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cost a lot like  
Christmas**

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# Evangelical Times

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## Consultation to ban 'conversion therapy' will end this month

**Mike Judge, Editor**

A public consultation on government proposals to criminalise so-called 'conversion therapy' in England and Wales will end on 10 December.

A ban has the potential to interfere with aspects of evangelical preaching, praying, pastoral counselling, and even parenting.

Campaigners want a complete ban so that it will be a criminal offence to attempt to help anyone resist LGBT temptations.

The government's consultation document – which is very thin on detail – insists that the proposals 'will not impact everyday religious practice'.

The document adds, 'parents will remain able to raise their children with the values of their faith, and simply expressing the teachings of a religion will not constitute conversion therapy.'

Many LGBT activists are insisting that a ban must cover all religious practices, including 'non-coercive' prayer.

But one group, the LGB Alliance, expressed caution. A spokesperson said, 'It's a slippery path when you start to interfere with religion,' adding, 'Are we going to go into mosques and churches and stop the priest and say "wait a minute, you can't quote Leviticus, it's homophobic"? I think it's been very badly thought through.'

The 'Let Us Pray' campaign, which has been set up to defend free speech and religious liberty, has issued guidance for how to respond to the consultation.

Those who haven't already done so are being urged to visit the website [letuspray.uk](http://letuspray.uk) and submit a response before the closing date of 10 December.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, there is a separate proposal to ban conversion therapy and a committee of the Scottish Parliament has been taking evidence on the issue.

Some liberal church representatives have told the committee that they support a ban. Revd Fiona Bennett of Augustine United Reformed Church in Edinburgh said a ban would help enforce pro-LGBT theology.

She said, 'A ban on conversion therapy ... from a theological point of view, from my perspective, would affirm that all are divinely created, and that all gender identities and sexual orientations are intentional.'

'It would be very, very helpful and life-giving to all of us in the church who stand in this perspective.'

But the campaign group Let Us Pray said, 'These activists are free to believe what they want. But they are not entitled to use the criminal law to settle their theological disputes.'

**Comment p.6**



Equality Minister Liz Truss (Source: UK Parliament)

## Gospel banner is ripped down during Glasgow COP26 climate conference

A gospel banner was ripped down from outside a Glasgow city centre church close to the venues of the COP26 climate conference.

The banner read, 'The world's most urgent need is churches preaching Christ crucified not climate change.'

It lasted less than 48 hours before it was torn down from its place outside The Tron Church, Glasgow.

Pastor of the church William Philip said, 'The fact that a church states publicly that the mission of the church is to preach Christ crucified, and not something else, should hardly be controversial.'

He said, 'We are not denying that Christians should care for creation – in the way that God commands, of course, and for his purposes (which may be very different from what some climate activists want).

'But we are saying that if the world stands at "one minute to midnight" (to use the Prime Minister's phrase) the real urgency is for people to know what that means.'

The unique charge of the Christian Church is to herald that truth, and the consequent essential warning to mankind.'

He said it was a shame that some Christians feel embarrassed about that. 'I think this betrays a dangerous misunderstanding of the real urgency of the message we have been charged with taking to the world,' he said.

## National News

# Ross Hendry takes up new role as chief executive of CARE

A new chief executive, Ross Hendry, has begun leading Christian charity CARE (Christian Action Research and Education).

He succeeds Nola Leach, who has retired from the role after nearly 20 years in post.

Before joining CARE, he was the CEO of Spurgeons children's charity and has also served as Deputy CEO in the office of the Children's Commissioner for England.

Before that, he was Head of Public Policy at Action for Children and stood as a parliamentary candidate for the

Labour Party during the 2005 General Election.

Hendry joins CARE in the same year the charity is celebrating 50 years since the Nationwide Festival of Light (NFOl), which took place on 25 September 1971 in Trafalgar Square, London.

CARE grew out of the NFOl in 1983 when co-founders Lyndon Bowring and Charlie Colchester re-named the ministry Christian Action Research and Education, better known as CARE.

Hendry said, 'What I love about CARE is that it believes in the whole Bible.'

'It believes in the good news of Jesus and in the calling

we have from God to make a difference in every area of society.'

'For CARE, that means working with policy makers, bringing a clear, biblically informed perspective on laws and policies.'

'As a society, we're swimming in deep waters, and there's such a need for the church to confidently engage with politics and policies.'

'My prayers and hopes are that we will be able to give our brothers and sisters in the wider church the courage to take a stand and to speak out.'

'We're going to do all we can to influence laws for good, to

train new leaders through the highly-regarded Leadership Programme, and equip the church on some of the most pressing matters of the day.'

'CARE has an immensely talented team of people who are passionate about making a difference, and I cannot wait to get started.'

Paying tribute to Nola Leach, he said, 'I'm conscious that I'm following Nola, who's done such an amazing job in leading the work of CARE.'

'I want to thank Nola for all her help during the last few months of transition, and wish her every blessing in this exciting new chapter.'



**Ross Hendry**  
(Credit: care.org.uk)

## BBC latest to drop Stonewall's controversial diversity scheme

The BBC has become the latest high-profile institution to cut ties with a controversial scheme run by LGBT group Stonewall.

The broadcaster decided to withdraw from the 'diversity champions' scheme because of questions surrounding impartiality.

The scheme tells employers how to promote LGBT ideology in the workplace and rewards those who do.

In a statement, the BBC said this 'has led some to question whether the BBC can be impartial when reporting on public policy debates where Stonewall is taking an active role'.

The BBC's head of news, Fran Unsworth, has reportedly spoken to LGBT staff and told them they must get used to hearing opinions they disagree with.



**A pride parade outside the BBC**  
(Credit: BBC)

## Government faces legal challenge over its failure to protect children from pornography

The High Court has granted permission for a judicial review to challenge the government over children's access to pornography websites.

The legal action has been taken by Christian campaigner Ioannis Dekas and a student, Ava Vakil.

The pair argue that the government acted unlawfully when it failed to implement rules passed by Parliament to impose age-verification checks on porn sites.

Part three of the 2017 Digital Economy Act requires commercial online pornography sites to have 'robust age verification controls in place' to prevent any under 18s from accessing the sites.

In 2019, however, the then Digital Secretary Nicky Morgan said these measures would no longer go ahead but will be included in the government's



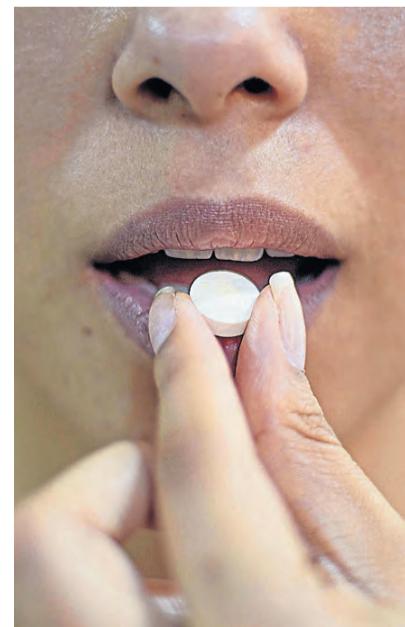
wider Online Harms Bill being brought in later this year.

During a court hearing last month, Lady Justice Whipple ruled to allow a judicial review of the government's decision in 2019.

She said that there's possibly a gap between the rules covered in the 2017 law and those proposed in the Online Safety Bill.

Dekas and Vakil have set up a CrowdJustice page to fundraise for their case.

## Scottish medics speak out against 'at-home' abortion scheme



Two senior Scottish medics have spoken out against the Scottish government's do-it-yourself abortion scheme.

Frank Dunn and David Galloway, both former presidents of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow, warned that the scheme could lead to women being coerced into having an abortion.

As reported in *The Times*, the doctors wrote to Maree Todd, Minister for Public Health, saying there were serious concerns over the use and abuse of the abortion pills,

which were allowed in March 2020 at the start of the UK's first Covid lockdown.

They said remote prescription of abortion drugs was unsafe and urged for in-person appointments to be reinstated.

In the letter, they said, 'We believe the Scottish government should reinstate in-person appointments at the earliest possible opportunity ...'

'Every clinician has a duty of care towards their patient and we do not believe this duty is best fulfilled by removing in-person clinician-patient contact for significant medical procedures.'

Official figures showed that DIY abortions accounted for nearly half of all abortions carried out in England and Wales from April to December 2020.

Sending out the abortion pills in the post was a measure that was intended to be temporary, to allow women to have abortions without risking catching Covid-19 by attending a clinic.

However, the Scottish government is considering whether the rules should be extended when the pandemic passes, making DIY abortions permanent.

Writing on the 54th anniversary of the 1967

Abortion Act, James Mildred, chief communications officer for CARE, said, 'Since 1967, an estimated 9.7m abortions have taken place.'

'Behind that eye-wateringly high number is a person, made in God's own image. And also behind that number are millions of mums and their husbands, boyfriends, partners and wider families.'

He added, 'In our culture, abortion is often seen as the only answer to a crisis pregnancy.'

'It has become normalized and ever-more available, especially after recent changes to the law allowing women to take both abortion pills at home.'

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Melvin Tinker cancer battle

Revd Melvin Tinker, an evangelical Anglican leader, revealed in October that he has stage four pancreatic cancer. He recently retired from St John's Church, Newland, after 26 years as vicar. In a statement, Michael Tinker said of his father, 'His and our hope is secure. It's been an intensely painful time, but the gospel has never felt so real.'

### GideonsUK rebranded

Following a split with Gideons International in 2019, the UK branch of the charity which distributes Bibles to hotels, schools, and hospitals has changed its logo and its name to 'GOOD NEWS for Everyone'. The split came after GideonsUK allowed women to become members, which is against current policy of Gideons International.

### Stanton Lees Bible School

The annual three-day Bible School meetings at Stanton Lees, Derbyshire, were held in September. Dr David Allen preached two sessions from John 17, and Pastor Lawrence Kennedy (recently retired from Ballee Baptist Church, NI) preached four sessions on 'Staying close to the Shepherd'. The final session was given by Dr Allen on Luther at Worms.

### LCM ministry appointments

London City Mission recently appointed Revd Dr Jason Roach as Director of Ministries and Carl Knightly as Director of Church Networks. Jason, a medical doctor by background, formerly pastored The Bridge Church in Battersea. Carl was formerly CEO of 'Faith in Later Life', an LCM organisation focusing on reaching older people with the gospel.

## Revd Joe Hall inducted in Bon Accord, Aberdeen

**By Michael Bowman**

By the Friday, all the invitations had gone out and plans been made, but who would turn up? Would Joe and Susy be there, or the guest speakers? What sort of turnout would there be?

These questions faced the organisers planning the event the following day.

Why the concern? This was to be the largest congregational gathering since the first Covid lockdown back in March 2019, and only a few weeks had passed since the one-metre social distancing rule had ended.

But thanks to the providence of God, all went to plan on 28 August. Around 200 people attended Bon Accord on what was a solemn yet very joyful occasion.

The worship service was conducted by the Presbytery Moderator Revd David Randall (Falkirk FC).

Taking 2 Timothy 4:1-8 as his text, he emphasised the



centrality of preaching in the context of the majesty of God and the loveliness of Christ.

Joe answered the standard questions, was duly ordained with the laying on of hands, and happily inducted to the congregation of Bon Accord.

It was an encouragement to the young new minister to have his three predecessors contribute to the proceedings.

Revd Alex MacDonald passed on his good wishes

and reminisced about his own experience in the city centre congregation – a time that he remembered with fondness even if the task seemed intimidating at the outset.

Revd Iver Martin (ETS Principal) addressed the new minister, expressing his joy at seeing Joe installed at Bon Accord. He referred to piety, priority, preaching, and people skills as four things to be mindful of.

He also exhorted the congregation to receive, love, respect, and encourage Joe in the work he has been called to do.

Revd David MacPherson sent greetings from Peru by pre-recorded video, saying he would like to be there but didn't relish the idea of spending a fortnight in a quarantine hotel at great expense. His watchwords were 'listen' and 'enjoy'.

Further words of encouragement were given by Revd Jerry Middleton, who spoke on behalf of Gilcomston and the wider local churches.

Pre-planned in the light of Covid restrictions, the Kings Community Church building was the venue for the after-church teas where each received an excellent selection of edible goodies in a box.

The celebratory occasion and the timing (at the end of a long period of Covid restriction) made this a special and happy time of fellowship.

## 14 pastors attend induction at Hayes Lane Baptist Church



**By Gary Clayton**

In September, Christians from Ashford, Bradford-on-Avon, Otford, Twickenham, and Reading attended the induction of Daniel Jarvis at Hayes Lane Baptist Church in Bromley, Kent.

The 170 attendees included 14 current and former pastors, with 70 others viewing the livestream service on YouTube.

The 29-year-old pastor replaces David Hircock, who faithfully served HLBC for over 20 years.

Pastor Gerard Hemmings of Amyand Park Chapel, Twickenham, explained how Dan joined their church in 2017, having come from Carey Baptist Church, Reading.

Having begun training for pastoral ministry in 2019, Dan's 'passion for the Lord deepened as he grew in Christlikeness'.

HLBC Elder Johnny Gooch spoke movingly about how God had shepherded the church throughout the pandemic, meeting its needs and leaving the members

'indebted to God's kindness in leading us to a man of his choosing'. Former pastor David Hircock gave notice of his retirement in 2019, triggering the search for a replacement.

In God's providence, Bill James, Principal of London Seminary, recommended Dan to the elders.

In November 2020, Dan, Justine, and their son Josiah visited HLBC so he could preach there. However, because of Covid, the number of those present was necessarily small, and conversation 'was brief and masked'.

Following some 'getting-to-know-you' sessions on Zoom, Dan preached for three consecutive Sundays, and it became clear that he'd been sent to the church 'for such a time as this'. On 24 February 2021, HLBC's members voted in favour of offering Dan the pastorate.

Invited to give his side of the story, Dan recalled his conversion under the ministry of Robert and Paul Oliver, and his growing desire to work in God's harvest field.

He served at Bradford-on-Avon, then worked as a trainee at Carey Baptist Church from 2015 to 2017.

Later, having taught RE at Fulham Boys School, Dan served as minister-in-training at Amyand and studied at London Seminary.

Having preached regularly during lockdown and watched HLBC services online, Dan and Justine became convinced that 'this is where the Lord would have us'.

Led by Gerard Hemmings, Dan then confirmed his faith in God and commitment to HLBC – the church affirming its commitment to Dan, with HLBC's four elders praying for his ministry and family.

James Muldoon, Carey Baptist's pastor, then spoke from Mark on the importance of serving God with expectancy and faith.

'In your day of trouble,' he told the packed church, 'choose to exercise faith, and experience Christ wrapping his arms around you.'

The joyous two-hour service ended with friends and family enjoying fellowship and food in the chapel garden.

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Tel: 07476 345705  
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Church website: [www.westhoughtonevangelical.com](http://www.westhoughtonevangelical.com)

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Pastor: Gerard Hemmings

### AMYAND PARK CHAPEL

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Whitchurch Road Cardiff CF14 3LZ

T: 029 2061 7738

E: [office@heath-church.org](mailto:office@heath-church.org)

W: [www.heath-church.org](http://www.heath-church.org)

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#### Youth Conference: 22–25 April

Speakers: David Campbell, Simon Curry, Conrad Mbewe

#### Ministers' Conference: 25–28 April

Theme: 'Communion with God'

Speakers: David Campbell, Conrad Mbewe, Robert McCollum Jr., Robert Strivens, Meirion Thomas

Yarnfield Park, Staffordshire

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## Malaysia: Audio Bibles and Covid aid bring joy to remote regions

Audio Bibles have been distributed, together with Covid aid, in areas of rural Malaysia – sparking demand for many more Bibles.

Christian groups linked to Open Doors UK have made long journeys to remote villages deep in the jungle, which are often overlooked by the national healthcare system.

Open Doors local partners, together with other Christians, started a relief programme for the indigenous communities and Christians in these villages.

The relief aid consists of food, clothing, masks, and sanitisers – and audio Bibles for Christians.

'Many have expressed that they are very happy that we put the spiritual aspect alongside with the social aspect for the indigenous people,' said an Open



**Remote Malaysian village receive audio Bibles** (Credit: Open Doors UK)

Doors partner. A lot of the indigenous believers have not previously had such easy access to Scripture, and most of the community are illiterate.

Others are now asking for the Bible. One local partner has received an order of 500 new audio Bibles to distribute in the area.

A further two churches have decided to adopt the use of audio Bibles for their own ministry to indigenous people.

So has a group working with refugees. And six other groups have also expressed an interest.

Following the high demand for these audio Bibles, Open Doors partners are

looking into translating the Bible into other indigenous languages.

That way, those who aren't as fluent in Malaysia's national language will be able to hear God's Word in their own local language.

Open Doors partners are working with different Christian leaders and local organisations to meet these demands.

They're hoping that the audio Bible will continue to impact many more individuals and families, so that God's Word will spread across rural parts of Malaysia.

Malaysia sits at 46th place on the Open Doors World Watch List. Converts from Islam to Christianity experience the most persecution, as every ethnic Malay is expected to be Muslim. These believers are often forced to hide their faith and meet in secret.

## Europe: Top court to hear cases against 'disproportionate' Covid worship bans

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) is set to decide whether worship bans which were imposed in Greece and Croatia during 2020 were lawful or not.

In cases currently sitting with the ECHR, the court is being asked to rule on whether worship restrictions during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic went beyond keeping citizens safe.

Lawyers for the claimants say the governments of Croatia and Greece imposed 'disproportionate' bans which affected freedom of religion.

Legal advocacy organisation ADF International has supported

similar legal challenges against blanket bans in other European nations, as well as in Latin America and Africa.

Robert Clarke, deputy director of ADF International, expressed his hope the ECHR would 'uphold the rights of all people to live out their faith'.

As reported by *Evangelical Times*, in March this year Scotland's top civil court found that the nation's restrictions on public worship were unlawful.

And the Chilean Supreme Court ruled that Covid-19 restrictions were applied in a discriminatory manner against believers in Chile.

Similar court actions are currently underway in



**Advocate Robert Clarke**  
(Credit: ADF International)

Uganda, Ireland, and South Africa, supported by ADF International.

## Haiti: Evangelical pastor shot, son killed, and hostages still not freed

An evangelical pastor has been injured and his son killed in a shooting in Haiti, as the country falls further into the grip of criminal gangs.

Stifinson Stanis, who works at the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Port-au-Prince, was travelling home with his family when gunmen attacked the vehicle.

His younger son was shot dead, but he and his older son survived and are now recovering from gunshots.

Haitian gangs have filled a power vacuum created by the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July.



**Stifinson Stanis**  
(Credit: stephaiti.net)

A group of 17 Christian missionaries from the US and Canada remain in captivity, having been kidnapped by a gang demanding \$17 million.

## Myanmar: Baptist and Presbyterian churches set on fire by military shelling



**Salai Za Uk Ling**  
(Credit: BBC News / YouTube)

Baptist and Presbyterian churches are among those to have been damaged by a fire caused by military shelling in Myanmar.

On 30th October, the Myanmar military – the Tatmadaw – shelled the town of Thantlang in the largely Christian Chin State.

The shelling caused fires that destroyed or damaged more than 160 homes and three church buildings.

According to *Myanmar Now*, the town had already been largely evacuated owing to the threat.

Religious freedom group Barnabas Fund says this latest attack is one of at least 20 similar cases documented by human rights groups and media outlets.

In each case, Myanmar's military government has been accused of deliberately targeting Christians, pastors and church leaders, church buildings, and other Christian sites.

According to Salai Za Uk Ling, deputy director of the Chin Human Rights Organization, the shelling constitutes a war crime against civilian property.

Uk Ling said, 'The extensive destruction of civilian property, carried out wantonly and not justified by any military necessity, represents war crimes and grave breaches of international humanitarian law.'

The comments were backed up by Ned Price, a spokesman for the US State Department, who called the shelling 'abhorrent'.

He said this underscored the 'urgent need for the international community to hold the Burmese military accountable and take action to prevent gross violations and abuses of human rights, including preventing the transfer of arms to the military'.

It is widely reported that ethnic-minority Christians have suffered persecution and violence in Buddhist-majority Myanmar for many years, and this has only increased since the February 2021 military coup.

Barnabas Fund quoted a pastor from the Chin Baptist Convention, who said, 'The coup has affected our ability to safely and freely worship. People worry that they will be attacked or bombed while they are praying.'

## Letters to the Editor

# ET Comment

## Encouraging words, but where's the detail?

It is encouraging to read what the government has written in its public consultation document on criminalising so-called 'conversion therapy'. They say they don't want to catch ordinary church practices. Nor do they intend to stop parents from bringing up their children in accordance with biblical values. And they say, 'simply expressing the teachings of a religion will not constitute conversion therapy.'

However, the consultation document is very light on specific details. So Christians must keep pressing the government to make good on these promises. If you haven't already done so, and if the deadline of 10 December is not yet past, ET would urge you to respond to the consultation. The website [letuspray.uk](http://letuspray.uk) makes it easy for you to respond.

But keep an eye on the Scottish Parliament. There are separate plans to introduce a ban on 'conversion therapy' north of the border. And the ban there may be much broader and more dangerous than in England and Wales. Activists know they could get more of what they want from the government in Edinburgh than the one in London.

A committee in the Scottish Parliament has been taking evidence on this issue. And the evidence presented by one liberal church leader shows the real intention behind this proposal. Revd Fiona Bennett of Augustine United Reformed Church in Edinburgh says a ban on conversion therapy 'would be very, very helpful' in pushing a pro-LGBT theology in the church.

That's it in a nutshell. They want to criminalise their theological opponents. They want to silence the Bible's teaching on sexual ethics. They want to handcuff faithful ministers of the gospel. That is why this is such an important issue.

So yes, we are encouraged by what the Westminster government has said. But without the details, we must keep on praying and acting to defend free speech and religious liberty – and do so throughout the whole of the UK.

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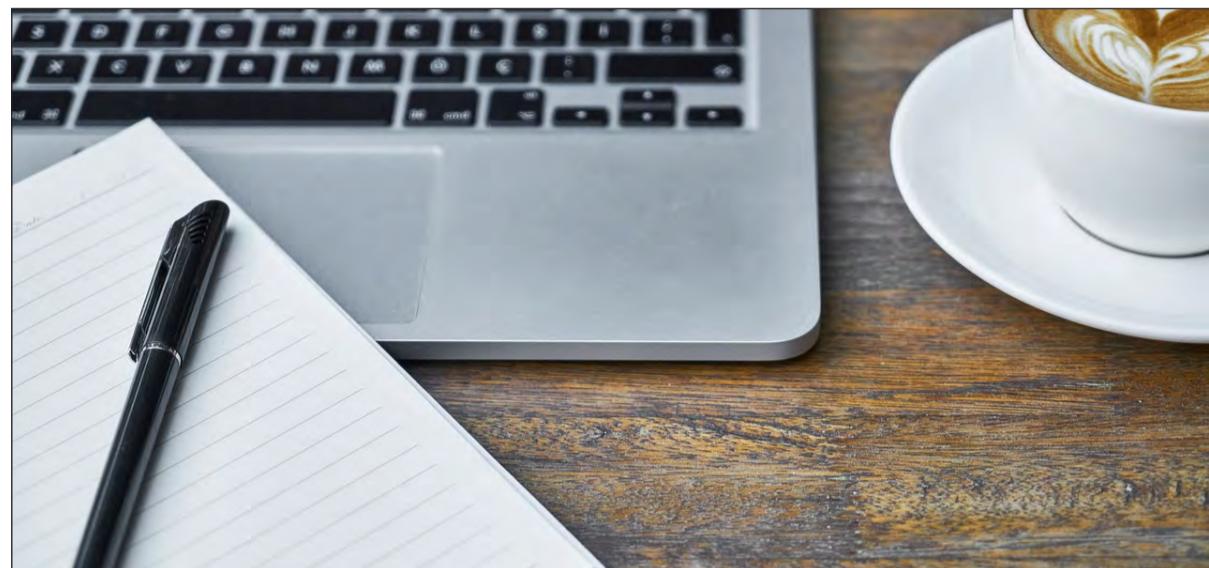
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# Letters to the Editor

Please email your letters to [letters@evangelical-times.org](mailto:letters@evangelical-times.org)  
Please include your name and address.



### Covid-19 vaccines

**Editor's Note** – We have received a large volume of correspondence in response to Celia Tooth's letter published in the November edition of ET. Rather than reproduce a selection, we have decided to print a summary to reflect the general points that have been raised.

*In Celia Tooth's letter, she called on Christians to take the vaccine as an act of love towards those who are more vulnerable to the virus. While some letters were supportive of that point of view, most expressed concerns.*

*Several correspondents pointed out that taking the vaccine ought to be a matter of individual Christian liberty. They said there were several grounds for conscientious objection to the vaccine, including the use of stem cells in the vaccine's development phase which are derived from an aborted foetus and the shortened timeframe of the vaccine's development.*

*Furthermore, a number of correspondents said that no one should be pressurised into receiving a medical treatment that they do not wish to receive. And they added that a person's vaccine status should not be an issue of division between believers.*

*We trust the above is a fair summary of the correspondence that has been received. Nothing in that summary should be assumed to reflect the editorial position of ET. But we would just note that this debate has the capacity to*

*become divisive. So we would all do well to heed the wise words of James 1:19: 'let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.'*

### Good cover-up

**SIR** – The article by Megan Hill in the October edition of *Evangelical Times* on 'The modesty conversation we need to have' is the wisest piece of writing I have read in modern times on this topic.

It is written in total accord with Titus 2:3-5: 'Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, busy at home, to be kind and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.'

What we wear should not malign the Word of God. That statement is about as far as I can go as a retired male pastor.

Of course, we must not make victims responsible for crimes committed against them. But how do we counsel young men who want to live pure lives and who find some clothing worn by the opposite sex too stimulating of desire to avoid looking at a woman lustfully?

Since Jesus said, 'If your right eye causes you to sin, gorge it out and throw it away' (Matthew 5:29), then surely it is not too much to ask a young woman to consider helping her admirers to control themselves.

Christians are the light of the world and, therefore, rejoice in taking the lead before a generation easily drawn by readily available pornography.

**Revd Richard Harrison**  
Pontypool, South Wales

### LGBT compromise

**SIR** – I am sure that many agree that our lives as Christians should be governed by the inspired Word of God and prayer.

Despite this, I have seen nothing that shows the Methodist Church and the Church in Wales have done this in their decision to bless same-sex 'marriage'!

The dangers of this are many! It can only lead to further dilution of God's message. It also saddens me that in the marriage debate no consideration is given to the possible consequences when same-sex couples have children which immediately brings in a third party (namely the egg or sperm donor). What effects may this have upon the child's future identity?

We know that the kingdom of God will never end, but that doesn't mean that churches or denominations won't if they continue to disobey or dilute God's Word.

**Michael Owen**  
Bolton

### Appreciation

**SIR** – Just read November's ET. I loved the articles on dreams, which TV films to watch, and 'The State of the Nation'. Keep up the good work!

**Dean McBride**  
Walworth, London

# Book Reviews



## Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

Christian enlightenment and encouragement for a special season

## Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year: Christian enlightenment and encouragement for a special season

**Timothy Cross**  
DayOne Publications  
206 pages; £5.00  
ISBN:978-1-84625-680-6

This is an excellent book which does what it says: it encourages Christians for both Christmas and the New Year. There are 30 chapters, each four to five pages long: 15 on the theme of Christ's birth and 15 for the New Year. It is a lovely blend of solid Bible doctrine and devotional application.

Each chapter ends with three points to reflect on, which remind the reader to pause and think again rather than rush on.

The Christmas chapters cover some familiar themes under catchy headings. They are always engaging and point to Christ and the great salvation truths. For instance, we learn how Jesus is the true 'son of my sorrow' (Genesis 35:18 – a reference to Rachel giving birth at Bethlehem), and how

Bethlehem ('house of bread') and Ephrathah ('fruitful') point to the Lord's Supper.

The New Year chapters include headings like, 'The unknown year ahead', 'One day at a time', and 'Peace: the lasting legacy of Jesus'. Here, again, are many truths which point to the character of God, the sufficiency of Jesus, and the promised blessing and support which all believers can know as they go forward into the New Year. These chapters will be especially

helpful to those with particular problems, worries, and trials, but they are also a reminder to every Christian that our times are in God's hands and we must trust him for the future.

In our modern pressurised world, here is an ideal book for every Christian. Try reading a chapter a day from mid-December to mid-January.

**Paul Relf**  
Chatham

## The Legendary Casey Jones and other American Folktales

**Geoffrey Thomas**  
Reformation Lightning  
112 pages; £7.99  
ISBN:978-1-83818-830-6

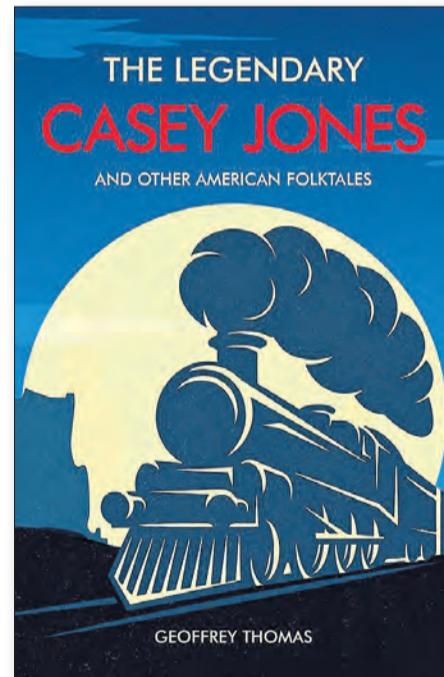
This is a colourful collection of ten American folktales, each one told in rich detail and followed by a short message about Jesus Christ.

For example, the first story, 'Beware of the Words, Smiles and Frowns of Men', is about a naïve farmer who is repeatedly deceived by a lying blacksmith. Geoff Thomas then tells a contrasting gospel message about the Lord Jesus, explaining how everything Jesus said is true, especially about his own death and resurrection.

Another short story, the American legend of Casey Jones, will appeal to children interested in trains, as Thomas describes the specifics of the locomotives of 19th century Mississippi. Casey Jones was a train engineer who gave his life in a train accident to save the lives of his passengers.

There naturally follows the story of Jesus: 'Just like Casey Jones, he did not abandon the train, jumping off the locomotive and leaving all the passengers to a grisly fate. He stayed there, refusing to leave his position, becoming the one who took all the danger and death so that none of those he cared about perished' (p.80).

The stories are short and largely accessible for children, although some of the vocabulary is a little ambitious for younger readers. They are told in a warm 'grandfatherly' style and would



be great as bedtime stories, being read and explained by an adult. Some of the text is slightly dense and children may struggle to enjoy them on their own.

Recommended for children aged 7–10 years old.

**Rachel March**  
Bradford

***'These would be great as bedtime stories.'***

## A Holy Minister: The life and spiritual legacy of Robert Murray M'Cheyne

**Jordan Stone**  
Christian Focus Publications  
192 pages; £11.99  
ISBN:978-1-52710-646-8

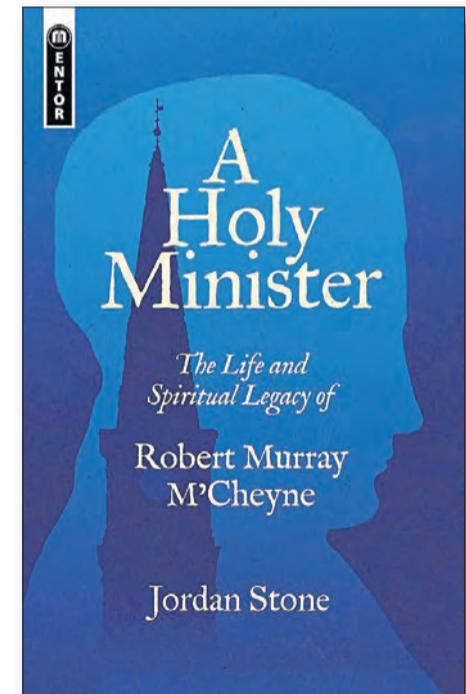
During his life and after his early death, Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813–43) was a legend in Scotland and beyond. His life was like a comet, brilliant and captivating.

Jordan Stone divides this new biography into three parts: 'A Life of Holiness', 'Foundations for Holiness', and 'A Ministry of Holiness'. His main aim is to uncover the reasons for the celebrated personal holiness of M'Cheyne and the effect it had on his life and labours.

M'Cheyne's pursuit of holiness was based on communion with Christ. His favourite book of Scripture was the Song of Songs, which he regarded as a parable about Christ and his church. Stone explores his subject's pursuit of Christ through the means of grace and suggests that M'Cheyne's rationale was distinctive. He saw the means of grace as primary pathways for loving communion between Christ and his people, like 'trysts' – secret meetings between lovers.

The book also focuses on his preaching of Christ, which was characterised by urgency, winsomeness, and tenderness. M'Cheyne was a preacher who freely offered Christ and who revelled in declaring Christ's love for sinners. He was an earnest and effective evangelist in home visitation and among children, and his church in Dundee enjoyed a period of revival in 1839 while he was engaged in a mission of enquiry in Jerusalem.

Not everyone will agree with M'Cheyne's reasons for defending the



Sabbath day (he regarded Scotland as a covenanted nation, a second Israel). Nor do readers need to share his premillennial views to profit from reading this biography.

Today's generation of Christians needs to know and learn from the life of this remarkable man so used by God. Stone outlines seven lessons from M'Cheyne, beginning with the centrality of his love for Christ. Though written primarily for preachers, every Christian who reads this volume will be challenged to pray for preachers of Christ, that they will be marked as men of sincerity and Holy Spirit unction.

**Austin Walker**  
Derby

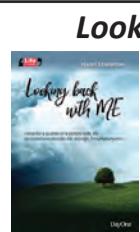


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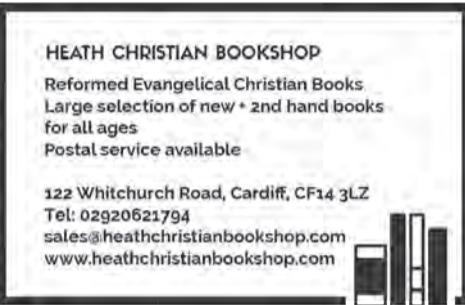
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### Looking back with ME

Living for a quarter of a century with the neuro-immune disorder ME (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis) by Hazel Stapleton. Published by Day One. Available on Amazon as a Kindle book. [www.oneaglewingss.me.uk](http://www.oneaglewingss.me.uk)



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Adverts should be sent to:  
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### PASTOR (FULL TIME) REQUIRED

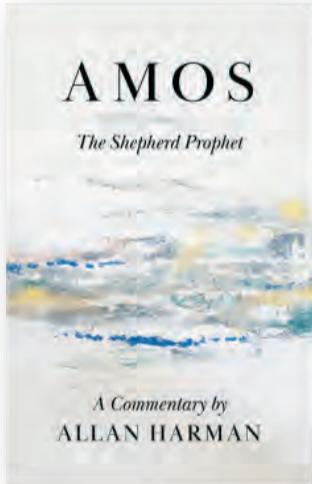
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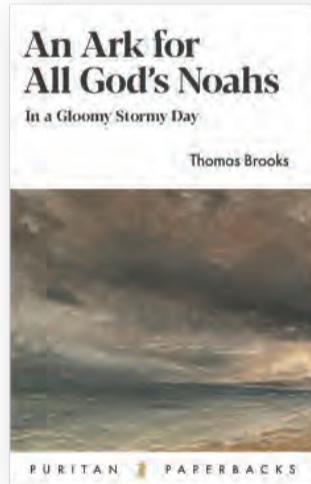
We look to God to make known to us His appointed servant. We are most mindful of the Scripture – ‘except the Lord build the house they labour in vain that build it’ (Psalm 127:1).

Applicants should send their C.V. to Barrie Gillam:  
E-mail: [barriejohnngillam@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:barriejohnngillam@hotmail.co.uk)

### NEW RELEASES



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Allan Harman  
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176pp. | £6.75



*An Ark for All God's Noahs in a Gloomy Stormy Day*  
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*The Child's Story Bible*  
Catherine F. Vos  
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*Transfiguration and Transformation*  
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# Evangelical Times

SPECIAL CHRISTMAS EDITION

December 2021

## Rescued from a life of drink and cocaine

### **Yvonne Edwards**

By August 1995 my attempts to run my own life in my own way and under the guise of my own very fluid moral code had landed me in hospital hopelessly and helplessly ruled by alcohol and cocaine.

Things had started so well. I'd been born into a loving, stable family and received a very good education which opened the door to many opportunities. I worked hard and enjoyed my career for many years.

I had married a kind, gentle, honest, hardworking man, and we had three beautiful children. But from my teens to mid-thirties, alcohol and drugs had subtly and gradually taken on increasing importance.

Looking in from the outside, all appeared well and even successful. A loving husband and children, a large home in the suburbs, cars, holidays, disposable income. As a wise lady once said to me, the 'shop window' looked good, but what was going on in the stock room?!

Scratch the surface and you would find a very loyal husband trying to hold me and our home together, constantly covering up and making excuses for my appalling drunken behaviour, unpredictability, and unreliability.

During my thirties I had every type of intervention available: numerous trips to the doctor, relapse prevention, talking therapies, and on and on. Always, after brief intervals of sobriety in which my family's hope would be renewed, I would drink again.

My neighbour was a retired Christian minister. He would kindly visit, leave me little books and leaflets (which remained very much unread), and also talk to me (I didn't listen).

Anybody who tried to speak of God was summarily dismissed – my atheistic belief system left me unwilling and unable to entertain the idea of God. My childhood encounter with 'religion' had rendered me stony-hearted.

I'd always been driven by a wild optimism and zest and enthusiasm for life – a real Type A personality with great self-belief in my ability to overcome life's hurdles and obstacles.

I had travelled and lived overseas in my early twenties and made friends easily (although didn't always manage to sustain these friendships due to my increasingly bad behaviour). I had a phoenix-like ability to rise and rebuild from one self-imposed crisis to another.

Continued on page 2



**Yvonne Edwards**

## The pale blue dot

### **Geoff Chapman**

In the 2015 film *The Martian*, astronaut Mark Watney is left behind on Mars when the *Aries III* space mission goes wrong.

Initially, the crew of *Aries III*, returning to Earth, believe that Watney is dead, but when he finds a way to communicate with Earth, a rescue mission is launched to bring him home.

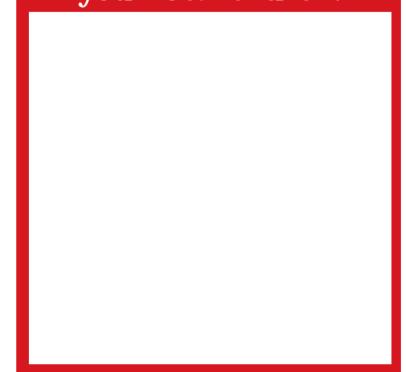
After many problems and set-backs, Watney is eventually rescued and brought back to Earth.

Science fiction has persuaded many people that aliens exist and that we aren't alone in the universe. This belief is largely fuelled by the theory that life will arise by chance if conditions are right, and that, once established, beings capable of space travel will eventually evolve, although there is no evidence this can happen.

The SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) project has been running for many

*Continued on page 2*

This newspaper has been distributed by your local church:



## Testimonies

### The pale blue dot

(Continued from page 1)

years, scanning the heavens for non-random radio signals which would be interpreted as having come from an intelligent source. Yet no signals have been detected.

When we consider the 'fine-tuning' of so many things which make life on Earth possible, the chance of finding other Earth-like planets seems exceedingly remote.

There are so many features that point to Earth having been designed for human habitation. The Bible says: 'He who fashioned and made the earth... did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited' (Isaiah 45:18).

Christians also believe the earth is special in another way: 2,000 years ago God stepped into history in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, to save a world that had been ruined by human sin and folly.

In 1990, the *Voyager 1* space probe took a remarkable photograph as it left our solar system. It was Earth – a tiny dot suspended in a sunbeam.

This photograph became known as the Pale Blue Dot. Astronomer Carl Sagan said, 'That's here. That's home. That's us... All of human history has happened on that tiny pixel.'

He also commented, 'In our obscurity – in all this vastness – there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.'



Source: Shutterstock

Sagan was mistaken. At Christmas we celebrate the fact that help has 'come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves'.

It came in an amazing and unique way: a tiny baby, born in Bethlehem. Much more amazing than the rescue mission depicted in *The Martian* or hypothetical visits by aliens!

**'The Creator entered his creation to lift us from the hopelessness of sin.'**

Jesus left the glory of heaven to become one of us. The Creator entered his creation to lift us from the hopelessness of sin and make it possible for us to have a relationship with himself through his death and resurrection.

'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him

shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

This is the real message from 'out there' which the world needs to hear. Let's take time this Christmas to contemplate the wonder of God becoming man, admit our need of God's forgiveness, and embrace the free gift of salvation and eternal life which came at such a great cost.

### Rescued from a life of drink and cocaine

(Continued from page 1)

I met my husband-to-be in my late twenties, and, having fallen in love, I had no doubt I could put my hedonistic and wild past behind me, settle down, and be a good wife and mother. I was wrong.

In fact, my drinking increased and I steadily spiralled into an at-home drinker, hiding my bottles, lying to my husband, and attempting to maintain a veneer of respectability.

The optimism and enthusiasm of my earlier days evaporated and I was left with a sense of hopelessness and futility – the fight had gone out of me and I was resigned to drinking myself to death. How dark it was!

I had a deep love and affection for my husband and my dear children, but even this was insufficient to stop me drinking.

At the end of August 1995, I was admitted to hospital very underweight and with an enlarged liver which rendered me a strange hue of yellow. After a few days free from alcohol and cocaine, I began to feel a little better and was allowed to walk in the grounds of the hospital, which were very peaceful.

I knew in my heart I was the author of my own downfall and did not blame anybody else. But I also knew from past experiences that it was inevitable I would drink again, no matter how deep was my desire not to.

I returned to my room and opened the bedside drawer looking for something to read, hopeful I might find a glossy fashion or beauty magazine. I found a Bible.

I'd seen a Bible before and remembered reading Bible stories at school – Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Moses, Jesus's birth (Christmas nativity) and his death (at Easter). I'd consigned it all to the box marked 'myth and fable'.

However, I fanned through the pages and stopped at a story in Luke's Gospel. I began to read of Jesus dining with a Pharisee (Luke 7:36 and onwards).

As I read the words, 'A woman in the town who led a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume,' I was overwhelmed by the knowledge and dread of myself as a sinner. I suddenly realised that was what was wrong with me.

I was overcome by great sorrow. I knelt by my bed weeping, and continued to read through the story of Jesus's encounter with this sinful woman. I realised that God had made me and I had spent all my life turning my back on him. My grief was so heavy and I cried and cried, saying, *Please, please forgive me.*

As I read this short story, I saw that Jesus forgave the sinful woman and I began to sense his forgiveness and love for me. At that moment in time my life

was eternally changed. The peace of God entered my heart, mind, and soul.

As the night came, I was talking to God and asking him not to be gone in the morning, pleading with him not to leave me. I felt fearful of sleep, but I slept peacefully and soundly.

God was there in the morning, and he has been there every day and night ever since. Some 26 years have passed and God has been faithful to his promise to never leave nor forsake me.

I went home to my family as a Christian wife, mother, and daughter, sober and with a heart thankful to God for his amazing love. I joined a local church and was baptised in November 1996.

The wonderful gift of being sober, the desire for alcohol and drugs completely removed, pales into insignificance when I reflect on the vast forgiveness of God and the price my dear Saviour paid at Calvary 'to save a wretch like me'. This is the true miracle of a sinful woman forgiven by God.

# Gentle but persistent: pursued by God

**Benjamin Saunders**

My childhood was, in many respects, fairly typical for a poor, working-class family: my father worked multiple jobs for us to get by; my mother took my siblings and me to school and looked after the home; and life was plain.

Despite all that might be expected to follow my formative years in a gritty, post-industrial town, I actually grew up to be quiet, gentle, and reserved. My earliest memories are ones of being in the corner or on the outside of a group. I was not confident, and I never wanted the attention of being the person at the front.

Although a shy and nervous boy, lacking confidence in anything public, I was always confident in my own abilities. My confidence above all rested in my intelligence: I was certain to have an excuse for every wrong, an answer to every question, and the final word in any discussion.

Even though I disliked being centre stage, I would dominate a debate or argument and, more often than not, do everything I could to showcase my understanding of the topic and to make everyone else involved look as stupid as possible.

From a very young age I remember feeling that I had something important to give to the world and would go out of my way to try to find it and share it. I wrote and performed music, did public speaking, and involved myself in politics, all while feeling uncomfortable with anything public.

To most people who knew me, I would appear to be wholly confident in myself even when I didn't have the skills to warrant such confidence. But in private I loathed myself: replaying the failures of my life many times over and in despair at having to live with these memories for many years to come.

I sought to overcome these feelings of inadequacy by indulging any desire that I might have, and I put my intelligence to good use in that respect. I was selfish, dishonest, and manipulative. If there was any way to get what I wanted, I was resolute in finding it.



In my late teens, I became more and more depressed and isolated myself from almost everyone. I sought only to try and satiate whatever lust would present itself. At this time I had started reading some anti-Christian books and had easily thrown off the loose shackles that my light Christian upbringing had placed upon my life.

This journey further away from any influence of God intensified when I studied at university and discovered philosophy. I was so taken up by the power, self-indulgence, and pride that philosophers like Nietzsche and Deleuze offered that I really thought I was going to understand the whole world. I would finally have the gift for the world I had sought after.

Within months of finishing my degree I suddenly had a desire to read the Bible. I didn't want it, and did my best to push it away, but it was persistent – gentle, but persistent. It continued, and eventually I succumbed, getting a Bible and opening it randomly in the New Testament.

It had opened at Matthew 5, and once I had read Jesus's

Sermon on the Mount I suddenly knew that these were the real words of a real man. He was not some figure made up to manipulate people; his were not a jumble of teachings from many sources arbitrarily attributed to one name. No – he was a real person, Jesus of Nazareth.

Even though this was significant and God was leading me to salvation, at this point almost nothing in my life changed. I was still proud and covetous and had simply changed my philosophy from Nihilism to Christianity.

From this point, however, God started to bless me in great abundance. He began to stir the hearts of my parents and, most importantly, the heart of my wife. Through my new-found interest she became interested, and the Holy Spirit worked in her over the next few years. Her desire to know God increased, and she was converted shortly after.

After that, a noticeable difference arose: my wife's desire to go to church and meet Christians was strong, whereas I, satisfied in my philosophy, felt differently. I went along to church not unwillingly,

but with the wrong heart and as the critic, rather than the submissive sheep going to be fed.

After one Sunday morning service, I told my wife how little I enjoyed going to church and she responded, 'If you don't like it, pray and ask God to make you like it!'

The sharp point of her remark pierced deeply and on our way home real repentance started to take hold of me: I knew something was wrong with me. This wasn't the remorse I had known in the past, the shame and embarrassment of my failures. Rather, I had sinned against God and I knew what that meant for me.

That afternoon I asked God to change me and he answered powerfully: rather than one service every few weeks, we attended every Sunday. I also began to go to the prayer meetings and wanted to pray, though I was too scared. The revival prayer meeting was a highlight of the month, and I immediately noticed a change related to the church: suddenly they were *my* people and I was *theirs*.

Within weeks, I felt a burden to preach. I tried my best to suppress it, not only because the idea of preaching was terrifying, but because I felt unworthy and utterly incapable of doing it. But the urge continued to grow and became overwhelming and unceasing.

The message I had sought to find within myself was now there: not my own, but God's good news of Jesus Christ. I knew something of the apostle Paul's compulsion: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the good news!'

God has taken my family through severe illness and hard times, helping us, protecting us, and training us for a lifetime's worth of service. After completing studies at London Seminary in June this year, we were able to survey the strength and grace that God had given us.

He had truly enabled us to do what had seemed almost impossible just two years before. God proved, and continues to prove, that since he has given us his only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, he will freely give us all things.

## Features

# The Feast of Purim and the Feast of Christmas



**By Alan Hill**  
Pastor of Lausanne Free  
Church, Switzerland.

Purim is a Jewish feast that commemorates the rescue of the Jewish people from genocide during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus in the 5th century BC.

During Ahasuerus's reign, a man named Haman became a high-ranking official. He was an Agagite and hated the Jews, especially one named Mordecai. This was because 500 years earlier his people had almost been wiped out by the Jewish King Saul.

Haman hatched a plan. He persuaded Ahasuerus to issue a decree for all Jews to be killed. Haman then chose the day for the slaughter by lot: the 13th day of the month of Adar. That was some months away.

But all was not lost for the Jews. Through the providence of God, the new queen of Ahasuerus was a Jewish woman named Esther.

She had been brought up by her uncle Mordecai. With his encouragement, Esther bravely revealed all to the king and the tables were turned: Haman was hanged and Mordecai was given the position previously held by Haman.

Mordecai was also allowed to draft a new decree giving the Jews permission to arm and defend themselves, then attack their enemies on the same day as the previous decree.

So instead of being a day of defeat, the 13th day of Adar became a day of victory.

Mordecai then proposed an annual feast to remember the Jews' great deliverance. It became the feast of Purim (Purim is taken from the Hebrew word that means *lot*).

Now what has this got to do with Christmas?



Source: Shutterstock

Perhaps you have agonised over whether you should celebrate Christmas at all. We are not commanded to remember the birth of Jesus in the Bible. Christmas has also become very commercialised and its true message sidelined by the emphasis on Father Christmas. Moreover, we do not even know the actual date of Jesus's birth.

Many Christians refrain from celebrating Christmas, and I respect their decision. However, I believe the Scriptures give us liberty in deciding whether to celebrate such a day. Paul writes in Romans 14:5-6, 'One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it.'

I also believe that the feast of Purim gives the church warrant to create a feast day to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus.

It is significant that there is no command from God to

add this feast day to the Jewish calendar. Mordecai was no prophet. We read in Esther 9:23: 'So the Jews accepted the custom which they had begun, as Mordecai had written to them.'

It was a custom, not a command – and a custom they were delighted to adopt and continue. It is almost certain that Jesus would have celebrated this feast.

If the Jews accepted Purim as a custom, cannot we Christians also accept Christmas as a custom?

Of course, we should avoid the world's version of Christmas (especially Father Christmas), but should we not seize the opportunity to celebrate the birth of our Saviour and share the gospel?

The feast of Purim also gives us an example of what we can do on such a day.

Esther 9:22 says, 'They should make them days of feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor.' I want us to apply what the Jews do at Purim to help us see what we can do at Christmas.

## Purim was a day of joy and so is Christmas

Why did the Jews have two days of joy? What were they celebrating? They had been saved from certain destruction!

It was their darkest hour since the children of Israel were trapped by the Red Sea in the time of Moses. The Jews were a captive race. They were unable to defend themselves. There seemed no way of escape. But God raised up a deliverer from an unlikely source – a woman named Esther.

What are we remembering on 25 December? The birth of our Saviour, our *deliverer*.

The world was in deep spiritual darkness 2,000 years ago when a baby was born in Bethlehem. At that moment, the spiritual darkness began to be swept away and the chains of sin began to be broken.

The shepherds marvelled, the wise men worshipped, and the angels sang. How they sang! 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill towards man.'

See salvation come down from heaven! See that God

became man to save his people from their sins!

If the Jews celebrated and rejoiced because of their physical, temporary redemption, how much more should Christians celebrate and rejoice because of spiritual, eternal redemption!

But this was not a day of rejoicing for everyone. For the enemies of the Jews it was a day of sorrow and death. They received the punishment that they truly deserved.

Esther 9:5: 'Thus, the Jews defeated all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, with slaughter and destruction, and did what they pleased with those who hated them.'

For millions, Christmas Day is a day of disappointment and sadness. Why? Because those who are not Christians have nothing to celebrate. Yes, they also give each other presents; yes, they also have a slap-up meal; but for what?

If you are not a Christian today and have not repented of your sins and believed in the Lord Jesus, then you have nothing to celebrate at Christmas.

Your presents will eventually break, the food will be gone, the tree will die, and what will you have? A hopeless future. All that awaits you is eternal death and eternal punishment.

But it need not be like that! You can turn Christmas Day from a day of sorrow into a day of joy. We read that this is what happened in the time of Esther. Many of the people in the land became Jews!

How can you turn Christmas day into a day of joy – a joy that will last forever? Become a Christian! Realise that Christ came into the world to suffer death and punishment for your sins so that you don't have to suffer eternal death and eternal punishment.

On the cross Jesus died a substitute's death. He took upon himself the punishment of all those who believe in him. He is the Saviour of the world.

How can you be saved? Jesus tells in the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in

him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

Come to Christ. Confess your sin. Ask him to be your Lord and Saviour.

## 2

### Purim was a time of feasting and presents and so is Christmas

In Esther 9:22, we read that during the feast of Purim families got together, they feasted and gave presents to one another. Doesn't that sound like Christmas?

Why were they doing this? Because we are told in Esther 9:22 that it was a holiday. The original Hebrew literally says, 'a good day'. It was a good day because of their good God. He had saved them from annihilation.

Scripture gives us examples of God's people rejoicing at the goodness of God and having a day of celebration. This occurred after the parting of the Red Sea and the deliverance from Egypt, after David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, and after the revival under Hezekiah.

If the Jews remembered their *physical* redemption, how much more should we remember our *spiritual* redemption?

On Christmas day we remember how we were delivered from sin. The day that Jesus was born was a good day! So children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts – in fact, everyone – may feel the liberty to have a day of feasting and giving of presents.

But as you eat your meal, thank God that the bread of heaven came down to earth. As you enjoy your festive drink, thank God that you have found the water of life. As you give presents, thank God for the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. And do it in a godly way, without going to excess.

## 3

### Purim was a day of helping the poor and so is Christmas

The feast of Purim was not a selfish, self-indulgent day. Esther 9:22 says that they gave gifts to the poor as well.

At Christmastime we should especially take to heart the

words of James 2:14-17: 'What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.'

Spare a few moments now to think about that neighbour who lives alone or that poor shunned immigrant family who live nearby. Can you help them in some small way over Christmas? Could you invite them to join you on Christmas Day? Could you take them to church and then take them home, giving them a meal to remember and gifts to treasure?

So the feast of Purim was a day of joy, a day of feasting and presents, and a day of giving gifts to the poor.

There was one other thing that it became a custom for the Jewish people to do at

the feast of Purim. They read the whole book of Esther, something they still do today. It is quite an event! Whenever the name Haman is read out, the congregation make a noise to blot out his name. Why? Because they are remembering that their great enemy had been defeated.

At Christmas we also remember that the coming of Jesus into the world leads to the blotting out of our great enemies sin and death and hell.

At the end of the service at Purim, the rabbi recites a prayer that begins and ends as follows: 'Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of the Universe... the God who brings salvation.'

We can say amen to that prayer as we remember that it is God who has brought us salvation.

So this Christmas there is no need to feel guilty about celebrating. Attend a Christmas service, have a wonderful Christmas feast, enjoy giving presents, and remember the poor and lonely. Above all, say thank you to God for sending his Son to save us from our sins.

## I assumed I was a Christian

### Robert Chamberlain

Coming from a Christian home and being reared on the Bible from a young age, I came to grow up assuming that I was a Christian.

This was even though my parents made it clear to me that I wasn't automatically a Christian from birth.

Nonetheless, I felt I knew all the answers at Sunday School, and assumed that the God whose existence I took for granted must have been pretty pleased with me.

When I was eight years old, my grandad became a Christian on his deathbed.

I saw the impact this had upon my believing family – that there was peace, hope, and even joy in the face of death.

When he died I wept, but not for him in heaven. I was crying for myself, deserving of hell.

As an eight-year-old, I may not have been a murderer or an addict, but I was certainly self-righteous, and God was in the process of humbling me.



A few days after my grandad 'fell asleep in the Lord', I asked my mum how I could be saved, even though I would have heard the gospel message from her many times before.

Mum quoted the words from 1 John 1:9: 'If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

I prayed to God to forgive me because of Jesus's sacrifice for

me. I immediately felt relief and assurance, but still tearfully (with joy) asked Mum, 'Is that it?'

I think I was expecting lightning and a voice from heaven! But deep down I knew that that was it.

While we often understandably like to focus on the joys of the Christian life, of which I have had many so far, I have also known my fair share of sorrows, including severe mental illness.

One of the side effects of this at one stage was a lack of assurance, until I stumbled across another verse in 1 John: 'When our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows all things' (3:20).

Partly due to ill health, I have yet to find my calling in life, although writing Christian content while 'tentmaking' as a teaching assistant seems to be the way forward for now.

God has been very merciful and gracious to me in not only giving me a measure of good health, but also a good Christian wife, and two daughters whom we are seeking to bring up to know God personally for themselves.

While I'm not guaranteed a future free of sorrows or ill health, God promises never to leave or forsake me, and I seek to serve him wholeheartedly.

# The story of the Müller Homes



**By Stuart Burgess**

Stuart Burgess is a professor of engineering design specialising in mechanical engineering.

Christmas celebrations were very simple in most Victorian orphanages. The Christmas meal was modest and there were few presents. Children who had uncles or aunts might get a few gifts, but children with no relatives would get none.

But things were different at the Müller Homes – the orphanage at Ashley Down in Bristol.

All the presents given to the orphanage were shared so that every single orphan received at least one small present at Christmas.

Sharing with others was one of the Christian principles George Müller taught the children.

Müller also regularly taught the children the way of salvation. Children attended Bible lessons at Sunday School, and prayers of thanks were given every day.

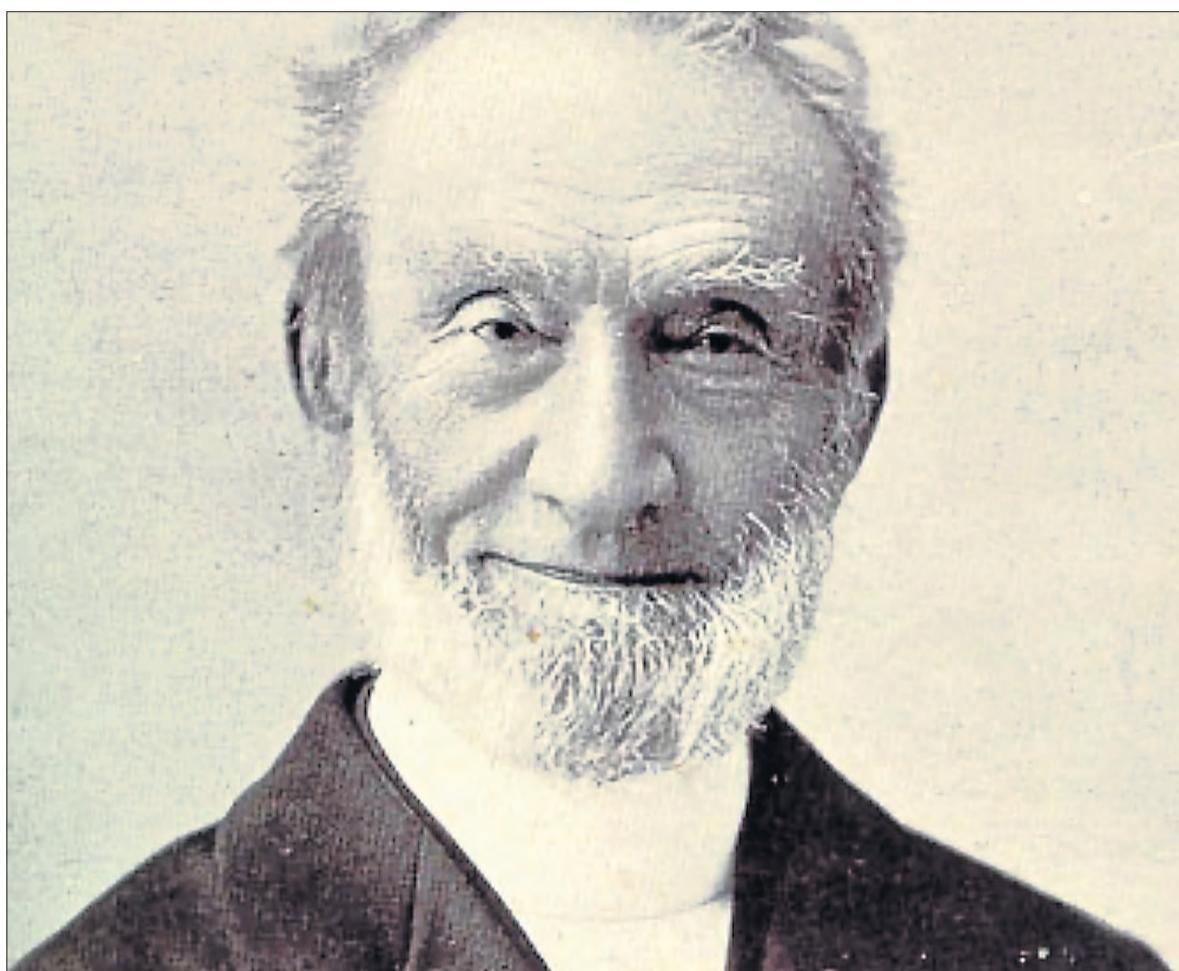
Müller also made sure that each child received a proper education so they could find employment on leaving the orphanage.

Testimonies from the Müller Orphanage show that the children were very happy – not just at Christmas, but all through the year.

## The story of the Müller Homes

The story of the Müller Orphanage is truly remarkable.

In 1829, George Müller came from Prussia to England at the age of 24 as a missionary. After trying out different opportunities for service, Müller settled in Bristol in 1832. He came with little money and had to learn the English language and English culture.



Müller built the Ashley Down orphanage entirely on donations. It has been estimated that the cost of the orphanage would have been over £100 million in today's money. The Müller Homes cared for more than 10,000 children.

Incredibly, Müller never asked for a donation – they just came throughout his ministry. Müller's method was to turn to prayer when he needed resources.

God answered his prayers in the most astounding ways. As well as God providing the financial resources that were needed, there are also accounts of free food being delivered to the orphanage just in time for meals, following the earnest prayer of Müller.

As well as the orphanage, Müller also founded the Scriptural Knowledge Institution for Home and Abroad, with the goal of aiding Christian schools and missionaries and distributing copies of the Bible and Christian tracts. It is recorded that during his life Müller gave away 285,407 Bibles and 1,459,506 New Testaments.

Müller worked in Bristol for 66 years until his death in 1898. Müller's funeral was attended by thousands of people, and many factories were closed out of respect.

Many Christians and non-Christians gave glory to God for

the work of Müller. The *Bristol Times* wrote the following: 'He was raised up for the purpose of showing that the age of miracles is not past.'

To this day, many people in Bristol are aware of Müller and thankful for his work. I know this personally because I grew up in Bristol and have worked for most of my career in Bristol. Also, for 85 years my family had a house next to the cemetery where Müller is buried. We often noticed flowers placed on Müller's grave.

## Why did Müller come?

The story of the Müller Homes raises the question of what caused Müller to come to England as a missionary and do this great work.

This year I gained a fascinating insight into the background of George Müller. In September I went to Halle in eastern Germany where Müller studied. I was invited to speak at a national conference for Christian schools in Germany. Interestingly, one of the biggest Christian schools in Germany is named after George Müller. It has over 2,000 pupils.

As I walked through Halle, it struck me that the town was a very cultured place of learning when George Müller studied there.

Halle was an economic and educational centre in eastern Germany. The Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg is the largest university in that region of Germany (Saxony-Anhalt), and is one of the oldest universities in the world.

Halle also has a classical music tradition that includes one of the world's greatest composers – George Frideric Handel.

## A humble servant of God

Müller could have had a prosperous career in Halle or the surrounding area. He could have enjoyed the rich cultural life of that part of Germany. But Müller came to England on his own to serve God as a missionary.

He was convinced that serving God and following his leading was the most important thing in his life.

I was struck in Halle with how humble Müller was to leave that place to be a missionary. With all due respect, Bristol is not in the same league as Halle in terms of culture and learning. Yet Müller was content to live his life in Bristol, far from his family.

I think one of the best evidences for the existence of God is the way missionaries like Müller are prepared to sacrifice so much to serve God.

## God equips his people for the work

In Halle I discovered another exciting historical fact about George Müller.

To gain experience of Christian service, Müller spent two months living in an orphanage in Halle as a helper. Halle had a famous orphanage created by Augustus Francke around 1700.

Müller saw first-hand how love and education was given to orphans by Christians. Müller was to use that experience to great effect when he came to Bristol.

It so happened that the conference I spoke at in Halle took place in the historic orphanage where Müller stayed. It was very moving to speak in the actual building where Müller learned about the workings of an orphanage.

It was entirely within God's plan to equip Müller with the skills and knowledge he would need in later life in Bristol. It is incredible to think that the orphanages in Bristol had their roots in Halle.

The Bible has many examples of God preparing people for service many years in advance. Moses was prepared by God for many years to be a leader of the children of Israel. King David was prepared by God to be a leader while he was a shepherd. These examples show that God is in control of all things and can always use circumstances for the good of his kingdom.

## The joy of serving God

Today there are still missionaries who sacrifice their careers and comfort to work for God in foreign lands with foreign languages. Each one is prepared by God to serve in the place where God has sent them. I know of one family which left for Madeira this year to start a new church on that island.

The best thing in life is to know God and be a part of God's plans. The saddest thing in life is not to be a part of God's plans. At the first Christmas there were those who became followers of Jesus and then had the privilege of working for God in his kingdom. Make this Christmas your time to become part of God's plans.

# From despair to deliverance

**Phebby Muwowa**

## Before I trusted Christ

My name is Phebby Muwowa, nee Muyooma. I was born and raised in Mumbwa, a semi-rural community in the Central Province of Zambia.

My earliest recollection of church life was occasional church attendance at Nambala Mission Primary School, run by the United Church of Zambia (UCZ).

Despite having no understanding of God's message of hope for mankind, I continued my not-so-regular attendance at church.

Some years later I went to Chipembi in Chisamba, a boarding secondary school for girls also run by UCZ.

Each day started with corporate devotions before class. I soon found myself joining many clubs within the school. Notable in my religious pursuits was my membership in the Zambia Student Christian Movement. I was baptised by sprinkling by the then school chaplain Mr Lumbama.

A few years later at the Mufulira School of Nursing on the Copperbelt, I quickly joined a local congregation of the UCZ at St John's Church. I also started a prayer meeting on a Wednesday with some of my new friends at the school of nursing.

I was also an ardent member of Mrs Betty McColl's Christian nurses' meeting every Thursday evening. Mrs McColl gave lifts on Sunday evenings to nurses who wanted to attend the church service at Pax Hall. Pax Hall was a Scout hall that was rented out for other activities like church services.

Dr Edward McColl, our consultant gynaecologist/obstetrician at the two mine hospitals (Malcolm Watson and Ronald Ross Hospitals), was also one of the elders at the Pax Hall meeting (Christian Missions in Many Lands).

With this level of religious activity, I had no idea I was headed in the wrong direction spiritually. And so it was rather unsettling, as I continued attending these meetings at Pax Hall, to hear that all my righteousness was as filthy rags before God, and that it is appointed for men to die once, but after this comes judgment.



I was rather troubled at the fact of not knowing while still alive where I would spend eternity when I die. I was feeling the pressure of these big questions of life, but did not know how to resolve them.

## How I surrendered to Christ

One of my student nurse friends called Sinai invited me to an annual Nurses' Christian Fellowship conference in Lusaka.

For some strange reason I was quite reluctant to travel, much to my friend's surprise.

**'It was rather unsettling to hear that all my righteousness was as filthy rags before God.'**

Then, to my great relief, I noticed that my turn to work a night shift coincided with the days of the conference. It was a done deal that I would not travel – or so I thought.

However, when the matron, who was not privy to our discussion about the conference, did the final rota, I was allocated to do my night shift a week earlier, and so I was automatically free on the days of the conference.

I found myself in the company of people who had truly experienced spiritual rebirth at the campsite at

Yielding Tree Farm in Lusaka West. It affected me, as I had never before experienced such nervousness and sorrow over my own spiritual condition as when I was in their company.

There was also a certain joy, love, and unity in their midst which somehow both alienated me and also left me longing for what they had.

On the second day of the conference we were put into Bible study groups. We had to answer questions based on the text that was preached on by our main speaker, Michael Eaton, who was an elder at Lusaka Baptist Church. The passage was Ephesians 2, particularly verses 1-10.

Each one of us had to try and answer a question. I was asked to describe the state of someone who has not come alive spiritually, according to the passage of Scripture we were looking at.

And what is their state when they have been delivered from a life of despair? With all the turmoil in my mind at this stage, I did not even try to offer an answer. Instead, it was a desperate cry for help I uttered publicly and unashamedly. I said I could not waste their time by trying to explain anything, as I felt it was much more important for me to work out my own position – meaning I did not even know how to describe my own state. Was I spiritually alive or not?

I did not have much sleep that last night of camp as I thought I would go away with unresolved questions. Though religious, I had no peace within. I had no power to keep myself from going my own way with no thought of God.

I had no appetite for breakfast the following morning. I joined the queue several times and would go to the end of it each time I drew closer to the front.

Unknown to me, a dear sister called Josephine had taken a keen interest in me from day one. She later told me she had been praying for me as soon as she had sensed my need for spiritual help. Like others, she had listened to me give a report on the group in Mufulira; she had noted how I answered during the Bible study and how unsettled and restless I was in the queue for breakfast.

*Continued on page 8*

## Testimonies

### From despair to deliverance

(Continued from page 7)

She asked me if she could have a chat with me. We stepped aside from the queue, and Josephine asked me a key question which I just needed to be asked in order to be helped. She asked me how long I had been a Christian. This helped me to open the floodgates of admission that I had never been a Christian and that by nature I was a child of wrath just as the others who were

separated from God. I confessed that I did not know what to do to find hope for my life.

Josephine explained God's message of hope for the world – for me. She explained how, by putting my trust in Jesus who died on the cross for my sins, I could be set free. I could know God personally. We prayed together under a shrub. It felt so good to be able to pray and experience that peace that was beyond description. Indeed, my burdens were lifted off me at Calvary. It was indeed a move from despair to deliverance.

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

### Changes in my life since I started walking with Jesus

My life is in the hands of God, just like it was before I knew him. I am now at peace with God and with myself, and on my way to heaven once this life is done.

Trials and temptations still come my way, but I have round-the-clock access to my heavenly Father through prayer and the prayers of others for me.

I have a new family: my local church and the church universal. I look at the past and

praise God for how he guided and protected me. I look at the present time and commit myself to him every day and trust him to perform his plans and purposes in my life.

I look to God to give me the grace to follow him whatever happens. I trust him for the future that will extend into an eternity with him. I thank God for the church family, and I pray and long for more people to have spiritual renewal and those already so enlightened to be encouraged to run the race set before them and finish it well by God's power and grace.

## From crime to Christ

### Terry Wighton

My father died when I was seven, leaving my mother with seven children to raise. I was the third youngest, and as a result of the sudden loss of my father, I developed a terrible stammer.

I was sent to a speech therapist who eventually gave up on me after three years. I fell behind in my schooling and left school at sixteen, unable to read or write.

From the time of my father's death, I gradually turned in on myself, growing increasingly angry with the world around me.

School was not about learning, but survival. Fighting and resentment of authority became the name of the game for me.

My first school was a Church of England school, and the only good thing about it was the headmaster who would pray for the pupils each morning at assembly.

When I was thirteen, the family moved to a small village in North Yorkshire called Skelton. My life became unbearable both at school and in the village due to being a London kid.

At sixteen I left school and got a job as a warehouse boy in a small supermarket. I walked out of the job after a year just because I was asked to wear a tie.

### Theft

This foolishness led to two years of unemployment and hardship for my mother and sisters. Due to the depression of the 1970s, there was little hope of ever finding work again. By the time I reached nineteen I had turned to crime and began to steal.

Inevitably, I was caught, and the authorities decided to make an example of me.

At my first trial I found myself facing six months in a detention centre. This



was called the 'short, sharp shock', aimed at breaking a young offender's will. Because I had a lawyer, they adjourned my case until later in the year.

### A mother's prayer

During the night before my second trial I could not sleep and went to my bedroom window. It was dark and I looked up at the stars. I found my attention caught by the sound of someone crying and praying aloud nearby.

It was coming from my mother's bedroom window: *Please God, don't let them send him down. Please God, don't let them send him down.*

These were the words she prayed repeatedly. My mind went back to my headmaster and his prayers for us children. On the day I left that school he had given me a Bible, and its core message of sin and salvation had never left me.

So far in my life, I had pushed Jesus and his gospel away and mocked those who believed.

As I listened to my mother's prayers, a great feeling of guilt and sin came over me. I turned my eyes to the heavens and really prayed for the first time in my life: 'God, if you are really real, get me off for my mother's sake and you can have my soul.'

The day of my trial came, and the Lord answered my prayer, but I still refused to yield my soul to him.

Remarkably, within a few weeks I found work and honest money began to come back into the house. Yet I could find no rest for my soul day or night.

### Turning point

Now, a few years before my trial, my brother had moved back to London and became a Christian. The change within him had amazed me. It was like he had become a new person!

One day I spoke to my mother and told her that I had to leave my job and home and find out if this God of the Bible was true.

My brother's church was the only place I felt I could go to for the truth, so my mother sent me off with her blessings.

My brother's church was full of young Christians about my age. When they talked about Jesus it was as if they knew him personally. They too had found what my brother had found: peace, love, and forgiveness in Jesus.

It was then that, in the quietness of my bedroom, I asked Jesus to forgive me and save me. That day in June of 1979, Jesus completely changed my life!

I was 20 when I put my trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and I am now 62. Over these years I have been privileged to serve him as a Sunday School teacher and deacon at my local church.

I have known sickness and health, joys and sorrows of many kinds, but can say, in all honesty, that there is nothing that compares with that moment when he came into my life in June 1979.

If anyone reading this article might be thinking of calling upon Jesus but is fearful of the change that will come, do not worry. He is a loving and gentle Saviour and longs to bless all that call upon his name.

# Christmas with Isaiah



**By Gary Brady**

Gary is pastor of Childs Hill Baptist Church, London.

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' -Isaiah 9:6*

The first people who thought about Christmas, if you think about it, were those who *looked forward* to the coming of Christ (also known as 'the Messiah'). This was true of Old Testament prophets like Isaiah.

The apostle Peter writes of such men that their prophecies had a divine origin: 'Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man,' he says, 'but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Peter 1:21).

Peter also says that Old Testament prophets 'searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when prophesying' (1 Peter 1:10-11).

Indeed, God told them that they were not serving themselves but Christian people like those around today when they spoke of the things that have taken place in history.

Isaiah is known as the 'evangelical' or 'gospel' prophet because his prophecy contains so many prophecies about the coming of the Messiah (Jesus).

One of the most wonderful is found in Isaiah 9:6. Chapter 8 of Isaiah ends on a very sad note. Isaiah prophesied in dark and dreary days when there was much sin and many troubles. However, God enabled him to look forward to better times.

Isaiah 9 begins with a strong 'Nevertheless'. The chapter's opening verses are full of hope for the future. The hope is so strong and these better times so



Source: Shutterstock

certain that Isaiah writes in the past tense, as though the times of blessing have already come!

Let's look at four aspects of the words in Isaiah 9:6, and then four amazing titles of the Lord Jesus.

## The hope of a child and a son

After the sadness and distress faced by the people in Isaiah 8, we need look nowhere else for hope than the words we read in chapter 9. The great victory that is going to come for God's people will be won through a person. Surprisingly, perhaps, the person is a child. The emphasis is not on the child when he grows up but on the fact of his birth. Once he arrives, all will be well.

He is referred to as both a *child* and a *son*. The word 'child' relates him to his ancestry. He has a mother like us all. 'Son' says that he will be a male, and, it is clear, of the royal line. He is son and heir. The word 'king' is not used – perhaps because the idea of kingship had been so greatly devalued by that time (Judah's kings had so often been reprehensible).

Isaiah has in mind the coming Messiah. God is powerful enough to destroy his enemies

in a moment, but again and again when prophecies come of the means of deliverance, 'a childlike face peers out at us' (in the words of John Oswalt). God overcomes his enemies by humbling himself and becoming vulnerable.

## A son both born and given – both God and man

Two parallel things are said of this child and son. He will be *born* – and centuries later Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem.

But he will also be *given*. God *sent* his Son Jesus into this world. This is what the hymn writer and pastor John Newton called 'the central truth of revelation' that, like the sun, casts its light on everything else.

## A son who would be born and given to those who believe

Is Jesus yours? In Hebrew the emphasis is on the child being born, the son being given, but notice too the repeated *to us*. To us. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther used to emphasise this bit when he preached at Christmas. By *to us* Isaiah means to God's people – to all who trust in him, Jesus has been born.

## The government would be on his shoulders

Isaiah's word for *government* is a rare word in the original language (Hebrew). It basically means that Messiah would be the epitome of princeliness, of executive authority. 'On his shoulders' symbolises bearing rule. The statement comes as no surprise – after all, the child is God's Son. He will reign until all his enemies are put under his feet. Of all people who have lived, we are called to put our confidence in this man.

## Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God

Four amazing names or titles for Messiah follow in Isaiah's prophecy. They are worth long and careful meditation. They show how wonderful Messiah would be. *Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*.

Isaiah lived in days when many thought themselves wise, but were in fact foolish. This is one of the biggest problems facing people today. We are convinced that we are wise and so we have become fools.

Do not make that mistake. It is only by going to the Wonderful

Counsellor, the Lord Jesus Christ, that we can have any hope. Yet how few turn to him! You cannot benefit from his counsel if you refuse to go to him. We all need to humble ourselves and go to him and to his Word for guidance, for wisdom. Jesus is the wisdom of God. Do you seek his counsel daily?

Jesus is also called 'Mighty God'. Do you know God's power at work in your life? Go to Christ and experience it for yourself. It is no good relying on our own power. It is easy to feel strong when all is going well, but think of the future. Are you aware of your own weakness – how easily you fall? It is good to be aware of our weaknesses, for this helps us rely on Christ, the one who gives strength and enables us to stand. Are you relying on his strength rather than your own?

Jesus is a man. He is able to sympathise with us and draw alongside us like no other. Yet he is also Almighty God. He can transform us like no other. He is the perfect Saviour. If we reject him, what hope is there for us when we face God's judgment of our lives when we die?

## Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace

The first two names flow from the name the Messiah is given back in Isaiah 7:14 – Emmanuel ('God with us'). The next two titles bring us to the matter of what this child to be born, this Son to be given, this Wonderful Counsellor, this Mighty God, will bring about when he comes.

To refer to the Son as 'Father' seems strange. The point is that the Messiah will reign *like a father*. And it will be an everlasting reign – if you are looking to the Lord Jesus, he will never be taken from you.

Finally, who is your Prince? Look to Christ, the prince of glory, the prince of life. He has overcome the princes of this earth, the prince of demons.

Do you know peace with God? It is the possession of all who trust in Christ. As Isaiah often says, 'there is no peace for the wicked.' But to those who look to Christ, God says, 'Peace, peace, to those far and near.'

Peace is often spoken of, especially at Christmas. It can be yours in Christ. Peace is not complacency or warm feelings. It is to know forgiveness and every blessing in Christ.

# Born of the Virgin Mary



**By R. C. Sproul**

Dr R. C. Sproul (1939–2017) was founder of Ligonier Ministries and pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Florida.

Along with the great theologian and philosopher Anselm of Canterbury we ask the question, *Cur deus homo? Why the God-man?*

When we look at the biblical answer to that question, we see that the purpose behind the incarnation of Christ is to fulfil his work as God's appointed Mediator.

It is said in 1 Timothy 2:5, 'For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself ...'

Now, the Bible speaks of many mediators with a small or lower case 'm'. A mediator is an agent who stands between two parties who are estranged and in need of reconciliation.

But when Paul writes to Timothy of a solitary Mediator, a single Mediator, with a capital 'M', he's referring to that Mediator who is the supreme Intercessor between God and fallen humanity. This Mediator, Jesus Christ, is indeed the God-man.

In the early centuries of the church, with the office of mediator and the ministry of reconciliation in view, the church had to deal with heretical movements that would disturb the balance of this mediating character of Christ.

Our one Mediator, who stands as an agent to reconcile God and man, is the One who participates both in deity and in humanity.

In the Gospel of John, we read that it was the eternal Logos, the Word, who became flesh and dwelt among us. It was the second person of the Trinity who took upon himself a human nature to work out our redemption.



In the 5th century at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the church had to fight against a sinister teaching called the Monophysite heresy.

The term *monophysite* is derived from the prefix *mono*, which means 'one,' and from the root *phusis*, which means *nature* or *essence*.

The heretic Eutyches taught that Christ, in the Incarnation, had a single nature, which he called a *theanthropic* nature. This theanthropic nature (which combines the word *theos*, meaning 'God,' and *anthropos*, meaning 'man') gives us a Saviour who is a hybrid, but under close scrutiny would be seen to be one who was neither God nor man.

The Monophysite heresy obscured the distinction between God and man, giving us either a deified human or a humanised deity.

It was against the backdrop of this heresy that the Chalcedonian Creed insisted Christ possesses two distinct natures, divine and human. He is *vere homo* (truly human) and *vere Deus* (truly divine, or truly God).

These two natures are united in the mystery of the Incarnation, but it is important according to Christian orthodoxy that we understand the divine nature of Christ

is fully God and the human nature is fully human.

So this one person who had two natures, divine and human, was perfectly suited to be our Mediator between God and men.

An earlier church council, the Council of Nicea in 325, had declared that Christ came 'for us men, and for our salvation'. That is, his mission was to reconcile the estrangement that existed between God and humanity.

It is important to note that for Christ to be our perfect Mediator, the Incarnation was not a union between God and an angel, or between God and a brutish creature such as an elephant or a chimpanzee. The reconciliation that was needed was between God and human beings.

In his role as Mediator and the God-man, Jesus assumed the office of the second Adam, or what the Bible calls the last Adam. He entered into a corporate solidarity with our humanity, being a representative like unto Adam in his representation.

Paul, for example, in his letter to the Romans gives the contrast between the original Adam and Jesus as the second Adam. In Romans 5, verse 15, he says, 'For if by the one man's offense many died, much more

the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many.'

Here we observe the contrast between the calamity that came upon the human race because of the disobedience of the original Adam and the glory that comes to believers because of Christ's obedience. Paul goes on to say in verse 19: 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.'

Adam functioned in the role of a mediator, and he failed miserably in his task. That failure was rectified by the perfect success of Christ, the God-man.

We read later in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians these words: 'And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.'

'However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven.'

'As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man' (1 Corinthians 15:45).

We see then the purpose of the first advent of Christ. The Logos took upon himself a human nature, the Word became flesh to effect our redemption by fulfilling the role of the perfect Mediator between God and man.

The new Adam is our champion, our representative, who satisfies the demands of God's law for us and wins for us the blessing that God promised to his creatures if we would obey his law.

Like Adam, we failed to obey the law, but the new Adam, our Mediator, has fulfilled the law perfectly for us and won for us the crown of redemption. That is the foundation for the joy of Christmas.

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

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## Testimonies

# Soldier of the Cross

**By Mark Reynolds**

Son of a miner, I was born in Wombwell near Barnsley in 1948. My first recollection of anything to do with church was around four years of age with the Boy's Brigade.

When I was five, the family moved to Rawdon, Leeds. My brother and I were taken to the Methodist Sunday School, and I joined the choir. I knew about God, but did not have a personal relationship with him. However, it was among the Methodists that I developed a love for hymns.

In September 1971, I joined the army aged 23. I had previously served six years as a reserve, and I was also married to my wife Jeanette with two children, Paul and Andrew. A third named Colin came later.

I served 22 years with the Royal Corps of Transport and then 20 years as an evangelist with the Soldiers & Airmen's Scripture Readers Association (SASRA).

I am still in ministry today as a Free Church Volunteer Chaplain at an HM Prison and as a chaplain to our local branch of the British Legion. I also take assemblies in nine local schools and run an open-air market stall near Pontefract, offering free Christian literature.

### Conversion

When I joined the army, Jeanette and I were not born-again believers, but if anyone had asked, I would have said Jeanette was a Christian because she had our boys christened and she sometimes went to church.

In 1978 when I was a corporal, I was posted to Bielefeld, Germany, for the second time. During this posting my life and Jeanette's changed dramatically.

Jeanette was in a supermarket and saw someone in uniform. He was Derek Brooks, the SASRA Scripture Reader for 1 British Corps. Along with his wife Heather, they chatted to Jeanette and invited her to their house for coffee. She agreed to stop by their home sometime.

One day as she passed by their house, she prayed (even though she was not then saved): 'Lord, if I go to the Scripture



Reader's house then I want Mark to go with me, because I know I will be different and I want Mark to change too.'

It was not many weeks after when Jeanette got her prayer answered and I learned of her encounter with Derek and Heather Brooks.

A Christian staff sergeant lived near to us. In November 1979, I was ill at home with a bad case of the flu. I asked Jeanette if she would pop across and see this man to give him my sick note and to ask him for something to read.

I liked science fiction or cowboy-themed books, but she came back with *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey. God used this book to convict me of my sin and bring me to Christ.

The words from Ephesians 2:8-9 were also key, breaking me that afternoon on 22 November 1979. I knelt down weeping, and asked the Lord to forgive my sin and come into my life. I got up from my knees and said, 'Lord, I do not know how to be a Christian but I'm willing to try. You will have to help me.'

When I told my staff sergeant what had happened, he said that he would introduce me to a Scripture Reader who would help me with the many

**'I know I will be different and I want Mark to change too.'**

questions I had. I certainly wanted to know more about the Bible.

A few weeks later, Derek Brooks held a film night and my staff sergeant suggested I take Jeanette along while he babysat our children. Jeanette came with me and, to my surprise, she already knew Derek.

That night the film was about an RAF pilot and the text from John 14:6. It was this particular verse that brought Jeanette to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we arrived home that night, I said to Jeanette, 'Do you think it would be alright if we knelt beside our bed and prayed together?' This we did – and what a joy it was.

Before I came to faith, the sideboard in our home in Germany was full of bottles of spirits. The problem was that the spirit was in the bottle and not in me! I poured them down the sink. I stopped swearing and smoking. I was in a regiment with nearly 1000 soldiers, and well known. All saw the change; some thought I was mad, others wished they had what we had, but we were constantly watched to see if it was just a phase.

From the word go SASRA supported us, involving us in Emmaus Bible study courses

(which I still use in prison ministry today). Derek moved the SASRA Bible study to our house, so we both got teaching and support as young Christians. We would think nothing of travelling from Bielefeld to Herford (around 10 miles away) every Sunday afternoon for fellowship and tea.

### Build up the highway

Some years later, we attended a SASRA prayer conference in Yorkshire, organised by the late SASRA rep Courtney Harris.

We felt the Lord clearly speaking to us from Isaiah 62:10, which reads, 'Go through, go through the gates! Prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway! Take out the stones, lift up a banner for the peoples!'

We felt a strong call to support the work of SASRA – to become 'signposts' to God that are clear, clean, and easy to read; 'road builders' who work hard and patiently set out the way of salvation; 'stone pickers' who remove the stones of stumbling; 'standard bearers' lifting up the banner of life that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

As a Reader I engaged in a wide variety of ministry. Normally my day would begin in uniform, meeting chaplains for morning prayer, visiting barracks, guard rooms, etc. I sought to build relationships and look for opportunities to visit servicemen after work to talk about matters of faith.

I led lunchtime fellowships, school assemblies, weekly Bible studies, and field services and supported chaplains in their ministry. Deputation work consisted of visiting churches throughout the country to give reports on the work of SASRA.

I served with SASRA for five years at the School of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers at Arborfield, and then fifteen years at Catterick Garrison, mainly in the School of Infantry.

We saw many lives touched and I had the privilege to help present thousands of New Testaments to new recruits as they came through training. By God's grace, there have been many opportunities to meet with recruits and share the good news of Jesus Christ – the news which had changed me all those years before in 1979.

# The first Christmas carol



**By Timothy Cross**

Timothy has written many Christian books and articles and has an honorary doctorate from Christian Bible College, Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

'O little town of Bethlehem', 'Hark the herald angels sing', 'Once in royal David's city', 'O come all ye faithful' – we all have our favourite Christmas carols.

Christmas carols are part of our Christian heritage. They capture the story and message of Christmas in verse. They also give articulation to Christian praise. For example: 'O come let us adore him, Christ, the Lord.'

Did you know that the first ever Christmas carol was uttered by angelic beings and not human beings? Luke 2:13-14 relates the first ever carol. It was uttered on the night of the first ever Christmas.

In the fields surrounding Bethlehem, Luke tells us of 'a great company of the heavenly host (which) appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests." Let us analyse this first ever Christmas carol a little more closely.

## Christmas praise

We note that this first ever Christmas carol begins by saying, 'Glory to God in the highest.' How different this is from some of today's messages, which seem to say words to the effect of 'glory to man in the lowest.'

Glory to God! Almighty God is the most blessed, glorious, and greatest of all beings. He is incomparable. He is in a category all his own. The goal of the universe is his great glory. Our chief end – according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism – is 'to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever'.



Source: Shutterstock

We may admire some of our fellow human beings for the abilities they have, but truth be told, Almighty God alone is to be worshipped and praised, for he alone is worthy to be worshipped and praised.

The multitude of angels had reason to glorify God. They did so because he had kept his promise and sent into the world 'a Saviour who is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:11).

As far back as Genesis 3:15, at the dawn of world history, God had promised that one would be born who would crush the head of Satan. He would overcome sin and death. He would undo the ravages of the Fall and restore sinners to harmony and fellowship with God our Maker.

In the Lord Jesus Christ God fulfilled his promise. Jesus is the 'Saviour who is Christ the Lord'. Angels have no need of a Saviour. We do, because we are sinners by nature and practice.

The gospel proclaims that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15). He did so by being born at Bethlehem and eventually offering up

his sinless life as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of others on Calvary's cross. Jesus – the one born at Bethlehem – is the 'Saviour, who is Christ the Lord'.

'Christ' is a title. It means 'the anointed one' or 'Messiah'. 'Lord' reminds us that he is the very Son of God and God the Son, to be honoured and worshipped as God alone is to be honoured and worshipped.

**Peace on earth?**  
'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.' We live, of course, in a warring world which is not at peace. Workplaces, families, and nations all experience disharmony and conflict. Jesus, however, came to give us personal peace – peace with God. He came from heaven on a peace mission.

By nature we are actually at war with God. Our sin puts us under his wrath. God is angry at sinners. By paying the penalty for the sins of all who believe in him on Calvary's cross, however, Jesus has pacified the wrath of God for all who believe. He has procured our peace with God.

Colossians 1:20 speaks of Christ 'making peace by the blood of his cross'. Romans 5:1 affirms, 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

*Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin? The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.* Jesus bestows on us personal peace. Scripture also teaches that Jesus will yet bring in universal peace, at the end of the age, when he comes again in power and great glory, and puts all his enemies under his feet.

## The grace of God

Finally, we note that the first ever Christmas carol draws our attention to one of the fundamentals of the Christian faith: the grace of God.

'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.' The Lord Jesus Christ is the unsurpassed and unsurpassable expression and evidence of God's goodwill and favour to humanity, the ultimate expression of his grace – his undeserved kindness and unmerited favour to undeserving sinners.

The message of Christmas is the message of the angels, which is the message of the Bible, which is the message of the gospel: that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

'But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy' (Titus 3:4-5).

Salvation, according to the Bible, is solely due to the goodwill of God: his unmerited favour demonstrated in sending his own Son to be the Saviour of all who put their trust in him.

The angels voiced their praise to God for what he had done and said: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.'

If we belong to Jesus, we have just cause to echo their praise. The hymn writer put this into verse and wrote: 'All glory be to God on high, and to the earth be peace, good will henceforth from heaven to men begin and never cease.'

# Sovereign grace comes to the council estate

**By Shane Goodyear**

I was born in 1985 in one of the poorer parts of London. Soon after my arrival, my father left the family home and, facing financial struggles, my mother and I ended up in a hostel near Feltham in West London.

It was an awful, scary place with one bed, a small tele, an oven just a few meters from the bed, and communal bathrooms. By 1993, we were moved to a small council estate in Hampton on the border of Hanworth and Feltham.

#### Downward spiral

'Mrs Goodyear,' a primary school teacher said at parents' evening, 'we feel that Shane's reading and writing are well behind his age. He gets very frustrated as his speech is not what it should be for a 6-year-old boy. We will put him for the foreseeable future into a Special Needs class.' My mother protested, but it was no use.

'Old Bill! Run!' came the call from one of my friends as he looked out while we were graffitiing a white wall. I ran as fast as my 14-year-old legs would carry me. Over the fence into someone's flower bed, and then I chucked the spray cans away (as well as the cannabis I had tucked into my sock). I dived into a giant green bush with leaves the size of my hands and waited.

After a while, I thought it was safe to emerge, and hopped back over the wall. I started walking the lonely, dark streets towards my friend's house when I heard, 'Hello, Sonny, you thought you could get away from us, did you? You're nicked!' A policeman had been waiting down the road in his car, which I could not see because it was dark.

'Mrs Goodyear,' said the secondary school teacher (this phrase must have had a dreaded familiarity for my mother by now), 'Shane is not getting on at school. His behaviour is unacceptable – he has assaulted pupils and taken drugs in the school toilets. He swore at Miss Hannah in music



lesson and almost started a riot. We are going to have to expel him from this school.

'With his actions in mind, he is lucky we are not calling the police. However, I am obliged to tell other schools of the danger he poses to pupils and staff alike, and inform these schools that three court hearings are coming in a

**'Rarely do we think of God's control over the mundane things of life.'**

matter of months concerning Shane and his criminal behavior.'

My mother, bewildered and not knowing what to do, cried. She felt like a failed parent, knowing her son to be a criminal, kicked out of school at the age of 14 and having no prospects of doing GCSEs at a mainstream school.

#### Tears of despair

'Shane, are you mad? Don't do it – you'll get us kicked out of the pub!' So came my mate's voice as I swung a punch at a bloke whose girlfriend thought she could get rude. 'Oi! Who do you think you are?' said a burly bouncer as he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, took me to a fire exit, and threw me down the stairs. I rolled out of the door and onto the pavement like a bowling ball.

That weekend I looked at my cuts and bruises, and felt my jaw to see if it was ok (it had been broken only six months before). Then I cried like a baby.

I was a 20-year-old man who thought he was 'hard', who thought he deserved something from life, but who took no responsibility for his actions. I cried like a toddler calling for his mother.

I knew the depths I'd sunk to; I knew spending money on drugs was destroying me. I felt I had no hope and that I'd be dead by the time I was 30.

Looking back now, I think of Jesus's precious words: 'I did not come for the healthy, but the sick, to call them to repentance.' It felt like a hopeless and evil time, but I see the Lord's handiwork in it all. These events were ordained by God so that I might seek and search for him.

For the time being, however, I was like a man trying to find a penny in a dark room: my heart was blinded by my sinfulness and I could not find God by myself.

#### Divine appointment

'Mate, you will go to hell because you are a sinner. If I was you, I would get on your knees now and repent,' said Jordan, my workmate from Marks and Spencer.

'What do you mean? I don't deserve hell. You don't know what I've been through!' I said with gritted teeth and a feeling of frustration and fear.

But I never forgot those words my workmate said. I spent the next two years (2005–2007) trying to avoid him. But then, in the canteen, he cornered me. I had the staff till to one side of me and scrambled egg and bacon on the bain-marie on the other.

My colleague said, 'All right, Shane, I have some DVDs for you if you're interested.'

Though hesitant, I took the DVDs, got back home that night, and chucked them to the back of a drawer where I kept unwanted things that I couldn't be bothered to throw away.

When we think about God's sovereignty – his control over everything that happens – we usually think of the 'big things'. God dividing the Red Sea so the Israelites could escape the Egyptian army, for example.

But rarely do we think of God's control over the small, mundane things of life – the actions we do without thinking and in a moment. Little did I know that those DVDs at the back of the drawer would change my life forever.

#### 'Read the Bible'

I woke up hazy from the night before, the room slightly spinning, and my stomach feeling like a wet and empty plastic bag. This morning was different because I also had another emotion. This emotion had gripped me once or twice before, but never to this degree: despair.

Everything seemed dark – no hope, no meaning, no reason. The weekend before, I had indulged in the pleasures of the flesh. But pleasure was far away now – I felt like I was stuck in a cage with thick metal bars, hoisted into the air by a taut rope, just dangling forever, no escape possible.

This feeling of despair drove me to put on the tele, start using cannabis, and try to lose myself in entertainment. But this did not work.

Then, a strange thought entered my mind: *read the Bible*. Read the Bible? Where did that thought come from?

In a large cupboard at the back of a room in my mum's council house, we kept such things as bikes, old football trophies, photos, and coats I would not be seen dead in.

But I knew there was also an old Bible there, given to my mother in the 1980s. I managed to retrieve it and started reading the first page: 'In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth...' I struggled to understand the old English. Even though I was 21, I had a reading age of 14.

But then I remembered those DVDs. I rushed upstairs, wanting and willing to know what those early verses in Genesis meant. I did not realise

it at the time, but God was about to give me the key that got me out of my suspended, thickly-barred cage of despair and grant me new life.

'There are two crews in this world,' said the guy on the DVD, 'the world's crew, which is fighting against God and rebelling against him. God will destroy this crew and sadly send them to hell.'

'But there is another crew: Jesus' crew, who are the children of God. Anyone can join this crew. No matter what you have done, no matter what you have been through, you can join this crew by turning away from the world's crew and your sin and believing that Jesus died for you and has forgiven your sin. He is alive now, and when you will follow him, you will become a part of his crew.'

As soon as I heard these words, I was stunned. My heart was lifted to a plane of peace, joy, and love. I said in my heart, 'Jesus, I believe in you. Forgive me for my badness, help me not to do any more badness, and let me follow you.'

#### Tears of joy

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther said that when he read in the book of Romans that the 'just shall live by faith', it was like 'the gates of heaven had been opened for him'. The only similarity I hold with this great reformer becomes apparent because this is what it was like for me: gleaming gates of heaven opening, and the Lord Jesus looking at me with his compassionate eyes, saying, 'Come to me, Shane, you who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Shane, your sins are forgiven, you are free, now live for me.'

I fell to the floor with tears in my eyes – tears of joy and of freedom as God's forgiveness and love tore through my heart. My Saviour and my brother Jesus loved me, died for me, and justifies me before God.

I managed to find a Bible-believing church on a council estate in Roehampton attended by people like me from the council estate who had become Christians. In this church, an older woman gave me a book of Bible verses to meditate on.

During the first few weeks of being a Christian, I found the verse that really spoke to me then and still speaks to me now: 'Call upon me in a day of trouble, I will deliver you and you shall glorify me' (Psalm 50:15).



AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME  
**IMMANUEL,**  
WHICH IS TRANSLATED,  
**GOD WITH US**

MATTHEW 1:23

Source: Shutterstock

## Immanuel, God with us

They were lying on straw beds, these two men, in a prison cell in China. They were both Christians, but had been arrested for being foreigners seeking to spread the good news of the Christian faith.

One of them was Rudolf Bosshardt, who had travelled to China with the China Inland Mission. Twelve years after arriving there, soldiers of the Red Army had arrested him, and so there he lay with a fellow missionary.

It so happened that even after months of captivity Rudolf had managed to keep track of time. He had calculated that that particular day was Christmas Day.

What could he do to communicate this fact to his companion without alerting the ever-present guards who demanded absolute silence?

Having caught his friend's eye, Rudolf slowly twisted a piece of straw from his mattress into the letter I, then another M, then M – A – N – U – E – L, spelling out 'Immanuel'.

Why did he do that? What does 'Immanuel' mean? And what has it to do with Christmas?

Matthew in his Gospel tells us that Jesus was born 'that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which is translated, *God with us*' (Matthew 1:22-23).

Christmas marks the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world. He is Immanuel.

#### Incarnation

The name first points to incarnation. Christ was always God together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, but two thousand years ago he became a man.



**By Tony Hutter**

Tony Hutter is a retired pastor who continues to preach the Word of God.

He who was worshipped by adoring angels in heaven – he who was the Father's delight – left the glories of that perfect environment and came here to this sad and sinful world.

He now rubbed shoulders not with angelic beings but with sinful men and women. God became man while at the same time remaining God.

Throughout his life he was 'God with us'. He came on a rescue mission – to save his people from their sins. When he died on the cross, he bore the punishment that they deserved.

#### Identification

Secondly, Immanuel indicates identification. Jesus took on our human nature. He took on flesh, blood, bone, just like us.

He came to live the kind of life we live, but with one outstanding difference – he never in any way, or in the slightest degree, sinned.

He knew what it was to be hungry, thirsty, weary, and even to die. He lived a human life.

#### Indwelling

A further point about the meaning of Immanuel, so far as the Christian is concerned, is indwelling.

To the believer, Jesus is not merely an historical figure, not only the founder of what is called Christianity. He is someone known and loved today personally.

In an amazing phrase, the apostle Paul wrote, 'Christ in you' (Colossians 1:27). That describes a Christian. Jesus indwells the believer, so that he truly becomes Immanuel, 'God with us'.

Don't be satisfied with celebrating Christmas just via food and drink and presents. You can truly celebrate it when you turn from your sin and trust the one who is Immanuel. Then you will have God with you forever.

**'To the believer, Jesus is not merely an historical figure. He is someone known and loved today personally.'**

## Testimonies

# Links in a chain: how five friends helped me find true faith in God

By Mark Oden

My paternal grandfather was a German Jew who managed to escape from Auschwitz to fight the Nazis as a sergeant in the British Army. My mother was an Italian Roman Catholic who married and moved to England at the age of 19. I am an ordained Anglican clergyman currently pastoring the Chiesa Evangelica Neapolis, a Free Evangelical church in the heart of Naples, Italy.

All in all, this makes me pretty confused! The Lord has used several key people over the years to guide me through my confusion towards him, and their stories are part of mine.

### The Teacher

I grew up in a God-fearing home with little understanding of who the God of the Bible really was. I had even less interest in following him. It wasn't until I reached the sixth form that I first engaged with him in his Word, the Bible.

For each school subject we were given a number and a letter in our annual report cards, the number relating to ability, the letter to effort. I figured the same system applied to God: I wasn't perfect and didn't often achieve an A1, but frequently was given an A for effort.

Surely, I reasoned, that would be enough for him.

According to Garth, my Religious Studies teacher who used his lessons to open the Bible with his students, that was not the case.

For the first time I was confronted with my sin. I remember being offended following a lunchtime evangelistic talk – how dare he speak to me and of me in that way!

But his words had a ring of truth that stayed with me.

One night I found myself out of objections and prayed for the Lord's forgiveness. From that point on I called myself a Christian even though I didn't really have an idea of what it meant to live as one. Garth had pointed me to Christ as Saviour and has been praying for me ever since.



### The Friend

University was a time of excess, during which the Lord held onto me by the thinnest of threads. He kindly placed two Christians in my life, one of whom has now become my wife.

Jane and I would walk to a good, Bible-teaching church most Sunday evenings where I would promptly fall asleep in the back row. One of my greatest regrets in life is not having made more of my university years to grow spiritually.

In our final year, Jane and I started dating. My parents were living in Sydney at the time. From the beginning, Jane felt uncomfortable with our relationship, recognising that I was a Christian in word but not in deed.

Round about the time my parents bought us return tickets to Sydney to celebrate New Year's Eve with them, Jane realised that we should not be together.

She sought wise counsel from two of her good Christian friends. One advised breaking up immediately, the other

going to Sydney first and then breaking up! She courageously chose the former and we broke up five weeks into my Royal Marine Officer Training. Jane had challenged me to follow Christ as Lord.

### The Highlander

I had no real idea why I joined the Marines after university. They very kindly gave me a bursary during my final year and a guaranteed place at the Commando Training Centre, Royal Marines (CTC RM), Lympstone.

Apart from a brief spell in the RAF cadets at school, I had no previous contact with the military. I arrived as an immature Christian but somehow felt convinced that this was the new start I needed. This was the moment to start living for Christ.

Sustained by the prayers of faithful friends, I pinned my colours to the mast early on and was known as the *sky pilot* or *padre* by my batch mates who thought I was mad.

My year at CTC RM was one of the hardest years of my life,

and it was only training rather than the real thing! In the Lord's mercy, he used me to witness to many of my contemporaries and taught me so many lessons that have stood me in good stead as I have served him.

In my first unit, the Lord sent one other Christian to walk alongside me – Rory from the Isle of Skye, chaplain to 40 Commando Royal Marines. He encouraged me with God's Word and prayed for me. He also married Jane and me.

### The Revolutionary

In my final two years as an officer, we were posted to a NATO base in Naples, southern Italy.

The Lord led us to a small, evangelical, Italian-speaking Brethren church led by Alec, a former fiery socialist worker from North London.

Over this time the Lord opened our eyes to the spiritual needs of southern Italy where a combination of Roman Catholicism and superstition dominate.

We fell in love with Naples, described as the city with the

biggest heart in the world, but of which one French historian wrote, 'Europe ends in Naples and ends badly.'

By the time we had finished our two years with NATO, Jane was pregnant, I had decided to leave the Marines and become a church apprentice, and Alec had opened a door to return to work with him.

In August 2003, we started full-time gospel work. I spent several years ministering in various churches and studying at theological college.

In August 2013, Crosslinks gave us the green light and we shipped our kit and deployed with our four children to Naples. Alec had remained a faithful friend over this time.

### The Neapolitan

Francesco was one of the young men who helped us unload our kit. He grew up in an evangelical family, his father an elder of one of the local churches. He was working part-time for the Gruppi Biblici Universitari (the Italian equivalent of the UCCF), running evangelistic student Bible studies and events.

We quickly became friends and started working together with a similar desire to reach out to one of the largest student communities in Europe.

In September 2015, Jane and I began a midweek evening Bible study in the centre of Naples in the hope that it might grow into a church plant. Francesco was one of the regular attendees.

In October 2016, by God's grace, we began Sunday evening services with Francesco working part time for the church and part time for the GBU. The Chiesa Evangelica Neapolis was born. Francesco has been my friend, Neapolitan cultural guide, and Assistant Minister ever since.

The Lord has used these five people and many others to shape and mould me into the man that I am today. As I write and think of the 47 years he has given me so far, I recognise how much he has done in my life and how kind he has been to me. To him be the glory!

# Thinking it through: Calculating Christmas



**By Stephen Rees**  
Pastor of Grace Baptist  
Church, Stockport.

In a few weeks most of us will be celebrating Christmas. Not all of us, of course. Some of you have settled it in your minds that you're going to have nothing to do with it. If that's your position, I admire you and I must admit I feel a pang of envy. I understand and can see the strength of your arguments. But in the end, on balance, I can carry on celebrating Christmas with a clear conscience.

And the same is true for most of us. The majority of evangelical churches in the UK make use of Christmas as a gospel opportunity. And most of you will send Christmas cards, give Christmas presents, put up Christmas decorations, and, come December the 25th, eat Christmas dinner.

## The cost of Christmas

It's not cheap. Last year was, of course, exceptional with severe restrictions on Christmas festivities. But if you go back to the previous year, 2019, it's estimated that more than 83 billion pounds were spent in the UK celebrating Christmas – that's more than a thousand pounds per man, woman, or child. This year, it's expected to be higher than that: somewhere nearer 90 billion pounds.

Where does it all go? Christmas dinner, we're told, costs an average of £161 per family. The average UK child receives gifts worth £132 (looking at what some children receive, I'm amazed the figure is so low). Visits to seasonal attractions ('Your children will love Santa's Winter



Source: Shutterstock

Wonderland!') or a Christmas pantomime can add hundreds of pounds to the Christmas bill. (Opt for a skiing holiday in Austria and hundreds can become thousands). A trolleyful of wines and spirits can add hundreds more. Even Christmas cards are a major item. Apparently, we spent £1.6 billion on cards last year.

Consumer surveys report that two out of five of those questioned say that they feel pressured to spend more than they can afford. When it comes to buying children's presents, the figure rises to nearly 50 per cent. Parents who say no to their children's demands are made to feel uncaring and mean. Two out of three people questioned say that they expect to start the New Year in debt as a result of Christmas spending. Two in ten of those who run up debts at Christmas will not have paid them off a year on.

So how do we, as Christians, decide what it's right to spend at Christmas? We face the same pressures as other folk. We don't want our children to be disappointed when Christmas Day arrives. We don't want our unconverted relatives to think that we are stingy and killjoy.

We don't want the folk in the office to note that we are the only staff members who never send Christmas cards. And in the middle of a cold, dreary winter, yes, we want to enjoy food, festivities, and fun as much as anyone else.

Yet we know that we cannot spend money as others do – with no thought for God's kingdom and his righteousness. In this, as in everything else, we want to please and honour God. So we ask, what does that mean in practice? Here are five important truths.

## 1

### Our money is not our own

Whatever money is in our hands has been entrusted to us by our Master to be used in his service and for his glory. It is not to be used carelessly, selfishly, or wastefully. Jesus told us to think of ourselves as *stewards* who will give account of the way we have used our Master's property (Luke 16:1-12). And he has told us that he expects us to use 'our' money, not for short-lived pleasure, but in ways that will bring eternal rewards.

'Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide

yourselfs with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys...' (Luke 12:33).

'I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings' (Luke 16:9).

Paul talks about the right use of money in almost every one of his letters. He tells us that Christians should use their money to relieve the needs of their fellow-believers (Romans 12:13); to assist missionaries (Philippians 4:16); to care for dependent relatives (1 Timothy 5:8); to support preachers and pastors (Galatians 6:6); and to give generously to all in need.

On the day of judgment each one of us will be asked whether we used the money entrusted to us in the ways that God wanted us to use it. 'For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil' (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Before I spend money, I must first remind myself, 'This is not my money.' And I must

ask myself, 'Am I using it in the way that will best please its real owner – the Lord Jesus?' That's not just a rule for Christmas. It's for all the year round. But perhaps I need to keep it in mind more at Christmas than at any other time.

## 2

### Self-indulgence is forbidden – even at Christmas

For many people, Christmas is the time when they feel entitled to shake off the restraints which apply through the rest of the year. People who are normally sober feel free to get drunk. People who are normally careful not to overeat stuff themselves. People who are normally careful about their outward behaviour feel no shame if they get carried away at the office party and join in obscene conversation or lewd behaviour.

The fact that it's Christmas seems to justify any departure from morality, good manners, or common sense. ('Well, it is Christmas, isn't it... you've got to let your hair down...') For such people, overspending is simply part of the package. If you've been careful with your money all through the rest of the year, you're entitled to forget caution when it comes to Christmas. That's the world's thinking.

But the Christian sees things differently, or should do. The Lord Jesus tells us that we are to take up a cross and deny ourselves *daily* – every day of the year (Luke 9:23). Wild parties, drunkenness, and self-indulgence are forbidden as much at Christmas as at any time: 'For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry' (1 Peter 4:3).

Overspending is no different. God's Word forbids us to spend money we don't have and to get into debt. 'Owe no man anything...' (Romans 13:8). The writer of Proverbs warns us that 'the borrower is the slave of the lender' (Proverbs 22:7). Is it

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## Thinking it through

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really worth enslaving yourself to a loans company for a single day of self-indulgent pleasure?

If your children are desperate for some costly toy and you don't have the money to pay for it, they'll have to do without. Better to spoil their Christmas dreams than to have your home repossessed twelve months later. If you've always had a turkey on Christmas Day, but can't afford it this year, better to live on corned beef than run up a debt on the credit card and then have to scrimp and save for a year to pay off the interest.

Never use Christmas to justify doing sinful, unwise, or self-indulgent things that you wouldn't do at any other time.

**3**

### Selfishness is always sinful – all the year round

I've given you already a string of quotations from the New Testament about the use of money. Each one of them emphasises that the Lord has entrusted money to us, not just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others. Jesus told us to love our neighbours as ourselves. Any Christian who takes that command seriously will find it impossible to lavish money on his own pleasures and entertainments while he sees people around him in desperate need.

Jesus told a story of 'a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day' while a poor man lay at his gate, sick and starving (Luke 16:19-21). Jesus declared that that rich man was cast into hell. The first Christians in Jerusalem 'were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common...' (Acts 4:32).

And the result was that 'there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need...' (Acts 4:34-35). They took Jesus's commands and warnings seriously!

Remembering those commands and warnings will put a restraint on our spending. Yes, it would be nice to buy my children everything they dream about, but what about children on the streets



*Source: Shutterstock*

of Manila who are starving or selling their bodies to survive? Yes, I could treat myself to the latest electronic gadget, but do I need it as much as my Albanian brother needs a heart operation?

The fact that it's Christmas doesn't mean that I'm entitled to stop loving my neighbour as myself! Christmas ought to be a time when we are more conscious than ever of the need to share all we have with others.

**4**

### It is not wrong to spend on those whom we love

I've quoted Jesus's words: *love your neighbour as you love yourself*. Who is my neighbour? Answer: every person I encounter. I should be prepared to care for every person whom God brings across my path.

But there are some people whom I have a special responsibility to love. My wife. 'Husbands, love your wives...' wrote Paul (Ephesians 5:25). I must love her as I love no one else on earth. Her spiritual, physical, and emotional necessities have a unique priority. My parents. 'Honour your father and your mother' (Exodus 20:12). My children. My wider family. My fellow church-members. I have a special debt of love to all these people.

And sometimes love demands extravagance. Jesus made that clear when a woman came to him and broke open a hugely expensive jar of ointment and poured it over his

feet. Judas Iscariot was quick to protest. 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?' (John 12:4). To which Jesus replied, 'Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you have always with you, but you do not always have me...' (vs. 7-8). It was appropriate that that woman should show her love for the Lord Jesus without thinking about the cost.

There are situations and occasions when it's right to show our love for someone in an extravagant way. The Bible assumes that a bridegroom will shower costly treasures on his bride (Song of Solomon 1:9-11); brothers who have quarrelled will bring costly gifts to each other as sign of their desire for reconciliation (Genesis 33:10); grateful subjects will bring costly tribute to a king (2 Chronicles 32:23).

For many of us, Christmas is the natural opportunity to show our love for the special people in our lives by buying them gifts that we would normally consider too costly. Or by making costly journeys to be with them. Or by providing costly meals to celebrate our reunion with them. That seems right and proper. Let's ask ourselves whether there are particular people to whom we owe extravagant love. And then let's be prepared to make Christmas special for *them* – even if that's costly.

So am I saying that when it comes to family and friends we should forget the first three principles? Not a bit of it. I'm not saying for a moment

that we can forget that this is God's money we're spending. Rather, we should say, 'This person is someone whom God has commanded me to love in a special way. He wants me to show that love in a costly way.'

Likewise, I'm not saying that we can throw off all common sense and spend money that we haven't got. By all means, do without coffee at Starbucks for six months so that you can afford the handbag your wife has long dreamed of, but don't go into debt for it.

And I'm not saying that as you spend money to make Christmas happy for your loved ones you should forget the poor. Why not covenant with your family that for every pound you spend on one another, you'll put aside another pound for needy believers in Cambodia or Ethiopia? Loving your neighbour and loving your family isn't an either/or. It can be a both/and.

**5**

### Fun doesn't have to be expensive

How much does it cost to make Christmas

memorable and happy?

Answer: a lot less than most people imagine. Yes, the advertisers and the media pressure us into thinking that we need to spend a fortune to celebrate Christmas. But in this, as in everything else, we don't need to believe the propaganda of the world. 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...' (Romans 12:2).

**Gifts.** Children don't need to have scores of trendy, in-the-stores-for-Christmas presents in order to enjoy themselves. Many parents have had the frustrating experience of buying costly presents for their children which are ignored while the children play with the stocking-fillers that cost fifty pence – the super-bouncy rubber ball, or the pack of snap cards.

Ask yourself what each of your children really enjoys doing, and then find presents that match their individual personalities and interests. Often you'll find that those presents cost a lot less than the 'this is what every child wants' product that the advertisers are pushing. The latest fashionable toy or electronic gadget is likely to be discarded as soon as the novelty wears off. Look for something that they can come back to day after day and find fresh pleasure in.

What we've said about children's presents applies equally to presents for grown-ups. Isn't that true in your own experience? When people give you presents, is it always the most expensive presents that have brought you the most pleasure? Or is it the presents – however small – that have been chosen individually to match your personality and interests? Thoughtful, individual gifts – often home-made gifts – can bring far more pleasure than much more expensive choices.

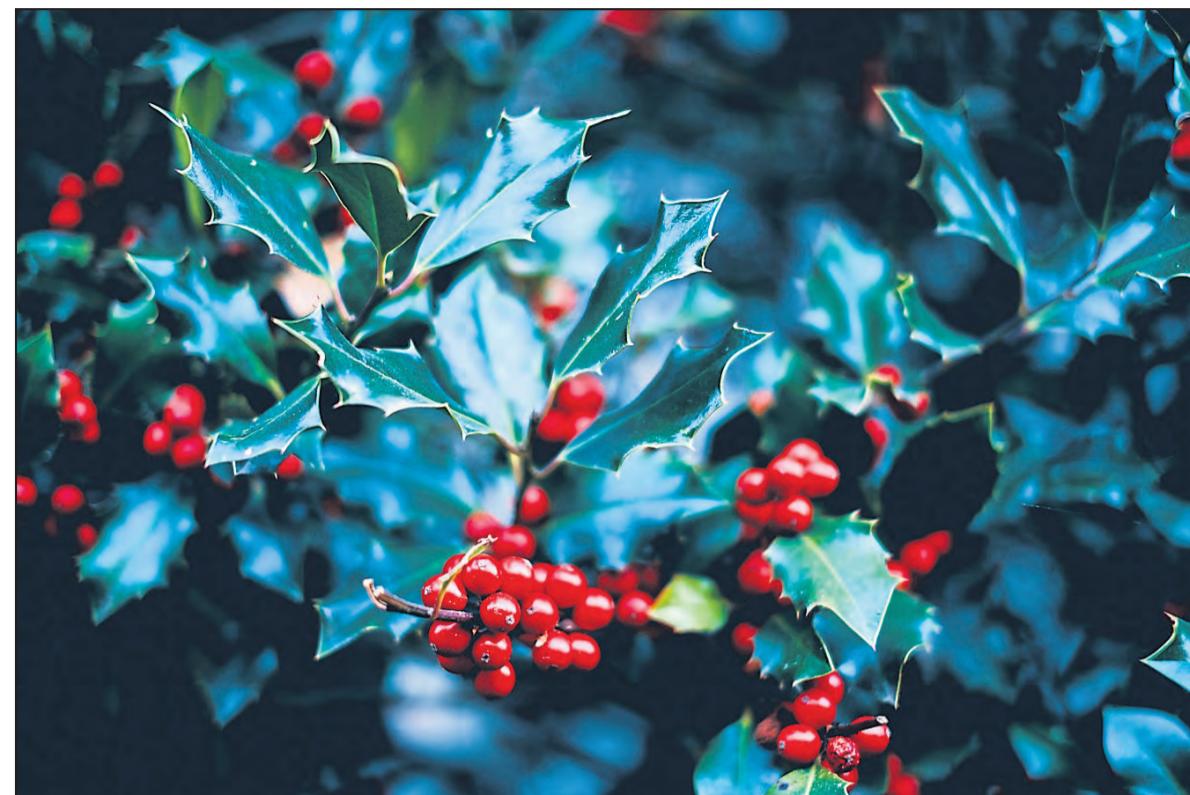
**Entertainments.** The same applies to entertainments. For the children, visits to Santa's grotto or Winter Wonderland or a Christmas pantomime aren't compulsory! For children whose parents are usually too busy to play, a long evening playing boardgames together can be just as enthralling. We've taken our children walking through the snow and watching the deer in a local park on Christmas Day. We've invited friends round and listened to Handel's *Messiah* or Bach's *Magnificat* together. We've organised jigsaw or puzzle evenings with everyone invited. Entertainments like these cost nothing – and the visitors can help you eat up the left-over turkey and mince pies!

**Cards.** Christmas cards – think carefully why you send them, and whom you want to send them to. Don't feel pressured to send them to everyone who's ever sent a card to you! Some of you will

feel you want to send cards to people who are your closest friends. Others will feel that those people already know that you care about them and that it's better to send cards to people with whom you'd otherwise lose touch. Others again will reckon that the folk to whom you send cards should be the people who are likely to get the fewest cards. In any case, decide how many cards you want to send and stick to it. You can always send a (free) ecard to everyone else!

#### All the trimmings.

Christmas decorations? Our children have enjoyed collecting holly and making their own wreaths. Or making chains of coloured paper just as I did half a century ago. Christmas tree? Well, yes, if you can afford it, it's lovely to have a real tree. But if you can't, why worry? The children will get just as much pleasure out of decorating the fake tree as a real one. If you're going to celebrate Christmas, do it properly – the old fashioned way: let the children do as much of it as possible themselves. Let



them bake shortcake and mince pies. Let them put on their own Christmas plays and plan their own Christmas surprises. Those are the things that will make Christmas memorable for them.

#### Remembering Christ at Christmas

I've been writing about Christmas simply as a midwinter festival – a time for feasting, gifts, games, fun. Of course, for most Christians it's more than

that. We use it as Christ's 'official birthday' and remind ourselves of God's love in giving his Son to a guilty world. At times, I wish we could separate out the two dimensions and keep Christmas as one or the other. But for better

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**YATE.** Grace Church, 250 Station Road, Yate, BS37 4AF. Sunday 11.00am & 6.00pm. Wednesday 7.30pm. Contact: The Elders, tel: 07783 300862. [www.gracechurch.org.uk](http://www.gracechurch.org.uk)

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#### CORNWALL

**FALMOUTH.** Carrick Free Baptist Church, Bosvale Community Centre, off Hillside Road, TR11 4HQ. Sunday 10.45am & 6.30pm. Tel: 01209 862920. E-mail: [carrickfbc@gmail.com](mailto:carrickfbc@gmail.com) [www.carrickfbc.org.uk](http://www.carrickfbc.org.uk)

**GORRAN HAVEN.** Haven Church (Mount Zion) (off Church Street), PL26 6JH. Sunday 10.00am (breaking of bread service) & 4.00pm. Wednesday 7.30pm. Tel: Anne Standfield, 01726 69252/Geoff Fox, 01726 842873. [www.havenchurch.co](http://www.havenchurch.co)

**NEWQUAY.** Reformed Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, TR7 1NB. Sunday 11.00am & 6.00pm. Tuesday 7.30pm. Pastor Josh Williamson, tel: 07580 485257.

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**CRICH.** Baptist Church, Market Place. Sunday 10.45am & 6.00pm. PM/BS Tuesday 7.30pm. Pastor Chris Hand, tel: 01773 853180. E-mail: [info@crichbaptist.org](mailto:info@crichbaptist.org) [www.crichbaptist.org](http://www.crichbaptist.org)

**DERBY.** Castlefields Church, Traffic Street, DE1 2NL. Sunday 10.30am & 6.00pm. Wednesday 7.30pm. Pastor David Fielding, 01332 550879. [www.castlefieldschurch.org.uk](http://www.castlefieldschurch.org.uk)

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or worse, Christmas has become almost unavoidably that dual-purpose celebration.

So let me close with one more Bible verse. 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Paul reminds us of the bitter poverty into which the Lord Jesus was born. And he points us to the real riches that Christ bestows on his people: not worldly wealth and luxury, but the presence and love of God himself. Two great truths for our meditation in these last weeks before Christmas. The Christian who understands those truths will know how best to use his money – and his life – for God's glory, not just at Christmas, but all the year round.

*All Bible quotations in this article are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers © 2001.*

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#### DEVON

**EXETER.** Independent Evangelical Church meeting at Heavitree Evangelical Church, Fore Street, Heavitree, Exeter, EX1 2RR. Sunday 11.00am & 6.30pm. Thursday 7.00pm Bible study & prayer. Tel: Pastor Jonathan Munday 01647 270067 or Brian Ashley 01392 431958.

**GALMPTON**, nr Paignton. Flavel Chapel (Reformed Evangelical), Stoke Gabriel Road, TQ5 0NQ. Sunday worship mornings, 10.30am. Walford Catling, 01803 559040, or John Young, 01803 521125. All are warmly welcome. E-mail: [walfordandelaine@hotmail.com](mailto:walfordandelaine@hotmail.com) Web: [flavelchapel.com](http://flavelchapel.com)

**HONITON.** Evangelical Congregational Church, High Street. Sunday services 10.30am & 6.00pm. Tuesday 7.30pm. Contact: Revd Mike Plant, 01404 548576. [www.honitonecc.org](http://www.honitonecc.org)

**PLYMOUTH.** Beacon Park Baptist Church, 11 Peverell Park Road, Plymouth, PL3 4LR. Lord's Day services 10.30am & 6.30pm. Wednesday Bible study 7.30pm. A warm welcome awaits you. Pastor Richard Clarke, tel: 01752 227009.

**SMEAETHARPE** nr Honiton. Newhouse Baptist Church. Sunday 11.00am & 6.30pm. Tuesday 6.30pm. Details: Pastor John Woollam, tel: 01404 861313. [www.newhouse-baptist.org.uk](http://www.newhouse-baptist.org.uk)

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BIRMINGHAM. Chelmsley Wood Reformed Baptist Church meeting at Fordbridge Centre, Nineacres Drive, Chelmsley Wood, Birmingham, B37 5DD. Sunday 11.00am & 6.00pm. Thursday 8.00pm. Tel: Keith Wrangles, 0121 7792804. E-mail: [office@cwrbc.org.uk](mailto:office@cwrbc.org.uk) [www.cwrbc.org.uk](http://www.cwrbc.org.uk)

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### YORK

YORK. Evangelical Church, Millthorpe School Hall, off Philadelphia Terrace, YO23 1DH. Sunday 10.30am & 6.00pm, except 1st Sunday evening, 5.00pm, Clements Hall, Nunthorpe Road, YO23 1BW. E-mail: [info@yec.org.uk](mailto:info@yec.org.uk) Tel: 01904 375875. [www.yec.org.uk](http://www.yec.org.uk)

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HULL. East Hull Presbyterian Church (Evangelical), R/O 336 Holderness Road, Hull, HU9 3DQ. Sunday 10.30am & 6.00pm. Wednesday 7.30pm. Details, tel: 01482 214248 / 01482 581069 / 01482 789690. E-mail: [christophermlawson@hotmail.com](mailto:christophermlawson@hotmail.com)

HULL. Kingston Evangelical Church, Park Grove off Princes Avenue, HU5 2UR. Sunday services 10.30am & 6.30pm. Wednesday 7.30pm. Bible study and prayer meeting. Enquiries, tel: 01482 844579.

### CHURCHES CHANNEL ISLANDS

JERSEY. Quennevais Evangelical Church.

Sunday 10.45am. See website for evening service details. Bible study/prayer meeting Wednesday 7.30pm. Contact: Leon Coates, tel: 01534 744984. E-mail: [contacts@quennevaisec.com](mailto:contacts@quennevaisec.com) [www.quennevaisec.com](http://www.quennevaisec.com)

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LAMPETER. Evangelical Church, New Church, 16 College Street. Sunday services: English 10.30am, Welsh (with translation) 5.00pm. Wednesday 7.30pm. Contact G. Jones, tel: 01570 423368. [www.lampeterevangelicalchurch.org](http://www.lampeterevangelicalchurch.org)

LLWYNPIA. Rhondda Evangelical Church, Salem Terrace, CF40 2JL. Sunday 11.00am & 6.00pm. Wednesday 7.15pm Ministry and Prayer. [www.rec.wales](http://www.rec.wales)

SWANSEA. Ebenezer Baptist Church, near High Street station. Sunday 11.00am & 6.00pm; SS 10.00am. Wednesday 7.30pm. Minister: Revd Graham John, tel: 01792 582845.

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**Events Diary**

# Events Diary

**THIS SPACE IS FOR YOU — send us details of your forthcoming special meetings, which we will endeavour to fit in, as space allows. Alternatively you can submit an event using the web site: <http://www.evangelical-times.org/events/submit.php>**

**ALL ITEMS FOR THE EVENTS DIARY MUST BE RECEIVED BEFORE THE 1ST OF THE MONTH PRECEDING THE MONTH OF PUBLICATION. THEY WILL BE DISPLAYED IN BOTH THE NEWSPAPER AND ET WEB SITE.**

**DEC  
3**

**CHIPPENHAM, Wiltshire.** Ladyfield Church, Hungerdown Lane, SN14 0BA. Corsham & Chippenham Central Bible Study, 7.30pm. Speaker: Geoff Weekes. Contact: Secretary (01225) 708643.

**DEC  
4**

**GORNAL, W. Midlands.** Gornal Bible Fellowship, Lake Street Methodist Church, Lake Street, Gornal, DY3 2AU. Meeting, 7.15pm. Preacher: Bill Patterson (Wellsbourne). Contact: (01902) 673150.

**DEC  
10**

**CHIPPENHAM, Wiltshire.** Ladyfield Church, Hungerdown Lane, SN14 0BA. Corsham & Chippenham Central Bible Study, 7.30pm. Speaker: Paul Mallard. Contact: Secretary (01225) 708643.

**DEC  
11**

**EVINGTON.** Evington Chapel, High Street, Evington, Leics., LE5 6FH. Autumn/Winter lectures 2021/22, 7.00pm. Theme: 'Names of Jehovah'. Subject: The Lord our Peace (Jehovah Shalom). Speaker: Paul Watts. [www.evingtonchapel.org.uk](http://www.evingtonchapel.org.uk)

**JAN  
8**

**GORNAL, W. Midlands.** Gornal Bible Fellowship, Lake Street Methodist Church, Lake Street, Gornal, DY3 2AU. Meeting, 7.15pm. Preacher: Paul Pomeroy (LTS). Contact: (01902) 673150.

**JAN  
22**

**LONDON.** East Dulwich Tabernacle, 107 Barry Road, London, SE22 OHW. The Jude Conference – Developing a Healthy Christian Mind and Heart, 10.15am – 4.00pm. There is widely reported to be a tsunami of mental health problems among young and old. In these sessions we focus on the help the Lord provides for his people. [www.judeconference.org](http://www.judeconference.org)

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## The Protestant Truth Society

The Society is seeking to appoint an accredited Part Time Wickliffe Preacher in Northern Ireland.

Applicants should be ordained or recognised ministers of the Gospel. The role is on a Consultancy basis with remuneration commensurate with the tasks undertaken on behalf of the Society.

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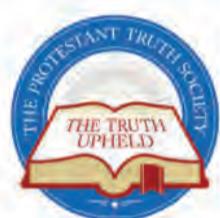
Applicants must hold to the Protestant and Reformed faith and be in full agreement with the aims and objectives of the Society. Please apply in writing demonstrating how you are qualified and suitable to fulfil the role of a Wickliffe preacher. Please also include a full CV.

Applications should be sent to our Head Office, at the address below, for the attention of the Chairman.

**Closing date for applications is 31 January 2022**

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## Features

# The good old days



**By Simoney Kyriakou**

Simoney Kyriakou is editor of the Financial Adviser and an award-winning financial journalist.

*Nothing wrong with getting nostalgic at Christmas, is there?*

Do you remember the feel of that thin, shiny foil Christmas presents used to be wrapped in? Or the Georgian soldier and his sweetheart on top of the tin of chocolates you were not allowed to touch until Christmas Eve? Can you recall the excitement you felt when decorating the entire ceiling and walls with metallic streamers and paper chains, or how the whole family looked forward to the brand-new Morecambe and Wise Christmas Special? What about snow? Remember that? I'm sure we always had snow at Christmastime, didn't we?

Hopefully for many people, looking back at Christmas Past will fill them with joy to recall time spent with loved ones who are now no longer with us. Thinking of how our childhood Christmases were always made as special as possible by our parents, regardless of how little money we actually had, can conjure up that warm, fuzzy feeling we come to associate with a Hallmark Christmas.

Cherishing the past is no bad thing – but nostalgia's tinted spectacles can make us imagine things were always chocolate-box perfect and filled with seasonal 'magic'. The reality was probably a lot of hard graft, slightly burned meat and soggy sprouts, and a bleak, grey Christmas morning with not even a whisper of snow. Disney has nothing on our own imaginations.

And that's the trouble: those who, like winged history, always look back while we press forward into the uncertain future will end up seeing a



Source: Shutterstock

distorted picture of what once was. Nostalgia makes us believe things 'were better then'.

Considering this year has been one of the worst in living memory for billions of people, it is understandable that people will be looking back to the past and wishing Christmas could be as 'just like the ones we used to know'. I don't blame anyone for feeling this.

But I do believe the danger for Christians is that we can get so caught up in the 'spirit of the season' – yes, even in the midst of a pandemic – that we spend more time in front of Amazon than in front of our Bibles. And even if we do keep our focus on the Bible, we may be tempted to dwell longer at the manger than at the cross.

It could be argued that some Christians may even spend more time at the cross than in watchful anticipation of Christ's return. When we get 'stuck' on what was instead of what will be, we risk forgetting that this life is only temporary; our time on earth no more than a journey to eternity.

The apostle Paul knew the importance of not getting tangled up with the past – either by our temptations or our traditions. In Philippians 3:13-14 he urges us to look to Christ and remember our goal is heaven. If you're reading this, you're not there yet. The race is still on – but are you still running in it?

**If we are blindsided by nostalgia this Christmastime we will cease to run the race. You can't look backwards while pressing onwards.'**

Paul says, 'Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'

Christians should be people of the future, but too often we are people of the past. We should be 'pressing forward'; instead, we are wishing things could be as they were. We should be 'looking ahead'; instead, we are looking back wistfully.

### The path from the manger

This does not mean we should not be filled with great gratitude for the Incarnation. That goes without saying. If Christmas memories only stretch as far as clementines in knitted stockings and Aunt Ivy's magnificent brandy butter, that is myopic at best, spiritually damaging at worst.

Christians generally know we need to push nostalgia aside and bring to mind the gospel story. It is right to let our minds and hearts dwell on what it meant for Christ to leave heaven and come down to earth as one of us.

Christ's birth in human form at that critical period in human history marked the moment of God's amazing intervention in the direction of all our lives.

No wonder Charles Wesley felt compelled to write these inspiring words:

*Christ, by highest heav'n adored,  
Christ the everlasting Lord!  
Late in time behold him come,  
Offspring of a Virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail the incarnate Deity  
Pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

We ought to look back at the Incarnation and fall down metaphorically in adoration, just as the shepherds did two thousand years ago when they gazed on the tiny, swaddled second person of the Trinity.

But we cannot stay there. We ought also to remember the path that led out from Bethlehem's manger towards Nazareth, Galilee, Jerusalem, and finally to a hill outside the city wall where the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified. We ought to kneel at the cross in repentance and thankfulness, praising Jesus our blessed Redeemer for his sacrifice.

But our minds must not leave us there, either. We cannot stay in the stable; we must not stay at Golgotha or we risk the angelic admonition, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead?'

Christ rose from the dead – he is a living Saviour. He is no baby king, or a dead hero, but a powerful God. He will come again. He will return to end all things and to bring in the new heavens and the new earth. This is a future he has promised will come to fulfilment, and when God promises something will happen, it happens.

Let us Christians remember that fact. We must press forward. It is no use wishing things were as they used to be; we must work towards the great harvest that is to come. If we are blindsided by nostalgia this Christmastime, as understandable as it might be when the world around us seems to have gone to pot, we will cease to run the race. You can't look backwards while pressing onwards.

So hang those wreaths, wrap those gifts, baste that turkey and, by all means, overboil those sprouts. Have a blessed and wonderful Christmas, despite everything this year has thrown at us. But remember to look forward – there's an even better day coming.