

A WONDER-FILLED LIFE

BY JODY BENNETT

The expression of the little girl in this photo is so delightful! It reminds us that children still have the capacity to be overcome with awe and wonder and excitement, in a way that us cynical and jaded adults seldom experience.

In the modern world where so many mysteries of science and biology have been discovered, where so many disasters and disappointments happen routinely, and where our lives are so busy, it is rare to feel awe.

Awesome has become such an overused adjective that the word 'awe' hardly means anything to us — certainly not the humbling sense of tininess in the face of great beauty or power that it used to mean. Awesome used to describe something that brought us to our knees in worship, that stopped our mouths in an 'O' of wonder, that reminded us of our creatureliness and frailty.

Modern society doesn't want to be reminded of those things. We think we are invincible, powerful and understand pretty much everything — certainly how to live successfully. (How is that working out for us?)

But every now and then one of us will stand in the bush on a dark night and look up into the vastness of space and be filled with wonderment. Or we will experience nature at its most powerful — a volcano, a tsunami, an earthquake — and be reminded again that our lives are a vapour, snuffed out as easily as a candle flame. We might be afloat on the ocean with nothing around us but water to the horizon, and be filled with a quiet fear of a bigness that we can't quite fathom. Or we may look down a microscope at the teeming life in a single drop of water and realise there are worlds within worlds that we hardly know.

I believe that sense of awe and wonderment are really important to maintain a proper sense of perspective in life; and to keep human's natural tendency towards self-satisfaction and pride in check. I believe that God made the universe and nature in all its intricate beauty and incredible variety to point us beyond what we can see, to His invisible Self.

As the Bible says: *"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork."* (Psalm 19:1)

That first Christmas, just over 2000 years ago, the most awesome,



A little girl on Christmas morning.
Photo: Stockphoto/Getty Images

mind-boggling, wonder-filled thing occurred: the God who made the universe (the part which we can observe is currently estimated to be 93 billion light-years in diameter!) and the fire-ball that is our sun, and the 963 000 (!) different types of insects, and every unique human being etc. etc., became a powerless, tiny, vulnerable human baby.

He entered His creation as a man in order to save humankind from the mess they had made with the free will He had given them. He didn't need us in heaven — He didn't need us at all — but He loved us so much that He came that first Christmas, grew, showed us how we should live, taught us, did miracles, and then died at our hands to take away all

our sin.

If that doesn't fill you with awe and drive you to your knees in worship, then consider what followed. He rose from the dead after three days and walked and talked with over 500 people for 40 days before returning to heaven — and promising to return again to make all things right at the end of time.

He promised that we too can overcome sin and death by simply believing in Him and what He did on the cross to atone (pay for) our sin. Just like that we get to conquer death by rising again in eternal bodies and we get to live forever in a place without pain or tears or illness or loss.

Awesome.

When the pageantry became personal

As a young boy, Robert Sproul dreamt of a white Christmas every year. He loved the exciting pageantry and tradition of Christmas. He loved the music and the late night Christmas Eve church service.

He recalled the minister starting his Christmas Eve homily at about 11:47 pm and, when the clock struck midnight, he would stop, smile to the congregation and say, "It's Christmas. And may I be the first on this day to wish you a Merry Christmas?"



"Well, that used to send chills up and down my spine,"

Robert said. "It was a tradition. He did it every year... As I grew up, I never wanted to miss a service, and particularly on those Christmas Eves when it had snowed and the lawn was covered in the new fallen snow. There was just something about it. I loved it."

But Robert didn't believe in God. For him, it was just tradition. "The real fun came the next morning when we got to open the presents and enjoy the visitation of the man from the North Pole."

But something changed in September of 1957. Robert had just spent his first week in college and he and his roommate decided to visit some bars. Robert reached the carpark before realising he was out of cigarettes. He went back to the dorm and bought a pack from the cigarette machine.

"I turned around and saw the captain of the football team sitting at a table," Robert said in an interview. "And he spoke to me and to my roommate and invited us to come over and chat. And we did. And this was the first person I ever met in my life that talked about Christ as a reality. I'd never heard anything like it. And I was just absorbed, sat there for two or three hours, and he was talking."

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BIANCA BUITENDAG

When the pageantry became personal

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The football captain quoted Ecclesiastes 11:3: “Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie.”

“And God awakened my soul by considering that passage, as I saw myself as a tree falling, and rotting, and decaying,” Robert said in a Ligoniers video. “And that was the description of my life. That’s where I was. Nobody had to tell me that I was a sinner, I knew that. It was abundantly clear to me. But as I went to my bedroom that night and got on my knees, my experience was one of transcendent forgiveness. And I was overwhelmed by the tender mercy of God, the sweetness of His grace, and the awakening He gave me for my life.”

Robert remembered being “absolutely absorbed with the discovery of Christ.”

“It was utter sweetness to me, and I had great delight in read-

ing the Scriptures and talking to people about the things of God.”

Three months later, Robert’s normal love for Christmas was taken to new heights.

“I remember my first Christmas as a Christian – coming back home for the holidays, driving through the snow to the church, going into the sanctuary, singing the same hymns that I had sung for so many years, hearing exactly the same sermon, hearing the chimes strike midnight. And this time when the minister interrupted his sermon and listened to the chimes and then leaned over the pulpit and said, “It’s Christmas,” I was ready to walk through the door into heaven. It was all the joy that I could handle because now for the first time I was experiencing this pageantry as reality, as truth, as something that had really taken place.”

Robert Charles is better known as RC Sproul – one of Christianity’s most influential teachers.

He produced many books, and lecture and video series, before his death in 2017. ●

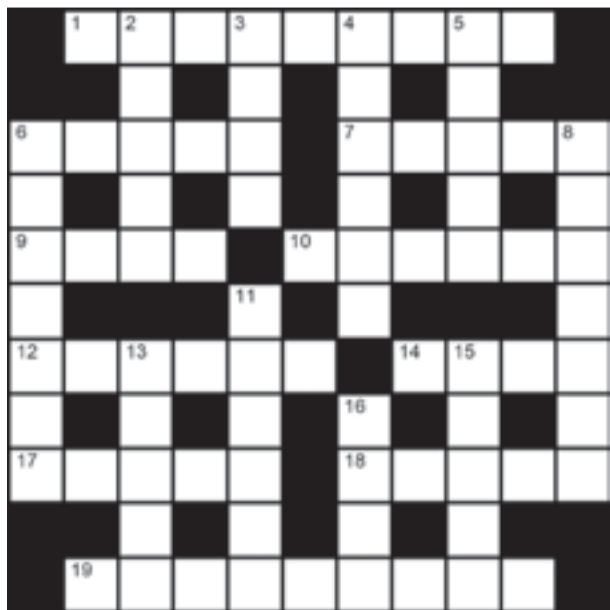
RC Sproul and his wife Vesta.



Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

ACROSS

- 1 Drug used in treatment of drug addiction
- 6 Of the eye
- 7 Pickling water
- 9 Toy that does tricks (2,2)
- 10 Get things in order (4,2)
- 12 To calm or comfort
- 14 Not quite closed
- 17 “Relatives” of Bigfoot
- 18 Abnormally active
- 19 Very bright – sparkling



DOWN

- 2 Way in
- 3 Computer breach
- 4 Wreckage from a crash

- 5 Over-loud
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- 11 Carpentry tool
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WHAT’S YOUR DESTINATION?

BY ANDREW LANSDOWN

“Where are you going for holidays?” Most of us repeatedly ask and get asked this question as the Christmas break approaches.

We place great importance on holidays. We spend weeks planning them, more weeks enjoying them, and still more weeks reliving them.

Holidays are one of the great pleasures of life. They offer us an opportunity to unwind from work, enjoy the company of loved ones, and experience new things.

The options for holidays seem almost limitless. Whether it is an exotic foreign getaway or a tent, caravan or cottage at a beach within a few hundred kilometres of home.

Unfortunately, holidays do not always go as we plan. Sometimes they are beset by minor troubles: the car breaks down, the fishing rod is left behind, and the children bicker. At other times they are marred by major misfortune: illness strikes, an accident occurs, or death arrives.

Every holiday season, the media abounds with news of holiday tragedies: a man holidaying in Bali contracts malaria and dies; a woman camping in the Northern Territory is eaten by a crocodile; vacationers in London are killed in a coach crash; a tourist in Florida is shot dead by a carjacker; a couple campervanning in British Columbia are executed by

homicidal youths.

While contemplation of such tragedies dampens the holiday spirit, it is a salutary reminder that our life on earth is transient, impermanent, passing. We are mortal, and our lives are as fleeting as our pleasures.

It also reminds us that we are weak, and the plans we make are subject to alteration without notice or consultation. Death and disaster do not take holidays, nor do they show respect for holiday-makers.

“Where are you going for holidays?” was the wrong question for some vacationers during the past year. And, although we do not know it and dare not think it, it is the wrong question for some of us this holiday season, too. For some, the right question is, “Where are you going for eternity?”

Indeed, sooner or later, at work or at leisure, at home or abroad, this question confronts everyone. For eternity is just a breath away from us all; and none of us knows which breath, in failing, will take us there.

“Where are you going for eternity?” What is your answer?

Jesus Christ maintained that death is not the end of human existence. Rather, it is the entrance to eternity. He also taught that in eternity we will live in one of two places (heaven or hell) and experience one of two states (joy or torment).

A day of judgment is coming for all people who have lived and are living upon the earth. On that day the Lord Jesus will separate the faithful from

the unfaithful. To the faithful he will say, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”. But to the unfaithful he will say, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:31-46).

“Where are you going for eternity?” Surely this question deserves at least as much attention as the question, “Where are you going for holidays?” Yet few of us devote any thought to it at all. We allow the cares and riches and pleasures of this life to choke off all contemplation of the life to come. We act as if our mortal bodies were not animated by immortal souls. We act as if material things were more important than spiritual things. We seize the present but lose the future.

With their increased time for relaxation, the summer holidays offer an ideal opportunity to reflect on the question, “Where are you going for eternity?” Are you going to heaven or to hell?

The Bible assures us that God does not want anyone to suffer His eternal punishment. That is why He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to earth at Christmas almost 2,000 years ago. “For 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).

When we turn from our sin and trust in God’s Son we can know with certainty and expectancy where we are going for eternity. ●



THE ANTICIPATION OF CHRISTMAS

BY GREG LAURIE

ON the first Christmas Eve there were no brightly coloured lights on any homes. There were no stockings that had been hung with care and no visions of sugar plums on anyone’s mind. It was just another night in Bethlehem.

But world history was about to change. When Mary and Joseph arrived in town, there was no room in the inn. So the Son of God entered our world in a stable or, most likely, a cave.

Now when parents have a child, especially their first child, they call their loved ones and tell them the weight and length of the baby and the actual time of birth. On the first Christmas, God the Father also made an announcement that His Son had been born.

Whom did He tell? You would think He would have told Caesar that the Son of God had been born. But instead, God

directed His message toward shepherds who were out in the fields at night, watching over their flocks.

The angel told them, “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Saviour—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognise him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:10-11).

So the shepherds went to Bethlehem, where they found Joseph and Mary, and the baby in her arms.

There are a lot of good things about Christmas, of course, but as we anticipate its arrival, let’s realise that Christmas cannot deliver on its promises. I think deep down inside, what we’re really longing for is not Christmas but Christ. I think the anticipation we have for Christmas is a longing for God Himself. And that’s the message of Christmas: Immanuel, God is with us. ●

Never ever alone again

BY HARRIET COOMBE

FOR many people, Christmas is about gathering with family and friends, sharing gifts and good food, and celebrating the joy and hope of Christmas. For many others however, Christmas is a lonely time – a reminder of broken relationships, of physical and emotional distance, and hopelessness.

Loneliness is always painful, but Christmas can take it to another level.

Part of the hope of the Christmas story is found in a prophecy that was written about 700 years before Jesus was born. "Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7.14).

Immanuel may be a familiar word to you – it appears in some Christmas songs. But you may not know there is a wonderful meaning behind the word. Immanuel (often spelled Emmanuel) means "God with us" and is another name for Jesus, a description of His nature. Jesus is "God with skin on". So Jesus' birth and death don't just mean eternal life for those who put their faith in Him, it also means that we are never alone while we are living here on earth.

No matter what you are going through, however hopeless your situation may be, or how alone you may feel this Christmas, Jesus is with you.

Sometimes people think that becoming a Christian means that you will never have to suffer again. The truth is that Christians still go through hard times, but the difference is that we never go through them alone. We always have the wisdom, strength, joy and love of our Saviour, who walks beside us. And the process of going through those hard times with Jesus helps transform us to be more like Him.

In Curt Vernon's song *Invite Me into Wonder*, he writes: "When hope's all but gone and all seems lost, You're Immanuel, God is with us now. When deceit's speaking lies and says I'm all alone, You're Immanuel, God is with us now."

For me, that changes everything! If you would like to experience this hope for yourself, see "How Do I Become a Christian?" on page 11.



Christmas quote:

IN 2016, the Queen said, "At Christmas, our attention is drawn to the birth of a baby some 2,000 years ago. It was the humblest of beginnings, and his parents, Joseph and Mary, did not think they were important... Jesus Christ lived obscurely for most of his life, and never travelled far. He was maligned and rejected by many, though He had done no wrong. And yet, billions of people now follow His teaching and find in Him the guiding light for their lives. I am one of them because Christ's example helps me see the value of doing small things with great love, whoever does them and whatever they themselves believe."

— Queen Elizabeth II, Christmas speech 2016



My life-changing Christmas

David Hamilton



Hate and violence shaped David Hamilton's life as he grew up during the Troubles in Ireland – an era of conflict between Protestants and Catholics. After he joined a terrorist organisation as a teenager, he was arrested for bombing a factory, and armed robberies, and was sent to prison – where the hate and violence continued.

But it was also there that one Christmas, David received – and extended – forgiveness. David became aware of the conflict in his country when he was 14 years old and a group of Catholic boys beat him up and threw him into a river. In an interview with Christianity Today, David says he asked the boys what he did to deserve their harsh treatment. They told him it was because he was a Protestant.

"Until then, I didn't know what it meant to be a loyalist or a Republican," David says. "Nor did I understand the distinction between being a Protestant and being a Catholic."

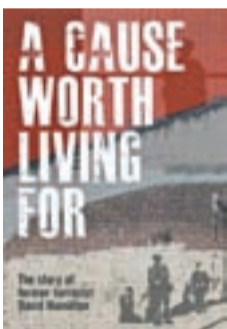
That day was a turning point for David, who vowed to never again have Catholic friends. A couple of years later he joined a skinhead gang. "It was safer to be in a gang than it was to be on your own," he shares in a YouTube video. "I would syphon petrol out of cars and make petrol bombs and throw them into the homes of Roman Catholics with the intention of burning them out of their homes." When he was 17, David joined an illegal paramilitary organisation called the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). In David's mind, he was a "righteous activist fighting for a good cause". But it wasn't long before he was sent to prison for his involvement in robberies and a bombing. He was released after a year and rejoined the UVF, which resulted in another arrest. This time he was sentenced to 12 years in prison. To David it was worth it.

"I thought... 'it's a cause worth dying for so I will be loyal to

them.' I wanted to fight the Irish Republican Army (IRA) – they had injured members of my family and I just wanted revenge for that."

After David's court case, his mother came to see him. She cried and begged him not to throw his life away. But David didn't want to hear it and told her to leave. On her way home, she visited a woman called Mrs Beggs, who said she would pray that God would change David's heart and that he would come home from prison a new man.

A few years later, David attended a church service just before Christmas, seeing it as an opportunity to get out of his cell. The prison chaplain asked for a volunteer to read a passage from the Bible and another prisoner suggested that David do it.



David's book about his life

David thought people would laugh at him if he refused, so he read the passage, which was the account of Jesus' birth in Luke.

"When I finished, I was smiling!" David told Christianity Today. "For some reason, it felt good."

The following month, David found a folded up piece of paper on his pillow. It was a gospel tract called, Jesus Christ is Coming Back Soon.

"I looked at it and laughed and threw it out the window," David admits. But then a thought came to him: "David, it's time to change. Become a Christian."

"I thought, 'Become a Christian? No, I don't want to be a Christian. They don't smoke or drink or chase women or do robberies or all the things I'd done.'"

But the thought kept coming to him. He picked up his Bible – he used the thin paper to roll cigarettes – and flipped through it. His cell mate asked him what he was doing and David replied, "I'm thinking of becoming a Christian."

His cell mate told him even God wouldn't want David, as he was too bad. That night another thought popped into David's head: "It's God Who has kept you alive."

David thought about his near death experiences, including a time when a bomb he had planted detonated early and he woke up with his clothes torn to shreds yet without a scratch.

Or the night when the IRA attempted to kill him while he was eating in a restaurant. Or when

someone put a gun to his head but the gun jammed when they pulled the trigger. As he thought about these experiences, for the first time in his life, David had a sudden desire to change. But he wondered, could God forgive someone like him?

As he flipped through the Bible, he read John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I JUST WANTED REVENGE



"I thought, 'I'm going to ask Jesus Christ to forgive me and to save me,' and I did," David recalls. "I asked God to take away my sin. I thanked him for sparing my life. And I said, 'God, if you change me, I will serve you the rest of my life.'"

The next morning he awoke with freedom and joy in his heart. He told his mother, who passed on the news to Mrs Beggs. She said she already knew, because God had "lifted the burden of her heart" and she was now praying for his future as a minister!

Over the next six years in prison, David grew in his faith. He also studied Ireland's history and gained compassion for those on the other side of the conflict.

After his release, David returned to jail, but this time through prison ministry where he shared his story with both Protestants and Catholics. David attended Bible College and became a minister of a church until his retirement. In 2020, he released a book about his story called, *A Cause Worth Living For: The Story of Former Terrorist David Hamilton*.

Christmas symbolism

HOLLY has been traditionally associated with Christmas, its thorns and red berries are said to represent the Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus at the crucifixion and the blood He shed.

THE traditional colours of Christmas decorations are red, green, and gold. Red symbolises the blood of Jesus, which was shed in His crucifixion, while green symbolises eternal life, and in particular the evergreen tree, which does not lose its leaves in the winter, and gold is the first colour associated with Christmas, as gold was one of the three gifts of the Magi, symbolising royalty.

SINCE the 16th century, the poinsettia, a native plant from Mexico, has been associated with Christmas, carrying the Christian symbolism of the Star of Bethlehem. In that country it is known in Spanish as the Flower of the Holy Night.

EIGHTH century missionary to the Germans, St. Boniface, is probably best known for what is called the "Felling of Thor's Oak." It is said that upon entering a town in northern Hesse (Hessia), Boniface learned that the people worshipped the god Thor whom they believed resided in a great oak tree among them. Boniface determined that if he wanted to earn an audience with the people, he would have to confront Thor. He announced that he was going to cut down the oak, and he openly challenged Thor to strike him down. Miraculously, as Boniface began to chop the oak, a mighty wind blew and hurled the tree to the ground. Tradition holds that a fir tree was growing in the roots of the oak, and Boniface claimed the tree as a symbol of Christ. Needless to say, the people readily accepted Boniface's message, and the tree eventually came to be associated with the birth of Christ and a celebration of the day when the mighty God (who could hurl a gigantic oak to the ground) chose to humbly enter the world as a babe.





Carla Practico thought drink, money and sex would fulfil her - but they didn't.

This is not your life

It was Carla Practico's 23rd birthday. Instead of celebrating with all her friends, she found herself alone at a bar, talking to a stranger she planned to go home with. Then a voice spoke to her and everything changed.

Carla told The 700 Club that she had spent her life seeking people's approval and searching for love. She worked hard at school, becoming president of the student body at high school and joining about 15 honour societies in college.

"I really was looking to feel important," she explains. "I agreed with the lie that unless I achieved, I really wasn't valuable. My Woman of the Year Award and Magna Cum Laude status defined me. After landing an internship with NATO and my dream job in New York City straight out of college, I found the accolades exciting for a moment, but I was lost, depressed, and didn't believe my life had any purpose."

"I got very quickly caught up into the nightlife scene," she admits. "(I was) all consumed with partying drinking and promiscuous activity."

"I was drinking three or four times a week - like blackout drunk," she says. "It did help me escape some of that pain that I was experiencing from rejection and not feeling worthy and not feeling lovable."

"It's like if someone will take me home that means I must be lovable," she explains. "Then you wake up in the morning and they don't even remember your name."

When she was about to turn 23, Carla planned her birthday party and invited the people she called her 'night-time friends'.

"Only one person showed up - it was so sad," Carla remembers. "She ended up going home ... At this point I was like, well I may as well find somebody to go home with."

"I was talking to this guy... and I heard a voice and it said, 'This is not your life' and as soon as I heard those words I knew they were true. It was almost as if someone had turned the lights on in the bar for me. It was like I could see clearly even though I knew I was still drunk and I needed to leave that bar instantly, and go find what is

life - what is my life?"

Carla put her drink down and walked straight out of the bar and into a taxi.

A man and a woman were seated in the front and, although they were off-duty, they agreed to take her home.

"The woman in the front seat said something to her husband about God," Carla recalls. "I instantly knew that the voice I had heard in the bar was God. I stuck my head through the little taxi window and I said, 'Do you believe in God?' and they started sharing the gospel with me."

Carla had grown up in a Christian home and knew about Jesus but never believed He cared about her. So when the couple in the taxi started telling her about Jesus' love for her

and that He died for her, she said it was like she was hearing it for the first time.

"It felt like it was just for me," Carla says. "I knew He came and sovereignly cut through all the mess that I had made. As they were talking to me I

instantly started expressing my sorrow for my sin to these people."

Carla said that was the night that everything changed for her and she started re-evaluating her life and who God was. "If He could invade my life and speak to me in the middle of a Manhattan bar, what else could He do? What else was He like?"

Carla found a church where she had a supernatural experience of the presence of God. She said after that, she stopped swearing, drinking alcohol and sleeping around.

"No one even had to tell me to stop sleeping around, I just didn't have the desire for it," Carla explains.

"I really just found myself constantly wanting to pray for people in the city of New York to know him. God never ever asked me to earn His love ... It was never about getting it right. When we actually believe and know that we're loved and that we were first created and designed to be the object of God's affection, you start doing the things that align with His heart. There's a difference between the peace that the world thinks is peace and the peace that only Jesus can give you. That's one of the greatest gifts that I experienced when He saved me."

Saving kids with a song

From poor rural Irish beginnings, dyslexic and raised by foster parents during WW2, Ray Barnett has made lifting children out of poverty his life's mission. And he has done it with a song in his heart!

Now in his eighties, Ray has been all over the world intervening in dangerous situations to rescue orphans, feed the hungry and intercede for the release of hostages.

His autobiography *Don't Tell Me it Can't be Done*, tells his exhilarating story that takes place in areas of the world that most people would avoid, negotiating with powerful people.

In the early 1980s, after Ray had already successfully brokered some difficult situations, he read in *Life* magazine about the "lost boys" of Sudan. Five thousand orphans were sent to Ethiopia, but were not accepted and turned back. One thousand were lost, but the rest ended up in Southern Sudan.

Ray decided he wanted to find them and help them, which he did. His humanitarian organisation, called Friends in the West, set up a school, and got food and support from over the border in Kenya. All the boys eventually got immigration status to leave for America and Canada.

"I'd been involved in Idi Amin's Uganda, when half a million Christians were put to death. I went back during the Ethiopian famine which was impacting Uganda, which was in a civil war. The Ugandan prime minister asked me to go to Lueuro, the killing fields of Uganda, to help there," he recounts.

While there Ray was so discouraged by the pictures of the emaciated Ethiopian and Ugandan children, but he wanted to showcase their potential. The idea just came: why not start an African children's choir?

In 1981, two years before, while driving in Uganda, Ray's group had given a little boy a lift in the car, and asked him if he could sing.

"The child sang a beautiful chorus to us, and we recorded it. The image of this bright, beautiful, articulate child is what people needed to see. I said to the prime minister: 'You're in a civil war and a famine. How can we get passports and visas for these orphans to come to Western countries?' He said: 'I'll get the passports; you get the visas.'

"In 1984, our first tour came to the UK and Canada. There's never been a day since when there hasn't been one of our choirs touring somewhere in the world," Ray smiles.

The break the children get in life from being in the choirs - the health care, regular food, education, travel and life experience, and love and nurturing - have led to many wonderful success stories.

"I'm proud to say that one boy is now a specialist doctor at Yale. His brother became a teaching consultant in Kampala, and the other is one of East Africa's leading civil engineers. Another of our children



Ray Barnett founder of the African Children's Choir, his daughter Julia Barnett Tracy, Choir Operations Director and members of the choir attend the 5th Annual African Children's Choir Gala in 2013 in New York City. (Photo by Brian Killian/WireImage)

is the top anchorman in Kenya, and another baby, the sole survivor in a Rwandan massacre, is now a nurse in the American air force. If I need a doctor, a lawyer, I can call up one of my children!" Ray jokes.

He has been the legal guardian for every child. "We put them through university as far as they can go. Now we're working with a major-general in the Marines to provide an ongoing mentorship program for them. Every one of our children has performed for queens, presidents and at major events and on prestigious stages."

Music was Ray's lifesaver too. It was a music teacher who first realised that he was dyslexic and got him the help he needed, showing the little boy the first kindness he had ever known.

The second thing that revolutionised Ray's life was when he was asked at 13 if he was a Christian. He answered that he had always gone to Sunday School. "To which they replied that I needed to be born again, and told me the story of Nicodemus. [A Bible story about a religious man who had a late night talk with Jesus, who explained that being born again did not mean a second natural birth but a spiritual birth into new life with God. (John chapter 3.)]

"I went home to my bedroom and asked the Lord Jesus to come into my life. I was inspired by the story of David Livingstone [a missionary explorer into Africa], but while I aspired to be like him, I never dreamed I'd work in Africa and help others."

Through his work with the choir,

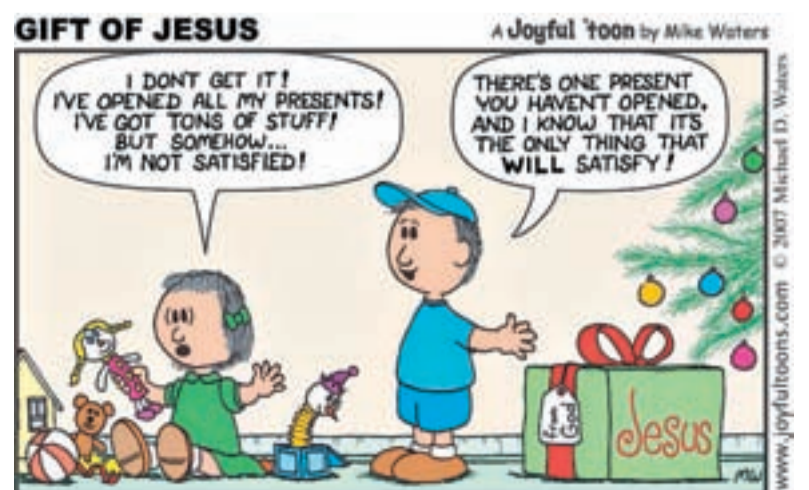


Ray Barnett with some of the children who have been in the choirs he started.

Ray has been able to raise millions of pounds to establish numerous schools throughout Africa that serve children who would otherwise have no chance at an education. He has also been able to raise significant money for emergency relief and development programs in Somalia, Sudan and Rwanda, and more recently to help orphaned children in South Africa who are battling hunger and disease.

Ray, whose wife died a few years ago, lives with his children and grandchildren in Vancouver.

"I am happiest when someone finds faith in Christ," he says. "A motto that changed my thinking is: Worship is not just when we are on our knees. Worship is every action we take during the day."



Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

- PSALM 107:8-9 NIV



The best Christmas

BY DESTINY BASILA

My early teen years were rough; I have depression and bipolar disorder and I'd been using boys, partying, and other things to cope. I caused problems at school and at home. I was very, very troubled.

Then, in 2019, a pastor passed out church flyers at my school. Something made me hold onto that flyer. I saw that there was a striking difference between myself and the people I knew who named Christ as their Lord.

I was empty, but they were very obviously whole. After two months of thinking about it, I decided to visit.

That first visit turned into a few. I got to know some of the members and promised that I would attend their upcoming Christmas play.

But, the day of the play, my mental health was at an all-time low — so low that I began planning my suicide. I wanted to do it that night, but I decided to go to the play first, since I'd promised.

The play's plot centred around a couple grappling with the tragic loss of their child. Throughout the play, the mourning couple turns to God for assistance. Again and again, He delivers.

I left the theatre with a clear message heavy on my heart:



Destiny Basila's life changed forever one Christmas.

if I put my trust in Christ, He would save me and keep me. I felt deep in my spirit that it was true, so I leaned into it.

As soon as I surrendered, I felt an immense weight fall off me and the Holy Spirit entered me.

I was born again four days before Christmas.

The suicidal urge that I so clearly felt just two weeks previous was gone. It was replaced with a genuine,

lasting peace. The Lord has renewed my interests, too. I have no desire to party or entertain drama. These shifts are already affecting some of my friendships, but the Lord has been faithful in giving me a community of believers.

My new life in Christ is so much better than the shell of a life I lived before.

The sex and the parties are fun in the moment, but the good feeling never lasts. The things of this world don't deliver...they leave us empty.

On the contrary, God's love is everlasting; His goodness never, ever expires.

As told to and edited by Adira Polite and originally published on Then God Moved

People pleasing wasn't enough

ELLIE'S STORY BY NAOMI REED

Throughout my high school years, my aim in life was to make people like me. I wanted to do well at school, have good friends, and go to the right parties. By year 12, I was doing pretty well at all that. My teachers liked me, I had good friends and my parents were pleased with me. It felt like I could people-please my way into most relationships.

Then, halfway through my final year of school, I went on a Crusaders study camp. My plan was to study, hang out with my friends, and ignore all the Jesus stuff. Up until then, my friendships had always been transactional. It's how we operated. I'll lend you my geography notes and you'll invite me to your party on Saturday night. But when I got to camp, I heard the gospel presented clearly for the first time and I saw people living it out, in sacrificial, not transactional love. They said that Jesus was their Lord, and they lived like He was. They treated me differently. They were actually interested in me personally and for the first time, it wasn't transactional.

After the camp, I went away thinking that I needed to figure out who this Jesus was. Perhaps He's not as dismissible as I thought. Back then, I had two friends at school who were Christians, so I asked them if I could go to church with them. They said yes and I went to church and I started to piece together a picture of Jesus. He was good and holy and powerful. But I still didn't think I needed Him. I was doing well in life. I didn't need Jesus. Then I finished my HSC and I went to Schoolies in Surfers Paradise. It was meant to be the pinnacle of my life, so far. I could tick off all the things that I'd been working on — academically and socially — and give myself a pat on the back. But it wasn't all great. If the pinnacle of my life was being in Surfers Paradise, sur-



Ellie realised relationships didn't have to be transactional.

rounded by drunk people who were vomiting in the corridors, then maybe my pinnacle wasn't all that it was cracked up to be?

At the same time, the Red Frogs came and knocked on my door. They're the Christian chaplains who minister at Schoolies. I invited them in because I still had questions about Jesus. They invited me to church and I went with them.

There was a testimony and afterwards we were invited to trust in Jesus and to pray. That's when I decided I didn't want to run from God's love anymore. I realised, during that year, why Jesus came. We're not good enough for God. Even though I could people-please my way into most people's good books, I couldn't do that with God. I did need Jesus after all, because He is the only one good enough for God.

The big thing that's changed for me after coming to faith in Jesus has been in my relationships. I've found, over time, that I have a

I HAVE A NEW CAPACITY TO LOVE PEOPLE



new capacity to love people — not transactionally. I can love people because God has already loved me. It's been a big change and I've had slow realisations. Even in Christian ministry, we don't meet with people because we think they're going to respond to Jesus. We meet with people because we love them, regardless. 1 John 4 says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (verses 10-11)

It's a challenge for me every day... and I have to keep learning it. My temptation is always to go back to a transactional mindset. But every day, I can love people because love comes from God. I need a fountain of love and I know that only comes from Jesus.

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MY GUILT AND SHAME DISAPPEARED

BY AUSTIN DARLEY

At age eight, I found myself in the middle of a custody war. My parents battled it out until I was 14. As a means of coping, I began drinking and smoking. I got into a lot of trouble; honestly, the only thing that kept me above water was baseball.

Things worsened in 2016, when my best friend took his own life. I fell into severe depression and attempted suicide myself, multiple times. I wanted to quit baseball, but others encouraged me to play in memory of my friend. So, in my second year, I tried out for the high school team and made it. The summer after that first season,



Austin Darley

Coach offered me a job. I took the offer, while most of my teammates went off to a Christian camp. One day after work, Coach asked if I wanted to go visit my teammates at camp. I was really tired and didn't feel like it, but something pushed me to say yes. Looking back, it's obvious that God's hand was at work.

We arrived at camp just in time for evening service. The youth pastor began preaching about common teenage struggles, such as smoking, drinking, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

This hit me hard. I'd struggled with every last one of the problems he listed. It felt like God was speaking directly to

me; I'd never felt so convicted in my life.

At the end of service, the pastor invited people to come down to the altar. Many went, but I was unable to move. I was stuck to my chair, tears streaming down my face.

The youth pastor eventually came over and discussed the gospel with me. I surrendered my life to Christ, for the first time, that night.

When I gave my life to Him, all the pain, bitterness, shame, and guilt went with it. That was the best decision of my life.

All I can say is that God is so good. Jesus is the greatest gift of all — one that we don't deserve.

But, God loves us enough to send His Son so that we may be forgiven and reconciled unto Him.

My walk with Christ hasn't been easy; I've made and continue to make some terrible decisions, but the Lord continues to love me and mould me into the person He created me to be. It gets hard, but I know that He is with me every step of the way.

As told to and edited by Adira Polite and originally published on Then God Moved

Mutations argue against evolution

The late Dr David Catchpoole, B.Ag.Sc. (Hons), Ph.D. worked for over a decade with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, researching mango fruiting and flowering physiology. For three years, he was seconded to James Cook University in Townsville, North Queensland. From 1999 to 2014 David worked for Creation Ministries International in Brisbane.

Dr David Catchpoole was nothing in his younger days if not patronising. The prominent Australian agricultural scientist remembers visiting Indonesia on an Australian aid project while he was in his early 20s with the mindset that “white Anglo people” were there to help “these inferior brown people”.

And then he discovered “a lot of them were actually smarter than I was” and ended up meeting and marrying Esther, an Indonesian woman.

In those days David, who was raised in a “thoroughly non-church-going household” was also an atheist.

“But,” he said in an interview with Creation Ministries International (CMI), “I saw things in Indonesia that confronted my worldview.”

“Though Indonesia is majority-Muslim, all the world’s major religions are represented there, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. I got to compare the good and bad of various religious influences on the people and regions.”

“It dawned on me that the good things we have in Australia are not because we’re racially superior, it’s our Judeo-Christian foundation.”

“At one time I had reason to remember the injunctions of my Christian friends, to call on the Lord in a crisis; and I did just that. I went to the world’s most populous Muslim country as an Aussie atheist, and came back a Christian.”

In 1997, David attended a seminar on creation/evolution organised by CMI that he said changed his life. By this time he had been a Christian for 12 years but said his views on the origin of life were “a nebulous hybrid

mix of ‘theistic evolution’, ‘day-age theory’, and ‘gap theory’.

“I went to the seminar to tell the presenters they were wrong.

“Well, I soon realised I was the one in the wrong, and let go of my long-age evolutionary views.

“I realised instead that the earth could be no older than about 6,000 years. The exact moment that turned my thinking around was when a simple image was put up, of Eden with layers of fossil bones in the earth beneath Adam and Eve.

“This showed the stark implications for Christianity — for example if dinosaur fossils were millions of years old that would mean there was not only death before the Fall; many fossils also show evidence of suffering, violence, and diseases like bone cancer.

“Yet after Adam and Eve were created, God called everything He had made “very good” (Genesis 1:31). I realised with a jolt that it made no sense for God to have looked at tumorous dinosaur bones on Day 6, then call this very good, knowing that cancer would cause such enormous future human misery.

“The Eden-on-bones scenario also raised a fundamental doctrinal issue. If we put the shedding of blood before sin, then why did God in Jesus shed blood because of sin? (Genesis 3:21, Hebrews 9:22, 10:4–10) I could see that my compromising of God’s Word by believing the secular millions of



David with his wife, Esther.

years completely destroyed the whole basis for the Atonement [Jesus’ death in our place for our sin] (1 Corinthians 15:21–22).⁴”

Two years later, David joined CMI’s international panel of speakers. “For many years I had the heart-warming

experience of seeing others ‘switched on’ by the Eden-on-bones illustration, as I had been.”

David said that various evolutionary geneticists have realised mutations accumulate so quickly (about 60–100 per person per generation)

that the human species should have become extinct long ago.

For instance, atheist evolutionary geneticist Alexey Kondrashov wrote an article in which he asked: “Why have we not died 100 times over?”⁵

David explained: “That presumes we’ve been here for the 100,000+ years of the evolutionary timeline. It’s not a problem in the Bible’s 6,000-year timeline, with only about 200 generations since Adam. We’re still going downhill fast, but it’s understandable we haven’t gone extinct — there simply hasn’t been enough time.”

David also did quite a bit of work among the Aboriginal communities and remembered one man’s reaction to his CMI presentation:

“I’ve been locked up in every jail in Queensland, so I’ve had the gospel preached to me more times than I can count. But I ain’t never heard the gospel like this. Just think

THE HUMAN SPECIES SHOULD HAVE BECOME EXTINCT



Atheist Stephen Hawking: “It would be very difficult to explain why the universe would have begun in just this way, except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us.”

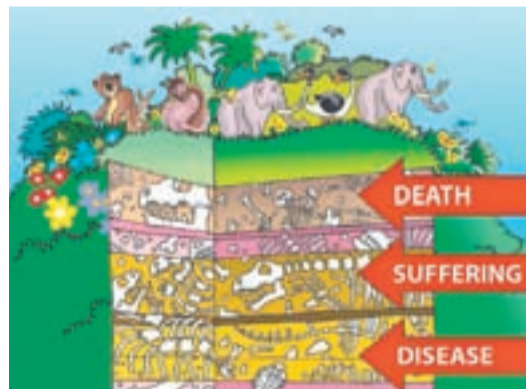
Atheist astrophysicist Fred Hoyle: “A common-sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature.”

... we [Aboriginal people] haven’t been here 60,000 years like they tell us; we come from Noah just 4,500 years ago, and Adam 6,000 years ago — along with everyone else alive today — that’s powerful! So Christ died for everyone — whitefella and blackfella!”

Recently, at the age of 62, David passed away after a long battle with cancer. He leaves behind his wife, Esther, their four children, and five grandchildren.

References and notes

1. The theory that God made the world using the process of evolution.
2. The theory that each day of the six Genesis creation days was many millions or billions of years long.
3. The theory that there is a gap of millions or billions of years between Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 and 1:2.
4. So it makes sense that most fossils are from the global watery cataclysm more than one and a half millennia after the events in Eden — the Flood of Noah (Genesis 6–8).
5. Kondrashov, A., Contamination of the genome by very slightly deleterious mutations: why have we not died 100 times over? *J. Theoretical Biology* 175:583–594, 1995.



The Eden on bones graphic that so influenced Dr David Catchpoole.

Believe it or not

Natural selection is not evolution

BY CARL WIELAND

EVOLUTION is the belief that everything has made itself — that natural processes (over millions of years, without miraculous, divine input of intelligence) have created an increasingly complex array of creatures.

According to evolution, there was once a time when none of the creatures in the world had lungs. This means that there was no genetic information (the ‘blueprint’ for living things, carried on the molecule DNA) for lungs — anywhere. Then, ‘lung information’ arose and was added to the world, but no ‘feather information’ as yet — feathers evolved later.

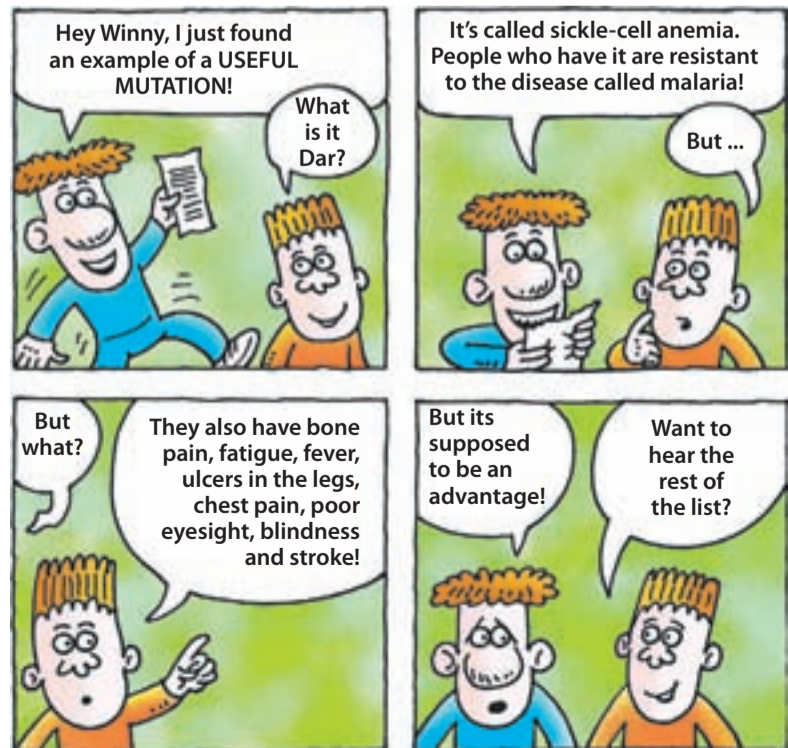
In other words, for every feature which arises by evolution, there would need to be new genetic information added to the total information in the biosphere (i.e., all the information in all creatures on earth). Some features could be lost subsequently, of course, so there will not always be a gain, but if microbes turned into magpies, maple trees and musicians, there must have been a massive net increase in information. This is not just any jumble of chemical sequences, but meaningful information, since it codes for complex structures which have purposeful functions.

So if new information, new functional complexity, can be shown to be arising by itself where previously there was none, this would give some credibility to the idea of molecules-to-man evolution, although it would not strictly prove that it had occurred. However, it can be shown that in every situation where populations of living things change, they do so without increase (and often with a decrease) of information. Thus, it is completely illegitimate for anyone to claim that such changes show ‘evolution happening’.

From www.creation.com/superbugs-not-super-after-all

Dar and Winny

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BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Don't let your anger ruin Christmas

BY ROB FURLONG

ABOUT a month ago I came across a trailer advertising this year's Christmas movie – *Violent Night*. Basically, the plot revolves around Santa going rogue and taking out the bad guys on Christmas Eve, using his heavy arsenal of guns and weapons. Hence the name *Violent Night*. (Disclaimer here – I am not recommending you see the movie – but there is a point to my mentioning it!)

Violence is not something we automatically associate with Christmas. Our minds are filled with thoughts of love, peace, and goodwill toward others, but violence? Certainly not!

However, if you read the account of Jesus' birth carefully – the first Christmas – you will discover that violence is as much a part of the story as peace and love.

Matthew records that several months after the birth of Jesus, Magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem seeking "He who has been born King of the Jews".

Their arrival becomes a cause of

deep concern for the local citizenry. King Herod has ruled the area with an iron fist for decades, systematically eliminating all rivals to his throne, real or imagined.

An extremely insecure man, Herod was alarmed by the news the Magi brought with them and so the city collectively held its breath as they waited to see how he would respond.

Herod first ascertains what the Prophets said concerning the place of the Messiah's birth before playing the role of charming host to the unsuspecting Magi. He elicits from them a promise that when they locate the Child, they will return to him with the details so that he too "may come and worship".

Herod's plan is to kill Jesus, and when the Magi do not return to him, (having been directed by God through a dream not to do so), he flies into a murderous rage and slaughters every child two years old and younger in the Bethlehem region.

Matthew tells us Herod was "furiously angry" – his insecurity, fear and uncontrolled rage leading him to rain



Santa, played by David Harbour, goes rogue in *Violent Night*.

down grief, injustice and suffering on innocent people.

It was truly, a violent night.

This past year together, we have talked a lot about anger.

We have looked at the negative side of anger – how it can lead to destructive behaviour in relationships, resulting in grudge holding, physical and verbal abuse; how it can kill communication and how fear is the driver behind anger.

But we have also considered its positive side. Anger is a valid emotion and when properly expressed and channeled, much good can come from it. This is especially so when we practice healthy skills such as patience, a genuine desire to listen to each other and giving up thoughts of revenge by freely offering forgiveness to those who have wronged us.

I am very aware that for many people, Christmas is not a time of "peace, love and good will". Rather,

it is a time of deep sadness, emotional (and physical) hurt and estrangement from God and people.

Perhaps that is you, as you read this.

Whatever it is you are experiencing at this moment, Jesus can bring peace to your life.

The other side of the Christmas story is that of the silent night and this truth has been beautifully captured in the words of the old carol:

*Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child*

*Holy Infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace*

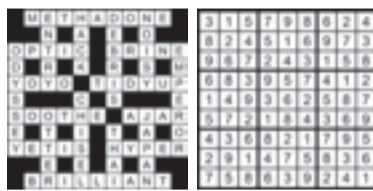
Jesus came to restore peace between God and people, and in their relationships with each other.

What a contrast this is to the destruction caused by Herod's uncontrolled anger!

In the silence and awe that surrounds the birth of Jesus, God offers us peace in exchange for our anger, resentments, and fears.

He offers you His peace, freely, today.

Please, open your heart to Him this Christmas.



Want to explore more?

Here are some **free**, helpful, Christian online resources:

Online Bible - Olive Tree app (we recommend that you start with an easy-to-read version like the ESV)	
Audio Bible - Bible.is app , or Youversion Bible app	
Christian radio station - CBN radio app (different channels for all genres of music)	
Christian podcasts and sermons - Edifi app	
Christian movies - New Faith Network app (7-day free trial)	
Daily thoughts and inspiration - Our Daily Bread app	
Advice on specific issues, Bible reading plans and studies for new believers - Youversion Bible app .	
The Bible explained with visual aides - the Bible Project on YouTube .	
Alpha Film Series on Youtube - an online introduction to Christianity.	
For kids - Superbook Kids Bible, videos and games app	
Comic book Bible online- goodandevilbook.com	
More inspiring faith stories - back issues of Challenge News at challengenews.online	

HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

What? Salvation is an eternal relationship with God – now on Earth and, after we die, in Heaven.

The Lord Jesus says: "I tell you the truth. Everyone who believes in Me has eternal life." John 6:47

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33

Who? Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ, regardless of how you have previously lived or what you have previously believed.

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

Why? Because sin separates us from a holy God. Sin is all the wrong things we do, say and think, as well as our desire to be our own boss.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

How? The Bible says you become a Christian by confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead.

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. Romans 10:8b-10

Ready to change your life forever? Here is a prayer you can pray, but you can also use your own words. The words are not as important as the heart attitude – which only God can see.

Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth,
I acknowledge that I am a sinner. Please forgive me for all the ways I have disobeyed and defied You.
Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to live the perfect life I couldn't, and die on the cross for my sins. Thank You that His blood was sufficient to pay my debt to You, and His resurrection proves that there is life beyond death. I accept that His sacrifice is all I need to get right with You – I bring nothing I have done but I give you everything I am. Help me to live for You. Please be my Saviour and my Master. Amen.

What now?

1. Tell someone - either a Christian that you know or email us at info@challengenews.org
2. Use the resources in the green box on this page to find a Bible to read and more information regarding Christianity.
3. Keep praying. Talk to God anywhere, about anything. He is always listening, and you don't need a formula.
4. Find a Bible-teaching church to attend.

AS A NEXT STEP :

I have prayed this prayer. Please send me: Bible Some 'starting off' literature Information on a helpful church

* Please tick and write clearly *

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info@challengenews.org

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

The power of gratitude

IN his article, "Gratitude: The Brain's Amazing Fertilizer," author Charles Stone documents scientifically-proven physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of practicing gratitude. His research in neuroscience is fascinating. He writes that there's a tonne of research that says having an attitude of gratitude gives you more energy. For example, in a research study one group of participants kept a journal listing things for which they were grateful. A second group recorded what annoyed them. People in the first group reported feeling more energetic and happier than the second group.

Charles lists other benefits. Grateful people are more other-centred and willing to help people, and that gives them a greater sense of significance and completeness. They sleep more deeply. They feel better physically. They have less anxiety.

All that's pretty amazing, isn't it? Then there's the fact about how our brains are wired. Did you know the human brain has five times more negative circuits than positive ones? It's called "negative bias". That's why it's much easier to be negative than positive. Or perhaps we should say, it's much harder to be positive.

Practicing gratitude forces our minds to focus on the positive, which actually rewires our brains. Maybe that's why the apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8: "*Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable – if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy – dwell on these things.*" He also encouraged the Thessalonians: "*in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*"

From author, CEO and pastor Chip Ingram in an article from Joy! Magazine, October 2022

Wise words

WHEN people encounter the true God, they experience a selfquake. That's one way you can tell if you've met Israel's God or simply a figment of your imagination. A made-up God will leave your world undisturbed, conveniently aligning with your priorities without displacing anything, because ultimately you are more glorious than it is. The real God, however, will land in the middle of your life like an elephant crashing through the ceiling, displacing your sin, changing all your priorities, and forcing you to reorient yourself around the weight of glory.

— Andrew Wilson, from *The God of All Things*

IF Christianity is true — and we have good reasons to believe it is — then we face judgement after death. There would be eternal consequences for those who have rejected God's offer of forgiveness for their sins. We don't face the nothingness of nonexistence; instead, we either face an eternity with God or separated from Him. That's the real truth about immortality.

— theologian Clay Butler Jones

SURFING THE STORM



Bianca Buitendag of Team South Africa surfs during the women's Gold Medal match on day four of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at Tsurigasaki Surfing Beach on July 27, 2021 in Ichinomiya, Chiba, Japan, while a rainbow lights up the dark sky behind her. (Photo by Ryan Pierse/Getty Images)

Bianca Buitendag's earliest memory is driving to the beach in the early hours of the morning with her dad, with surfboards on the car roof, the smell of coffee emanating from a flask next to the driver's seat, and a map spread out wide.

"That's what surfing was to me from the beginning – an excuse to explore, an excuse to adventure," Bianca writes in her website bio.

Since that first memory, Bianca has gone from strength to strength. By eight she was already competing in surfing competitions and she took part in her first international tournament at 13. She spent most of her adult life as South African's top ranked surfer and represented the country at the 2020 Summer Olympics where she won silver in the women's shortboard competition.

Bianca was born in George, Western Cape, South Africa in 1993 and describes her background as traditional Afrikaans. When she was 12, her family moved to Victoria Bay, where Bianca would spend hours before and after school in the ocean.

Bianca says her father, Collin Buitendag, was the one who pushed her into her first wave and introduced her to surfing. He was one of her staunchest supporters, often travelling with her to competitions around the world. Sadly Collin passed away 2015, when Bianca was 21.

"Nothing prepares you for that moment," she explains in a video with CBN South Africa. "You never imagine that it will happen to you

and then it does... I really felt like I lost the protection and the guidance. I was like in the world alone."

In the midst of her grief, Bianca didn't care whether she won or lost competitions. However later that year, she finished at her career-best at World No. 4 in the World Surf League rankings. It also made her the most successful South African professional surfer – male or female – of the past 18 months.

Bianca says she held onto faith while mourning the loss of her father.

"A lot of times you read 'The Lord is my strength' in the Bible and you kind of flip past it and it's just theory, but when you can't get out of bed because you're in such a dark place the Lord really is your strength – it becomes very much practical."

Bianca spoke about her faith in a video by The White Shack, sharing that despite being raised as a Christian, it wasn't until she was an adult that she embarked on a journey to make her faith her own. Bianca now says she has found the overwhelming truth of God's love.

"I celebrate it every day," she shares. "It is what keeps me going."

In an interview with This Life Online, Bianca says, "It's a pity that for some people, tradition has taken so much away from His wonder, but for me personally, it's impossible not to believe. God has held my hand tightly through all these years, through the dark and scary. His love liberates me and I believe Him every time He says the word 'new'. New morning. New mercy. New hope."

After Collin's death, Bianca knew her professional career would soon come to an end.

But then it was announced that surfing would be included in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games and Bianca's mother urged her compete. Her mother's recent battles with colon cancer, which was removed, and lymphoma, which she is still fighting, inspired Bianca to compete.

She says it was "vasbyt en gebed" (resilience and prayer) that gave her the strength to bring home a silver medal, which she dedicated to her mother.

During the final, Bianca says she felt like she was part of something bigger than herself.

"A big rainbow just appeared out of a typhoon sky and I just knew God was with me," she shares.

Following the Olympics, Bianca retired from professional surfing.

In a Facebook post on July 28, 2021, she wrote: "Ever since my father passed away, my life's ambitions have changed drastically, and my heart quickly moved away from chasing heat scores. It has been over five years since, enough time to respect all the commitments I have made, to my beautiful country, myself and many others. The Olympics has coincidentally acted as the perfect opportunity for closure. I will, however, never stop rushing towards saltwater at every opportunity. The sea is my therapy, the place I feel closest to heaven."

The 28-year-old thanked those who had supported her throughout her career and added: "Most importantly – although I like to believe that I'm tough and independent, I want to acknowledge my Heavenly Father, who has held my hand tightly through all these years –

through the dark and scary. He has been my best friend, my closest companion. Ever since my first contest at eight years old, my last sentence before every heat has been, 'Father, I trust You, have Your way.' After all these years, I can confidently stand knowing that His will did, indeed, prevail."

After retirement Bianca will help run a Christian organisation called Life Community Services in George in the southern Cape, where she is overseeing construction of a primary school.

Bianca Buitendag gestures after competing at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 in Japan. (Photo by Ryan Pierse/Getty Images)



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