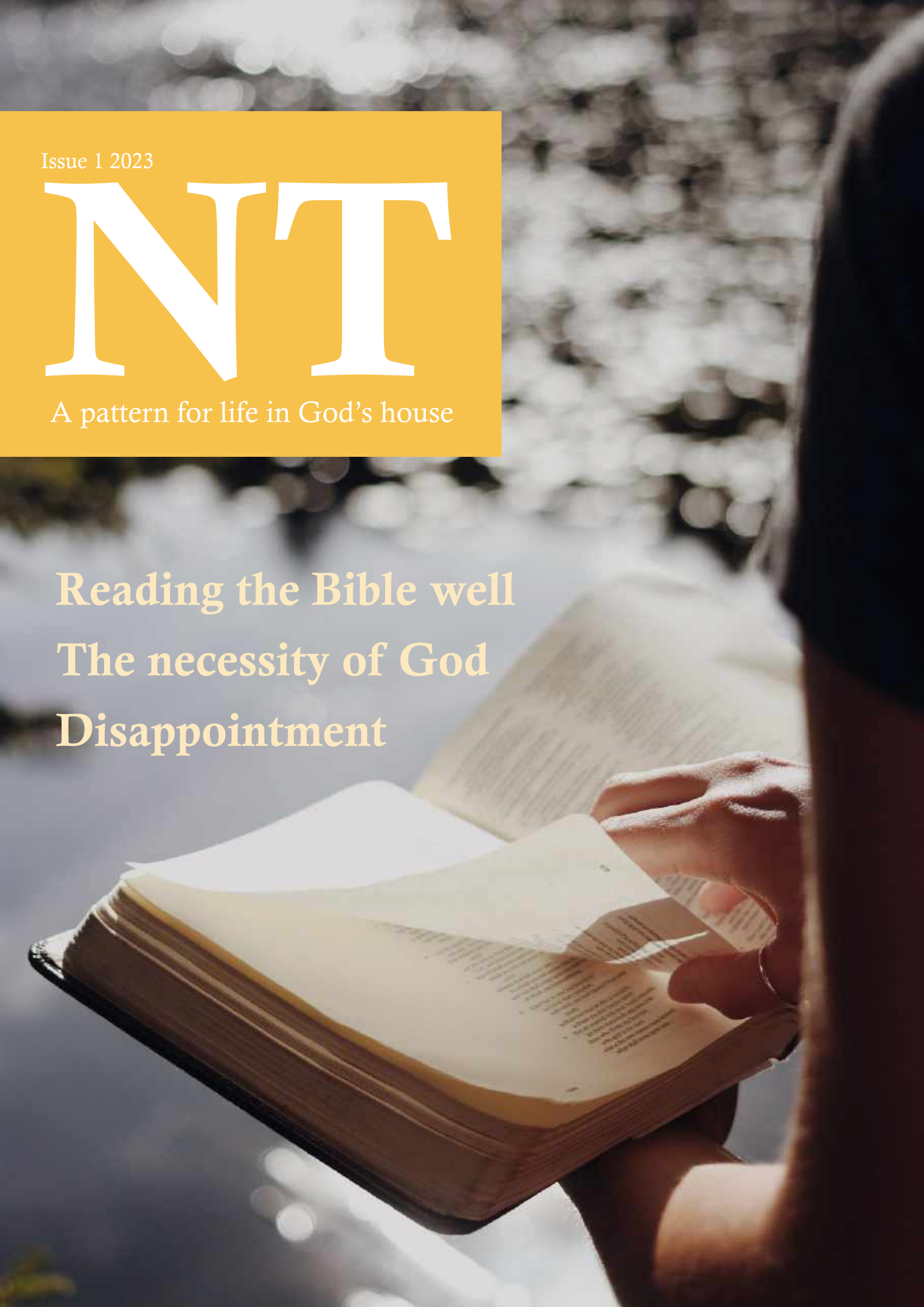
Issue 1 2023

NT

A pattern for life in God's house



Reading the Bible well

The necessity of God

Disappointment

From the Editors' desk

The first publication of this magazine by the Churches of God in 1888 was most aptly named Needed Truth. Now almost a century and a half later we are still in need of truth – the truth. Well might Pilate, nearly 2000 years ago, ask the question, "What is truth?" This was in response to Jesus' good confession, *"You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."*[1]

In these days of the internet and social media, fake news and alternative facts are common phenomena and for many it is difficult to distinguish what is true from what is not. We get the truth and the answers to all the important questions of life in the Holy Scriptures, the word of truth.[2] We need the Spirit of truth[3] to help us to prayerfully read those well and to be discerning in our application of them to disciple life.

So, in this new series of Needed Truth, we are getting back to the very basics of who and what we believe in and what it is that God is looking for in our lives as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that *without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him*.

We will be reminded that there is only one living and true God, of the great need of humanity and how that need has been provided for by the amazing grace of God in the One who is the way, the truth and the life.[4]

As you read these articles, and most importantly the Scriptures that are referred to, please ask yourselves two important questions:

1. What can I learn? and

2. What should I then do?

Lindsay

References:
(1) John 18:37-38
(2) Ps. 119:43
(3) John 16:13
(4) John 14:6

Bible quotations from NIV 2011

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Archived issues and new subscriptions available at
💻 https://churchesofgod.info/publications/nt-archive/

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NT Needed Truth

is published quarterly by the Churches of God in the Fellowship of the Son of God (www.ChurchesofGod.info) and may be obtained from

Hayes Press
@ sales@hayespress.org
💻 www.hayespress.org
✉ The Barn, Flaxlands, Royal Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire, SN4 8DY UK
Needed Truth

Telling right from wrong

Jonathan Beimers, Brantford, Canada

> *Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*[1]

We all need discernment.

In his second letter, Peter tells his readers that he knows his time is nearly over:

> *I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon ... And I will make every effort so that after my departure, you may be able at any time to recall these things.*[2]

It's Peter's final Bible letter, the last thing many will hear from him. He's not going to waste time with trivial things and chapter 2 shows why we need discernment.

> *... false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, ... bringing upon themselves swift destruction.*[3]

There were false prophets in the Old Testament, at the time Peter wrote this and there will be even more false prophets in the 'latter days'. Next Peter describes what the false teachers will bring and how they will bring it.

They will bring destructive heresies (v.1); destructive ways (v.2 NKJV); and deceptive words (v.3 NKJV).

These false teachers will bring bad theology, have bad behaviour and have a bad or unbiblical message. Notice Peter uses the word 'destructive' or 'destruction' three times in those three verses. It's the Greek word meaning destruction or waste, thus causing un-usefulness or death.

And Peter tells us how false teachers will bring it: they will bring it in secretly (v.1); deceitfully (v.3); enticingly (v.14) and alluringly (v.18).

Their bad message will sound so enticing in hopes of drawing listeners in. It will sound so good that it even sounds like they are offering us freedom. *They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.*[4] A lot of things sound great, sound enticing and alluring, sound like they are offering freedom, but actually they offer a road leading to destruction.

The only thing that can truly make us free is abiding in God's word: no one else and nothing else. Jesus said,

> *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*[5]

Notice 2 Peter 2:1 says that destructive heresies come in secretly; the only way they can come in secretly is if we

are not paying attention. Therefore we must be aware – be able to discern – so that we are not led astray.

To discern means to be able to tell the difference between right and wrong, between truth and error or, as Spurgeon put it, 'telling the difference between right and almost right'. There are lots of things that sound almost right in this world, but we need discernment to tell what is right and what is wrong; what is right and what is almost right.

So, how do we discern?

> ***Test everything**; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.*[6]
>
> *Do not believe every spirit, but **test the spirits** to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*[7]
>
> *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that **by testing you may discern** what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*[8]
>
> *It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, **with knowledge and all discernment**, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.*[9]

And we read in Acts 17:10-11 about the Bereans who were praised because they tested everything they heard from Paul against the Scriptures.

Our goal needs to be the same as Paul's: *I want to know Christ*[10] (i.e. I want an intimate relationship with Christ). We know life is not a playground; it's a battleground. We need to be able to discern right from wrong, truth from error and right from almost right.

References: (1) Heb. 5:14 (2) 2 Pet. 1:13-15 (3) 2 Pet. 2:1 (4) 2 Pet. 2:19 (5) John 8:31-32 (6) 1 Thes. 5:21-22 (7) 1 John 4:1 (8) Rom. 12:2 (9) Phil 1:9-10 (10) Phil. 3:10 NIV

Bible quotations from ESV unless stated otherwise

What is the fear of the Lord?

David Webster, Liverpool, England

As Christian believers who have been justified by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, is it right that we should fear God? In one sense, of course, the answer must be 'no'. John assures us that

> *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*[1]

However, in another sense, the answer is 'yes'! The psalmist wrote, *Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in obedience to him.*[2] Furthermore we are told in an early report about the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria that *living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers*.[3]

That tension between two opposite ideas is captured in the record of the Israelites at Sinai where they were not to be afraid but were, certainly, to fear their God:

> *Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.'* [4]

Fear is a state of alarm, anxiety and concern about possible danger or pain. But it can also mean respect, awe and reverence. As we have seen, the Bible mentions both types of fear. The first type is negative and will drag us down. The other is a reverential awe of our great God, acknowledging his power, glory and all other attributes.

The fear of the Lord is a positive thing that will keep us from doing wrong. In fact, it is said of those who are condemned for their foolish behaviour that, *"There is no fear of God before their eyes."*[5] and, according to Proverbs, *To fear the LORD is to hate evil.*[6]

The Christian writer, AW Tozer, put it like this:

> 'The greatness of God rouses fear within us, but His goodness encourages us not to be afraid of Him. To fear and not be afraid - that is the paradox of faith.'[7]

Samuel, one of the great spokesmen for God, put the fear of the Lord at the top of good and right things to pursue:

> *I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.*[8]

So this reverential fear for God will cause us to faithfully seek out the right ways and to meditate on what God has done for us.

The fear of the Lord brings with it humility, repentance and a sense of trembling.[9] But why? When we recognise the greatness of our creator God we realise how small we really are. When we think of God's holiness we are struck by our own sinfulness and when we read and meditate on what God tells us in the Bible we ought to have a sense of trembling. One writer put it like this:

> 'It would be insane to think we can just stroll up to the Creator of the universe and have a cavalier spirit. We are blind if we think we can do that without trembling.'[10]

Furthermore, considering the Lord as the one before whom we will stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ brings a sobering sense of fear – that we should order our lives in such a way as to be confident as we *make it our goal to please him.*[11]

So the Bible teaches us that the fear of the Lord is our duty;[12] it brings a right understanding of our relationship to God.[13] It encourages us to turn away from unrighteous behaviour and it brings wisdom.[14] It teaches us the reason we should be good employees[15] and why we should serve God faithfully.[16] Some of these themes will be looked at in the coming months, God willing.

References: (1) 1 John 4:18 (2) Ps. 128:1 (3) Acts 9:31 (4) Ex. 20:20 (5) Rom. 3:18, quoting Ps. 36:1 (6) Prov. 8:13 (7) Tozer, AW, 1996, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, OM Publishing (8) 1 Sam. 12:23b-24 (9) See Is. 66:2 (10) John Piper, https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-for-the-christian-to-fear-god (11) 2 Cor. 5:9 in the context of verses 1-11 (12) See Eccles. 12:13 (13) Luke 12:4-5 (14) Prov. 9:10 (15) Col. 3:22 (16) Josh. 24:14

Bible quotations from the NIV (2011)

The choice of grace

Phil Allen, Cardiff, Wales

The word ‘grace’ as used in a Christian context may be defined as favour shown by God to people who don’t deserve any favour at all. It means that God loves, forgives and saves us, not because of who we are or what we do, but because of the work of Christ. It is initiated entirely by God and we are saved in spite of ourselves. Human works don’t come into it at all.[1]

During the days of the apostle Paul, Israel as a nation had generally rejected its Messiah, and a substantial number of Jews had embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. God had not cast away His people entirely and those He foreknew had been elected, or chosen, by God’s grace to form a remnant people. This remnant was preserved solely because it was in the purposes of God and would be used to His glory, just as another remnant had been used in the time of Elijah.[2]

Today, there is another type of remnant, made up of those serving God faithfully from among both Jews and Gentiles. The qualification to be part of this remnant is by means of the new birth,[3] by adherence to the Apostles’ teachings, and to the commandments of the Lord Jesus Christ.[4] It is not by race but by grace that we are called and saved.

By the sovereign grace of God, every believer has been chosen in Christ and provided with a wealth of spiritual blessings.[5] These include the gift of the Holy Spirit,[6] and also spiritual gifts.[7] However, we probably know from our own experience that not every believer is constantly filled with the joy of the Lord or rejoices in God’s grace at all times.

Timothy was a young man who had come to know the Lord Jesus as his saviour, had received the Holy Spirit and was devoted to serving the Lord.[8] However, it seems that Timothy reached a certain point in his life where he was in need of much encouragement. Paul writes to him to remind him of the gift that God had given to him, of God’s power and tells him not to be ashamed of the gospel. Given that Paul often mentions the concepts of bravery and courage to Timothy, this might have been a spiritual weakness that Paul was helping him to address.

Paul reminds Timothy that he has been saved and called to live a holy life, not because of any merit of his own, but solely because it was in God’s purpose and because of God’s grace. This grace was given to Timothy in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time. This is an amazing concept that applies not only to Timothy but to every believer.

At salvation every believer receives God’s grace that not only forgives, but is also able to equip and embolden, so enabling him or her to live a holy life, holding fast to sound teaching.[9] Sometimes, like Timothy, we need to be encouraged to stir up the gift of God which is in us. This has the idea of stirring up embers to make a fire burn more brightly. It is not achieved through mere human effort, but by diligent cooperation with the Holy Spirit who fills and enables us to become certain of our calling and gracious choosing.[10] Through grace, God will provide the resources a person needs for every situation.[11]

By exercising godly discipline, we produce the fruit of God’s nature in our lives.[12] God gives us His power when we are weak, His love to deal with those who seem unlovable and His discipline for the times we lack self-control.

We keep the gift ablaze by not letting our spiritual selves grow cold or, worse, lukewarm. We fan the flames of faith by continuing to keep in step with the Spirit, following the Holy Spirit’s direction. We stir up the gift by not quenching or neglecting the Spirit of God, but by allowing Him to thrive in us like a living fire.[13]

We may have periods in life when we feel despondent or discouraged. At such times it is good to reflect on the grace of God which enabled Paul to write, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* and *my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus*.[14]

References: (1) Eph. 2:8-9 (2) Rom. 11:1-6 (3) John 3 (4) Acts 2:41-42 (5) Eph. 1:3-7 (6) Acts 2:38 (7) 1 Cor. 12:8-10 (8) Acts 16:1-5 (9) 2 Tim. 1:6-14 (10) 2 Pet. 1:5-8 (11) Acts 1:8 (12) Gal. 5:22-25 (13) 1 Tim. 4:14 (14) Phil. 4:13,19

Bible quotations from NKJV

Reading the Bible well

Introduction

Brian Johnston, Leigh, England

Suppose we encounter the simple sentence, 'Jim was green.' The first time we come across it is when someone is regaling in story form the events of an evening when various people spent time playing a board game using different coloured counters. We next run up against it in a piece of creative writing utilising intense images to describe in word pictures the reactions of individuals to associates who became much wealthier than them. For a third time, we read the same words in a column summing up a debate between participants who espoused different attitudes towards the environment.

Interestingly, our reading skills relatively easily decode the same simple sentence in three very different ways by accounting for the fact that the first instance of storytelling employed a narrative writing style; whereas the second was written with a poetic flourish; and the last was found in the style of a reported discourse in which opponents traded debatable points.

This may sound heretical, but the Bible should be read in one sense as we read any other book. It is not just another book, of course. Of all the books on our planet it's uniquely a revelation from God. However, the master communicator employed the same three universal human writing styles to engage our minds with eternal truths. Someone has assigned each chapter of the Bible to these writing styles and found that the Bible is 44% narrative; 33% poetry; and 23% discourse. It's good to be alert to each of these styles within the Bible.

We may be more familiar with other ways of dividing up the Bible: such as the authoritative characterization of the Old Testament as the Law; Prophets; and Writings.[1] It's also common to hear of Bible literary genres such as the Apocalyptic (Revelation; and parts of Daniel; featuring graphic, even grotesque symbolism). As far as reading skills go, it's our awareness of how the Bible is divided into narrative, poetic and discourse writing styles that's likely to help us most in making sense of what we are reading.

If we read any book designed to hone our Bible interpretation skills, we soon pick up methods that emphasise observing words in their context; interpreting what it means for us sympathetically with what it meant for its initial audience (those to whom the words were originally addressed); thinking through what they made of them; and so applying God's intended message by adjusting our actions or attitudes. These are surely helpful disciplines.

First, we need to see what's actually there in the text and not what's supplied by our imagination. Second, we need to understand what we see as it was understood at the time of writing. Third, we are then faced with identifying the shared truth it teaches and so to the task of responding as intended. Some authors use different terms, such as: observation; interpretation; and application. It's valuable to stress the key point of 'shared truth' and how arriving at this takes different skills depending on whether we are reading narrative, poetry or discourse.

The obvious challenge we face in studying the Bible is that we live in a very different culture from the first Bible audience. This creates a sense of distance. On the other hand, God remains the same and we share the same corrupt human nature with the Bible's characters. The thrill of Bible study becomes essentially to identify the intended truth God was sharing with a wider audience (i.e. ourselves!) by means of David or Paul or whomever. The shared truth may not be exactly the same as for them, but for us it's the principle lying behind it.

It's this idea of shared truth that's key to successful Bible study. If we don't pay sufficient attention to this, we run the real risk of 'proof-texting'. By that we mean lifting and twisting a Bible statement to superficially support our own opinion (for example, a Prosperity Gospeller may abuse Ecclesiastes 10:19 that – out of the context of the book – seems to suggest that actually 'money is the answer to everything')! Again, we may 'over-spiritualise' a text. That is, we view the plain text as a type of spiritual code. Now, place names in the Bible do have associations; there's some symbolic force in certain things (such as snake and lion) and some numbers (e.g. 7, 12, 40) appear to serve as imagery. However, figures of speech and Bible types (or 'prophetic symbols') apart, we are not intended to look for hidden meanings by reading between the lines of the text. Nor are we meant to allow our own 'nice thoughts' to control the text. I once heard the parable of the Good Samaritan treated as an allegory, with the inn spoken of as a church of God! Don't differences between believers often come down to flawed Bible study?

So far, we've identified the three styles of Biblical material: narrative, poetry, and discourse. We've also majored on the chief goal of Bible study and stated that it's to arrive at finding the eternal truth being intentionally shared with us. We now need to put these two things together: for each style there is a specific approach to get at the truths being shared.

Narratives teach truth in a different way from say, discourse. Narrative has distinguishing features: its setting; its characters; and a developing plot. We do well to pay attention to these. Places can be stigmatised. The timing may be in a time of famine. Characters may be painted as foolish, lame, etc. Plots often feature conflict and resolution. From Abraham, we learn the outworking of God's purposes demands faith on our part,[2] but there's also a warning that we can complicate things by our own independent actions (Lot, Hagar, and lies about Sarah). Many narratives feature polygamy. Does this mean that God endorsed it? No, it would be hard to find an example where it ended well. Narratives don't tell us, they show us. We may ask: 'Does the author interpret for us or pass any form of judgement? Depending on whether traits or actions by the characters are approved or disapproved, we learn to follow or avoid similar examples. Should there be no explicit judgement stated, we can go to clearer texts where the same action is commanded for or against elsewhere. Should there even be no guidance elsewhere, then we take it simply as what happened, not what should have happened. An example of the last category can be found in Judges chapter 6. This is narrative, with no indication as to whether Gideon's action with the fleece was right or wrong. Since this is not commanded elsewhere, we should not repeat his action.

There are different skills for extracting meaning from poetry compared with narrative. More than 50% of *the LORD*'s quoted speech in the Hebrew Bible is poetry, with one third of the entire Bible written in the style of poetry (and it spans genres such as story[3] and prophecy[4]). With poetry, we *feel* as well as understand. It's more memorable. There's little to compare in preaching with the power of a well-turned phrase. We meet figures, images and intense, emotional language. The embedded poetry of Judges 5:26-27 is significant as it tells us graphically with heavy repetition of how Jael killed Sisera. But it's far from boring, despite the repetition. With Hebrew poetry, we should be switched on to the rhyming of ideas (not words); as well as observing the overall structure – one to look out for is when ideas are presented in mirror image form. Our eye is then guided to the focal central line as its axis of symmetry.

In discourse, material is arranged in paragraphs. A paragraph is a unit of writing organised around a single thought. A logical sequence of ideas is presented from paragraph to paragraph, the flow most usually being connected by words such as: yet; therefore; for this reason. In discourse, logically related ideas argue towards a conclusion.

Let's take the example of Leviticus 19:19 concerning the prohibition on having two kinds of materials together. The writing style here is discourse (as is most of the Law and the Epistles). This is a specific command to a limited audience. There's nothing to compare with this elsewhere and no reason is given here. However, we may deduce a general principle as the shared truth: namely, God does not like any blurring of distinctive things or confusion of things He separates. With discourse, as in preaching, we should find an introduction, body and conclusion. For example, in Philippians, Euodia and Syntyche are to think the same as Paul, even as all the church is to think the same as Christ. This will ensure they put others first. Humility like this provides for unity in the church and greater effectiveness in the Gospel.

Notes: Articles to follow will expand on dealing with each of the three writing styles.

Although there will be points to challenge, the book 'Read the Bible for a Change' by Ray Lubeck is suggested as being worth a critical, discerning read. It has influenced the material above.

References: (1) see Luke 24:44 (2) Gen. 15:6 (3) 1 Sam. 2 (4) Joel

Humanity's need

Geoff Hydon, Mount Forest, Canada

This series intends to encourage us all to joyfully reflect on the vital biblical truths that are shared in common with all those who are born-again Christians. The approach is not to attempt in-depth theological arguments, but rather to give the generally accepted conclusions on key matters, relying principally on straightforward Bible passages. In this opening article, we consider what Christians would generally agree are humanity's most basic needs before God.

The majority of people today find a need to believe in a supernatural being and align themselves with one of the major religions. It is reported that Christianity tops that list, followed by Islam, then Hinduism and Buddhism. A minority of people are atheists.[1] And all Christians surely echo the psalmist's words that it is foolish to say there is no God.[2] We must immediately acknowledge that 'Christianity' is a broadly defined term. As in Judaism and Islam, all Christians believe there is only one God,[3] who created everything.[4] For many, including eminent scientists,[5] this is a more understandable and believable explanation than attributing what we can now observe to a mere succession of favourable chance events; for current purposes we joyfully record that born-again Christians attribute the origins of the universe and ourselves, to the Trinity, an all-wise God.[6] Likewise, to say why God did this could profitably fill a book! The Bible gives a very concise reason in Colossians 1:16-20, in which the deity of Jesus is pivotal.

If we read the context for those references in Colossians and Psalm 14 it will bring us to another major aspect of shared Christian belief: that despite a perfect origin humanity has rebelled against its Maker and God has justly condemned the human race because of that.[7] The reality of good and evil is undeniable, a logically defensible truth. If we think it through, we will find there must be a conscious requirement for good human behaviour defined not just by a selfish gene's personal advantage; first-responders evidence that daily by risking their own lives to save others. Christians assert that a holy God is the source of this criterion of required good. This is clearly a differentiating factor between humans and animals. And all Bible-believing Christians agree that this divinely instilled conscience evidences the Bible statement that since our first parent, Adam, sadly we too are all born sinners.[8] The initial and total failure of humanity in this respect is well described as 'The Fall'. Unlike the law of gravity which shows even inanimate objects are compelled to fall, the law of sin[9] says that people left to themselves inevitably fall morally, even

though not compelled to do so. Jesus left no doubt that this means we are all justly condemned for our choices, and eternal fire is real.[10] However, born-again Christians joyfully believe that is not the end of the story. Though as sinners we could not restore our relationship with a holy God, He has enabled us to be saved from His judgment because the Son of God has paid for our redemption. Acceptance of that amazing gift is so life-changing, it is biblically described as being born again,[11] by which we become children of God not just sons of Adam.

So, we are happy – along with many millions of other people who classify themselves (correctly) as Christians – to conclude here the greatest need of humanity can be met. We must indeed all rely on accurate information to find this solution, but because we believe that God evidently created us to have an ability to receive communication, we may be assured our Maker has that ability too, and has used it to communicate with us. That includes importantly the inspired writings, conveying His messages to us in an enduring way so that we need not rely on myths and fables.[12] And the chief point of His message is that because of the excellencies of Jesus and His sacrifice for us, we may find safety from the punishment our condemnation deserves. What a message!

References:
(1) https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/religion-by-country (using UN data) (2) Ps. 14:1 (3) Deut. 6:4; Eph. 4:5,6; 1 Cor. 8:6 (4) Gen. 1:1; Is. 42:5; John 1:1-2 (5) Pew USA research 2009: https://rb.gy/ssyx3h (6) Gen. 1:1; Ps. 104:24 (7) Rom. 11:32-33 (8) Rom. 5:12 (9) Rom. 7:18-24 (10) John 3:18; Luke 16:23; Rev. 20:10,15 (11) 1 Pet. 1:18-23 (12) 2 Pet. 1:16

Guarding our hearts and minds

Geralde Mag-usara, Uraya, Philippines

Freedom from anything that contaminates, being faultless or unadulterated – that's what purity means. This is impossible for anyone to attain, since we were born with a sinful nature. But if we respond to His words, God can help us.

Our heart pumps blood more than 100,000 times a day to keep us alive. Our brains are also connected with our hearts and perhaps physically control everything, especially our thoughts and emotions. Medics remind us to keep a healthy lifestyle to prevent these two important organs from disease. We also need to keep our spiritual hearts and minds healthy from spiritual diseases to stay on track with God. This is necessary for our salvation, our communion and our devotion to God.

Salvation

In one sense, our hearts are made pure at the time of salvation.[1] Jewish religious leaders during the time of our Lord on earth, some perhaps who were present for Jesus' sermon on the Mount, considered themselves pure because they maintained an outward cleanliness by following traditions based on the Law. They missed the teaching of Jeremiah 17:9 that says that our *"heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick"*. Jesus confirmed this when He said, *"from within, out of the hearts of people, come the evil thoughts"*.[2] Only trusting in Christ's sacrificial work on the cross can cleanse our hearts from the defilements of sin.[3]

Communion

The Lord Jesus said: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."*[4] To continue in communion with God, Christians must maintain their purity. *Come close to God and He will come close to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*[5] The double-minded person has a heart divided between God and the world. Purity of heart is to will only one thing: total allegiance to God: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."*[6] As we draw nearer to God, our hands are further cleansed and our hearts more deeply purified. Double-minded literally means two-souled or two-spirited, wishy-washy, uncommitted, divided, doubting, wavering, uncertain and especially a division of our interest between the world and God. We live in difficult days where people are *lovers of self*[7] and perhaps we encounter it particularly through the world wide web and social media. People expose their bodies to stimulate sexual pleasure and if we don't guard our minds, we may fall into the trap of the Devil's snares. Our God is *not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness*.[8] We need to set our minds on the things above, not on earth.[9]

Devotion

The opposite of purity, the willing of a single thing, is impurity or double-heartedness, and is the same as idolatry: *Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*.[10]

Christians are still 'in the world', but we should bear in mind that we are no longer *of the world*.[11] Satan pollutes the mind of unbelievers, distorting the truth.[12] We can conquer using weapons that *are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for … destroying arguments*.[13] Our knowledge of God's Word is the key to purifying our mind from the world.[14] Christians shouldn't align their minds to whatever is trending within society. Self-promotion, pride and materialism keep us from being devoted to God. Paul teaches us to *not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*.[15] Above all, let us imitate the 'mindset' of Christ Jesus.[16]

We are commanded to remember the Lord each Lord's day.[17] When we do that, surely we are entering God's presence in the holy place in heaven.[18] We need a sincere heart upon entering.[19] Failure to do so is serious. God will not hear us if we regard wickedness in our hearts.[20] King David experienced the pain of this and it led him to beg God to create in him a clean heart.[21] God will help us when we constantly examine and cleanse ourselves from all that defiles.[22]

The Lord is coming very soon. *And everyone who has this hope set on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure*.[23]

References: (1) Acts 15:9 (2) Mark 7:21 (3) 1 John 1:7 (4) Mat. 5:8 (5) Jas. 4:8 (6) Mat. 22:37 ESV (7) 2 Tim. 3:2 (8) Ps. 5:4 (9) Col. 3:2 (10) Jas. 4:4 RSV (11) John 15:19 (12) 2 Cor. 4:4 (13) 2 Cor. 10:4-5 (14) Ps. 119:9 (15) Rom. 12:2 (16) Phil. 2:5-8 (17) Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2 (18) Heb. 10:19-20 (19) Heb. 10:22 (20) Ps. 66:18 (21) Ps. 51:10; see Ps. 15 (22) 1 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 7:1 (23) 1 John 3:3

Bible quotations from NASB20 unless otherwise stated

The necessity of God

David Woods, Manchester, England

For many people, there's no need for God.

Estimates suggest that 15-20% of the world's population now holds an atheistic worldview, rejecting the idea of the supernatural and relying solely on naturalism to explain the universe and life within it. YouGov statistics from November 2020 revealed that 41% of the UK population now align themselves with the statement, 'I don't believe in a god or a higher spiritual power'.[1]

Additionally, the Buddhist religion, practised by an estimated 535 million people worldwide, does not require faith or belief in a god and does not include the concept of a god. While it accepts the supernatural, such as reincarnated figures who can help or hinder people on the path towards enlightenment, the existence of a supreme deity is irrelevant.

As Christians, how might we interact with some of those who say, "There is no God"?

One way is to consider the necessity of God: that life and the universe demand, rather than deny, the reality of 'the God who is there', as Francis Schaeffer put it. It's how we interpret the data and the evidence that makes all the difference.

Think about the reality of our existence for a moment. Our English word 'exist' comes from the Latin *existo* which means 'to stand forth from, to come forth'. In our understanding of the world, all that exists relies on something before it for that existence; everything we know has come out of something before it! Of necessity, then, for anything to exist, there must be something before that existence that is, itself, not contingent on anything else! That would point to an eternal immaterial God, such as the one revealed to us in the Bible.

Those who do not believe in God struggle to provide a coherent explanation for existence. Someone who tries to argue that energy existed before matter, and was the cause of creation, has no way of explaining how that energy came to be. As astronomer and planetary physicist Prof. Robert Jastrow said, 'The Universe flashed into being, and we cannot find out what caused that to happen.'[2] Yet, naturalist[3] scientists continue to invent hypothetical objects, that have never been observed, to maintain their theories and worldview!

If you're still with me, let's think about the necessity of God this way:

Those who say there's no God must have a coherent explanation for

1. How everything came from nothing;

2. How order came from chaos;

3. How life has arrived from non-life;

4. How minds have developed from mindless matter.

How did everything come from nothing?

We've already considered the atheist's difficulty in explaining this without recourse to the continual postulation of new, untested and unverifiable theories.

Christians turn to the Bible and read, among other texts, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*[4] and *by faith we understand that the world has been created by the word of God so that what is seen has not been made out of things that are visible.*[5] This truly is a matter of faith, but it's not 'blind faith' as many suggest. Rather, it's a reasonable faith based on the evidence of our very existence. We believe that God is spirit[6] and that this God *calls into being things that do not exist*.[7] This immaterial God revealed his name as *I AM* [8] – the eternally self-existent one. He has always been, and always will be. He is 'the uncaused cause', and he is the reason why there is everything rather than nothing.

How did order come from chaos?

Scientists are agreed that the universe had a beginning; it is not eternal. 'The Big Bang' is the primary creation theory taught in our schools and colleges and is what most people would say when asked how the universe came to be. The Big Bang was one huge, cosmic explosion, we're told. Yet we know that explosions, even 'controlled' ones, do not result in finely tuned order; the opposite is true! That said, most people seem happy to accept that time and chance following the Big Bang has produced the delicately balanced order we see all around us.

We are fascinated by the discoveries that reveal the amazing intricacies of life and the universe; the person who says there is no God puts this purely down to blind chance. We know from experience that this is highly improbable! The Bible reveals an intellectual God of power, intention and order. A reading of Genesis chapters 1 and 2 will show us God's direct involvement in the creation of everything, and Hebrews 1:3 speaks of His continuing involvement as He sustains what He has made. He's the great Designer! The amazing precision and interdependency of creation point to a God infinitely greater in power and knowledge than we are.

How did life arrive from non-life?

I remember a conversation with my company boss just before leaving the firm to go out and engage in full-time Christian work. He tried to convince me that I was making a very great mistake and that there was no God to believe in, never mind serve. As we chatted around the subject he eventually, with some frustration, told me that life came from the planet Mars via an asteroid that hit the earth millions of years ago; there was no convincing him otherwise. What he was revealing was a very great weakness in the naturalistic worldview he had put his faith in – the claim that life developed from non-life. My boss recognised that natural processes on earth could not generate life from inanimate objects, so a spark of life was required from somewhere else.

The early chapters of Genesis describe God creating inanimate matter followed by living organisms. Eternally alive and all-powerful, He had what was necessary to create life in all its forms. But there's more: Christians believe that God has the power to raise the dead to life. Looking again at Romans 4:17, the earlier part of the verse says, *God, who gives life to the dead…* Christians have always believed that God resurrected Jesus; He who had died was given life. That's a core belief for genuine believers – that God can make what is without life have life, and He proved it in the person of Jesus. Christians believe in one resurrection that, without doubt, demonstrates that God creates life!

How did minds develop from mindless matter?

Our consciousness is a mysterious reality, isn't it? Philosophers and cognitive scientists agree. The British philosopher Colin McGinn, who said that the human mind is incapable of solving the problem of consciousness, wrote, 'we know that brains are the *de facto* causal basis of consciousness, but we have, it seems, no understanding whatsoever of how this can be so. It strikes us as miraculous… Somehow, we feel, the water of the physical brain is turned into the wine of consciousness, but we draw a total blank on the nature of this conversion…We want to take the magic out of the link between consciousness and the brain.' There's a real desire to remove the miraculous, or 'the magic'. But there's no way of doing so! Consciousness can't be explained or understood by a naturalistic worldview that refuses to accept the supernatural.

Going back to the Bible again, we read that God made humanity in His image.[10] This means that humans were created intentionally to possess some of the attributes of God, such as consciousness, knowledge, and moral awareness. God is the source of 'knowing' and the giver of the consciousness we possess, the very consciousness that makes us aware of God's necessity.

Paul wrote to the Church of God in Rome that people in his day were suppressing the truth about God *in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*[11] It's the same today as it was back then. People continue to suppress the truth about God in their refusal to accept that the evidence within them, and all around them, most logically points to an eternal immaterial God of infinite power and capability. As Paul continues, *they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened.*[12]

This very refusal to accept the evidence betrays the sinfulness of the human heart. Only God can overturn such futility and darkness in someone and we praise Him that He does. It is our task to lovingly, and winsomely, speak of our convictions with simplicity, taking people to the necessity of God for the creation and then to the necessity of God for salvation: *"there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among mankind by which we must be saved."*[13]

References: (1) see https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/articles-reports/2020/12/29/how-religious-are-british-people (2) Message from Professor Robert Jastrow, LeaderU.com, http://www.leaderu.com/truth/1truth18b.html 2002 (3) naturalism: the worldview that says Nature is all there is, without need for recourse to the supernatural. (4) Gen. 1:1 (5) Heb. 11:3 (6) John 4:24 (7) Rom. 4:17 (8) Ex. 3:14 (9) McGinn, C, *Can we solve the mind-body problem?* Mind, Vol.98, July 1989 https://www.jstor.org/stable/2254848 (10) see Gen. 1:26-27 (11) Rom. 1:18-20 (12) Rom. 1:21 (13) Acts 4:12 Bible quotations from NASB20

Annexation alert

Martin Jones, Hamilton, Canada

A quick quiz question for you: what was the last territory to be added to the former British Empire? Well, on 18 September 1955 at precisely 10:16 am, Rockall – an uninhabitable granite outcrop almost 200 miles off Scotland's west coast – was declared officially annexed by the British Crown when three soldiers were deposited on the 100-foot long island by a Royal Navy helicopter to hoist the Union Flag and stake the UK's claim. The reason for this strange act? The UK was testing its first guided nuclear weapon and was concerned that the Soviet Union would use Rockall to spy on it. Eighty-four year old Scot, J. Abrach Mackay protested: "My old father … claimed that island for the Clan of Mackay in 1846 and I now demand that the Admiralty hand it back. It's no' theirs." The British Government ignored him and treats Rockall as its territory to this day.

'Annexation' is the forcible acquisition of one state's territory by another via military occupation followed by a formal declaration. There have been much more significant annexations than Rockall in the last century, including Germany's annexation of Austria (1938) and Israel annexing the Golan Heights (1981). More recently, Russia annexed Crimea and is now doing the same with other parts of the Ukraine. There are various reasons why it occurs – perhaps a historical claim to the land, the desire for access to natural or economic resources or part of a geo-political strategy.

Whatever the human machinations, it's good to realise that divine sovereignty is always at work as nations and empires rise and fall over the centuries. That's why God could reveal to Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the image represented the coming, transient world powers.[1] God, says Paul, *made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place*.[2]

When we zoom in from the macro-view we also see personal boundaries being encroached upon and territory lost as a result. Some neighbours have taken each other to court to resolve who owns a few disputed inches of their backyards! That might seem frivolous to us, but the issue was important enough for God to warn the people of Israel *cursed is he who moves his neighbor's boundary mark*.[3] While that perhaps reflects the modern maxim 'cheats never prosper', it's exceptionally strong language for what seems a minor civil matter. Perhaps it alerted the landowner to the need for vigilance; barely imperceptible concessions of a foot or two could eventually accumulate into a major land-grab and a loss of their allotted and hard-won inheritance.

We, too, need to be vigilant as Christians because Satan desires to encroach on territory that rightly belongs to the Lord – us! The Lord has staked His indisputable claim to us; not by planting a flag but by setting *his seal of ownership on us*[4] – a legally effective term – and He has *put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit*.[4]

The same Spirit wants to fully occupy and bring forth fruitfulness in us, but that's exactly what Satan wants to foil. That's why Paul warned the Ephesians: *do not give the devil a foothold*.[5] A 'foothold' – a piece of territory measured in inches and yet that's all Satan needs. Cunningly, even though he can't move the boundary mark – the 'red line' that denotes holy living – himself, he'll tempt us to do it ourselves little by little, whether in our homes, in our place of education or work, and even in our churches. We can be sure that whatever ground he gains, it will produce only weeds. Peter asked Ananias a disturbing question: *"Why has Satan filled your heart?"*[6] He'd given Satan a foothold in a place the Holy Spirit should have been filling. The deadly consequences got the attention of the early church – and they should get ours!

References: (1) Dan. 2 (2) Acts 17:26 ESV, see also Deut. 32:8. (For any fearing mass watery extinction via global warming, this sovereignty is equally true of the rest of creation – see Proverbs 8:29; Psalm 104:9.) (3) Deut. 27:17 NASB95, see also Deut. 19:14 (4) 2 Cor. 1:22 NIV (5) Eph. 4:27 NIV (6) Acts 5:3

Bible quotations from NASB20 unless stated otherwise

God's guiding hand

An interview with Hilda, Mount Forest, Canada

In this interview (recorded in October 2022), we asked Hilda (or Sony as she is known among friends) to provide some background and then explanation for her decisions.

So, please tell us a bit about your start in life.

I was born and brought up in Chennai, which is on India's east coast looking out to the Bay of Bengal. Chennai used to be called Madras. It is a vast, busy, noisy city, with people coming and going 24 hours a day. By God's grace, all my immediate family are Christians. My father was greatly helped by a USA-based missionary who spent much time in our area, serving in the Churches of Christ. In due time, my father became a pastor in the Church of Christ in Chennai, and I grew up with my two sisters under the influence of my godly parents who instructed me from the Bible.

Were you aware that there was a Church of God in Chennai while you were living there?

No, I felt no need to venture out to explore other Christian churches. I was satisfied in my personal study and felt fully occupied doing what the Bible said I should where I was. I found my husband (Nivas, see picture) within that church, and felt the Lord blessing me in my service.

How did you come across the Churches of God then?

After much prayerful thought, my husband and I decided we should see if we could emigrate to Canada. We had both successfully gained undergraduate degrees and had good jobs, but prospects seemed better there. With family support, I signed up for graduate studies at the Algoma University campus in the Greater Toronto Area. I had relatives who were already living and working in Canada, and they had moved to a new home in Mount Forest, where they had room to accommodate me when I first arrived.

On the 12th of July, 2021, I landed in Canada. It was a Monday, but Sunday was fast approaching and I didn't have a church to go to. I prayed to God to lead me to the right church. I started looking around the town. I came across the Church of God at Mount Forest on Google Maps. After a thorough read of each section of their website,[1] on July 25 2021, I decided to pay a visit. I was warmly received by a brother whose wide smile burst right through the "Jesus loves you" Covid-protection mask! That day, my heart was full when I left after observing the worship service. I could see God's hand in bringing me to the right church – one that was a spiritual building for the glory of God[2] – an answer to my prayers. *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*.[3]

The house church meetings, and the absence of a huge physical building crowned with a cross sign, didn't hold me back as I was well aware that the church is comprised of 'living stones'[4] and the reality of Christ's presence can be observed wherever we are gathered together in His Name.

Tell us more!

I began attending all the church meetings regularly, and after a friendly interview I was able, as a baptized believer, to join the church and participate fully. I initially had some questions regarding the differences in belief between the Churches of Christ and the Church of God, but having examined the truth of Scripture carefully on each point I am convinced that I am in the right place, serving alongside other disciples in the Church of God in Mount Forest. The church has cared for me, nurtured me, helped me to grow to be a better Christian in many ways, and has opened my mind to comprehend the Word of God better. Opportunities for service and fellowship have been opened for me, including an enjoyable stint working at Mount Forest Camp and getting to know people from other churches of God in Ontario.

Getting through this past year, especially with my husband's visa delays and my father's health going downhill, would've been strenuous if not for the prayers and spiritual and mental support I received from this church.

By God's grace, and in answer to the repeated prayer requests of the church, my husband has been given a work permit and, God willing, our plans are to serve together in Toronto, where now that I have completed my studies we are confident the Lord will bring good work opportunities.

References: (1) www.mountforestchurch.ca (2) 1 Cor. 3:9 (3) Rom 8:28 (4) 1 Pet. 2:4-5

Praying like Moses

Lindsay Woods, Belfast, N.Ireland

The two most vital and equally important daily disciplines in our lives as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ are: reading, studying and meditating on the Word of God; and prayer. The twelve apostles gave their undivided attention to these as the number of disciples was increasing early on in the church in Jerusalem.[1] If you are like me, you may often find praying more difficult than reading until real times of trouble or crisis come.

In this series we will be looking at the prayers of some of God's faithful servants so that we might learn and be encouraged in how to pray. First, we will consider the prayer of Moses in its context as recorded in Exodus 32:1-14 (11-13) and Deuteronomy 9:7-21. It would be a good idea to take the time to read these Bible passages.

As always, the context and circumstance are so important. This certainly was a crisis, first for God's people and indeed for their leader Moses. The Israelites, not long delivered from Egypt by the powerful arm of Yahweh, and having declared that they would be obedient to all that His covenant required of them,[2] grew impatient as they waited for Moses to return from his meeting with God on Mount Sinai to receive the commandments. It's almost unbelievable that they should make a golden calf to worship as their deliverer from Egypt. God's justifiable and fierce anger was such that He told Moses to leave Him alone so that He might destroy the people and make from Moses himself a great nation. Moses' response was that of a true mediator who, with no thought for personal glory, pleaded for his people. It's not until just before the people were to enter the promised land, and Moses was rehearsing to them all that had happened in the wilderness, that he revealed what his pleading really involved – 40 days and nights fasting and prostrating himself before God. His prayer is powerful and so effective for a number of reasons. Moses had come to know his God so intimately – His ways and His character – through face-to-face experiences.[3] In his intercession for the people, Moses pleaded God's great works towards His people; His Name, reputation and honour in the sight of the Egyptians; His inviolable covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and for His mercy instead of judgment.[4] He brought to God His word, His promises, His faithfulness and His character, knowing that the answer to his appeal would be perfectly just and in full agreement with all that God is and does. As Moses was beseeching God, seeking His favour, the expressive Hebrew employs the idiom that he was softening God's angry face against the people. Isn't that so intimate and yet so profound? And God listened to him and relented. We pause to rejoice today in the work of our great mediator,[5] advocate[6] and intercessor[7] who, in our prayers to the Father in His name, brings to His children mercy, grace, forgiveness, peace[8] and the confirmation of His very great and precious promises.[9]

There's also the thought in this incident that Moses was being tested and God really wanted His servant to plead for His people. Would Moses give up on his own people and take up the offer of personal exaltation? Moses passed the test and as a true shepherd, leader and mediator he stepped into the breach before God to turn away His wrath. God knew the heart of His servant Moses, but notwithstanding He gave him the opportunity to make the right decision for the name and honour of his God. We too will be brought into testing times of deep trouble in our lives, but will we know our God so well that we can be bold in our prayers, pleading for His guidance, mercy, grace[10] and peace in every circumstance and trial?[11]

Wouldn't we like to be able to pray like Moses? If our prayers bring to God His word, are focused on His honour and glory and are more concerned about the welfare and blessing of God's people than our own selfish desires, then we can be confident that we are praying in the Spirit[12] and in the will of God.[13] James reminds us in his epistle that the prayer of faith, and of a righteous person, is most effective.[14]

We too can, with true reverential fear, 'stroke the face of God' as we pray, make petition and supplicate Him with thanksgiving through our great high priest and mediator, the man Christ Jesus.

References: (1) Acts 6:2-4 (2) Ex. 24:3 (3) Ex. 33:11,18-23; 34:5-7,33-35; Num. 12:8; Deut. 34:10 (4) Ex. 33:19; 34:6-7 (5) 1 Tim. 2:5-6 (6) 1 John 2:1 (7) Rom. 8:34 (8) John 16:33 (9) 2 Pet. 1:3-4 (10) Heb. 4:15-16 (11) Phil. 4:6-7 (12) Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 6:17-18; Jude 20 (13) 1 John 5:14-15 (14) James 1:6-7; 5:16b

Bible quotations from NIV 2011

Disappointment

Ross Osborne, Glasgow, Scotland

Disappointment is a feeling we have all experienced. We can be disappointed when circumstances don't turn out the way we had hoped, we receive bad news or friends let us down. Disappointment is defined as 'sadness or displeasure caused by the non-fulfilment of one's hopes or expectations'.[1] While we can bring to mind examples from our personal or work lives, we must admit disappointments occur in our Christian experience too – from low turnouts of people at outreach events that we spend time organizing, to prayers that seem to go unanswered, to Christian friends we've been taught by or served alongside losing their faith.

In 1 Samuel 30, David returns to Israel to find not only has his then hometown of Ziklag been ransacked, but the women and children, including his two wives have been abducted. To compound his sorrow, his own men blame him for this and are planning to stone him! David's response to this series of profound disappointments was that he *strengthened himself in the LORD*.[2] When all others seemed to be against him, he knew he could rely on the faithfulness and strength of his unchanging God.

Disappointments can be very hurtful, leaving us wondering what to do next. David gives us an example of what it means to walk with God in disappointment: he leans on God and seeks His help.

Elijah, after a great triumph where he had seen the immense power of God, was also hit by a sudden disappointment. He had boldly confronted 450 prophets of the false god Baal – whom many Israelites were now worshipping – with a challenge. This challenge played out in full view of the people. He told the prophets of Baal, *"You call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God."*[3] The outcome was that the *fire of the LORD*[4] spectacularly consumed Elijah's offering. At this moment Elijah might have expected national revival to follow, where Israel would turn back to God. Instead, he received death threats which left him terrified and running for his life.[5]

Times of spiritual triumph may be followed by opposition or setbacks. We may find ourselves feeling discouraged when things don't go the way we imagined, but results will come in God's timing.

Many disappointments come from broken promises. There can be various reasons why we break our promises to each other. We may have had good intentions, but didn't properly consider what the promise involved. We might have been unable to keep our promise due to changing circumstances that are beyond our control. Worst of all, we may have made the promise without intending to actually keep it.

With God's promises, however, these things don't apply. Nothing is impossible for Him;[6] He is always able to fulfil His commitments to us. He knows the future, meaning no unforeseen circumstances will prevent Him from making good what He says. Most importantly, God is by nature absolutely faithful – He cannot lie.[7] We can rest on His faithfulness and have cast-iron certainty that what God promises, He does!

Perhaps the most glorious fulfilment of God's promises came out of what seemed the greatest ever disappointment. Following the death of the Lord Jesus, the hopes of His disciples were shattered. One of the people on the road to Emmaus put it this way: *"Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people…our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."*[8] However, they were soon to discover He had risen from the dead, as He had repeatedly promised![9] This confirmed Him as the 'Christ of God',[10] and any expectations they had of Him before were now overwhelmingly surpassed. Jesus was and is the one who can never disappoint.

When we feel disappointed, it's worth reminding ourselves that our God will never disappoint us. He will do *immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine*.[11]

References: (1) Oxford Languages Dictionary (2) 1 Sam. 30:6 (3) 1 Kings 18:24 (4) 1 Kings 18:38 (5) 1 Kings 19:2-3 (6) Mat. 19:26 (7) Heb. 6:18 (8) Luke 24:19-21 (9) Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34 (10) Luke 9:20 (11) Eph. 3:20 NIV

Bible quotations from ESV, unless otherwise stated.

Labour that's not in vain

Geralde Mag-usara, Uraya, Philippines

We value prayer support for the Lord's work here in the Philippines through crusades, conferences and door-to-door evangelism.

As our climate seems to change globally, the weather pattern here is not as it was before. But praise God, since we have the wonderful gift of a Gospel Van, there's no hindrance as far as holding crusades – whatever the weather. Using the Gospel Van, we canvass interested people during the day, inviting them for the evening's event in our local church hall. Sometimes we ask each saint to cooperate in the work by bringing one or two friends. It's been particularly effective in Nabunturan and Kaligutan. At that crusade in Kaligutan about 40 persons attended. We were glad to see fourteen souls accept the Saviour.

A couple of months ago we conducted four crusades in Davao. Most attendees were already believers, but a few we led to the Lord. During later follow-up we led some more to the Saviour, among whom was Norma Casundo, a previously devoted Catholic, who suffers with severe asthma. When we got to know her, she was wishing for God to extend her life until her 70th birthday (October 2022). She'd already prepared for her death in terms of financing her funeral. And then she added that she'd asked God for one thing – that he'd bring her to heaven when she died. She asked this as she didn't know where she would spend eternity. We told her that she can be 100% certain in advance: that she could be fully assured about her salvation through God's Word. As soon as she heard that, she grabbed her paper and ball-pen to take careful note of all the verses we shared. We sensed the Spirit working in her heart. It's rare to see a devoted Catholic here reading the Bible. But she's different. She carefully listened to us and immediately wrote down John 3:16; 5:24 and 1 John 5:12-13. And then she responded with urgency; repenting and believing the good news.[1] As we guided her through the sinner's prayer, her tears genuinely overflowed. After that, we saw joy in her face. Until now Norma is unwell physically, but she keeps sharing God's words to her grandchildren. And praise God, five of them have been baptized and numbered in Uraya (Davao).

Our last conference was held in Montevista and there were more than 100 people (including visitors not in the church). The purposes of this kind of gathering are twofold: fellowship with fellow saints in other churches of God and gospel witness to visitors. This results in us visiting them door-to-door.

For the last quarter, there were 71 people who applied for fellowship. 54 of them were numbered in churches of God such as Bullucan, Malabog, Uraya, Montevista, Lingig, Tagum, Montevista, and Nabunturan. In Bullucan, there were eight newly baptized and added to the church. We are thankful most of all for God's answer to the church in Nabunturan. Three months ago, during our district elders meeting, we were considering the future of the Church of God in Nabunturan. Satan had successively attacked the church by means of quarrels among saints and those remaining were no longer capable of functioning as a church. We began intensive in-reach and outreach programs for five weeks. God blessed the initiatives with His help. Inactive saints were revived. We also prayed for the results of our intensive outreach and, praise God, the church grew both in faith and number. From its recent low point of six, the church is now comprised of 30 saints. We also thank God for providing us with our dear brother Rolando Cariaga and his family (assisting from the neighbouring church at Montevista) for their labour in caring for this church. God is using them so much for the growth of this church.

Nabunturan

Although not many, three men were numbered in Lingig recently (from our outreach in San Jose). They are Qurino Angyas, Ricky Laguiman, and Dino Angyas. They are relatives of our dear late Bayani Asang. It was last July 25 when Bayani brought us here to preach the good news among his relatives. But a couple of hours after we arrived in this place, he passed away. Although we lost our brother, we gained three souls. His labour was not in vain in the Lord.

Paul said, *Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*[2]

References: (1) Mark 1:15 (2) 1 Cor. 15:58

Bible quotations from NIV 2011