

# MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERING

**M**any people have experienced suffering to a greater or lesser degree – in fact if you haven't you probably just haven't lived long enough yet. Suffering is part of life but for some people it seems that they get more than their 'fair' share.

Vaneetha Rendall Risner has probably suffered the same way you have, and in ways you haven't dreamed of. Her amazing story is detailed in her book "The Scars that Shaped Me".

Born in India, to Christian parents, Vaneetha contracted polio long after it was virtually eradicated. Because her doctor had never seen it before, she was misdiagnosed and given the wrong treatment. By the time they realised what she had, the child was totally paralysed.

Because the physicians in India offered little hope, her parents moved to London. Vaneetha spent most of her childhood in and out of hospital.

By 13, she had undergone 21 operations and moved from England to Canada and then the United States. She eventually learned to walk, at age 7, but with a pronounced limp.

In high school, Vaneetha confronted her bitterness against God and surrendered her life to Him.

For a while, her life improved. She went to college, got a job and years later married a graduate school classmate. They had a daughter.

Then followed three miscarriages. Eventually they had a little boy. He was born with a serious heart defect, but survived a successful surgery at

birth, only to die at two months old due to a doctor's mistake.

The couple then had a second daughter.

Several years later Vaneetha developed an inexplicable pain in her arm and was eventually diagnosed with post-polio syndrome, which is incurable, involves increasing pain and weakness and could end in quadriplegia. The need to conserve muscle strength put an end to all her creative pursuits such as painting, crafting, scrapbooking, embroidering, making jewellery etc.

At this point Vaneetha's husband decided he had had enough and left the family, eventually divorcing her.

Here is a woman who knows suffering. Chronic suffering and acute suffering, suffering caused by others and caused by circumstances, physical suffering and emotional suffering, suffering that is past and suffering that she has to anticipate in the future.

Surely such a woman's perspective on the pressing and recurring issue of 'where is God when we suffer?' should hold some weight. Although, she never pretends it's easy, here are some of Vaneetha's words of wisdom:

- When she was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome, she admits: "At first I was angry, Then I grew depressed ... I questioned God's love ... eventually I asked Him to help me handle my losses well and give me grace."

- "And God changed everything. Not by changing my circumstances but by lighting a path through the darkness. He taught me how to pray, how to ask, and how to receive. He gave me glimpses of His glory. He showed me how He is using my circumstances to change me."

- "The entire process [of slowly getting weaker] is humbling, but this dependence on God and on others has grown my faith in incalculable ways. ... I can show the surpassing worth of Christ when I suffer well – when I joyfully accept circum-

stances that are less than perfect, when I give up my need to control. Willingly relinquishing my need to have things exactly as I want is an act of worship."

- "The Bible is shockingly honest. And because of that, I can be honest as well. I can both complain and cry, knowing that God can handle anything I say. The Lord wants me to talk to Him, to pour out my heart and my thoughts unedited because He knows them already."

- "When I feel desperate, my prayers are not long or eloquent. Sometimes they're just groans gasped out between sobs. Sometimes simple cries of, 'Help me, Jesus!' Sometimes just silence before Him. My biggest challenge is not to turn away. Or stew in my anger. Or numb the pain elsewhere."

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Vaneetha Risner has been shaped by her scars.

## Unjustly jailed for 39 years

BY JIM DENISON (REVISED)

**MUCH** about today's news leaves us feeling powerless. The death toll from the recent Brazilian dam collapse exceeded 99, with another 259 missing and feared dead. A gardener in Toronto has pled guilty to killing eight men, some of whom he buried in planters. Floods in Saudi Arabia have killed at least twelve people.

If we believe in an all-powerful God – or even if we don't – we wonder why He allows so much suffering in His creation. If a car had as many problems as our planet, we'd hold the manufacturer responsible.

Of course, this analogy breaks down when we discover that the Fall [when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit, allowing sin to enter the world], not divine mismanagement, led to the brokenness of our planet (Romans 8:22).

Dostoevsky notes in *The Brothers Karamazov* that, after centuries of living under Christendom's authority, humans have finally declared themselves free from God's sovereignty. We're convinced that we can do what we wish, when we wish, with no divine consequences.

But we can't have it both ways. We cannot refuse to live by God's word and then fault God for the consequences

of our disobedience. That is like driving our car into a tree and blaming the car company!

We have a choice.

One the one hand, we can reject God's goodness and presence when they seem to be contradicted by what we understand of our present circumstances. If life becomes difficult, many blame God.

Atheist Sam Harris claims that in the face of catastrophe, "God is either impotent, evil, or imaginary."

In short, when life is hard, people ask God, "Why?" When life is good, however, people tend to ask, "Why God?" We credit ourselves with what we have and have done.

But the fact that we were conceived through no action of our own literally gives the lie to the "self-made" person. A turtle

atop a fencepost had help getting there.

The better approach is to judge our circumstances by God's character and trust that the King of the Universe is still in charge.

Craig Richard Coley, wrongly imprisoned for murder for 39 years, was formally pardoned in November 2017.

The Governor of California commented at the time on "the extraordinary grace with which he endured his lengthy and unjust incarceration". How did Coley do it?

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**BACK PAGE**

**FAITH-FULL FIGHTER**  
**DESHAUN WATSON**

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Craig Coley before he went to jail, and after his release.

# Quiet zone for the soul

**THE** Green Bank Observatory, in West Virginia (pictured), is a cluster of radio telescopes in a mountain valley. According to *The New York Times's* Pagan Kennedy, these giant devices are "like superhuman ears—they can tune into frequencies from the lowest to the highest ends of the spectrum."



without music. Often even one device is not enough, and she will play a phone game while "watching" Netflix on TV or listen to a social media influencer while doing homework on her tablet!

If we want to have good mental health and know peace, we all need a "Radio Quiet Zone" for our souls.

In the Bible, God says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). It is a real challenge in our modern world to turn off and experience silence. To learn what it is to quiet our spirits, to hear our own thoughts and perhaps, even, to hear our Maker's voice.

Christians have long advocated a daily "quiet time", a few minutes of time, usually in the morning, during which they read the Bible and pray, clearing their head and preparing for the day.

Another good way to get some "Radio Quiet Zone" is to get out into nature (without headphones) – walk in the garden or on the beach, look up into the trees – and let God speak to you through His creation.

I read somewhere that to be free of device addiction, we should turn off our devices for an hour a day, a day a week and a week a year. Even that is a daunting prospect for many, but I think a more frightening thing would be to come to end of our lives and find that we have crowded out the important with the irrelevant and filled our minds with trivia, missing the Truth.

However, as even a short-circuiting electric toothbrush could interfere with their signals, the residents of Green Bank do not use mobile phones, Wi-Fi, microwave ovens, or any other devices that generate electromagnetic waves, and it has become a haven for those with the debatable disability of electromagnetic hypersensitivity.

Kennedy calls their town "the land where the Internet ends."

Inside the National Radio Quiet Zone, she experienced "the kind of silence that I hadn't heard in years." But she asks: "Who will save the endangered Quiet Zone inside our own heads? What about the thoughts as subtle as the transmissions from the remote galaxies of our memories? Is the ever-present hum of the internet drowning those out, too?"

Unfortunately, many of us know the answer to her question.

A teen I know is so used to constant entertainment that she plugs in her headphones for every car trip, watches Youtube on her phone while washing dishes (!) and claims she can't go to sleep at night

# Making sense of suffering

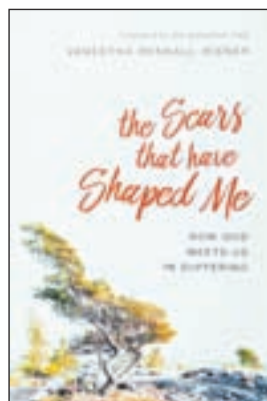
• From page 1

• "I may not understand how, but God is doing something bigger with my life than I can possibly see. My suffering is never senseless; it will not be wasted. He will ultimately use every struggle for my good and His glory."

• "I have often been devastated when God tells me no, but as I submit to His will in those situations – even with disappointment and tears – He assures me He's working for my good. I see only part of the picture. He has a purpose in His denials. God is not an unpredictable God. If He says no to our requests, He has a reason .... For now, we must trust that His refusals are always His mercies to us."

• "God knows what I need and has chosen for me what I would not have chosen for myself, given my limited perspective on life and my desires for my own comfort. But if I had God's perspective and knew what He knows, I would undoubtedly choose what He has given me. It has all been necessary."

The blog that became Vaneetha's



Vaneetha and Joel

book was started in 2013.

Two years later she again found relationship happiness, marrying a man named Joel.

Read more of her inspiring insights at her blog Dance in the rain at [www.vaneetha.com](http://www.vaneetha.com)

## TAKING A CHANCE ON IT



BY ALAN BAILEY

**JUMPING** off the top of a cliff or a bridge with a long piece of rubber around one ankle is not my idea of fun. Bungee jumpers, as they are called, seem to like it. You've seen them on TV undoubtedly, and they scare the daylights out of me.

They plunge downwards, then, like a yo-yo suddenly change direction. Of course, the tether is anchored up there somewhere and they know before they jump that all will be well; they won't hit the ground but will live to tell the tale.

**Risk takers**

Life is full of risks of course, some scarier than others. Sometimes they are unavoidable. Strangely enough, we like the idea of risk-taking. It must be in our blood. In some people more than others.

For instance, look at the business done every day by the betting shops, the lotteries, the pokies, the bookmakers and the casinos. People win and lose fortunes in certain cases. Others, who haven't much to start with, take the plunge with what they have, and, unlike the bungee jumper, they often lose the lot.

Every day on the Stock Exchanges, risks are taken, some paying off, others not.

**A drawing power**

It is the hope of winning that drives people on. Stories of others striking it lucky grab the imagination. But then, how do we explain why people take deliberate risks with their health? Or

take foolish risks on the road? Or try to beat the law of the land? Cheating fate has an attraction for us.

**Everything is a risk**

Today, young people are educated to think that the whole world, including their own existence, is the result of blind forces working by chance. So if the human race came about by sheer fluke, it can't have meaning. If it is the product of chance, most likely it will be the victim of it. We will go out into non-existence with no-one to care.

**Older ones too**

I often meet people who are willing to take the greatest of risks without much thought. Their preparation for death is even less than the bungee jumper's preparation to jump. They go out into death holding on to flimsy protests about being good enough as they are to meet God. What a plunge! What an awful shock many will receive! And there is no coming back for a second chance. It is foolish in the extreme to gamble on eternity.

**Playing it safe**

What better way to find the secret to eternal security than to listen to Jesus Christ, the One who knows. No-one compares with Him, because He is Lord of the universe. He puts beyond doubt the question of life after death. He died in our place to secure for us forgiveness, and everlasting life. He lives today to hear the prayer of seeking souls. No risk here. All certain as His promises. *No-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ* (1Cor 3:11). •

## Unjustly jailed for 39 years

• From page 1

By actively practising his Christian faith, starting a prison Bible study group and later earning degrees in theology, biblical studies, and biblical counselling.

"My way of looking at things changed," Craig said. "I believed whatever whatever happened was what God had in store for me, and everything I get is a blessing."



Craig Coley

When those who call God 'Lord' face suffering for no apparent reason, they can know that their Father knows. Nothing about their present circumstances changes His eternal character. The Bible promises that He is working all things for their good and His glory. (Romans 8:28)

And they, like Job in the Old Testament, can rest in His presence when they do not understand His purpose; they can trust His heart when they cannot see His hand.

Kate Bowler says of our broken world: "The mighty Kingdom of God is not yet here" but "God is here. We are loved. It is enough." She's right.

The Bible claims and the cross of Jesus proves that God loves us unconditionally and passionately.

Trust the challenges you see to the God you cannot see, and you will experience answers that you could not have imagined.

This is a compilation of three abridged articles by Dr Denison. See his full articles online at the Denison Forum.

## Crossword

- ACROSS**
- 1 Squeezed hard
  - 5 Historic period
  - 7 Hubbub
  - 9 Harbour craft
  - 11 Male descendant
  - 12 Behind
  - 13 Welcome \_\_\_\_
  - 14 Pull roughly
  - 16 "Get the picture?"
  - 18 Pellet in a pod veggie
  - 20 Field yield
  - 21 Part of the foot
  - 23 Propel a boat
  - 25 La Scala event
  - 26 Blow below the belt
  - 27 Surgical room



- DOWN**
- 1 Waterway link since 1914 (6,5)
  - 2 Has being or is
  - 3 Of slight build
  - 4 Point of small 'r'
  - 5 Advantage
  - 6 Fairly accurate
  - 8 Therefore
  - 10 Craving
  - 15 Say yes
  - 17 Canyon sound
  - 19 Take, receive
  - 22 Boast
  - 24 Soaked

**SOLUTION PAGE 11**

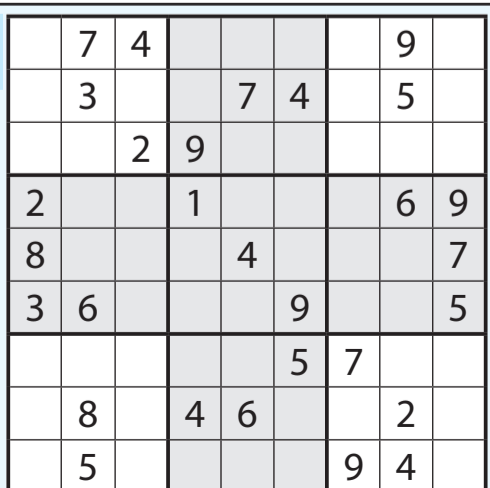
## Sudoku

Fill in the grid so that every row, every column, and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 through 9.

Puzzle Level: Medium



**SOLUTION PAGE 11**



# X Factor singer changes his tune

**M**atthew Grech, a former X Factor contestant who sang under the name Jay Omaro, endured a lot of criticism when he stated publicly in 2018 that he was no longer following a same-sex attracted identity and was emphatic that no 'conversion therapy' had influenced his decision.

His story has become the subject of a documentary film called 'Once Gay'. He believes that people have the right to walk away from a homosexual lifestyle, which should be as respected by the wider community as the choice of those entering that lifestyle. This belief has led to him facing criticism from many in the gay community, as well as politicians in his homeland of Malta.

Matthew was brought up Roman Catholic, in a stable family. However, he became addicted to lust as he moved into his teens.

At a boys-only secondary school, Matthew found it hard to fit in as he

was skilled in singing and playing the piano and not interested in sports.

"I experienced considerable peer pressure from close friends, when I was 14. I would hang out with girls and date them to try to fit in. I tried hard to be a normal teenage boy, but I caught myself fantasizing about guys.

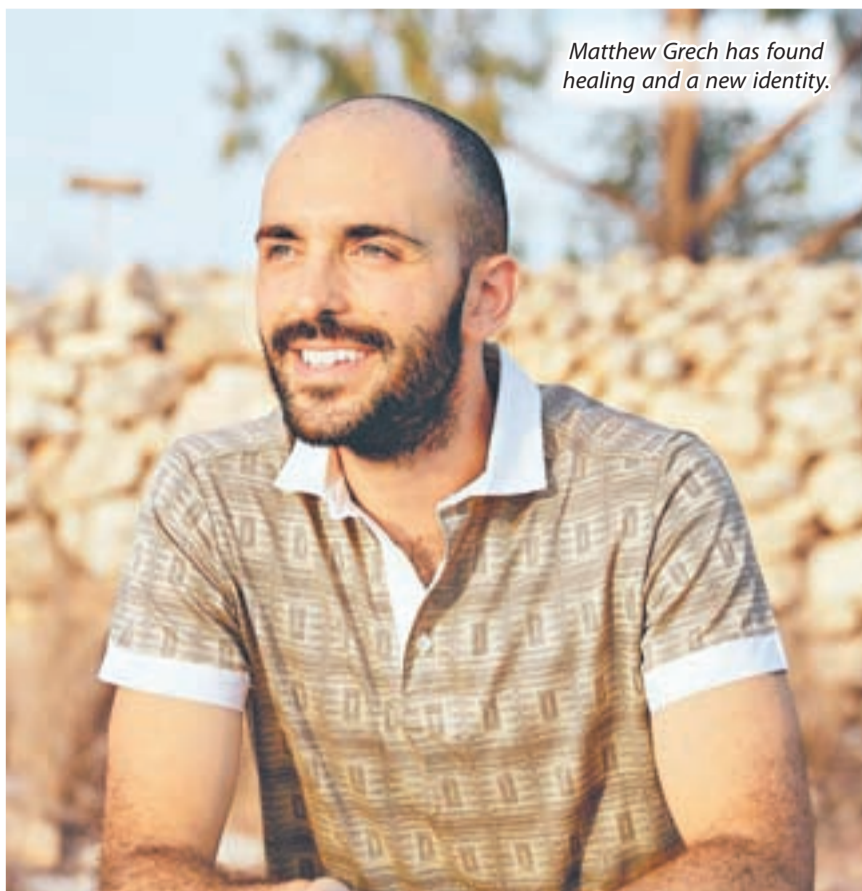
Friends mocked me about being gay and attracted to boys.

"Doubt and insecurity began to define me, to a point where I began to doubt my sexuality. Could this be true? Did I end up

sexualizing my unmet need to bond with persons of the same gender? Were there other factors in my upbringing that led me to believe that I was a lesser male?"

Matthew became a practising homosexual and music became a means whereby he could 'dream big and come out of my bleak reality for a while'.

"I developed my talent, and recorded my own music, aged 16. Little did I know that the local radio



Matthew Grech has found healing and a new identity.

stations would find my music appealing."

The young singer was nominated at the Malta Music Awards and Bay Music Awards in 2006-2008, as Best Newcomer, Best Solo Artist, and Best Male Artist.

"I hid behind my alter ego, Jay Omaro, my stage name at the time. It felt so good to be appreciated, valued and highly esteemed."

Matthew moved to London when he was 19, to find 'breakthrough' in his musical career. He also became interested in Reiki, the new age practice of laying on of hands for healing. He had ambitions to become a Reiki master and "achieve a tangible sense of spirituality in my life".

A Christian woman, who was a friend of his father's, warned Matthew about the dangers of invoking spiritual powers other than Jesus and explained the good news about the salva-

tion God offers everyone through the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins.

She invited Matthew to a prayer meeting, which he felt obliged to attend.

"As I stepped into the rented school hall where these Christians gathered, I encountered a family of believers that freely worshiped and prayed to a God that was present for them in the room, and a God they knew personally.

"It was authentic - it felt alive. I was drawn to their prayer language and the seamless fruit of their life. I loved their diligence in bringing the Bible with them to church."

Matthew later experienced a supernatural healing from a migraine.

"I was powerfully touched by the Holy Spirit before Communion as I knelt down, and knew that my life was being shaken for the better. I bought my first Bible, and lived with an intense daily longing for more of God and His ways.

"On my personal journey with the Bible, God revealed my own sin, and I felt Godly sorrow for being a sinner. I was taught that if I believed that Jesus is the Son of God, and made Him Lord over my life, I could seal my commitment to follow Him through the rite of baptism.

"I did this, fully surrendering my life to the Lord." Like many others, Matthew realised that it is not an issue of 'gay or straight', it is an issue of 'is Jesus Lord or not'. We all come to God sinful and He, in His time, will give us the conviction, desire and strength to deal with whatever areas of our lives are not pleasing to Him.

Matthew, now 30, has since seen Jesus healing and delivering "thousands of people" in churches. His desire continues to be to know Jesus more and to share the love of God with others, whatever their background. Single, after leaving a lover when he converted, Matthew hopes to find a wife one day.

He added: "Now I know Jesus is alive, that He loves all sinners, and that He is calling them to repentance [turn away from sin] for the gift of eternal life. That life can start for you today! Make a decision for Jesus, I urge you!"



Young Matthew when he was known as Jay Omaro.

## Free from abuse and hauntings

**Sandy Boyd remembers when she played in a field of flowers as a child. There she felt safe and loved and free to dance and sing. Sadly, that safe field only existed in her mind.**



**A**t 12 years old, Sandy's dad gave over his life to the Devil and began using her in sexual satanic rituals.

"Every time he came to me for these purposes," Sandy recalls, "I would escape mentally to this beautiful field of flowers. It was my place of refuge."

Sandy's family had practised witchcraft for many generations and even had a family guardian spirit "to protect them". They held séances, asked the spirit for advice and would hear her responses through noises in the house.

However, the guardian spirit didn't protect Sandy from her dad. "He used to come into my room and start chanting. Then I would feel the demonic spirits around me," she remembers.

Her father also forced Sandy to use cocaine, as a means of controlling her.

Finally, at 17, Sandy ran away from home. But, addicted to drugs and with nowhere to go, she had to turn to prostitution to survive. "It was a choice I made, but at that time," she says, "it was the only choice I had."

Sandy's 'guardian spirit' confirmed her 'choice' of profession and gave her the strength to get up each morning and prostitute herself, she says.

Over the next ten years, Sandy married and divorced twice, and had a daughter, of whom she had custody. During that time, the drugs, demon spirits and Sandy's father still ruled her life. Her father often supplying her with drugs.

Later her father wanted her to pay for his financial support with more sexual rituals, causing Sandy to cut ties with him for good.

"I was very repulsed by it. I was repulsed by men in general at this point," she admits. "I hated them. I despised them. And I refused to have anything more to do with him."

Sandy and her daughter moved in with Sandy's sister. She thought it would be a ref-

uge, but one night a demonic figure appeared at the foot of her bed.

The demon said, "It is time now to pass on to your child what your grandmother taught you."

"I was terrified," Sandy admits. She was ready to do whatever it took to protect her daughter. She thought it would be better if she died and her daughter ended up in foster care potentially with a healthy family in a wholesome environment.

So, the next day, Sandy dropped her daughter off at day care and drove to a remote area, where she planned to slit her wrists. As she pushed her car seat back, between the console and the seat she felt a New Testament Gideon's Bible.

"I just found the Bible there. I don't know where it came from," Sandy explains. "I turned to the back and there was a sinner's prayer and I could relate to those words. I thought, 'God, I'm a sinner. I have done so many bad things. I give my life to you. Take control.' And immediately I felt such a peace come over me that I had never felt in my life before."

Sandy says that through that prayer she recognised that Jesus was real. "My eyes were opened and the blinders were taken off. I was able to see Jesus for who He was in my life."

At that moment Sandy's desire for drugs vanished and, for the first time, she had hope. But the battle wasn't over. Later that night

she heard her daughter screaming. Sandy rushed to her. "She was standing up in her crib, flailing her arms, and her toys were flying around the room and the ceiling fan was spinning madly. 'They're biting me, Mommy. They're biting me,' she kept saying. And I saw bite marks on her arms."

Sandy grabbed her daughter and huddled with her in the corner of the room praying to Jesus. "I felt Him shelter me from everything that was going on," she says.

That wasn't the only time of demonic attack, but through prayer, counselling and Bible reading, Sandy stood strong against it and eventually it stopped.

Later she married Scott, who helped her on her journey to complete freedom in Jesus Christ. He helped her to pray through all the areas of her past where the devil might have been given a foothold in her life.

"God healed my wounds of abuse and helped me to forgive my father, who has since passed away," Sandy says. "The loving compassion to be able to love the person who hurt me and caused so much abuse in my life comes from the Lord."

Today Sandy and Scott pastor a church in Texas, helping others to find freedom in Jesus, and Sandy's daughter is their worship leader, in charge of music.

"Walking in freedom is amazing," Sandy smiles. "I am free. Jesus is the saviour and He is the only one who can set us free."

# Homeless, broke Kiwi finds hope

**"I felt as if a ton of bricks had lifted off my shoulders"**

BY IAN WHITE

Expelled from school as a "waste of oxygen," Paul Hattaway celebrated his 50th birthday last month, looking back on a life that is the opposite of wasted.

Paul left home as a teenager to escape his horrific upbringing. But a cycling tour through the stunning scenery of New Zealand was the beginning of Paul's journey to fulfilment.

The youngest of six children, Paul was jokingly told by his mum that he was almost called 'Day' because, when he first appeared, his parents declared: "Let's call it a day!"

New Zealander Paul admits: "Before I met Jesus I was deeply oppressed and my life was going nowhere.

"My school principal had labelled me a 'waste of oxygen' and I had started to believe it.

"When God first called me I had \$5 to my name and was unemployed ... all I had to offer Him was a miserable life of failure, loneliness, and depression ... I carried all of my worldly possessions in a bag, and had been sleeping on the roof of a public toilet."

**Tidal wave of evil**

Paul left home to escape severe beatings from his dad, and the "tidal wave of evil" from two siblings after they had experimented with drugs.

His sister even tried to suffocate him with pillows: "I remained pinned down as the breath drained from my lungs, while the room was filled with her loud, satanic laughter..."

A dejected 16-year-old Paul left Auckland with a one-way ticket to the South Island, sensing the reality of God's existence for the first time after a gruelling bike ride covering the entire 600-mile length of the island.

"My senses could scarcely contain the majesty of my surroundings... My bicycle journey convinced me of God's existence more than if I had listened to a thousand sermons. I had experienced the Creator's sermon."

But young Paul still wasn't sure if it was possible "for a human being to personally communicate with God."

But after touching down in Australia's huge city of Sydney in October 1986, the day after his 18th birthday, all that was to change.

Homeless, lonely and empty, Paul had already become a run down and battered "old man".

"I was enveloped by a suffocating web that threatened to entangle me forever...I believed in a Creator, but I didn't think He could be approached or known."

**Entire world changed**

At his lowest point, Paul cried out to God for a job whilst sleeping



The Great Wall of China in a land where God is breaking down even stronger walls - ideological ones.

single contact, and \$50. He began work as a Bible courier, carrying hundreds of Bibles across the Chinese border.

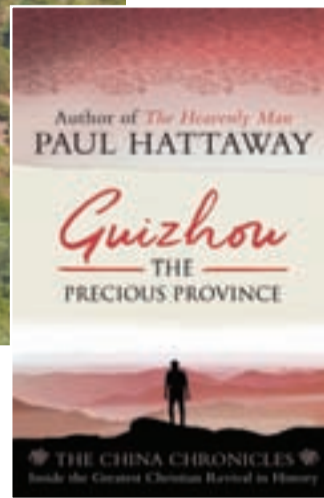
Today he leads Asia Harvest, supporting thousands of indigenous missionaries and supplying millions of Bibles.

For decades, Paul has been travelling into China and other Asian countries to take Bibles to Christians desperate to read the Scriptures in their own language. He shares his dramatic experiences in a series of China Chronicle books, like his latest, Guizhou: The Precious Province.

His books are an eye-opener on the difficulties that Christians face in China. Recently, the Chinese government has begun a new crackdown on Christians, including concentration camps, facilitated by the construction of a mass surveillance state.

But this has not deterred Paul, as he's worked with the Chinese Church for more than 30 years. Paul says: "I have been the beneficiary of a completely lopsided exchange. I handed Jesus my futile existence, and in return He gave me a life of purpose and fulfilment."

An Asian Harvest (An Autobiography) is published by Monarch Books; Shandong, The Revival Province and Guizhou, The Precious Province, are published by SPCK and all are available through Amazon.



on a toilet roof in a public park and, before he knew it, he was miraculously working at a canvas factory.

Challenged by fellow worker Darren to attend his church, Paul went along and was immediately

struck with the reality "that the hundreds of Christians surround-

ing me possessed something that I didn't have".

As Paul said "Amen!" to a prayer to put his faith in Jesus Christ his "entire world changed".

"My whole body felt dramatically different, as if a ton of bricks had been lifted off my shoulders and thrown to the floor..."

"I laughed out loud with a sense of profound amazement at God's love and goodness. I knew that I had found the truth.

"I had arrogantly told Darren I

would come to his church to have a laugh. I never imagined my prediction would come true in the way it did!"

Paul quickly became convinced he was being called to China after listening to a couple of Chinese preachers who had been imprisoned for their faith, at the very church back home in New Zealand that he had vandalised as a youth!

Paul arrived in Hong Kong with nothing more than a backpack, a

**ALL I HAD TO OFFER [GOD] WAS A MISERABLE LIFE OF FAILURE**



## I thought no one could love me

**Middle class teen sinks deeply into drugs and self-destruction before finding peace**



Pam Pena

Pam Pena was a middle-class, suburban, messed-up teen. She was into drugs and sex. She had had an abortion, a fight with anorexia and tried to commit suicide several times.

Even though Pam had come from a good home with loving parents, "As I moved into my teenage years, I transferred my need for approval from family to my peer group, which led to some poor choices. I had a sense of purposelessness because I really didn't develop a relationship with Jesus, although I had heard about Him from when I was young and even 'given my life' to Him when I was five."

Pam found out she was pregnant and the couple decided she would have an abortion. "Later, I experienced rejection from that young man and also from the rest of my peer group," she remembers.

Devastated by the rejection that left her hurt and empty, Pam developed a negative self-image and thought nobody cared for her and that God could never love her because of what she'd done.

Once, she tried and failed to take her life by overdosing on a whole bunch of pills. She also used bulimia [throwing up] and anorexia [refusing to eat] as ways to try to gain control of her life.

"I weighed just under 100 pounds (45 kilos) when I was at my thinnest when, originally, I weighed 132 pounds (59 kilos)," Pam tells. Ironically, "that behaviour took complete control over me. I did not have control anymore over that."

of college and turned further and further away from God.

"I was introduced at my job to cocaine by some friends," she shares. "It was almost like I was immediately addicted because cocaine is an appetite suppressant. For me, that's something I needed, I wanted - and then it was just a downhill spiral."

Pam lived close to a drug den where she would go frequently to get drugs. She was involved in a relationship with the drug dealer and many times she would not leave for days, even weeks.

On one occasion, not able to get free from her sadness and turmoil, Pam deliberately drove into oncoming traffic.

"A passenger bus hit me broadside," she recalls. "It turned over my car and I was trapped inside. The police arrived and pried me out of the vehicle. I was able to step out of the vehicle, unharmed."

Once again, Pam's life had been spared but the battle still raged in her soul. Her search for peace led to bad relationships, more bingeing and purging and more cocaine.

"Basically I always had cocaine with me and I was going, one day, to get some more," she says.

**ANY LIFE – NO MATTER HOW FAR GONE – [GOD IS ABLE TO CHANGE]**



"On the way, I cried out from the deepest part of me. There was no sound. I just called on Jesus. I called on His name. The love of God just came into the car in such a powerful way.

"I was at a point, finally, where I was ready to lay down all my trying and all my striving and I believed that God loved me that day," she continues with tears in her eyes. "For the first time I had a peace and I knew that God was going to save me and was going to help me. He was going to rescue me. That was the beginning of deliverance and a change in my life. From that day on, I never did drugs again."

God did a miraculous work in Pam's life. He touched her soul and renewed her mind so she could have victory over the secret areas of sin in her life.

"God is so good!" Pam declares. "I had a lot of fears about my health and my ability to be a mum and also about being a good mum if God should give me a child. So I'm thankful that the Lord has blessed me and has allowed me to have a house filled with children."

Pam goes on to say, "He came to set the captives free, He came to release prisoners from darkness

and that is what Christ will do in any life. Any life – no matter how far gone, how deep the pit, His arm is able to reach down and get a hold of that life and change it for His glory. He is able.

"Look, I was there. He brought me from point A to point B and if He can do it for me, He can do it for you too," she encourages audiences she speaks to.

One of Pam's favourite Bible passages is from Psalm 136:1: "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His love endures forever."

# How do we picture heaven?

BY HANNAH THIEM  
(AMENDED)

IN a recent episode of the Netflix series *The Good Place* the characters finally [SPOILER ALERT] made it to the REAL Good Place - well, at least the front door.

*The Good Place* is an exploration of morality, heaven, hell and the afterlife. Currently finishing up its third season, *The Good Place* has managed some superb twists. It has manipulated an audience into feeling sympathy for a demon, thinking seriously about moral philosophy and has given us a new and helpful framework to talk about what happens after we die.

Through three seasons we have watched the show meander through the "Bad Place", the "Neutral Place", the "Real Bad Place" and finally the "Good Place".

It's something of a relief. However, when our heroes finally do make it to the "real" Good Place, it is disappointing. The creators of *The Good Place* rely on some Ned Flanders-esque tropes to depict their moral equivalent of heaven. Sure, it's funny, but as we dive down into the stereotypes they are based on, we start to see some dangerous lies Western society believes about heaven.

So here are three lies *The Good Place* depicts about heaven and three truths that we need to focus on.

**Lie One:**  
**Heaven is all about me**

"Are you sure we are in the actual good place - it is rather carpeted", asks Tahani (played by Jameela Jamil), an aristocrat obsessed with appearances. She is asking because her assumption is that a good place could not have carpet that she doesn't appreciate.

It's an assumption that is reaffirmed almost immediately. They are convinced they are in the real Good Place when they breathe in and can smell "whatever makes you happiest". Whether it is warm pretzels, absolute moral truth, or the curtain between first class and economy closing.

They are content because they have found themselves in an individualistic heaven that answers their every desire.

**Truth One:**  
**Heaven is about God**

*After this I looked, and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb... And they all cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God. Revelation 7:9-10*



The cast of *The Good Place* (from left) Ted Danson (Michael), Kirsten Bell (Eleanor), D'Arcy Carden (Janet), Manny Jacinto (Jason), Jameela Jamil (Taha ni) and William Jackson Harper (Chidi).

As soon as we start to think that heaven is about us, we miss the point. God is not providing us with an individualised fairground to play in - He is providing us with true happiness: relationship with Himself.

**Lie Two:**  
**The agents of goodness are naïve and incompetent in the face of injustice**

"Well geez Louise, I hope you're okay! My name's Gwendolyn, and welcome to the Good Place!" says the first Good Place inhabitant we meet.

She accepts a series of far-fetched lies, is excruciatingly cheerful and can't help but wave at the humans. She may as well be saying "Hi-diddly-ho!", she is that ridiculous.

The other Good Place agents we meet are a committee obsessed with following the rules. They discover injustice, and their response is to spend 400 years making a committee and another 1000 years checking there is no conflict of interest.

The agents of the Good Place have no way to stand in the face of injustice, other than shaking a fist, which may or may not turn into a cheerful wave.

**Truth Two:**  
**God has dealt, powerfully, with injustice**

*He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed until he has established justice in the earth. Isaiah 42:3b-4*

God isn't left wringing his hands. By sending Jesus to deal finally and perfectly with injustice, God ensures that justice is enacted.

**Lie Three:**  
**If you try hard enough, you will get to heaven**

This lie is threaded throughout *The Good Place*. It is what spurs the humans on as they confront demons and other obstacles. It's the most dangerous lie of all, because it's the one we are often all too close to believing - that if we just try hard enough, we will eventually find a judge, or accountant, or committee, that will accept us as good people.

We haven't made it to the end of the show, but we can be pretty confident that it won't end up with the characters in the Bad Place, as they all deserve.

**Truth Three:**  
**It is only through Jesus that we can be accepted**

*For it is by grace you have*

*been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no man can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9*

Jesus says Eleanor or anyone else won't be able to ever earn enough points to get into "The Good Place" - and we don't have to. The divine man Jesus destroyed any point system. Instead, He "earned" those points and can take the debt of sin from you and me.

Christians are saved the anxiety of the characters on the show, wondering about their eternal fate. Thanks to Jesus' death, we can be confident that we will be accepted by God into Paradise.

*The Good Place* is a fantastic television series. It gets people talking about important issues and also provides a medium to think about morality.

But it is important as we watch that we don't get sucked into the distorted view of heaven and humanity that it depicts. Because when you start to distort God's character, heaven, or the message of salvation through Jesus, you paint yourself a picture of a good place that isn't that good after all - instead of the holiness and perfection the Bible promises, it is just a shinier version of this broken, sinful reality we already know.

This article first appeared in Southern Cross magazine. It is reprinted here with kind permission.

## Saved by a Tweet

**GAVIN** Finch of Kansas City, Missouri, was perfectly healthy until, at age 20, he found out he was dying. Gavin had a rare disease and his kidneys were failing. Dialysis was the only thing keeping him alive. He needed a new kidney, and fast.

Desperate, Gavin's girlfriend Ally Braymer posted a tweet hoping to find a match: "My boyfriend needs a kidney. Blood type is A+. Retweet to spread the word."



Good Samaritan Lindsey, sick Gavin and girlfriend Ally.

Lindsey Edwards was scrolling through Twitter when she just happened to see Ally's tweet. "I'm like, 'I'm A+,'" Lindsey recalled thinking. "I should give him a call!"

Bear in mind, Lindsey had never met Gavin, Ally, or any of their family members. But as soon as she saw the tweet, she knew she had to give him a second chance a life.

"You didn't know me before you decided to donate a piece of your body to me, and that blows my mind," Gavin wrote in a heartfelt Facebook post after the successful surgery. "Your compassion is unmatched... A lifetime of trying to repay you wouldn't be enough. Thank you."

*"I have a theory that selflessness and bravery aren't all that different."*  
- Veronica Roth

## Harry Potter, meet Jesus

IF you are someone who generally finds church a bit boring but loves the Harry Potter books and movies, then Leverington Church in Philadelphia has an unusual sermon series that might just pique your interest.

Entitled *Harry Potter meets Jesus*, this set of eight short talks by Pastor Langdon remains true to both the Bible and the novels. They bring out some fascinating parallels that are sure to make both more interesting to a generation of readers that have been influenced by what is arguably 'the most popular cultural phenomenon of our time'.

Langdon deals unflinchingly with such thorny topics as free will (and the sorting hat), racism (and mud bloods), depression (and dementors), what good parenting looks like, self-sacrifice, temptation and the hard teachings of Jesus.

For instance, one excellent analogy is drawn between Harry's relationship with Albus Dumbledore and our relationship with God (although, as Langdon makes clear, Dumbledore does not represent God in the books).



really needs to know is "is he good, does he care, and can I trust him?"

The same is true when we face rules from God that seem arbitrary. Do we only obey when we understand everything - even though God is infinite and we might not be able to understand even if He did explain Himself - or do we base our obedience on relationship because we have come to understand that God is good, He cares and we can trust Him?

The sermons can be watched or listened to and are accompanied, on the website, by notes that include the scripture references and key points, that can be used for further study. Check them out at [www.levpres.org/harry-potter](http://www.levpres.org/harry-potter)

# Bad choice damages actress for decades

Shari Rigby lives the glamour life of a Los Angeles-based author, speaker, and movie director. She is a former model, who represented brands like Mercedes Benz, and American West Airlines, and is an accomplished actress.

However, Shari's life has not been all high-flying and success – she has experienced relationship pain, drug abuse, and an unwanted pregnancy that led to abortion.

She grew up in Cooperstown, North Dakota and was introduced to God and the good news of Jesus as a child.

"[At church] the pastor was speaking about heaven and hell and that if you didn't want to go to hell you needed to accept Jesus," she remembers. "So, I raised my hand. I did accept Him at that point in my life but I really didn't know who Jesus was and I definitely did not start a personal relationship with Him nor was I walking as a believer. I didn't know what I was really getting into, but He knew me."

After that, Shari's life took a crazy turn and went down a dark path of drugs and promiscuous sex.

At sixteen, she fell in love and got married to a man who turned out to be a "manipulative, controlling drug addict".

At seventeen, Shari became pregnant. "I graduated from high school when my son was five weeks old," she says.

Several years later, she divorced her husband, went to college and worked two jobs to make ends meet.

"During that time, I definitely wasn't walking the right walk—I was very much in and out of relationships—and just trying to get by," she shares. "My desire to be needed was an addiction far greater than any drug. It began to eat me alive."

Then, Shari became pregnant again. This time, she decided to have an abortion – a secret that she kept hidden for twenty years.

She says this poor choice broke her and caused her much pain, shame and regret. "It held me captive for so long."

Finally, at twenty-five years old, Shari's life came full circle to her first prayer to God. "As time went on, I started to know who I was," she says. "When I began dating my husband after going through a lot of difficult things over many years, he was really the first person who said, 'I want you to come to church with me. I want to introduce you to my church.'"

When Shari remembered her commitment to God as a young child and realised her need for a Saviour. In a wonderful moment of surrender, she rededicated her life to Jesus Christ.

"As I walked through life with all of those pains and struggles, the beautiful thing is that I kept getting picked up," she smiles. "I would continue choosing things that weren't good for my life, but ultimately God kept giving me other choices."

Even though Shari knew that she had been forgiven and set free by Jesus, it took her a long time to overcome the pain that resulted from her abortion.

Later, God made a way for Shari to begin an acting career at an age most women are retiring from the industry. She moved to Los Angeles in 2009 and was involved in faith-based feature films that received numerous awards and impressive box office rankings.

However, the one film that stands out to Shari



Actress Shari Rigby attends the premiere of Mom's Night Out at TCL Chinese Theatre IMAX in 2014 in Hollywood, California. Photo: Paul Archuleta/FilmMagic



is *October Baby* – a movie where she plays the mother of an abortion survivor who is put up for adoption.

Shari reveals that she started crying when she read the script for the first time: "God started a work in my life the moment I started reading the script. He knew

that I still needed to be healed, even though He had forgiven me.

"When filming got underway, Jesus met me on the set and walked me through each one of those scenes. That wasn't me up there. It was His message."

There is a particular scene in the movie where Shari's character's daughter tracks her down and leaves a note on her desk that says: "I forgive you."

"That was my moment with God," she tells. "I felt Him speaking to me, saying, 'It's OK. It's over. You've been forgiven.' I received forgiveness in my life and then started to see what this movie was going to do."

For the next two and a half years, Shari travelled to pregnancy care centres and maternity homes to support and encourage men and women and to hear how her story had impacted them.

She has also given her testimony at various events and conferences, written many books, including her biography, *Beautifully Flawed*, and founded a group called The Women in My World.

Shari has been married for nearly twenty years and has two boys, Donnie and Levi.

## When I say I am a Christian

When I say ... "I am a Christian," I'm not shouting "I'm clean living". I'm whispering "I was lost, but now I'm found and am forgiven."

When I say ... "I am a Christian," I don't speak of this with pride. I'm confessing that I stumble and need Christ to be my guide.

When I say ... "I am a Christian," I'm not boasting I am strong. I'm professing that I'm weak and need His strength to carry on.

When I say ... "I am a Christian," I'm not bragging of success. I'm admitting I have failed and need God to clean my mess.

When I say ... "I am a Christian," I'm not claiming to be perfect. My flaws are far too visible but God believes I'm worth it.

When I say ... "I am a Christian," I still feel the sting of pain. I have my share of heartaches, so I call upon His name.

When I say ... "I am a Christian," I'm not holier than thou, I'm just a sinner who received God's grace, somehow.

by Maya Angelou

### MY DESIRE TO BE NEEDED WAS AN ADDICTION



## Trust your bubbles

BY RICHARD INNES

**VERN** Trent tells about a scuba diver who said that when you are in deep water, you are encircled by light, so there is no way you can tell which way is up because the water diffuses the light. You are also totally weightless, so you have no sense of gravity. The only way you can tell which way is out is to go the direction the bubbles are going.

Surrounded in an aura of light and weightlessness, it is very easy to lose all sense of direction and get disoriented. You may sense that this way is up even though your air bubbles are going sideways. You may be so convinced that your perception is true that you decide to ignore your bubbles and go the way you think is up.

One of the first things we were told when learning to scuba dive, Trent said, was to always trust your bubbles – to always follow your bubbles. No matter how you feel, no matter what you think, your bubbles are always right.

Life can be like that at times too. If we base the rules of life on our feelings, perception or what we think, we can be very easily led astray.

The philosophy, 'if it feels good it must be right,' is a dangerous guide to follow because our feelings can play all sorts of tricks on us. If something is wrong, it is wrong regardless of how we feel or what we think. True, it is important that we don't deny or repress our feelings, because we can learn to trust them; but what we can't always trust is our interpretation of them.

The only safe guide to follow when it comes to the rules of life is to trust God and His Word, the Bible. Therein lie the 'bubbles of life' to follow. These 'bubbles' are always right. Always!

*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Psalm 119:11*

This article first appeared in ACTS International Encounter magazine. Used with kind permission.

# Murderer finds hope in max prison

Gary Norris had been arrested and charged with first degree murder. He was going to spend the rest of his life behind the bars of the State of Louisiana's Angola Penitentiary, the largest maximum security prison in the US – a violent prison where "men are raped and murdered".

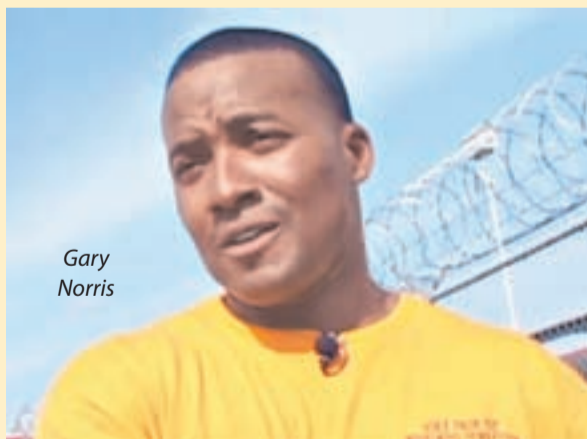
"I remember when I first got here that I was scared," he admits. "I did not know what was what. I had heard a lot of stories [about this place]. I had gotten to a point where I thought my life was over – that it was finished."

Gary was sitting on his bunk with the words of his mother ringing through his mind: "You will never amount to anything."

"I believed it," he says. "Whether I succeeded or failed, I figured that [it did not matter]. I would not be letting my mum down."

Then, something miraculous occurred. Gary shares, "I was thinking that if God is really God and if He is really real, then I did not want to read about Him anymore, I did not want anyone to tell me about Him anymore...I wanted to experience God for myself on a person-to-person basis. I just cried out to God and my prayers were heard."

God revealed Himself to Gary in a way that changed his life forever. "I knew from that day forth that Jesus was real," he smiles. "I knew that the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus had taken place. It was not because anybody had told me about it; it was because I felt it in [my heart] and I saw that Jesus was no longer on that cross. I realised that I did not have to live my life anymore. I could allow Jesus to live His life through me. I



Gary Norris

think that is the most awesome experience anyone can ever encounter."

During the years before his arrest, Gary recalls "chasing drugs, chasing women and chasing money. I thought that if I could get those things, then that would fulfil me."

However, "when God came into my heart...I realised where true fulfilment comes from. I feel that everyone should experience that - whether you are inside Angola or outside Angola, God's love is what everyone needs and it is real. I think that is what everyone needs to know – that God is real."

To this day, Gary "cannot believe that I went to the actual level where the crime took me to".

"I remember being on my bed one day feeling sorry for myself, even though I had experienced the presence of God," he shares. "I will never forget the voice of God. He just simply spoke to me and said, 'Get over it. I saw it before it happened. That's why I had to come and die for you.' God released His forgiveness in my heart. He said, 'I have already forgiven you. Now you have to forgive you.' And that is where I am right now."

Speaking of the change that has happened in his life, Gary says, "I am new. I am walking in newness of life. I feel that is hard for a lot of men to do here because this place tries to remind you of who you used to be but God has never spoken to me about who I used to be. Never. He has never reminded me of where I have come from but He has my eyes and my mind focused on where He is going to take me."

# The atheist who dared Dawkins

BY ANDREW HALLOWAY

**P**OST-GRAD student Peter Byrom was bowled over by Richard Dawkins' famous book, *The God Delusion*.

While studying for a Masters degree at Kent University, a friend gave him the book and soon Peter was watching atheist videos on YouTube and reading the more extreme atheist material.

It was the trendy thing to do. In an interview for the Solas website, Peter recalls: "You think it makes you a more sophisticated person, because you embrace the grey areas and complexities of the human condition. So the whole ethos was, if you are a sophisticated, intelligent, person, you don't do 'the god-stuff' which is for losers. That was an atmosphere that I very much enjoyed and embraced, because that gave me more permission to just do things my own way."

In truth, Peter was attracted to a lifestyle where anything goes, and atheism provided the excuse to ignore the bits of Christian upbringing he'd had.

Peter was also taken in by Dawkins' science guru status, which he uses to promote his 'new atheism': "Dawkins gives you a sense of being 'in' on the wonder of science, and he plays on his talents for explaining science and enthusing people about it. He persuades many people that finding science beautiful, and the natural world amazing, means rejecting all religion... and that belief in God is lazy and boring."

He adds: "The bit I found liberating [in Dawkins' book] was when he defined faith as 'belief without evidence'. I now know that's nonsense, but back then, I bought into his definition."

Having absorbed the arguments, Peter began to use them in debates with believers. The only problem was, that meant getting to understand the arguments they used in return: "It was then that I discovered good Christian apologists confronting the new atheists. YouTube recommended videos with titles like 'Dawkins wipes the floor with...' or 'Dawkins destroys...' such and such a person. However, through those debates I was exposed to other points of view."

"Eventually, I discovered [Christian intellectuals like] William Lane Craig, John Lennox and David Robertson."

When the new atheists came up against these debaters, Peter saw that they were struggling.

For example, Peter was convinced by the atheists' 'Who made God?' argument, "until someone like William Lane Craig comes along and dismantles it. He shows that Dawkins has made all sorts of logically invalid steps and equivocations... So, firstly, I discovered how logical argumentation actually works, and then saw that the 'new atheists' didn't live up to that standard."

It was at this point that Peter stood up in an auditorium and publicly asked Prof Dawkins if he would debate William Lane Craig – but

Dawkins refused. The incident 'went viral' on YouTube.

Peter wasn't impressed with the arrogant excuse Dawkins gave: "It might look good on his CV, but not on mine."

"It was pathetic!" says Peter. "I got very disgruntled with Dawkins. I felt almost personally let down by him. I'd based a lot of my world-view, values and behaviour on his work..."

Craig had already debated three of Dawkins' new atheist chums, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett, yet Dawkins claimed: "I don't know who Craig is."

That disappointment was the start of a long road to Christian faith.

"In terms of coming to Christian belief myself, there were a mixture of factors... I had decided that I didn't want to go anywhere near Christianity because I didn't want an authority figure over my life... So, emotionally I was very set against it. But the intellectual barriers had started to come down."

"At the same time I ended up living with two friends. One was... an atheist who became a Christian. He

had a massive conversion experience, and that was really annoying; really inconvenient... our flat was a constant source of debate and discussion.

"However, I saw the impact of becoming a Christian on my friend. I couldn't help noticing that bits of his character seemed to be oddly improving!"

Meanwhile, Peter had got into a bad relationship because of his atheist, 'anything goes' philosophy, and the results were coming home to roost.

A year after becoming intellectually convinced of Christianity, Peter finally asked Jesus Christ into his life.

Since then, knowing Jesus has helped him deal with his perfectionism: "Becoming a Christian involves

learning that your security is in Christ, and that it's not about getting your act together and being a perfect person. The irony is that it frees you up to have a better shape to your life because your security is all in God. He has forgiven your sin, and you don't need to... base your life-identity on something else."

He also has a better relationship with his parents, and is now married.

"The Christian life isn't all easy... but it does mean that, whatever happens, you are secure in Christ, and can trust Him, and that is the greatest thing to have."

"If I was to sum it up, I'd say, 'Don't be conned'. Faith is not 'belief without evidence' as Dawkins says."

For Peter's full story, see [www.solas-cpc.org](http://www.solas-cpc.org)



When Peter Byrom (left) challenged Richard Dawkins to debate a Christian academic, Dawkins' refusal went viral on the internet.

## Believe it or not

### BIRDSONG ORGAN AN EVOLUTIONARY PUZZLE

BY CREATION MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL

**THERE** is little in nature to compare to the beauty of bird song. For this, birds use a unique avian vocal organ called the syrinx located in their chest. Birds also have a larynx, which is what other animals and mammals use to make sounds, a voice box situated in the throat. But birds only use their syrinx to vocalize. A new study trying to identify its evolutionary origin has come up short, confirming the syrinx is unique to birds, an evolutionary odd duck.

Most evolutionists say that birds evolved from dinosaurs. But the origin of the syrinx is squarely at odds with this notion, as no dinosaur has been found with a syrinx. Rather, the 'oldest' known fossilised syrinx was found in a fully formed bird, the fossils of which are found with dinosaurs—*Vegavis iaai*, a member of the duck/geese created kind.

In short, said Chad Eliason, a co-first author of the study, "We don't know where that organ came from, how and why it evolved."

If only evolutionists would save themselves the trouble of trying to find evolutionary links. We read in Genesis that birds were created according to their kinds on Day 5. This would have been complete with the syrinx, able to produce the majestic sounds God created them to make.

Kingsley, E.P., et al., Identity and novelty in the avian syrinx, PNAS 115(41):10209–10217, October 9, 2018  
Birds' voiceboxes are odd ducks, [fieldmuseum.org](http://fieldmuseum.org), 24 September 2018.



## CREATING GOD IN OUR OWN IMAGE

BY JIM DENISON (EXCERPT)

**VOLTAIRE** noted, "In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favour ever since."

Reading Psalm 143 this week, I was struck by a thought I'd never considered before.

David prays about how God, out of His love, will bring David's soul out of trouble, cut off his enemies and destroy his adversaries (verse 11-12).

David ended his prayer with the words, "for I am your servant" (v. 12b). "Servant" translates the Hebrew *ebed*, meaning someone who is subordinate to a master or owner. Why would David think that the Lord was more likely to answer his prayer for protection if he was the *ebed* of God?

Because a master is responsible for his or her servant. A good master provides security and all the needs of the servant. So long as David remained the *ebed* of God, he could count on the protection of God.

If, however, he became his own master and made God his servant, he was on his own. He could not count on the King to protect someone who was rebelling against His authority.

As I considered this fact, I realized that it encapsulates the tragic mistake our secular culture is making. We believe that we are God and God is our subject.

As C. S. Lewis put it: "The ancient

man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock [on trial]. Man is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock."

And, as a result, we lose the fear of divine judgment in this life and the next.

One of Satan's greatest victories in our culture is persuading us that the love of God precludes the judgment of God. We would never believe this of a parent or an employer, but many believe it's true of God.

To even suggest that the Lord might punish us for unbiblical morality is to be branded intolerant and puritanical. To even suggest that those who reject Jesus will spend eternity separated from Him in hell is to be ridiculed for fanatical bigotry.

But a holy Master must punish the sins of His subjects, whether they recognize His authority or not. A criminal who no longer believes there is a judicial system is no less subject to it.

Because you and I are fallen people, our default position is to be our own master, the king of our own kingdom. Every single day, we must make

the conscious decision to dethrone ourselves and enthrone Jesus.

If you've not put Him on the throne of your life yet today, you are on that throne. And you're missing His blessing while risking His judgment. Consider this article to be God's invitation to make Him your King and yourself His servant.

And know that your Father always gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him.

See Jim's full article at [thedenisonforum.org](http://thedenisonforum.org)

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# BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS



## LISTENING IS MORE THAN JUST HEARING

BY ROB FURLONG

American author, Sherry Turkle, has written extensively on the impact of technology on human relationships and the ways we do or don't communicate with each other.

In a recent book she commented on the rise of the smart phone and how society's preoccupation with it was contributing to a lack of empathy among people.

She tells the story of a young girl, aged 10 who, like many of her generation, spends a large amount of time on the phone.

The girl was called into the Principal's office, not because of her phone use, but because she had invited all

but one of her classmates to her upcoming birthday party.

When asked by the Principal how she would feel if she was the one who had been excluded, the young girl replied in a monotone voice, "I have no feeling about that at all."

As the Principal confided to Turkle, the girl was not "a bad kid" but her ability to relate with empathy to the pain of another was non-existent.

Turkle says that this is because when we spend most of our time communicating electronically we lose our ability to relate personally and deeply with each other.

You see, in a real conversation, when a person is vulnerable with us, we have to deal with their tears and emotions in *real* time and by that, I mean when we are meeting with each other face to face.

A person can react with anger or lash out hurtfully via a Facebook or Twitter post, and we can ignore, unfriend or ghost them.

But when we are face to face with



observations about technology's impact on relationships, our reluctance to

listen to each other is not a new thing.

In the past, wives often held "sparkling" one-sided conversations with the back of a newspaper.

In my family, we "talked" to each other through the TV! (This is not as crazy as it sounds. It involves talking to the other person while looking at the TV screen and your words somehow magically bounce off the screen and into their ears.)

So how can I listen with empathy? *Be prepared to sit with the person.* Give them your time. They are opening their heart to you – honour that!

*Don't be afraid of emotions.* They may get angry or cry. It's okay - right now they need someone they trust and with whom they can be totally honest.

*Get rid of all the distractions.* Put the phone down. Turn off the TV. Place the newspaper to the side. Right now, the person sitting in front of you is more important than anything else.

*Remember.* You are not perfect - you have faults, weaknesses and hurts also - one day, you will need someone to listen to you as well.

Here's to being better listeners! •

another person it is a very different story.

Of course, it is entirely possible to ghost or ignore someone when they are sitting directly opposite you.

You simply "zone out", choose to respond to what they are saying half-heartedly or be more intent on what you are going to say next.

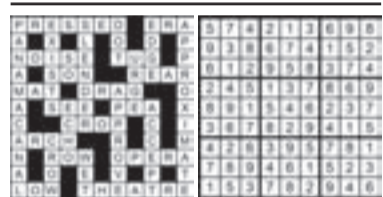
M. Scott Peck once reflected on how he had done exactly this in a five minute conversation with a school friend:

*During our five minutes together, I was listening to what he had to say only so that I might turn it into a clever rejoinder. I watched him only so that I might see what effect my remarks were having upon him. I had not cared a whit for my classmate.*

Listening with empathy to another person requires great discipline and a willingness on the part of the listener to accept the fact that things could get messy!

And it is going to take time – undistracted time – for the person sharing to be truly heard.

While I agree with Turkle's



## How can I become a Christian?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered though Jesus Christ

We read in God's word: "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)

**OUR PROBLEM:** Separation from God  
"Everyone has sinned. Nobody is good enough because God's standards are perfect" (Romans 3:23)

ADMIT

**GOD'S REMEDY / SOLUTION:** Jesus died on the cross  
"God demonstrates His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)

BELIEVE

**OUR RESPONSE:** Trust Jesus by receiving Him  
"To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12)

COMMIT

Here is an example of how you can pray.

Dear Father in Heaven. I come to you now because I want to be saved. Please, forgive me of my sins. I believe that you sent your Son Jesus Christ to die for me and that you have raised him from the dead. I now ask Jesus Christ to come into my life as my Saviour and Lord. Take control of my life. Please make me the person You created me to be. In Jesus Christ's name. Amen

The Lord Jesus says: "I tell you the truth. Everyone who believes in me has eternal life." (John 6:47). He gives life of a wonderful quality that continues forever.

AS A NEXT STEP:

If you prayed the above prayer, tick this box



I have prayed this prayer.

Please send me:

- Bible
- Some 'starting off' literature
- Information on a helpful church

If you have NOT prayed the prayer at this stage, tick this box



I would like to think about this.

Please send me:

- More information as I am inquiring about being a Christian.
- I have a problem (see attached letter)

\* Please tick and write clearly \*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Age and occupation (it helps) \_\_\_\_\_

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## The same but changed

BY JODY BENNETT

**THERAPEUTIC** or cognitive reframing is defined as "looking at a situation, thought, or feeling from another angle, thereby altering its meaning." In other words, the situation itself doesn't change, just your perspective on it.

Counsellors and psychologists use this technique to help clients work through problems, and I have found that God is an expert at therapeutic reframing. So many times I have handed problems or hurts over to Him in prayer and nothing outwardly has changed, but my whole feeling towards a person, memory or situation has been altered, thereby helping me to bear it or to forgive.

This has happened so often, my prayers are now more "Lord, change how I see this" rather than "Lord, take this away!"

As sinful, selfish individuals limited by our own life experience and assumptions, so often our perspective is warped, our premises faulty. We need God to open our eyes to how other people view the issue, argument or situation – or how God does.

The prophet Elijah during the reign of King Ahab saw persecution and compromise all around, and became depressed, but God shifted his view to the 7000 faithful believers who hadn't bowed down to the pagan god, Baal. (1 Kings chapter 19)

John the Baptist in prison, about to lose his head, wondered what on

earth God was doing. Jesus didn't rescue him but showed him how John's declarations had been fulfilled and his work had indeed ushered in God's kingdom. (Matthew chapter 17)

The crowd ready to stone the adulteress thought they knew God's will until the Carpenter gave them a different perspective on their self-righteousness. (John chapter 8)

The disciples on the Road to Emmaus are distraught at the death of Jesus, until the Stranger beside them gives them a different reading of the events by taking them through the Old Testament scriptures. (Luke chapter 24)

The situations themselves didn't change, but everything was different for those involved.

Becoming a Christian allows God to reframe your life, your disappointments and failures. The Bible tells of how He turned a shepherd boy into a king (David), a prisoner into a prime minister (Joseph), a denier into a devotee (Peter) and used a humble peasant girl to be the mother of God (Mary).

And if you think your situation is hopeless and can't possibly change, not to worry: God can change everything without changing a thing. Even if you never get out of prison, get well or see your loved one again, even in your on-going circumstances God can shift your view, reframe your life and "do abundantly more than you could ask for or imagine".

Try Him! •

## Ask Y:

Peter Meadows answers your questions about God

QUESTION: Does the claim that God is "holy" have anything to do with real life?

A GREAT question. The focus Jesus gave was on "real life" being about knowing – as a friend – the God who made us. And experiencing His help to live the kind of life He has in mind for us. All of which involves getting to know what God is like. Which is where "holy" comes in.



It is easy to imagine – or hope – that God is much like a puppy. Safe, agreeable and OK to take on. That's not how Jesus conveyed Him. Not as "safe" at all. That's not because God is nasty, cruel or vindictive. But because of the very substance of what He is.

Let me explain with an analogy: Day-by-day you sit within reach of an electric socket and don't give it a second thought. Of course you are careful. You don't mix electricity and water, or put your fingers in the socket, but you happily use electricity to run your appliances.

But somewhere a huge power station is generating raw, naked, electrical power. This electricity is nothing like the few meager watts that help keep your hair curled or your toaster toasting. No way. If this kind of electricity went straight into your home it would be meltdown. Everything would be left as a charred blob on the landscape.

We can too easily assume the great God of the universe to be like common domestic electricity. Tame. Safe. Manageable. But the Bible reveals God to be like the raw power that comes from the electricity plant.

God is holy. Pure, powerful and unspoiled goodness. A searchlight, not a flashlight. A forest fire, not a flickering match. A tsunami, not a wave.

And "holy" consumes anything that is not of the same substance—in the same way darkness is consumed by light, forests are consumed by fire and whole swathes of land are consumed by a tsunami.

What turns that raw electricity in to a safe power that makes life work better? A transforming substation. A go-between that stands between the ultimate power and us. And that is exactly what Jesus came to be – so we could have real life.

By His death on the cross Jesus stood between God and us – and goes on doing so. Through our faith in Him we have a way to relate to an all powerful and holy God. To know Him. And to make it possible for that same God to be our strength and help.

This is what makes real life possible. •



# FAITH-FULL FIGHTER

**H**ouston Texans quarterback Deshaun Watson may be only 23 but he has already proved himself to be not only a brilliant ball player but a dogged and resilient human being, who takes one look at adversity in life and works out how to rise above.

Deshaun grew up in Gainesville, Georgia. While he was still in high school, his mom, a single parent, got tongue cancer. Deshaun stepped up to the plate to help the family financially by doing filing at the courthouse three times a week, after football practice, until 10pm. Then there was the game on Friday, housework on Saturday and church on Sunday.

The team's coach said Deshaun never let on about the pressures at home, even as he was setting records for Gainesville High on the field, keeping up with his schoolwork and helping his brother look after their twin younger siblings.

His friends said he never asked for money, although his family was poor enough to get a home through charity Habitat for Humanity when Deshaun was 11.

Now that he earns millions playing professional football (he signed a four-year \$13.84 million contract with the Texans in 2017), Deshaun has returned the good fortune he received, with interest, by building homes for others through the same organisation, and donating generously to Hurricane Harvey victims.

While in college, the quarterback would come home on holidays and work painting houses in the blistering heat.

Jack Waldrip, his father figure, who found him the job, remembers: "No complaints. No nothing. He didn't ask for any handouts. He was just that type of person. Man, what a work ethic. ... Some people have heart. I don't know if you're born with it. Some people just have that determination, that spirit to be successful no matter what the circumstances are."



Deshaun with Jack Waldrip



Deshaun Watson #4 of the Houston Texans is tackled from behind by George Odum #30 of the Indianapolis Colts during the Wild Card Round at NRG Stadium on January 05, 2019 in Houston, Texas. (Photo Bob Levey/Getty Images)

**RIGHT:** Deshaun's arms are full of revealing tattoos. (Photo: Getty Images)



"He just has that. He's just special."

Deshaun is also extremely intelligent and "constantly loading his brain with as much intel as possible" as one coach put it. But his success has not made him proud. As another commented after Deshaun orchestrated a surprising win, "He was so naive and humble in the moment. You just knew right away we had something special here."

Playing for college team the Clemson Tigers against South Carolina in 2014, Deshaun showed true grit, insisting on going on the field with a torn ACL (ligament in the knee). He braced up his knee, threw for 269 yards and two touchdowns, rushed for two more scores and wasn't sacked. He never said a word about the pain to teammates either. Most didn't even know he had torn the ACL until after the game.

However in 2017, when Deshaun again tore his ACL, ending his NFL prospects for his rookie year and landing in hospital, he did not appear too upset.

Family and friends did not detect any sadness, any madness, any of the hysterics that were sweeping the football world. Teammates, opponents and fans were cursing the football gods. Yet there Deshaun was. At peace and bursting with "I'll be back" optimism.

"Every obstacle, he's like, 'Oh, all right. Here's what I have to do to get past it.' And he just does it. He doesn't spend time crying over stuff," Deshaun's high school coach explains.

Deshaun did come back from that injury and performed so well in the 2018 season that he was named for his first Pro Bowl [all-star game at the end of the NFL season] this past January.

On his Twitter and Instagram account, Deshaun is open about the faith that directs his life and decisions. As he attended church regularly as a child, we can only assume that he came into a relationship with Jesus early on. He quotes Proverbs 22:4, "Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honour and life." And his intro begins "God 1<sup>st</sup>!"

He also quotes: "1 Peter 5:6-7 'Humble yourselves therefore under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.' Stay low!"

He recently visited Israel and shared with his more than 1 million Instagram followers the powerful moment when he got baptized in the Jordan River. Baptism [being immersed in water] is a symbolic action that signifies death to one's old self and resurrection to a new

life of commitment to Jesus Christ.

"Got Baptized in the Jordan River. Went tubing in the Sea of Galilee. Took a trip through Mary Magdalene's hometown. Saw the first church in (Capernaum). Life Changing Experiences – Major Blessings!" He wrote in a post.

Besides displaying his faith on his social media accounts, one can also read it all over him – literally! Deshaun has many arm tattoos, most of which are faith-based.

For instance: "Glory to God!" on his inside right upper arm; "Philippians 4:13" above it; a quote from Proverbs 30:30 under a picture

of a lion on his left bicep; and a reference to John 17 below it.

This last is difficult to make out, but possibly verse 3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent."

Readers might be interested to know that Deshaun's mum (whose name, Deann, is another tattoo on his arm) survived her bout with cancer, although she had to have her tongue removed, and Deshaun bought her, for her birthday in 2017, her first car – a Jaguar! ●

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