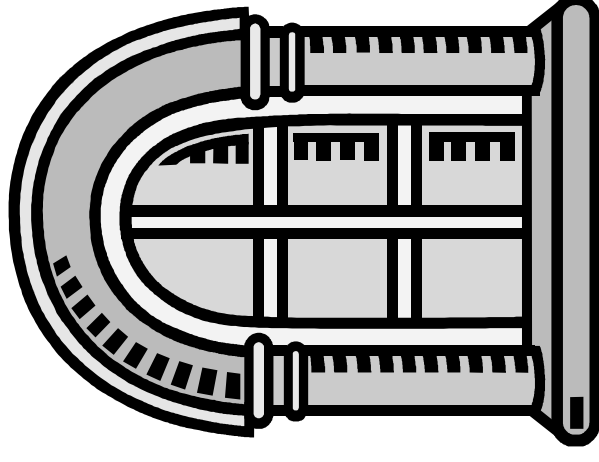


Windows to Faith



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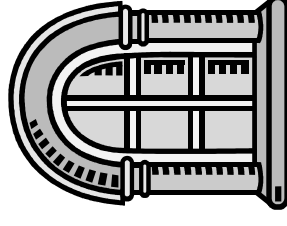
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Windows to Faith

by Brian Johnston



was able to say to the brothers who had mistreated him: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." (Genesis 50:20 NKJ)

History would show that the sufferings of Joseph's life were for God's glory. But what about Joseph personally? As we read to the end of his life-story we get unmistakable glimpses of how he matured as a person as a result of all he went through.

Amazingly when Jesus Christ was on earth - in fact, when he hung on the cross - he too experienced the reality of God his Father hiding himself. It was then he called out. *And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* (Matthew 27:46)

Here the hiding of God had to do with our sin which Jesus was bearing in our place while dying on the cross. Again Isaiah - who seems to say more about God hiding himself than most - once said to the Israelites:

But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. (Isaiah 59:2)

If we want to find God and be close to him, we'll need to turn from our

sins. We'll need to:

*Seek the LORD while He may be found,
call upon Him while He is near*
(Isaiah 55:6).

The Bible promise is we will find him when we seek for him with all our heart.

God is waiting for us to do this, he wants to be found by us. But he won't force himself on anyone. Even to his disciples Jesus said in John chapter 14:

"He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

At this one of the disciples picked up on the fact that this implied that in a sense the Lord would be hidden from others, and so he *said to Him, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?"*

Jesus answered and said to him, *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him"* (John 14:21-23). That's how much the God who hides really wants to be found by us - he wants to have an abiding place in our hearts and lives!

1. What's so amazing about grace?

'What's so Amazing about Grace?' is the title of a book by Philip Yancey. The question came to mind as I was returning home to the United Kingdom after a tour of duty in the Far East. In a short while I'd met lots of people who genuinely seemed ready to appreciate God's grace as I spoke to them about it from the Bible. Their response to it was so enthusiastic. At times they'd even give the Word of God a standing ovation!

But I knew as I returned to the West that the very same teaching would more likely bring no response other than blank indifference. Why doesn't the Good News of the New Testament sweep people in the West off their feet in the same way? Why, in some parts of the world, are people more likely to leave a church service unmoved by the same message which elsewhere moves the congregation to tears? Part of the answer - a very large part perhaps - has to do with certain opinions which seem more ingrained in western society than in - shall we say - developing countries. What might these opinions be? Well, I think the first is the opinion that morally speaking, we're OK.

How is it that this expresses itself? One way is through our high opinion of modern achievements. It's easy to move on from that to a high opinion of ourselves. In any case material wealth is often viewed as more important than moral character. By that I mean people think nothing of bending the truth a little for the sake of financial advantage. What's a little compromise of our integrity if it means getting a jump start on the competition?

But even if that should be thought of as a vice, surely - we think - our small virtues will compensate even for great vices. In the political arena, we're often encouraged to downplay someone's 'indiscretions' in their private life because their skill in public office is an overriding compensation.

And if such a person - or anyone else - should happen to suffer at all from a bad conscience, he or she would likely be advised to seek therapy or counselling to deal with these self-destructive negative thoughts. The basic mindset is that at heart we imagine we're thoroughly decent - and, tragically, we assume God shares this complacency!

Well, in the light of all that, the first biblical reality we need to register – before we can appreciate just how amazing grace is – is the truth that morally speaking, we are, in fact, NOT OK. The Bible presents us with a picture of reality that's really the virtual opposite of the general thinking we've illustrated in much of western society.

It tells us that humanity is a creature fallen from God's image, for it says, *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23). More than that, we're rebels against God's rule, for *we have ... rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments* (Daniel 9:5). This makes us to be guilty and unclean in God's sight, as again the Bible points out: *all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment* (Isaiah 64:6).

This leads us to be fit only for God's condemnation, since *the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23).

Something else which seems to be more and more accepted these days in our society is the belief that wrong should be tolerated as far as possible. Parents hesitate to correct children, and teachers may not punish pupils. The public puts up with vandalism and all manner of antisocial behaviour. It seems willingness to tolerate evil is regarded as a virtue, and it's taken for granted that God feels the same way. But nothing, in fact, could be

further from the truth. Wrong will NOT be tolerated. Retribution is a feature of God's character: *"shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"* is the question asked in the Bible (Genesis 18:25). God is not true to himself unless he punishes sin. God himself declares that *"He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished"* (Exodus 34:7). Wrongdoers have no natural hope of anything from God except retributive judgement.

Our society is also deceived into thinking that we can do anything. Probably nothing did more to promote this than Dale Carnegie's blockbuster book 'How to win friends and influence people'. It was all about how to put the other person in a position where he cannot decently say, "No". From this, optimism spills over to the belief that we can even repair our relationship with God. Just as the pagans long ago believed they could put the gods in a position of not being able to say no by offering them gifts and sacrifices; nowadays we think we can do the same by our church-going and good deeds. But the sober reality is simply that we can NOT do anything to make ourselves acceptable to God. Regaining God's favour is something that's beyond our power, for the Bible declares *by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified* in God's sight (Galatians 2:16).

The last idea that we get easily fooled into thinking is that God is

God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Romans 1:20)

So God's invisible qualities can be discerned in 'natural' things like new life and mother love - not just in the supernatural realm. We can discover God in the 'ordinary happenings' of life.

It's often when we're enduring hardship or suffering that we think of God as hiding from us. Long ago, God's people, Israel, complained *"My way is hidden from the LORD, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God"* (Isaiah 40:27). It's true they spoke of their way being hidden from God rather than God hiding himself from them; but to them the result was the same. They felt abandoned - as though God just didn't care.

Even when we're tempted to feel the same, the Bible reassures us that nothing could be further from the truth. God does indeed care, and the Bible informs us that suffering was not part of his original design for this world he made for us. It was an 'intruder' let into this world by human rebellion. Despite that, God has joined us in the experience of suffering particularly through the life and death of Jesus, his Son. He has shown that he cares even to that extent. In our case too, God uses the suffering which is allowed to come into our experience to shape his

ultimate purposes in us, while at the same time promising an end to it for those who find him.

We've all heard someone take it upon themselves to criticize God for not intervening to stop some suffering. But in the Bible there's one attribute of God which is elevated to stand for his whole Being. It's the apostle Peter who makes mention of it when he says:

'the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water' (1 Peter 3:20).

God is never in a hurry. To us this at times makes him appear as a hidden God with a hidden agenda. To take a Bible example we could turn to the story of Joseph. The refrain we keep reading concerning Joseph is that *'the Lord was with Joseph'*. Despite that assurance, Joseph had no burning bush experience nor mountain top experience like Moses - instead he seemed to suffer more than his fair share of injustice and human tragedy. We have the advantage of being able to read to the end of his story. We discover that God was indeed with Joseph but - for a while at least - he was with him in a hidden way.

Instead of being spared suffering, and in place of any visible signs of God's presence with him, Joseph was granted amazing insight. He sensed how his personal struggles served a greater national purpose. Finally, he

11. Hide 'n' seek

I know a little boy who some time ago used to like to play 'hide and seek' with his parents. If they hadn't noticed his absence or if they were taking too long to find him, a little voice would inform them that he was "hiding behind chair" or wherever it was that he happened to be. Obviously, his interest in hiding lay in being found! It was really the excitement of being discovered that he enjoyed!

I was reminded of that when I came across this quote from someone called Meister Eckhart. He says: 'God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away'.

The Bible advises us to, *Seek the LORD while He may be found* (Isaiah 55:6). God is a God who wants to be found, he waits to be found by us. So I want to explore with you what it means to have a God who plays hide and seek with us. For not only are we invited to seek him, but the same Bible prophet exclaims:

Truly you are a God who hides himself,

O God and Saviour (Isaiah 45:15).

Philosophers have wrestled with the hiddenness of God. The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber said:

'The Bible knows of God hiding His face, of times when the contact

between heaven and earth seems to be interrupted. God seems to withdraw Himself utterly from the earth and no longer to participate in its existence. The space of history is then full of noise, but as it were, empty of divine breath.'

But why should God do this? Why should God be a God who hides himself? In his relationships with humans God puts a premium on faith. But faith can only be exercised in circumstances that allow for doubt - circumstances such as God's hidden-ness. Think of the experience of the Psalmist in Psalm 42. He wrote at that time:

They continually say to me, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:3). His faith in God was being challenged. And the psalm is him seeking after his God.

I recently took my children to visit some Natural History Museum exhibits. One exhibit was interesting. It comprised side-by-side scenes of winter and summer foliage. It took a second look before we spotted the camouflaged animals. In a similar way perhaps we can lose sight of God among the natural wonders of the world around us. We'd be less likely to make this mistake if we took the apostle Paul's words to heart when he says in Romans chapter 1:

For since the creation of the world

bound to help us. The ancient pagans thought of each god they believed in as depending on the service of its worshippers. They needed each other and so were bound to help each other. In the modern age, one French freethinker was reported to say on his deathbed: "God will forgive - because it's his job to do so." Today many others seem to have the impression that God will be obliged to love us in the final analysis. But God is NOT bound to help us, for the God of the Bible does not depend on his human creatures for his well-being - the Bible says: "*nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything*" (Acts 17:25). So our only claim upon God is for justice - which for us means certain condemnation as we've seen. God does not owe it to anyone to stop justice from taking its course. He's not obliged to pity or pardon anyone, as the Bible says: "*He did not spare their soul from death*" (Psalm 78:50).

The story is told of Napoleon inspecting his troops. A woman whose son was sentenced to be severely punished, cried out to the great general: "Please show mercy to my son!" Napoleon turned and replied: "He does not deserve it!" The defendant's mother, realizing full well she was in a desperate situation, shot straight back: "But I'm not asking for justice, I'm begging you for mercy". I believe Napoleon took the point. To show mercy means not doing as the person deserves.

Our situation too is desperate. Let's think about all we've said so far: contrary to what's generally accepted in the West - morally speaking, we're NOT OK; wrong will NOT be tolerated by God; we can NOT do anything to make ourselves acceptable to God; and God is NOT bound to help us in the final analysis. The people in the East seem to accept this more readily than we do. They know a lot more about desperate situations. We need to catch up with them. We need to come to terms with these 4 biblical realities, and stop fooling ourselves. When we do, we realize that we need to adopt before God the same position the defendant's mother took in her appeal to Napoleon. We need to throw ourselves upon God's mercy, just like the man in one of the stories Jesus told who went into the temple and prayed: "*God, be merciful to me, the sinner*" (Luke 18). Jesus was making the point that that's the kind of prayer God listens to - while rejecting our own complacent presumption. From the idea of mercy we move a step further to the idea of grace. If mercy is not getting what we do deserve - like being spared judgement; then grace is getting what we don't deserve - like being favoured with a free gift. It can only be by the mercy of God that we don't receive the punishment we deserve; and it's by the grace of God that we can receive instead what we don't deserve - which are all the

blessings of salvation!

Maybe now we can at last begin to see what's so amazing about grace!

– when once we realize how we truly deserve the exact opposite of what

God wants to offer us! The Bible

says: *By grace you have been saved*

through faith; and that not of

yourself, it is the gift of God; not

as a result of works, so that no one

may boast (Ephesians 2:8).

And it adds: *You know the grace of*

our Lord Jesus Christ ... Christ died

for our sins (2 Corinthians 8:9; 1

Corinthians 15:3). It's all at Christ's

expense, but we, for our part, do

need to "*Believe in the Lord Jesus*"

in order to be saved (Acts 16:31).

Then we'll be able to really mean it

when we sing:

Amazing grace! How sweet the

sound

That saved a wretch like me;

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

purpose ... and you ... with the help

of wicked men, put him to death by

nailing him to the cross [remember

his Death by Design]. *But ... God has*

raised this Jesus to life [recall his

Resurrection] ...

"what shall we do?" "Repent [or

turn]" ... "what must I do to be

saved?" "Believe in the Lord Jesus,

and you will be saved." [then you'll

know that Amazing Change]' (Acts 2-

16).

dishevelled butterfly with crumpled wings that lifts itself up, but the wings expand as blood enters them, next they harden and dry - and within the hour they are ready for use!

It's not a birth, more of a resurrection, because it emerges full-grown, and perfectly fitted for a life entirely different from that of a caterpillar – a life for which it now has different equipment: 6 legs, 4 wings, and 2 eyes with 6000 lenses!

There can be no other explanation but that this butterfly emerging from its chrysalis has all been carefully planned and designed. Have you ever wondered if there really can be another explanation except that Jesus Christ in resurrection emerged as planned from that Jerusalem tomb in the unstoppable power of a new life? A former Lord Chief Justice of England did wonder about it, but after considering all the options he said 'There exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent and fair jury in all the world could fail to bring in the verdict that the resurrection story is true'.

The good news of the Christian Faith is Jesus and the resurrection!

And it is good news, because it can lead to an amazing transformation in us too. The butterfly's amazing transformation is the result of the genetic message; the amazing transformation we're talking about is the result of the gospel message. It's

a transformation that deals with our sin: that's our 'I'll do it my way' attitude which has broken our relationship with God. God has fixed it so that we can be acceptable to him - no longer repulsive because of the sinfulness of our being. He's offering an amazing transformation that makes us into a new being – high-flyers you could say - fit for heaven, forgiven, all guilt removed, in possession of eternal life as a gift from God.

What an amazing transformation that is! From struggling to resting - from guilt to peace - from failure to forgiveness! But maybe you're saying: 'How can I know this amazing transformation in my life?' Please, tell God if you realize your life's not as he intended – but instead it's empty; tell him you no longer want to keep going your own way, out of touch with him, tell him your old attitude, your old self-centred lifestyle is ready to die; tell him you're now ready to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; ready - by trusting - to become a brand new person in him. Here are Bible verses to help you:

'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!' (2 Cor. 5:17).

'Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God ... by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him [think again of his Wonderful Life] ... This man was handed over to you by God's set

2. Back from the dead!

It seemed like a terrible domestic tragedy. Fire officials believed the fire at the family home was sparked by a faulty extension cord. It was extinguished in only 10 minutes but that still allowed enough time for the baby girl's room to be gutted. At the time of the fire, the authorities told the birth mother that her child had died in the blaze, although they could find no body. Investigators concluded that the infant's body must have been consumed by the intense heat and flames. And so the girl, Delimar Vera, was believed to be dead only 10 days after she was born in 1997.

The truth began emerging in January of 2004 when the child's birth mother (Luz Ada Cuevas) happened to be at a birthday party in Philadelphia. Among the guests was a 6-year-old girl. The woman said she knew at once that she was gazing at the face of her long-lost daughter! To prove it, she approached the girl, pretended there was gum in her hair and removed five strands of hair. Later, DNA tests confirmed the mother's intuition - it was indeed her long-lost child!

What seems to have happened involved Carolyn, a family acquaintance. Carolyn announced that she was pregnant during a visit to the new mother shortly after baby

Delimar's birth. She then abruptly ceased contact after the (15 December 1997) blaze.

Police believe she snatched her friend's newborn daughter in 1997 and then torched the family's house to cover her tracks. At the time of writing, the accused, (Carolyn Correa, 42, of Willingboro, New Jersey), had turned herself in to the authorities.

It's bizarre, but it's not new! Around 4,000 years ago, in the Middle East a father was confronted with the evidence of his son's death - only to discover years later that he'd been conned - his son was still alive and well! I'm referring to the Bible character of Jacob, and the son he believed to be dead was, of course, Joseph.

There's a Bible saying which is 'you reap what you sow'. In a way, that's what Jacob found out. Jacob had once deceived his own father, Isaac. The deception had involved placing the skin of a goat on the back of his hands and neck, so that his blind father Isaac who relied on his sense of touch mistook him for his brother Esau - Esau being the outdoors-type had rough and hairy skin. This play had worked to Jacob's advantage, but now in his turn the deceiver was to be deceived. One day his sons brought to him a coat stained with

goat's blood. The coat belonged to Joseph, his favourite son, of whom his brothers were madly jealous. Jacob now was deceived into thinking the blood, like the coat itself, was really Joseph's – and so he believed his beloved son to be dead. But, instead, his brothers had sold him into slavery.

Jacob, who'd once deceived using the skin of a goat, was himself deceived by the blood of a goat! Strange that it should be a goat in both instances - an animal the Jews often used as a sacrifice for sin. In fact, it's from this sacrificial practice that the expression 'scapegoat' has come. The Bible was preparing us throughout Jewish history to recognize Jesus as the true 'scapegoat' in his death on the cross for our sins. Sadly, many don't see it that way, because the Devil has *blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see it* (2 Cor. 4:4). Just as Isaac in his blindness couldn't see through the deception; many today can't see through the Devil's lies: lies like you're not that bad, you'll be OK, just live as good a life as you can. We can be so easily deceived in all kinds of ways. Here's another Bible example of how people were deceived. We find it in 2 Kings 3:9-24 where we read that:

The king of Israel set out with the king of Judah and the king of Edom. After a roundabout march of seven days, the army had no more water

for themselves or for the animals with them.

"What!" exclaimed the king of Israel. "Has the LORD called us three kings together only to hand us over to Moab?"

But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there no prophet of the LORD here, that we may enquire of the LORD through him?" An officer of the king of Israel answered, "Elisha son of Shaphat is here ..."

... and [Elisha] said, "This is what the LORD says: Make this valley full of ditches. For this is what the LORD says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink. This is an easy thing in the eyes of the LORD; he will also hand Moab over to you ..."

The next morning, about the time for offering the sacrifice, there it was - water flowing from the direction of Edom! And the land was filled with water.

Now all the Moabites had heard that the kings had come to fight against them; so every man, young and old, who could bear arms was called up and stationed on the border. When they got up early in the morning, the sun was shining on the water. To the Moabites across the way, the water looked red - like blood.

"That's blood!" they said. "Those kings must have fought and slaughtered each other. Now to the

a total insect soup – for throughout it all the heart goes on beating away at 60 beats per minute! You could almost say that's a description of death by design (if it weren't for the fact that the heart goes on beating). The death of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago is also a mystery. If his life was so wonderful, how come he ended up being executed?

The importance of Jesus' death for each one of us is all bound up with who He was and what He'd come to do. To help us understand the death of Jesus let me remind you of the true story of two brothers in San Francisco. The younger brother ran with a street gang. One night during a fight the knife in his hand met the soft flesh of a rival. Death was swift.

The young man ran home to swap his blood-stained clothes for clean ones, then he disappeared into the night. The older brother arrived home soon afterwards to find the clothes lying where they'd been abandoned. The sound of police sirens was in the air. By the time the police knocked on the door, he, the older brother, was wearing the stained clothing as though it was his own. He was charged, tried and eventually executed for murder. During all this the younger brother witnessed the love of his older brother - who died in his place and paid his penalty. Finally, it became more than he could bear. Overcome with remorse, he turned himself in and made a full confession. But the police sent him away. There could be

no charges because his brother's death had satisfied the demands of the law.

And that's what God has done for us. He's dealt with our sin in a way that's both just and loving, by taking our punishment upon himself. He came in person as Jesus to do exactly that at the cross – it too was death by design, God's design. As the apostle Peter told his audience shortly afterwards:

"This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God's set purpose ... [and] you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23)

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:4)

Yes, even in humanity's biggest blunder, God was on the throne; and now he wants you to invite him onto the throne of your life - but a total change must take place – as with the butterfly, your old self's going to have to die and you'll also have to tell God you're ready for him to make a new person of you.

Death by design leads to a new lease of life for the caterpillar, as a butterfly emerges from the chrysalis. Even before its emergence, the markings of the butterfly can be seen through the chrysalis. First there are slight indications of movement, then the chrysalis splits and the butterfly begins to emerge: out come legs, antennae and trunk from the chrysalis in which they formed. It's a

10. An amazing change

It would be by no means an exaggeration to say that a caterpillar has a wonderful life in the sense that some pretty amazing things happen to it. After emerging from the egg, it increases its body weight by at least a thousand times, and it also sheds its skin many times. Then at the end of its caterpillar stage, it discards its 16 legs along with its head capsule with its 6 simple eyes - it's all pretty wonderful stuff!

As you trace the life cycle through - from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis, and finally to a butterfly - there's such evidence of design that you could say the Creator's fingerprints are all over it! It's that Designer of all life that the Bible claims to introduce to us as an all-knowing, all-powerful Being, famously revealing His standards for human society in the 10 commandments. As delicate as a butterfly is, we're no less totally dependent on the same Master Designer of life for every breath we breathe.

We've thought of the various stages in the life cycle of a caterpillar, but think of the stages of our own lives: from childhood to youth to the middle years and then on to the senior years - it can also be a wonderfully rewarding experience. But there's only been one life lived on this planet which could never

have been better - the only truly wonderful life this planet has seen is that of Jesus Christ. His life was consistently wonderful - *"the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him"* (Luke's Gospel chapter 2:40) ... *"he went around doing good"* (Acts 10:38). Even sources outside the Bible agree on that; he lived life from beginning to end just as God had intended. He went about doing good; he pronounced forgiveness; he accepted worship; his was the ultimate life demonstrating that he was God come as man - and that this was all that we could ever wish for in God!

But someone was saying in my hearing the other day that death is part of living. It certainly seems that way for the caterpillar. For as the chrysalis takes final shape, the skin hardens, but inside the organs soften before being dissolved. Special cells are generated in its apparently lifeless body - cells whose job it is to turn the organs to pulp - breathing tubes, muscles, nerves all disappear as such - body cells break down and change places to develop into entirely new and different organs. As far as any active life is concerned, the creature has 'died' - but the process stops short of turning it into

plunder, Moabi!"

But when the Moabites came to the camp of Israel, the Israelites rose up and fought them until they fled. And the Israelites invaded the land and slaughtered the Moabites. (NIV)

The fatal mistake of the attacking forces was that they were deceived into thinking something was blood when it was really only water. They came to their end because they were trusting in something other than blood. Please don't repeat that mistake. The Devil will whisper his lies: "You're doing fine, "Surely your best will be good enough." But all who for their eternal salvation trust in something other than the blood of Jesus' cross will have been deceived. When it comes to the question of our admittance into heaven let's make sure it's the blood of Jesus Christ - and only that - that we're trusting in.

We began with the story that reminded us of Jacob and Joseph - the story of a young girl who'd been presumed dead for 6 years, but who turned out to be not dead after all! In a way, that may also make us think about the story Jesus told about the prodigal son. This young man in Luke chapter 15 wasted his share of his father's inheritance. It was only when he was reduced to feeding pigs far away from home that he came to his senses. As he made his way home he had good cause to be unsure of the kind of reception he'd receive. He'd made a real mess of his life. No-one would blame his father

for sending him away, but instead his father welcomed him with open arms. He rejoiced at the prodigal's return and said: *"This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."* It was as though he had received his son back from the dead.

That story illustrates how God is prepared to receive us when we come back to him acknowledging our sin. We, too, the Bible diagnoses, *were dead in ... transgressions and sins ... gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts ... but because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved* (Ephesians 2).

So we, too, can come back from the dead! - from being spiritually dead in God's sight, that is. Don't be deceived, that's how God views us. But he longs to give spiritual and eternal life to all who turn to him in faith, trusting only in the blood - the blood of God's Son, Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins and who himself came back from the dead to be our risen Saviour in heaven.

Like the true story we recounted earlier, this is definitely not another case of 'too good to be true!' Truth can be stranger than fiction!

3. "Dead man walking"

In parts of the USA, when a condemned man begins his final walk to the death chamber, just before they close the door of the corridor, the warden or one of the chief guards will often shout through the hall ... "Dead man walking!" This is to let everyone know that a man is spending his last few moments of life on this earth, and the other inmates are to show respect. The man is alive, but only for a few moments. When he gets to the death chamber, it will be all over.

There's a man in the Bible whom we could describe as a 'dead man walking' because he was under a sentence of death and disgrace. Here's the sentence given through God's prophet, Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord ... "Go to this steward, to Shebna, who is in charge of the royal household, [say to him] 'What right do you have here, and whom do you have here, that you have hewn a tomb for yourself here, you who hew a tomb on the height, you who carve a resting place for yourself in the rock? Behold, the LORD is about to hurl you headlong ... you shame of your master's house.' And I will depose you from your office ..." (The Bible Prophet Isaiah 22:15-25 NAS)

What was this man's crime? And why

was he hanging around the royal tombs? We begin to sense that here is a man with oversized ambitions. God addressed him as 'This steward' - that cut him down to size! This man who was merely a steward in charge of the royal household seemed to have got ideas above his station. Rubbing shoulders with royalty had, it seems, given him the idea that he could make quite a name for himself. So Isaiah found Shebna eyeing up the royal tombs. It seems he was planning to erect a magnificent sepulchre as a monument to his memory after his death. He was aiming to be associated with the kings in death by having his burial place found among them.

Isaiah exposed all this proud scheming with his piercing questions. He began by asking Shebna what right he had to even be at the royal sepulchres - what possible business had he there? This question was followed up with a second question: 'Whom do you have here?' - in other words what was his connection with the nobles who lay buried there or whose tombs were being prepared there in readiness for their death? What claim to nobility did he have?

The ancients took designing their burial chambers very seriously - very often some grand edifice was built to contain their remains. Rock-hewn

power'.

The fact that Lincoln before becoming President had experienced two failed businesses, a nervous breakdown, the death of a sweetheart, and been defeated for public office no less than 10 times in 30 years means that he was reasonably qualified to offer that opinion which compared adversity with success as to which is the greatest test of character. Power, it is said, corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Maybe we've seen examples of what's meant by that in, for example, the Watergate scandal, or much more extreme - the case of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

In total contrast, the Bible reveals to us the lovely character of the only man to walk this earth with absolute power at his disposal. When they came to arrest Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said to his disciple: *'Put your sword back into its place ... do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?'* (Matthew 26:52,53). What power - but what restraint! This was the same man who *'went about doing good'* but the religious establishment - being envious of his popular appeal - had delivered him up to the Roman governor. It was to that Roman

governor, Pontius Pilate, that he said: *'You would have no power over Me, unless it had been given you from above'* (John 19:11). That he, the Lord of Glory, should deliberately not summon up his power but instead allow himself to be crucified through weakness demonstrates the character of God's compassion. By the grace of God he came purposely to veil his glory and restrain his power so that he might become through his death, the sacrifice for our sins.

In Jesus, God used his absolute power not for his own good but for our freedom.

For *'everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins'* (Acts 10:43) and so escapes the judgement to come. We need to recognize we're all slaves. For *'everyone who sins is a slave to sin'* Christ said (John 8:34). It was for the abolition of this spiritual slavery of ours that Jesus used his power. Only the message of the world's best-selling book can set us free - *'the truth will make you free'*. Like 'Honest Abe' we need to allow ourselves to be driven to our knees ... before the perfect character of our Champion - even Jesus the Son of God!

my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day." Lincoln Observed: The Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks edited by Michael Burlingame (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998), p. 210.

Yes, true prayer impresses upon us our own inability; and stimulates us to faith in the power of the God who, by contrast, is able. What weak and feeble creatures we are, compared to the unwearied great Creator! The Bible uses a powerful illustration when it likens us to grass, and mere human glory, it says, is like the flower of the grass which quickly fades and perishes.

This aspect of things was something which also gripped the humble mind of President Lincoln. It's recorded among his collected writings that he treasured the report of an Eastern monarch of whom 'it is said ... [he] once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: 'And this, too, shall pass away.' The president commented "How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!" The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln edited by Roy P. Basler, Volume III, "Address Before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society,

Milwaukee, Wisconsin" (September 30, 1859), pp. 481-482.

'And this, too, shall pass away' – we could all do with bearing that in mind. It's too easy to live as though only the present moment matters. But this saying about all things passing away really does give us the correct perspective. It's consistent with Matthew's Gospel chapter 24(:35) where Jesus says: *'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away'*. This message of all things passing away - these words were spoken by the Lord to give solemnity to his appeal that we need to be ready for his return and for the judgement to come. For this is what that bestselling book the Bible tells us – that *'it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgement'* (Heb.9:27).

Some people, I know, think that the testing experiences of this life are the only form of judgement that we'll ever experience, but the Bible being God's Word speaks with authority when it makes mention of judgement to come. The God who offers us salvation from judgement to come also promises help in this life to those who humbly trust in him. Thinking of testing experiences, Abraham Lincoln once said something about what he considered to be the ultimate test of human character. He said: 'Nearly all men can stand adversity but if you want to test a man's character, give him

tombs were carved out of the heights at Jerusalem for kings like King Hezekiah. The Second Book of Chronicles tells us he was buried 'in the upper section of the tombs' of the kings at Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 32:33). But why was this man, Shebna, who was only a steward, presuming to make a name for himself in death - by cutting out a rock-hewn tomb for himself at the heights of Jerusalem? This seems to have been the ultimate in self-promotion. Shebna was trying to exalt himself in death - literally carving out a place for himself in the history books - by having his name associated in death with the great and the good at Jerusalem.

It can only be the perversity of our fallen human nature that makes someone want to glory in their shame – and death is our shame, being the wages of our sin: for *the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 6:23). Ever since our first parents sinned in the Garden of Eden, and by that sin death entered into this world (Romans 5:12), *man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment* (Hebrews 9:27).

So Shebna's recorded sin is now fully exposed. This was an attempt to make a name for himself in death, a name greater than he had in life - by trying to reserve a grand sepulchre (rock-hewn) near Jerusalem - an action that, in effect, hides the fact that death is really our shame.

There's a kind of boasting in death that's even been made into one of the human wonders of the world. The leading example is found in the mausoleum of Halicarnassus, itself one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was built about 353 BC. The mausoleum was a huge marble tomb built for King Mausolus of Caria in Asia Minor. It was - as we've mentioned - considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Isn't this another prime example of what Shebna was guilty of? Mausoleums like that are vain attempts to make death seem glorious - and more than that: an attempt to deny resurrection truth in an effort to forget judgement to come. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, said, *"A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out"* (John 5:28). This is something that many people wilfully forget. Our mortality isn't something to be gloried in, but it should make each of us humbly seek to get right with God, our Maker and Judge while we still draw breath.

Shebna, you recall, tried to exalt himself through death by being laid in a rock-hewn tomb at Jerusalem. Perhaps there's perhaps another aspect to his audacity. For Jesus, the Son of God, would later humble himself to be laid in a rock-hewn Jerusalem tomb. Luke takes up the story in his gospel:

Now there was a man named

Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no-one had yet been laid. (Luke 23:50-53 NIV)

We mentioned the seven human wonders of the ancient world, what we've just read about from the Bible - the account of the burial of Jesus Christ - is without doubt the divine wonder of the world: that the incarnate Son of God should die for our sins according to the Bible and be buried in a tomb at Jerusalem - a simple tomb that's now empty! The opened, empty tomb opens up a vista beyond death for all who trust in the Saviour God has provided. Victory over the enemy of death itself is possible if we're prepared to humbly enter by faith into the victory over death which Jesus has won for us.

Maybe you remember the story of the little girl whose walk home from school took her past a graveyard. Someone asked her, "Aren't you afraid to walk past the cemetery?" "No," she replied, "because my home is just beyond it." The Christian, too, has a home in heaven, a home beyond the grave.

A friend of mine recently died of

cancer. I'd only known him for a couple of years. On my final visit to him in the hospice - one day as the sun could be seen setting through the window of his room, I reminded him of the evening hymn:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide

The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide.

When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,

Help of the helpless, O abide with me!

We talked of an evening time recorded by Luke in his gospel when two disciples of Jesus, on the third day after his crucifixion, invited a stranger - a companion in travel - to stay or 'abide' with them. Here, in fact, are Luke's words:

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus [for he was the stranger] acted as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." (Luke's Gospel 24:28-33)

The Stranger did respond to that appeal given on the road to Emmaus. And when he did so it was then the disciples discovered to their amazement that the stranger was none other than Jesus risen from the dead! 'Abide with me; fast falls the eventide' - it's a prayer for the eventide of life. The Lord only appears to be going to pass us by - only so that we might constrain him

died and then her father was killed before the promise given to Tom was put into effect. Afterwards, the mother insisted on selling Uncle Tom. This time Uncle Tom got a harsh owner who treated Tom savagely for helping others. The story closes with Tom forgiving his captors, despite being fatally wounded. Before he dies the original owner's son tracks Tom down, but it's too late to save his life.

The only happy ending for the story is that its message brought home to many at that time the conviction that slavery was wrong. But there was resistance from rich slave-owners which led to the American Civil War from which Lincoln emerged victorious as the champion of the slaves.

Lincoln declared: 'Our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal ... we hereby resolve that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom'.

So the best-seller's message had been effective! In Washington there stands a monument to the memory of Lincoln - at his feet crouches a grateful, liberated slave - it's a monument that was funded entirely by freed slaves in appreciation of their saviour.

The world's greatest ever best-selling book continues to be the Bible. The Bible was a book Abraham Lincoln had this to say about: "In

regard to this Great Book, I have but to say, it is the best gift God has given to man. All the good the Savior gave to the world was communicated through this book." The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln edited by Roy P. Basler, Volume VII, "Reply to Loyal Colored People of Baltimore upon Presentation of a Bible" (September 7, 1864), p. 542.

Its message is more powerful than that of any other book, for Christianity offers a new start - a new start through being freed from the failures and guilt of the past. Its message really does offer 'a new birth of freedom', and it directs our attention to another saviour and champion, Jesus Christ, whom the Bible declares to be the Son of God with power. May I ask if you've already shown your appreciation and bowed at his feet? Have you ever got down on your knees and in a humble prayer to almighty God

acknowledged before him that you know you're a sinner - a sinner who now wishes to turn from sin and put your total trust in God's own Son, Jesus Christ, who loved you and gave himself up for you on the cross, so that you may now in faith receive the forgiveness of sins which God offers you in his name?

According to his own testimony, President Lincoln knew the value of kneeling in prayer before his Maker. In a dispatch from the time of the Civil War he wrote:

"I have been driven many times upon

9. A new birth of freedom

Abraham Lincoln (1809-65), the 16th President of the United States is remembered for his vital role in preserving the Union during the Civil War, and also for beginning the process that led to the end of slavery in the United States. He's remembered for his character, his speeches and letters and the fact that he was a man of humble origins whose determination and perseverance led him to the nation's highest office.

We'll remind ourselves of one or two of his quotable speeches. First his 'House-Divided' Speech in Springfield, Illinois, June 16, 1858: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half-free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved - I do not expect the house to fall - but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other."

The original 'house-divided' speech was given by Jesus Christ. It was delivered when the Bible tells us:

"they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him ... when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince

with a heartfelt appeal. Just as he responded to the disciples then, he'll come in and lodge in our hearts if we invite him - and invite him we must for as I shared with my dying friend we dare not die without him - for how shall we fare in the judgement of the resurrection day if we die with our sins still unforgiven?

Luke goes on to tell us that when the eyes of the two disciples were opened and they recognised him ... *he disappeared from their sight ... [and] they got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.* (Luke's Gospel 24:28-33)

I've been looking at the geography - Emmaus was to the west of Jerusalem so they'd been walking with Jesus towards the setting sun. Later they turned and retraced their steps - they headed back to face the risen 'Son', the Son of God at Jerusalem! They couldn't wait to tell their news to others - and what news it was! - they'd seen a 'dead Man walking'! By the time the sun comes to set on your life, I trust you, too, will be found walking towards it in the company of Jesus.

of demons, that this fellow drives out demons. "Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself" (Mat.12:22-26). By the same test of consistency which Lincoln later recognized, Jesus demonstrated that the power for good which worked in him was the power of God, and revealed him to be the Son of God.

But Lincoln's application of Christ's words was in connection with human slavery, you'll recall. It was around the same time that a book was published (in 1852) in the USA which was a moving story that amounted to a passionate attack on slavery. It was called Uncle Tom's Cabin. Uncle Tom, the story's main character, was a slave to a good master who fell on hard times and was forced to sell him. When Uncle Tom was scrubbing the deck of a boat he rescued a young girl from drowning, her father, out of gratitude, bought Uncle Tom. He was treated well by his new master and befriended by the girl, but her mother was unsympathetic. Young Evie was in poor health, and at her request Uncle Tom was promised his freedom, but then first the girl

4. The way to happiness

It was Oscar Wilde who said, "In this world there are only two tragedies: one is not getting what you want, and the other is getting it." He was making the point that no matter how hard we work at trying to be successful, wealthy or famous, it simply will not give us the happiness we yearn for deep-down. Ask any counsellor, and he or she will tell you from their experiences in the consulting room that achieving success does not guarantee an individual's happiness. In fact, success fails to deliver happiness so often that two terms have been defined to characterize aspects of the problems people face in coping with their own success. The first is 'the Imposter Phenomenon' which arises from the unconscious belief that our success is really undeserved and one day we will be seen by others as the frauds we really are. The other is labelled 'Success Depression'. It sounds like Alexander the Great was a victim of this because it's reported that he wept 'when there were no more worlds to conquer'.

But the lure of success is as strong today as ever it was. When one US publisher was asked about the kind of book that sells, he replied: "We

can't go wrong with a well-written book that tells people how to avoid being losers." Anything with the word 'winner' in it sells.

When best-selling thriller writer Jack Higgins, author of 'The Eagle Has Landed', was asked, "What, of all the things you know now, do you wish you'd known as a boy?" he responded by saying, "That when you get to the top, there's nothing there."

One man who got to the top was tennis player Boris Becker. He appears to be agreeing fully with Jack Higgins when he's on record as saying: "I had won Wimbledon twice before, once as the youngest player. I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed: money, cars, women, everything ... I know that this is a cliché. It's the old song of the movie and pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything, and yet they are so unhappy ... I had no inner peace. I was a puppet on a string." A counsellor might have said that Becker was suffering from 'success depression'.

Let's stay with sport for a moment longer. Extreme sports have become very popular in recent years. One young man addicted to parachuting

We, too, can be sure we will find mercy, if we follow the Bible's instruction found in Isaiah chapter 55:

Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will

abundantly pardon. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD (Isaiah 55:6-8).

God's way of showing mercy led him to give his own Son, Jesus Christ, to die to pay the price of forgiveness for all who will forsake their own way and turn to him in personal faith. This, and only this, is God's way of forgiveness.

really at fault? Perhaps, there's more to this than meets the eye. Some of the original words in the text have a fuller meaning than is often brought out in our English language Bibles, and they just might give a clue as to what Ham's attitude and motivation may have been in what he did. Let's try to put this incident in context first of all. Noah was a spiritual giant, a preacher of righteousness' who'd found favour in God's sight so that he along with his family were saved when the world perished in the divine judgement of the great flood. But just like another of the Bible's heroes, King David, Noah too, made mistakes. After centuries of taking a moral stance, one day Noah lets down his guard:

'he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. 'What was the wrong in what Ham did? When the Bible tells us Ham saw the nakedness of his father, the word really means "to gaze with satisfaction". And when the Bible says Ham told his brothers, the sense could well be not just to tell, but "to tell with delight".

Does that give us a clue, I wonder? Could it be that Ham resented his upbringing. Did he resent having to live up to his father's standards? Was there resentment in his heart because of pressure to keep up the family reputation? If so the time he

accidentally came across his father's lapse in the tent could well have been the moment he sensed freedom at long last from all those inhibitions he'd resented for years. But what's the point for us in tracing the roots of resentment? Well, it pervades our society, don't you think? Resentment of God, resentment of siblings, resentment of parents – just like we've suggested in those three biblical examples. It's surely helpful to know where it all stems from. It began with Satan poisoning Eve's mind, causing our first parents to question, dilute, add to and reject what God'd said. And in the generations that followed, we've seen how such wrong thoughts produced bad behaviour and negative feelings. Yes, the whole race has been infected with this poison. Which of us has never been resentful at some time? Who can dispute the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ when he said: *"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts ..."* (Mark's Gospel ch.7v.21)?

And the same *'Lord ... will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts.'* (Paul to the Corinthians 4:5). But as we think of judgement, it's interesting to compare Adam with Noah for both are the ancestors of all living. It's remarkable that each of them sinned by partaking of a fruit, and in both cases the judgement that followed was tempered with mercy.

American university: "Let us take a few minutes to reflect on the life of our friend and colleague before the winds of time cover over his footprints in the sand." How sad if we can aspire to be nothing more than 'footprints in the sand'!

In the wisdom section of the Bible we find the following sober nuggets of truth:

For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered (Ecclesiastes 2:16).

Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other (Ecclesiastes 3:19)

Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labour that he can carry in his hand (Ecclesiastes 5:15-16)

Statements like these serve as humbling reminders to us that it's beyond our ability to correct life's inequities. Life's futilities are to test and humble us before our Creator. The same place in the Bible reveals God as the ultimate source of life's pleasures - for he is the one who gives us the capacity to enjoy them. Each one of us has within us the capacity to recognize that this is true for, God *has ... set eternity in the hearts of men* (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Speaking of God, we find an interesting historical description of Christianity in the New Testament of our Bibles - it's simply referred to as

was told by his fiancée that she'd only marry him if he overcame his addiction to the sport. The young man went to see a counsellor who asked: "Why do you do it?" The reply was, "Because it's only then that I feel really alive." For him, the appeal of extreme sports lay in a desire to rise above an emotionally flat existence. Happiness for him seemed to be a rush of adrenaline.

But what generally defines 'happiness'? Throughout time philosophers have struggled with this question. Freud said we're happy when we're experiencing pleasure. Adler, his disciple, disagreed and said it was a sense of power that brought happiness. Abraham Maslow, a great early 20th century thinker, believed it was only when people reached the full potential of their capabilities that they could feel happy. Victor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist, said it had to do with sensing life was more than eating, sleeping, working and having children; while Carl Jung the eminent psychologist wrote, 'About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives.'

Of all the suggestions made by these thoughtful people perhaps it's the idea of having a sense of meaning and purpose in life that comes closest to defining happiness.

The following words were spoken at the memorial service of a highly respected faculty member at an

'the Way' in the following account of early Christian persecution:

Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. (Acts 9:1-3).

When thinking about this term 'the Way' as describing Christianity, I remembered that after 1100 failures someone remarked to Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, "You must have wasted your time." "Oh, no," he replied and went on to explain that in science there is 'the way' to do something and everything else is simply 'not-the-way' to do it. Edison gave the example of producing water - it has to be two parts of hydrogen in combination with one of oxygen - everything else is not the way to produce water. "So," he continued, "I did not have eleven hundred failures. I simply found out eleven hundred ways how not to invent the light bulb."

I think that's a wonderful answer. And I would go on to agree with the assessment - made by someone else - that this age we're living in is one where people are finding out a hundred and one - or is it 1100 and one - ways of how not to be happy!

The same Saul we've thought about, who persecuted those of the Christian 'Way', came to realize for himself after an encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus that this was the only way to live with a real sense of meaning and purpose, and where happiness flows out of that sense of meaning. Later, the same Saul said:

Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:4-8).

He'd discovered that knowing Jesus was the way to bring true meaning and purpose - and direction - to his life. He'd found for himself the truth of Jesus' claim when Jesus declared, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Jesus declared himself as 'the Way' to God and eternal happiness. I need to be careful not to give you the impression that all earthly problems will be a thing of the past once you've put faith in Christ. The incomparable experience of life that Saul went on to know as the apostle Paul was at times filled with sorrow and difficulty because he himself was now at the receiving end of those hostile to his new-found faith, but still he spoke of 'the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ' for he knew that in all his difficulties he had the Lord with him. This is not so

and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it." Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him' (Genesis 4:2-8).

It's not difficult to read between the lines of what was going on here. Ever since God had killed an animal to clothe Adam and Eve it would seem likely that they'd have understood something about the need for a blood sacrifice for sins. I think we can safely suppose they passed this knowledge on to their children. But then we read of that expression: 'in the process of time'. Now I wonder what lies behind that? Perhaps it was something like this. Cain had developed his expertise in cultivating the ground. He was satisfied with its good produce. He took pride in the work of his hands. How infuriating it was that whenever he wanted to give an offering to God, he had to request a sheep from his brother Abel! In a spirit of resentment, Cain may well have got to the point of saying: 'What's wrong with my own efforts? Why has it got to be a lamb anyway?' And so one day he did his own thing, he offered a bloodless offering, not according to

the example God had given at the beginning when sin first made its appearance in the human race. When his offering was not accepted by God - but Abel's lamb was accepted - Cain's resentment boiled over and he murdered his brother. For our third example I want to bring us down the centuries until we reach the time of Noah. We join the story at the point when the great flood is over, and we read:

'Now the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole earth was populated. And Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brethren" (Gen 9:18-25).

Taken at face value it seems hard to justify Noah's curse on his son Ham - after all wasn't it Noah who was

8. Resentment

Imagine you're about to sit down for some relaxation when there's a ring on the doorbell and suddenly relaxation has to be put on hold as a troop of relatives descend on you expecting to be entertained and fed! Or perhaps you'd been saving for a while and have only just got enough for that long-awaited purchase when out of the blue the tax demand arrives ... In many everyday situations like those, it's possible we can betray some feeling of resentment.

I've been noticing – from the early chapters of the Bible – just how close to the root of our problems this feeling of resentment is. Let's go right back to what the Book of Genesis tells us about the Garden of Eden:

'Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, "You shall not eat it: nor shall you touch it, lest you die."'" Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing

much instant happiness as eternal happiness. It's not a happiness that depends on the things which happen to us. But deep down it's the state of happiness - sometimes felt more keenly than at other times, it's true - but which is always available to the Christian, as a result of the fact that

all his or her sins are known to be forgiven.

The Bible says, *Blessed - or happy - is the man whose sins are forgiven* (Psalm 32) and Jesus Christ alone is the way to that lasting form of happiness.

good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate' (Genesis 3:1-6).

It all started with a question, didn't it? But by means of that question Satan injected the poison of his own resentment into Eve, the mother of all living. *'Has God ... said, 'You shall not ...?'* It was a question calculated to arouse a feeling of resentment in Eve – was it really true that God was keeping back something good from her? Eve was infected. She was beguiled into feeling a certain resentment towards God. And so she took the forbidden fruit and ate, and Adam with her failed God's simple test of obedience.

Feelings of resentment would soon surface again in her family as first she bore a son called Cain, and:

'Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain

5. Our need for healing

Alexander Fleming (1881-1955) was researching the bacteria responsible for turning wounds septic (Staphylococci), a problem which had led to many deaths in the First World War. He cultivated the bacteria in shallow circular glass containers known as petri dishes and added nutrient gel. Fleming maintained them at the temperature of the human body to simulate the conditions of a genuine infection.

Like some other discoveries in science, that which Fleming was about to make was assisted by a couple of accidental happenings. The first accident took place at the end of July 1928. At that point his investigation was finished and Fleming went on holiday during August. Being an untidy man, he just left everything as it was. Another group was researching a rare mould in the same building. This particular mould produced large amounts of what came to be known as penicillin. And that mould found its way into Fleming's laboratory.

The second 'accident' or freak event was that during that August temperatures plummeted in London. This circumstance set up the perfect condition for the mould to produce penicillin. Fleming returned at the end of his holiday and began to apply antiseptic to clean up the dishes in

his laboratory. It was then he noticed that the bacteria colonies close to the mould patches had died! An interruption actually drew his attention to this effect of the mould when he was explaining the dirty dishes to a colleague who had popped in to see him. So perhaps we could call that a third 'accident'!

Fleming didn't really know what to do with his discovery at first. He believed penicillin would be useful only for surface infections. He failed to appreciate it could act as a powerful antibiotic. But by 1942 the antibiotic had been tested and was ready for mass production. In 1945, Fleming and two others (Florey and Chaim) shared the Nobel Prize in recognition of their discovery and its application.

I mention this because of an analogy the Lord Jesus made one day. It's recorded in Mark's Gospel chapter 2 verse 17 that Jesus said: *"It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick."* In other words, the effective operation of the Gospel is like the operation of medicine in the human body.

"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" was God's diagnosis of the human condition through the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament (17:9). The power of God had to

My God and thy God. 'Thy God shall be my God.' Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God. He is to be found only by the ways taught by the Gospel. Greatness of the soul of man. 'Righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee.' Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy ... Total submission to Jesus Christ.'

Pascal, the father of probabilities, wasn't leaving his eternal destiny to 'chance' - He had come to know God, the author of this improbable universe. I invite you to take that step of faith into 'the other room' and discover for yourself the Creator God in the Christ of the cross - and by doing so you take all the uncertainty out of your eternal destiny.

should see a contrivance: but if I saw it grinding, I should be assured that a hand was at the wheel, though in another room. It is the same in nature." The Bible introduces us to that hand in 'the other room'; the hand at the wheel. It tells us all we need to know about why things are the way they are.

Blaise Pascal was someone who ventured into the realm of 'the other room'. A great mathematician, he's remembered as the father of probabilities. But this text was found on a paper sewn into his coat, a hidden companion which changed coats with him. It reads:

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certitude. Joy. Feeling. Peace. God of Jesus Christ.

those things of man which can be known by the spirit of man which is within him and those higher things concerning his future, which he cannot know by that spirit."

Hawking, with whose quote we began, says about the four forces of the universe and their relative strengths that 'the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life'. Hawking is on a search for the so-called 'Theory of Everything' saying that 'if we should discover a complete theory ... we shall ... be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer ... then we would know the mind of God'.

But the Bible says (1 Corinthians 2:11-16): *'who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us ... The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct*

him?" But we have the mind of Christ.'

So you don't need a theory of everything to have the mind of God in Christ – you don't need to be a Hawking or an Einstein to have the mind of God – all you need is God's Spirit in your life – and this is God's gift to us when we come to faith in Jesus Christ his Son. What you need is the Spirit of the God who's 'personalized in Jesus Christ' – as Copernicus put it: With the help of the Holy Spirit you can then evaluate not only the things of man but also the things of God – not just the how but the why. But an unbeliever, someone without the Spirit, cannot properly evaluate the things of God – that person thinks the Christian message of the cross where Jesus died for our sins is foolish – but it's that understanding, more than anything else (1 Corinthians 1:23,24), which expresses and defines 'the mind of Christ'. A spiritual man – someone who has the Spirit of God – can make judgements about all things, but natural man – any man or woman – who does not have the Spirit of God cannot discern the mind of God – cannot appreciate what it is that breathes fire into the equations that describe this wonderful universe that we inhabit. William Paley whose (1802) book on Natural Theology was compulsory reading for Cambridge students for a considerable time once said: "If I saw a hand-mill even at rest, I

enter the human condition in order to heal it - just like the mould had to come into contact with the bacteria to affect it. Unless penicillin enters the bloodstream and is conveyed to the sites of infection, it cannot effect a cure. In the same way, Christ does not heal us by external example; but only when we receive him in faith.

We'll take this a bit further. Suppose you and your best friend go on an adventure holiday to South America. After flying there you hire a car and set off into the jungle. Unfortunately, you crash the car and your friend suffers a leg wound. You immediately give first aid, but some soil has entered the wound, and you begin to notice signs of high fever, reddish-brown pus and gas bubbles on the skin. To your alarm you notice your companion is becoming confused, sweating heavily and developing a rapid heartbeat.

In something of a panic you manage to restart the car and you drive frantically to a medical centre. It seems you were right to suspect that your friend's life is in danger. The medical centre's diagnosis is gas gangrene (caused by the bacterium *Clostridium perfringens* infecting the open wound) - a condition that's fatal without immediate remedial action. But just imagine your relief when the situation is turned around by a large dose of penicillin!

Some time afterwards and on reflection, you realize how previously 'gas gangrene' and 'penicillin' had

only been names to you, but at that moment it became a matter of life and death; you simply had to trust the penicillin, for there was no hope without it. It had the potential, but it still had to be administered.

Compare that whole scenario now with the good news of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the Christian message of hope through Jesus Christ at first seems irrelevant and of no interest to you. Jesus Christ is just a name to you, seemingly of no direct relevance to your life - until you become conscious of how desperately sick the human condition is!

Jesus gave the following diagnosis. It was in response to some who were criticising his disciples for not washing their hands (see Mark 7:18-23). Jesus said:

"Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body."

He went on: *"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean': For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'."*

I ask you to reflect on the truth of that diagnosis. It ought to alarm us. We're dealing here with a worse disease than gas gangrene. This is a condition for which the work of Jesus

Christ is the only potential cure. But it still remains for you to apply it ... Here's a simple prayer that might help you make that personal application:

"I recognize, before a holy God, that I'm a sinner (for *all have sinned and the wages of sin is death* - Romans 3:23 & 6:23)

"I also realize I can do nothing, but can only repent of the offence that this is to a holy God

"I do believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God - I believe that He died to bear the punishment for my sins (just as Paul said to the Corinthians: *Christ died for our sins*)

"I now invite him into my life and by doing so I will receive the gift of the grace of God's forgiveness." (simply because the Bible promises me that *the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* - Romans 6:23)

A prayer like that is the prescription for life - new life in Jesus Christ! Once again, may I ask you, "Have you made this greatest of all discoveries? Have you taken the only medicine God prescribes for your spiritually sick condition before him?"

sketches demonstrated was not only that the earth was moving around the sun but the orbits of the planets weren't circles but instead elongated circles or ellipses. But why should the universe be like this? To Kepler the universe was a 'sacred sermon, a veritable hymn to God the Creator'. His famous prayer was 'O God, I am thinking Thy thoughts after Thee'. These great men of science had great faith in the Creator God.

Galileo made one of the early telescopes - discovered after a spectacle-maker had accidentally looked through two lenses. Galileo pointed his telescope heavenwards and what he saw was that the moons of Jupiter definitely went around Jupiter - it was more confirmation that the ideas of the time were headed in the right direction. One obituary of Galileo says, 'With ... Christian firmness he rendered up his soul to his Creator, sending it, as he liked to believe, ... to watch from a closer vantage point those eternal and immutable marvels which he, by means of a fragile device, had brought closer to our mortal eyes.'

Sir Isaac Newton was brought up in Grantham where he did little to distinguish himself at school other than carve his name into the window-sill. It can still be seen there today, but through the cover of glass in case anyone else should wish to follow his example! Whenever we think of Newton we think of the law of gravity and no doubt about the

story of the falling apple which is most likely apocryphal. In Newton's universe the sun's massive presence was what attracted the planets, and this 'force of gravity' bent their motion into captive orbits around it. But Newton was honest about why it should be like this: "The cause of gravity I do not know," he said. And added: "This most beautiful system of the sun ... could only proceed from the council and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being ... a God of order, not confusion."

But then came a book-binder, one Michael Faraday. When re-binding Encyclopedia Britannica his enquiring mind began to question Newton. His idea was that forces like the electric and magnetic forces didn't operate instantaneously over distances as Newton assumed. With help (from James Clerk-Maxwell), he was able to show that such messages took time because the transmission was restricted to the speed of light.

The stage was now set for Einstein. In a brilliant move he put the various pieces of the jigsaw together and came up with a view of the universe in which the sun was to be pictured rather like a gymnast standing on a trampoline - the sun distorted the 'canvas' of space which was why the planets went around it. So our understanding of the universe was changing, but the faith of scientists like Faraday remained as steady as a rock. He said: "I have never seen anything incompatible between

6. Leader of an epic rescue

"Men Wanted for Hazardous Journey. Small Wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success." According to one account - perhaps apocryphal - that was the wording of an advert Ernest Shackleton placed to gain recruits for his 1914 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Not a very enticing offer you might think, but 27 men did sign on - and although they were unsuccessful in the technical sense - they did, however, manage a heroic safe return.

Shackleton's expedition has gone down in history as one of the greatest epics of survival. Two ships were to set sail. One, with Shackleton at the helm, would cross the treacherous Weddell Sea and land at Vahsel Bay. A second would travel over the Ross Sea; its crew would land and stash supplies for Shackleton's overland crossing. The challenges were obvious: The Weddell Sea was notorious for relentless and crushing ice; Vahsel Bay offered no proven landing; and the territory between the Weddell Sea and the Pole was uncharted. Shackleton made his plans with these difficulties in mind, but he couldn't have known that the sea's

ice would freeze early and thick that season.

In August 1914, while other Englishmen were mobilizing to do battle in the Great War, the crew of the Endurance - a 300-ton Norwegian-built schooner - slipped down the Thames and headed south. For six weeks the Endurance smashed through frozen seas. By January 29, the ice had won, and it held the Endurance fast in a gyrating mass of tumbled, jagged slabs - some thrusting 20 feet into the air. The Endurance had sailed 12,000 miles, pushed through pack ice for a further 1,000 miles, and now - less than 100 miles from its destination - it became trapped. "It was more than tantalising," wrote one of the two surgeons on board, "it was maddening."

Maddening or not, Shackleton calmly announced that the expedition would winter on the ice until the spring. The men amused themselves by racing their 60 or so Canadian sledge dogs. Shackleton, wrote the surgeon, displayed "real greatness. He did not rage at all, or show outwardly the slightest sign of disappointment." Even when the ship began to crack, Shackleton kept the expedition together, ordering his men to set up

7. There's fire in the equations

In one of his popular books, Stephen Hawking, who's generally recognized to rank among the world's top living scientists, asks the intriguing question: 'What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?' Down through the centuries, many of the giants of science not only wanted to know how the universe works but also why.

Long ago, Aristotle reasoned that he couldn't feel the earth to be moving; so everything he could see moving - objects like the sun - must revolve around the earth in circles. It took until the 16th century until this mould of thinking was broken. But why did Aristotle think everything revolved around the earth in circles? Well, to him, circles were the perfect shape ...

Aristotle believed in an unchanging universe, with everything retaining its 'natural place' in the overall scheme of things. But centuries later Copernicus became fascinated by the 'wanderings' of the planets. Sometimes the planets were observed to be not exactly where they might be expected to be. They were seen to wander in their movements. Today we might think of

it like cars travelling closely together in congested motorway lanes. Pick a car in the next lane and watch its progress from your window.

Sometimes it nudges ahead of you; at other times it falls behind relative to your own rate of progress. But you only see that kind of wandering because you're in a moving car. That was the breakthrough idea that led Copernicus to the radical notion that the earth must itself be moving. This would allow us to see the wandering of planets in their orbits if they all, like us, revolved around the sun. Copernicus was a God-fearing man who believed in 'God personalized in Jesus Christ'. He said he was simply trying to describe what has been 'built for us by the Best and Most Orderly Workman of all'.

Kepler proved the idea of a moving earth. He happened to inherit the best astronomical observations available at that time. They'd been compiled by a man called Brahe who seems to have been a bit of a colourful character -- because his nose was cut off in a duel so after that he wore a metal one! Based on these superior measurements Kepler made calculations, and from the calculations, sketches. What his

"Ocean Camp." Using the ship's battered timbers, they built a galley and storehouse on the ice and filled it with three tons of food which they were able to save. They surrounded this building with tents and lifeboats.

On October 27, 1915, the Endurance sank. Shackleton stayed up all night, and the next morning, after serving his crew coffee at five a.m., he announced, "Ship and stores have gone - so now we'll go home." Easier said than done! It would take another six months before they could set off, but home they would eventually go.

On April 9, 1916, the ice finally thinned enough for the men to again take to the sea. Their only hope for survival, Shackleton determined, was to reach Elephant Island, some 100 miles away. After seven days of storm and cold, having to bail their open lifeboats constantly, the men arrived - some of them just barely alive. Shackleton knew that to stay on the remote outpost, several hundred miles from the southernmost tip of South America, meant almost certain death. So he and five volunteers took to the sea again in the largest of the lifeboats. Their goal: the whaling camps off South Georgia Island, some 800 miles north.

That's the truly amazing part. Some think it to be the most remarkable boat journey of all time. These men spent 17 days on the stormiest ocean on the planet. One of Shackleton's

biographers has described that lifeboat as "a cockleshell that was like an insect swimming in a tidal wave."

Expedition member Frank Worsley, an expert navigator, took only four sextant readings along the way. Had his calculations been wrong by one degree, they would have sailed off course. But the boat plunged straight on, through snow, hurricane-force wind and seas as high as 20 feet. The men pulled screws from the boat and forced them into the soles of their boots for traction. Emaciated, they reached land, then had to trek 22 miles over the unmapped, glaciers and mountains of South Georgia to reach the whaling port. As they began their 36-hour hike, Shackleton said, "If anything happens to me while those fellows are waiting for me, I shall feel like a murderer."

It never came to that. Four months later, after three unsuccessful attempts to sail back in rescue, Shackleton returned to his crew. They were scratching limpets from the shore when he arrived; for even the penguins had abandoned desolate Elephant Island! Near-starved, the men had endured by huddling under their lifeboats, singing songs to hold on to the last threads of hope and sanity. All 28 men who sailed on the Endurance survived.

Raymond Priestley, the geologist on an earlier Shackleton Antarctic expedition, reflected years later: "For

swift and efficient travel, give me Amundsen; for scientific investigation, give me Scott; but when you are at your wits' end and all else fails, go down on your knees and pray for Shackleton." That was the impression made by this trustworthy and remarkable leader. His was an epic rescue - one which almost moved me to tears as I watched a film version of these events. That most definitely was a great voyage of endurance. But there's a greater leader; a more inspiring rescue mission; and a greater endurance. The details form the central grand theme of the Bible.

Jesus Christ's appeal for followers is even more stark and challenging: Jesus said, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"* (Luke 9:23). 27 responded to Shackleton, will you be one to respond to Christ?

Shackleton risked his own life for his men. Christ, the greatest leader, gave his life. Of him, the Bible says: *He leads [his followers]... he goes on ahead of them ... [he] lays down his life for [them]* (John 10:3,11).

Shackleton didn't lose a man on the expedition. Jesus could say in a prayer to his Father concerning his followers: *"Those whom You gave*

Me I have kept; and none of them is lost" (John 17:12).

The Bible pays tribute to Jesus on no less than four occasions as the chief or greatest of all leaders. In his death he's described as *the [chief leader] of life* (Acts 3:14-15). In his resurrection and exaltation now in heaven, he's called a *[chief leader] and a Saviour, to grant repentance ... and forgiveness of sins* (Acts 5:30-31).

Indeed the Bible goes as far as saying that the sufferings of his cross were the appropriate means to demonstrate that Jesus Christ is an accomplished - in fact, the consummate - leader (Hebrews 2:10).

His journey from heaven to earth and back again can rightly be called the greatest 'voyage' of endurance. We're told he's the 'chief leader' who *'endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God'* (Hebrews 12:2).

Shackleton kept his promise to return to collect his men, and Jesus Christ will too, for he's promised: *"I will come again"* (John 14:3). Are you waiting for *[God's] Son from heaven ... Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come*? (1 Thessalonians 1:9,10)?