs them to keep in place truth, righteousness, readiness, faith, salvation and the word of God (6:13–17). He also emphasises the key role of prayer (6:18). Like Paul, Peter also gives wise guidance in defeating our foe – speaking of the need to resist and to have faith in God’s grace, restoration and empowerment (5:9–11).

When Christ rose from the dead on that first Easter, the powers of evil that attacked him all through his life – climaxing their powerful assault in Gethsemane, his trial, torture and crucifixion – were finally defeated. Easter,

when we remember Calvary and the empty tomb, celebrates Christ's triumph over the power of evil, and over death.

When confronted with evil in all its forms, we can claim this victory of Jesus Christ. In this connection, we need to exercise our right of refusal to be dominated, to be defeated, to be discouraged and to be overwhelmed. We need to say "No!" to our greatest enemy and develop that attitude of continually trusting in the victory of Christ.

Let us join Paul when he says, "I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection..." (Philippians 3:10) and, "I know whom I have believed and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Timothy 1:12).

Paul's prayer for the young Ephesian church is mine for you, dear reader, as well as for myself. I pray:

That God ... will give you spiritual wisdom and the insight to know more of him. That you may receive the inner illumination of the Spirit which will make you realise how great is the hope to which he is calling you – the magnificent splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians and how tremendous is the power available to us who believe in Christ. That power is the divine energy which was demonstrated in Christ when he raised him from the dead and gave him the place of supreme honour in heaven – a place that is infinitely superior to any conceivable power or authority and which carried with it a name far beyond any name that could ever be used in this world or the world to come." (Ephesians 1:17–21, J B Phillips)

To overcome the cosmic opposition, we need to be aware of and open to experience daily this power present in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. John 12:31; 1 John 3:8; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14–15). This power of God changes death into life, hopelessness into hope, sorrow into joy, darkness into light, fear into faith – and overcomes the powers of evil.



THERE IS HOPE!

For many years Eastern Europe was under rigid Communist control, and many Christians suffered terribly for their faith. At one point during this period I teamed up with a prominent leader from the USA – who exercised a risky undercover ministry – to conduct a few conferences to equip and encourage Christian leaders from those countries. We were accompanied by his daughter on one of these ventures. While we were travelling, she asked us, “Is there any hope for Christian people in these cruel regimes?” Unrehearsed, we both simultaneously replied, “For Christians there is always hope!”

Here we were declaring our faith in the socio-political dimension of Christian hope – hope in the midst of the challenge of ideologies and religious belief systems that are contrary to Christianity. We made our statement in spite of the cries of oppressed groups, many of whom must have felt their situation was beyond hope.

Within a year or so the Communist bloc disintegrated and there emerged increased degrees of freedom for the church to live out its faith and witness.

The training we were providing for Christian leaders, who themselves were liberated from fear about their own future, helped equip them to pastor those with whom they worked, in the midst of their anxieties and struggles. We

believed that attitudes of hope would emerge, which would help people in their private lives and through them impact their societies – producing justice, Christ-like love and caring, responsible communities.

Because of God’s work through Jesus Christ during his time on earth and God’s ever-present grace, true followers of Christ can find promise and hope regarding their own personal future. We look forward to the resurrection of God’s people and to his kingdom coming in all its fullness. There is a joyous expectancy about eternity, when every sign of sin will be no more and we will become like Christ.

For this reason, I find great fulfilment in conducting the thanksgiving services marking the passing into eternity of one who trusted Christ. A few days before beginning to write this chapter, I had the privilege of conducting and preaching at two such events. Both were for friends who were devout believers in Christ and, in entirely different ways, had deeply impacted many lives for good. Those who were nearest and dearest grieved deeply for their precious loved one. But they grieved with hope. These services were, in a very real sense, closure events but, because of the living relationship with God of those who had departed, they also signified new beginnings – “spring times” – ushering my departed friends into a new fullness of life. These were celebrations of the grace of God, of faith and hope. How inspired Paul was to write, “Death has been swallowed up in victory ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:54, 57).

For over a decade I strongly supported my closest friend and soul mate, Robert J Hillman. He experienced a series of health problems, finally being diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph glands. He battled with dozens of tumours throughout his whole system despite years of treatment. He had the strongest personal faith I have ever encountered. Many who strongly believed in God’s power to miraculously heal uplifted him regularly in prayer.

Robert wrote an intensely practical booklet, *There Is Hope*, for those who are ill and those who care for them. (Unfortunately it is no longer in print.) Here is a brief extract from the opening chapter:

No one can live fully without hope. When all hope is lost a person fades away and dies, commits suicide or simply exists instead of really living.

We all need two kinds of hope. The first is hope for the present, hope for our lives in the here and now. It is made up of a sense of purpose, motivation, a reason for living – a sense that life is worthwhile. The second is hope for the future, hope that takes us confidently into the next life.

In my own struggle to cope with non-curable cancer and in ministering to many seriously ill people, especially cancer patients, I have become convinced of the enormous importance of both kinds of hope. I am also aware of the damaging effects of false hope. To be helpful, hope must be based on reality, not on wishful thinking.

My cancer specialist has emphasised, out of long experience, the importance of having a positive attitude. The patient who gives up often quickly gives in to the disease. Such a person can easily be overcome by feelings of hopelessness and depression, especially when the doctors say that there is no hope of cure. *No hope of cure can easily become emotionally the same as no hope at all.*¹⁰

When Robert was diagnosed with non-curable cancer, he was told he would live for only a short period. However, he lived for over a decade, exercising a remarkable ministry during that time. His medical team said it was because of his positive attitude. Robert never hesitated to say his attitude arose from the hope his living relationship with God gave him for each day and for the future.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah is often spoken of as a prophet of gloom and doom. But to me he is a prophet of unyielding hope. He inspires me more than any of the other prophets, important though each one's message is. To me, Jeremiah is the great prophet of hope.

For 40 years Jeremiah faithfully fulfilled his ministry in spite of appalling opposition and lack of obvious results. God entrusted him to warn his nation of the judgment, misery, suffering and desolation awaiting them because of their ongoing disobedience. But again and again Jeremiah breaks the darkness of his messages with rays of hope, if only his nation were to repent and turn to God's ways. He is an amazing example of perseverance, utter faithfulness and unwavering dedication.

What made Jeremiah a prophet of hope was essentially his clear understanding of the nature of God. He had a robust idea of God as one who hates sin and deals severely with it, because it ruins and distorts his plans and purposes for the world. However, Jeremiah also knew that God is holy love, that he loves all sinners and longs to forgive and renew those who repent and turn to him. Jeremiah preached that, because God is merciful, life can begin again! Underlying his message was hope for each day and hope for the future – no matter what the circumstances of life – for those who had faith in a merciful God and sought to discover and be obedient to his plans and purposes.

Here are just some of Jeremiah’s words that generate hope for God’s people still today, for both the present and the future, no matter what we may be currently experiencing:

- “LORD, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in times of distress ...” (16:19)
- ““For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future ... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”” (29:11,13)
- “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.” (31:3)
- “Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you”. (32:17)

Let Bob Hillman’s words once again encourage us:

Christians await God’s future, whether tomorrow or later, not with fear and trembling, because we know that Christ – the One who has come, has ministered to poor sinners and has given his life to rescue the lost – is also the one who will be present in that future. It is the God whom Jesus addressed as Abba, Father, who will transform the world, as promised, and be glorified in the new creation. So it is unambiguously in hope that we wait.¹¹

Yes! For Christians *there is always hope!*

11 *There Is Hope*, Robert J Hillman, ANZEA Publishers, 1992.



EPILOGUE: MY PRECIOUS JEWEL

“A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.
Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.
She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.”
(Proverbs 31:10–12)

I am sure that most of the experiences I have recorded in this book would never have occurred if I had not had June as my wife. My life and ministry would have been much, much poorer if I had not married June fifty years ago.

The following is my brief tribute to this woman of God.

June’s biblical understanding, spiritual perception, discernment of God’s intention, prayerful support and willingness to release me to be away for long periods (often in distant places) has impacted my ministry more than anyone

will ever know. In my all-too-frequent absences, she was a mentor, pastor, spiritual guide, teacher and model of true Christian living to our family.

June is a woman of integrity. She is always open and thoroughly honest. She never wears masks. She can always be relied upon, trusted and believed.

I have never heard her unfairly criticise anyone. She does not damage people's reputations by cruel censure or fault finding. She does not hold grudges and is ready to forgive. She is not cynical and never gossips.

June is remarkably consistent. She is never moody or temperamental. Her faith never wavers. She has an inner strength that is unchanging.

June loves me and each one of our family deeply. Her love is clearly evident in her compassion, her care and concern, her kindness, her patience, her sympathy and her goodness.

I grieve that the chronic fatigue and, more recently, other disabilities restrict her.

For fifty years June has been the keystone of my ministry and of our family.

“Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
'Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.'
Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”
(Proverbs 31:28–30)



A GUIDE TO ENGAGING WITH THE CHAPTERS

The following agenda will be helpful to being open to God “getting your attention” after reading a chapter. It can be used *personally, with a friend, in a small group or in a mentoring relationship.*

a. Connecting with Your Own Story

Reflect on the following:

- What similar experiences have you had? What did these experiences mean to you?
- What new insights did you gain from this chapter?
- What encouraged and/or challenged you?

b. Connecting with the Biblical Content

Almost all of the chapters include one or more verses of Scripture. The following questions will help you relate this biblical dimension to your own life and assist you to apply it. (When used in a small group, the leader may need to do some preparation regarding the meaning of the Scripture passages, using a reliable commentary.)

Reflect on the following:

- What is the main message for you from the Scripture content of this chapter?
- What would happen if you took this seriously? (Write down one or two ideas which come to mind.)
 - To what persons would you relate differently? (Write down their names.)
 - In what situations would you act differently? (Be specific.)

c. Connecting with Others

Share with *a friend* or *your small group* as much as you feel able of the above work.

(The listeners should aim at concentrating with loving sensitivity on what the speaker is saying, and avoid imposing their own ideas. They can help the person develop his/her thinking by asking: “How would you apply that to this situation?” or “What would you say to this idea?”)

In *a mentoring relationship* with a more mature person, a mentoree could bring his/her work to be discussed in a session. Mentors should also be prepared to share openly anything they feel appropriate from their own reflection. In *a peer mentoring relationship*, the sharing should be done in an equal manner.

d. Connecting with God

Respond in prayer to what God draws to your attention.

On your own, make some notes (i.e. keep a simple journal) of the things you will pray about. Confession, thanksgiving, petition (asking God for things) and intercession (praying for those who came to mind) will most likely all have a place.

Ask *anyone you confided in* to pray for you regarding the specific matters you shared.

In a small group situation, break into pairs for prayer or go around the group with each praying for the person on his/her left based on brief notes made while that person was sharing.



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