

TRAUMA TO TRUTH

BY HARRIET COOMBE

After a turbulent childhood, a traumatic marriage and the loss of her sense of self, Pamela "PJ" Elsmore embarked on a journey around the world in search of truth. When at last she found it, she returned home to Perth, where life hasn't been the same since.

PJ shares with *Challenge News* that early on in her life, her family immigrated to Perth from New Zealand and not long after that, her parents divorced.

"There was lots of love from our parents, but there was a loss of the security of that nuclear family," PJ shares.

PJ's mother began a relationship with a man who had alcohol issues and, fearing for their safety, PJ, her mother and sister went into hiding. When PJ's mother met and married a new man, life didn't improve.

"They married when I was 12. I cried through the whole service. Something died inside of me and I believe that was the end of my

childhood at that moment. There was a lot of abuse in my parents' relationship and it was like being in a nightmare," PJ says. "[I experienced] sexual abuse, verbal abuse and emotional abuse."

PJ and her sister would visit their father every second weekend, until he started a new relationship, when the visits dropped to once a month.

"Then they got married and moved away and then it was every holidays. So he became more and more absent, which was upsetting for me as I was very close to my dad. His new wife was emotionally abusive too. And neither parent protected me from the behaviour of their spouses."

When PJ was five, before her parents split up, she had an experience that she consistently referred back to throughout her life.

"My dad had put me to bed, I had my little cat on the end of my bed and I was lying there, ready to go to sleep and I heard this voice about a foot from my face in the darkness say, 'Pamela, I love you.'"

Her father had left the room and



there was no one else in her house that it could have been.

"I thought, 'That's God!' I just knew in my spirit it was God."

After that, PJ began writing letters to God, telling Him about her life. Her faith was further strengthened when she attended a Scripture Union camp when she was 11.

"I gave my heart to Jesus at that camp. When I heard the gospel message, I knew that was what I wanted. I wanted to say yes to Jesus."

PJ recalls praying a prayer of salvation (similar to the one on page 11). She was attending an Anglican

church with her mother and sister at the time and made the decision to be baptised and receive Communion.

"Later on in my life, I was to go back to that experience as a five-year-old of God speaking to me and my baptism, because I nearly left my

faith altogether," she admits.

In her teenage years, PJ recalls multiple spiritual encounters at various churches and youth groups. At 18 she started attending a church and joined the music team.

• Turn to page 2

The blind men and the elephant

ADAPTED FROM DAVID A. HORNER

THERE is a popular analogy used to show that all religions are valid ways to describe God. Religion professors especially love this philosophic analogy, because it equalises all religions, making all religions equally "true" in their description of God.

The analogy is this: there are four blind men who discover an elephant. Since the men have never encountered an elephant, they grope about, seeking to understand and describe this new phenomenon. One grasps the trunk and concludes it is a snake. Another explores one of the elephant's legs and describes it as a tree. A third finds the elephant's tail and announces that it is a rope. And the fourth blind man, after discovering the elephant's side, concludes that it is, after all, a wall.

Each in his blindness is describing the same thing: an elephant. Yet each describes the same thing in a radically different way.

According to many, this is analogous to



the different religions of the world – they are describing the same thing in radically different ways. Thus one should conclude that no individual religion has a corner on truth, but that all should be viewed as essentially equally valid.

This is a powerful and provocative image, and it certainly seems to capture something of the truth.

If God is infinite and we are finite, it is reasonable to believe that none of us can fully capture

His nature. But does this philosophic analogy demonstrate the truth that all religions lead to God? To conclude that it does would ignore several points...

First, there is a fact of the matter: the elephant. What the blind men are attempting to describe is, in fact, an elephant, not something else. Just so, there are factual questions regarding God. "Does God even exist?" is a question of fact, much like, "Was Abraham Lincoln ever President of the United States?" If so, it would be true whether anyone believes it or not, and to deny it, one would be mistaken. Thus, not all opinions, whether concerning elephants or the nature of God, are equally true.

Second, all four blind men are, in fact, mistaken. It is an elephant and not a wall or a rope or a tree or a snake. Their opinions are not equally true – they are equally, and actually false. At best, such an analogy of religious pluralism would show that all religions are false, not true.

• Turn to page 2

Fun for Kids

Pages 5,6,7



STRONG WEAKNESS
PHIL ROBERTS

The blind men and the elephant

● From page 1

Third, and most importantly, the philosophic analogy does not take into account any kind of special revelation. If a fifth man were to arrive on the scene, one who could see (and who was able to demonstrate his credentials of having sight), and he was to describe the elephant as an elephant, then it would change the analogy entirely.

Jesus Christ, unique among all religious leaders of history, claimed to be such a "fifth man," a definitive revelation of God. Many of the people who watched Jesus' miracles and heard Him speak were offended by His clear statements about His deity. "This was why [they] sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath but also called God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18).

Jesus however, invited us to believe in Him if we want our search for God satisfied... "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

Want to check out Jesus' reliability to be this "fifth man"? Read Lee Strobel's book *A Case for Christ*.

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JUST DO IT

THERE is a story attributed to famous 18th century American thinker, writer, and inventor Benjamin Franklin (but which he says should rightly belong to one John Clifton), about how he wanted to convince people that street lighting at night was a good idea. No one was really interested in his arguments though, so he just followed his own advice. He placed a candle in an ornamental lantern on a long bracket on the outside wall of his home and lit it each night.

His neighbours soon saw how practical it was to have street lighting to protect one from accident or attack

and they too started to put up their own lanterns, thus introducing street lighting to Philadelphia.

I think there is a good lesson in there for us all – rather than trying to convince people of your opinion on social media or bemoaning the crazy awfulness of the world, rather than complaining and cajoling, just do the right thing yourself.

Live your convictions, look after your own patch and do as you would have others do.

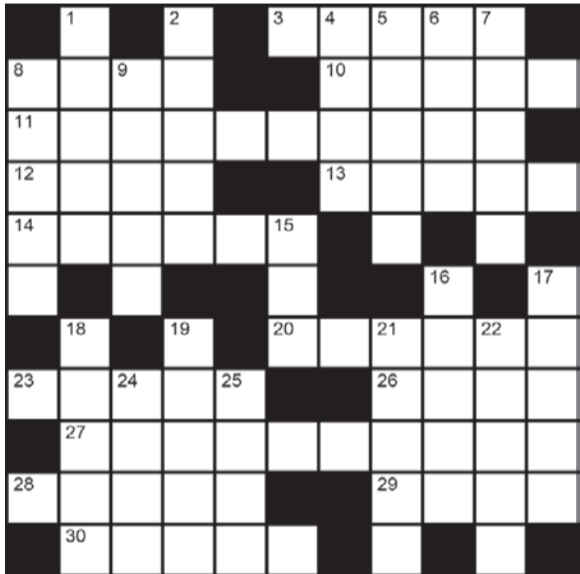
You may just find that your example will catch on and you might create your own little revolution for good. ●

Coffee Break

CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

ACROSS

- 3 Speak, talk
- 8 Brewed beverages
- 10 To quarrel
- 11 Sewage disposal
- 12 Battery fluid
- 13 Fable writer
- 14 Harbor a grudge
- 20 Clerical assistant
- 23 Event you usually sleep through
- 26 Australian gem
- 27 Temporary camp, often for troops
- 28 Relating to ships
- 29 Boats like Noah's
- 30 Former capital of Japan



DOWN

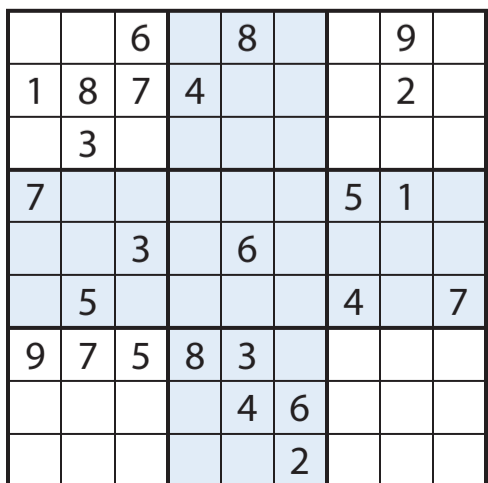
- 1 Tranquility
- 2 Onstage whisper
- 4 "Cheerio!" (2-2)
- 5 Gave one's best shot

- 6 These puff up easily
- 7 Speak at length (3-2)
- 8 Pre-Soviet rulers
- 9 Licorice-like flavor
- 15 Facial twitch, eg
- 16 Pickled bud used in cooking
- 17 Boadicea's subjects
- 18 Opening shot in billiards
- 19 Chocolate source
- 21 Julius, for one
- 22 War machines
- 24 Grudging resentment
- 25 Distilling grain

SOLUTIONS PAGE 11



"I'm putting out an alert. Our innovative spirit has been reported missing."



No more anger or shame

BY MICHAEL ASHCRAFT

Ahn became an atheist when his father, a devout Buddhist, left his mother, a nominal Catholic and no god answered his prayer that his family stay together.

"I felt panicked," Ahn says on a Fishers of Men Halifax video. "In my mind I said, look at these religious folks. Not even the religious folks can get it together."

He even cried out: "If there's a God, please stop this now!"

Meanwhile at school, Ahn learned about the survival of the fittest, a tenet of evolution. "I liked this idea," he remembers. "That message resonated with me: I'm going to be so tough, I'll never be in this position again where I'm being left, where it's going to break."

He vowed to find his happiness, to make money and buy the things he wanted.

Soon he discovered pornography, first in magazines and then online in the 1990s. "When I found these magazines, it was like a drug," he says.

The pornography imbued shame in Ahn and gave him low self-confidence, he says. "[Women] were like goddesses to me," he says. "I couldn't talk around them. I was gazing from afar with lust."

Meanwhile, he projected an image of being a good guy.

In college, he overcame his shyness and eventually moved in with a girl. "That lust in me destroyed that girl," he admits. "She was a Christian. I convinced her not to listen to her mother. I convinced her to move away from her church. She was such a sweet girl, and I just took her and demoralised her."

Then, because pornography makes you always dissatisfied, he dumped her. "I took everything pure from her, chewed it up and spat it out," he admits. "I used her. I broke her heart heartlessly."

He ignored the promise ring he had given her. "For me, she wasn't enough," he acknowledges. "My lust needed more."

Ahn got into clubbing and one-night stands. "It was never enough," he says. "It led to depression. I was feeling depression, but I didn't link it to my addictions."

Eventually, Ahn realised that atheism meant there was no need to project an image of being a good person. "I make my own beliefs," he thought. "In college you're taught, What is truth? There is no truth. It's all perspective. It's all relative. There is no true good, no true bad."

But his depression deepened. "If there's no purpose in life, why am I working so hard at college?"

One day while passing a church, Ahn thought: "If there is a God, He's

definitely far away from me and He doesn't like me and He doesn't care about me. But if there is a God, I'm going to pay my respects."

That visit led to more and then to a young people's retreat where the divide between the committed Christian guys and Ahn became evident. Their music was different. They cracked innocent jokes that Ahn didn't even understand; he told perverted jokes that he alone laughed at.

In his mind, he felt judged. "I started getting angry at these Christians though they never said anything to me," he says. "Thoughts started coming to my mind like, if there's Heaven, they're going to Heaven and you're going to..."

One night during the retreat he opened his Bible by chance to John 1:12: "But to all who did receive Him, He gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in His name."

Ahn thought that seemed pretty easy so he uttered a prayer to receive Jesus, but he wasn't really sincere. However, in the midst of his sarcasm and desire to offend Christians by mocking the prayer of salvation, he heard a booming voice.

"I know you."

All the anger and rage subsided under a tremendous presence of God.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

"I felt so understood, so loved," Ahn says. "You know who I am."

He looked up to the Heavens and uttered: "Jesus, you're real. Show me what it's like to be a Christian."

As he attended church and read scripture, Ahn began to understand that pornography was not a good and natural thing. He felt a Presence next to him one day while he looked at porn, and Jesus impressed on his heart: "Those are my daughters."

"Lord, I'm so sorry. This isn't honorable," he prayed. "I didn't realise."

As he read the Bible, Ahn realised he wasn't only hurting God. "I was hurting myself," he says. "I was turning myself into a weak man by giving in to my lust, by not practicing self-control. I was becoming a weak man."

God promised him a beautiful spouse, but he had to learn to wait, Ahn says.

"Little by little, I began to get set free from pornography," he says.

With the deliverance from pornography, Ahn also got freed from the rage that got planted in his heart the day his dad abandoned the family.

Ahn studied molecular biology and today hosts a radio show in Orlando.

"When you experience the kingdom of God, it comes with so many benefits: life, joy, love, peace," he says. "When I came to Christ, I discovered the peace of God. It's something you can taste and feel." ●

Trauma to truth

● From page 1

"I ended up meeting a guy and we got married, but he wasn't a Christian. He also had alcohol and anger issues. It lasted about four years, but during that time I was losing a sense of myself. I was going to church but I was living in the world as well. The church was a bit of a social club, we didn't have heart conversations. I would sometimes play music at church while still being intoxicated from nightclubbing the night before."

At the same time, she was asking questions about the Bible and sin but her questions went unanswered. PJ admits she was living a double life and questioned whether the church and Christianity were for her. When her marriage fell apart, more doubts crept in.

"So I started to pray, 'If You're real, God, show me. Reveal Yourself to me so that I'll know You better. And while You're at it, reveal me to me because I don't know who I am anymore.'"

About two years later, when PJ embarked on a trip around the world, God answered her prayer.



PJ Elsmore at age 11.

In England she visited a church that took her in and, through reading the Bible, praying and input from church members, her faith was restored. PJ says God revealed Himself to her and confronted her with her sin (wrongdoings and self-seeking) and she prayed for God's forgiveness and surrendered her life to Him. "I finally had a proper relationship with Jesus. I'd been lovingly disciplined by the Father and I'd been placed in this community of people who loved me."

Since then, PJ's life hasn't always been smooth sailing. She married a man she met at Bible College but the relationship broke down a short time later.

"It was very traumatic," she shares. But she turned to God in her pain and asked Him to guide her. "There was a profound journey of restoration and healing that came out of it."

PJ has now happily remarried and lives, works and attends church in Perth. She also volunteers with a prison ministry (she regularly leads music at a maximum security men's prison chapel service, and marks Bible studies and writes letters of encouragement to prison inmates). She also leads a workplace evangelistic prayer team in the city. ●

Actress finds her best role

April Hernandez-Castillo who readers may know from her roles in *Dexter*, *ER* or *New Amsterdam*.



April Hernandez-Castillo had already escaped an abusive partner and suffered an abortion when she found fame as a Hollywood actress, but the tough Puerto Rican from the Bronx had not yet finished “getting busy living.”

The quote, “Get busy living or get busy dying,” from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* had helped April break free from her abusive relationship. However, she really started to live when she got into a different sort of relationship, a spiritual relationship – with Jesus.

“I grew up Catholic, but I’ve always known that God was calling me [into a personal relationship with Him]. ... I just had to make that step and say, ‘OK, I’m going to accept You, and I don’t know what that looks like.’”

It took many years for April to finally make that step.

April’s parents loved her and raised her to love herself. As a young

woman, she was confident and strong.

However, when she was 16, she fell in love for the first time and eight months into the relationship “the beast came out” and her boyfriend began to abuse her physically and emotionally.

She was in shock, denial and fear, and didn’t know what was going on. The shame of what was happening prevented April from telling anyone and kept her in the relationship for three more years.

Then one day, strengthened by the *Shawshank* quote, she took control of the situation and broke off the relationship. At about that time she also had an abortion, which she said made her want “to kill myself because of those feelings of shame”.

April then became more focused and determined to pursue acting. She was still broken, in denial, and healing. She then met Jose Castillo,

who would eventually become her husband, and also made her first commitment to Jesus. However, April says it wasn’t a deep, heart-felt commitment.

Her first big acting job was a Super Bowl commercial and she started getting more TV parts. Then April’s dreams came true when she got the role of “Eva Benitez” in the feature film *Freedom Writers*.

She was living in her new Hollywood world, but boyfriend Jose was still in New York. April says New York represented what was wrong in her life. She didn’t think Jose was moving forward and they were on the verge of breaking up.

But she did move back to New York. Jose started going to a new church and eventually she joined him. They started attending every Sunday and the people were very loving.

One weekend, Jose went on a men’s retreat with the church. April says he came back a completely different man from the Jose she had known for the last six years. She didn’t even recognize him.

They continued as a couple, which was difficult because April was very angry with God. She didn’t understand the new man in front of her. He no longer wanted to be intimate [as

they weren’t married] and that was a huge problem. They stayed together but it was awkward.

Then April went on the church’s women’s retreat. Just like Jose, she left for the retreat on a Friday and when she returned on the Sunday, things were totally different and she was completely in love with God. Then she made a true commitment to Christ. Eventually, April and Jose married.

“
My conversion was anything but beautiful. It was a fight.”

“I always tell people, my conversion was anything but beautiful. It was a fight. I didn’t really understand why I had to give my life to Jesus,” she admitted. “But it wasn’t a giving; it was actually gaining something. I wrestled a long time with it because my identity was completely wrapped up in being a Hollywood actor.”

Then, for a season it seemed God took away her acting career — just when it had been flourishing — and April had to choose to either trust God, or go back to relying on her own resources and choices.

“Then I was put... in a very dry desert time for the next three-and-a-half years,” she recalls. “I felt bamboozled. I felt angry. I felt like — ‘I didn’t sign up for this. I wasn’t looking for Jesus.’ He just came in and messed my whole thing up. But obviously, it’s the greatest decision of

my life. “God’s grace, my goodness, there were so many times where I just wanted to tap out. If we’re talking about MMA [mixed martial arts] what do people do when they’re under pressure? They tap out,” she explained. “But even in the tapping out, God allows us to do that, and He waits, and that’s why I think I love Him so much. He allows us to find our way.”

Through the process April kept faith, walked through her hardships and prayed through things. Some of the things she learned are: to let God do what He wants to do and stop fighting Him; worship and choose to believe Him; and do right even when you don’t see anything happening. “God calls us to persevere,” she explains.

April is now a busy actress. She and Jose also speak regularly at juvenile facilities. A few years ago they started a ministry called Bold Faith Ministries; they have two daughters.

You can read more in April’s book called *Embracing Me*. •

I was addicted to opioids

BY MICHAEL ASHCRAFT

Dr. Lou Ortenzio derived satisfaction from serving his patients in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Maybe he got too much satisfaction because he was working 16-hour days.

“I felt like I had to perform at such a high level, be 10 feet tall, bulletproof and faster than a speeding locomotive and trying to make your patients happy,” he says on a CBN video. “I did take good care of people, I really cared about them and they knew that I cared.”

Ironically, caring for others made him neglect his family and himself.

“My wife certainly never saw me. The children hardly knew who I was,” he says.

What drove him to unreasonable exertions?

“At my core I didn’t love myself,” he says. “I needed everyone else to love me to make me feel adequate.”

Inevitably, the life he built began to crumble under the strain.

His wife took the kids, separated from him and moved to Pittsburgh. It was supposed to provoke a change in him and bring about a reconciliation. Instead, they divorced.

Lou didn’t know what to do, so he just kept working.

One night working late hours, he felt an

excruciating headache. Over the counter meds did nothing to alleviate the pain, so he reached for something stronger: Vicodin.

“It gave me this tremendous relief of pain and suffering, but also gave me this sense of euphoria that I could do anything and that just grew and grew and grew,” he says.

Vicodin is a potent pain reliever used commonly for people after surgery. It belongs to the class of drugs known as opioids, which have plunged America into a drug addiction crisis.

Being a doctor, Lou felt like he could keep it under control but eventually it turned into unmitigated addiction. He was a doctor, so he prescribed it for himself.

“You think you’re Superman, and you think you can do that and control it,” he says.

A decade later, Lou was downing 40 pills a day.

His sterling job performance began to slip. “I’d failed as a husband. I’d failed as a father; my practice wasn’t going well. And I realized that I could not stop using medication. I couldn’t stop using the opiates. I was stuck.”

He had first reached for Vicodin to help him out of a pinch. Now what would help him out of the Vicodin?

One night in the fall of 2002, Lou decided to take his life. For some strange reason, it didn’t work. Not even suicide worked. In despair, he cried out to God.

“God, I really don’t know or understand,” he prayed. “God, take me out of this mess. I can’t do this anymore. You’ve got to do something.”

At work the next day, they saved a crash victim in ICU.

Lou was an emotional wreck but his friend Nurse Donetta was serene. He asked her where she derived her peace, and she said, “Jesus.” Donetta invited Lou to church.

After attending church for a few Sundays, Lou realized, “I had messed up terribly and I needed to be forgiven. I asked Donetta, ‘How can I be forgiven,’ and she said, ‘You just get forgiven by just asking.’”

Lou begged God: “Please take over in my life because I sure can’t do it on my own. I sure can’t run this thing. I’m running it into the ground. I’m running myself into the ground. I’m going to be dead.”

After a few weeks, he became a Christian, not in church but with a patient. He confided that he still had not accepted the Lord into his heart.

The patient responded, “Well let’s do that right now. Get down on your knees. I’ll get down with you and we’ll pray.”

That was it. In an instant, God transformed Lou.

“I got up off the floor, feeling like I really legitimately was 10 feet tall and bulletproof, but only with Jesus, only with that power,” Lou



Lou Ortenzio

remembers. Lou realized the wrong question was “What Would Jesus Do?” The right question was “What had Jesus done?” he says.

In 2004, Lou remarried his first wife. He had lost his medical license for the fraudulent prescriptions but was eligible to apply for reinstatement. Instead he felt called to continue performing the community service he started as a punishment for prescription fraud — helping people recover from drug addiction.

Today, Lou serves as executive director of the Clarksburg Mission, providing shelter, food and hope in Jesus to those in need.

“It doesn’t make any sense how my life ended up like this,” Lou says. “It only makes sense in the kingdom of God.” •

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When God disappoints us



Jared and his wife Kristen.

Jared Taibi's life had fallen apart with a vengeance by the time he was in his 30s.

His teenage years were marked by mistakes and events that shaped him into a rebellious yet insecure adult, insecurity he tried to drown out with immoral living.

He says his drinks and drug days led to health issues and that he suffered from such "horrendous pain" he spent almost every night "literally shaking and quivering in pain".

To take control of his health, Jared went to the other extreme and threw himself into weightlifting, admitting it became an obsession. Steroids were part of the training. "I was on four different steroids at one time," he says in a YouTube video on a channel called The Pilgrimage Way.

Then in 2015 his marriage hit the rocks. That year he also suffered two concussions that left him with blurred vision, dizziness and barely able to read or drive.

"I was very sick and nauseous; I had headaches all the time," Jared reveals. "I became almost completely debilitated and I started hallucinating. My neurologist said my symptoms would probably never go away.

"I was only 30 and it looked like I would have to live for the rest of my life riddled with pain." Depressed and defeated, Jared contemplated suicide.

He knew he had another option, but he avoided it like the plague. That option was God.

Jared had been raised in a Christian home had committed his life to Jesus Christ when he was five but when some friends experienced disappointment in their faith he thought God would let him down too, and so he turned away from God.

"I felt I was not a good person and that God maybe didn't love me. Pretty soon I stopped going to church," he says. "I stopped seeking God, stopped reading my Bible. You can imagine how things go when you start living that way; you start going after more of the world and less of God. Eventually, I avoided everything that had to do with God."

But when his marriage began to crack, Jared says a good friend told him he was not living right, that God needed to be a part of his life again. "I thank God that person was obedient to speak those words to me," Jared shares. "I remember bawling my eyes out. I realised I was living so far away from Him.

"I went home, got on my knees, said sorry to God and asked Him for help and forgiveness."

Jared pleaded with God to restore his marriage. "I thought that would be His will. I told my wife our separation was not of God; I begged her to start praying and seeking Him. But it was never actually a marriage in God's eyes. There had been unfaithfulness on both sides; it was an ungodly union that I put together."

His wife told him she was a lesbian and would only consider staying together if Jared agreed to an "open relationship" in which they could see other people.

Jared refused. He still hoped God would change her but says God led him to this verse which addresses marriage to an unbeliever — "If the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace." (1 Corinthians 7: 15).

As difficult as it was, Jared says he is thankful God did not save his marriage because "there is no way I could have lived in peace in that situation".

So, after nearly seven years of marriage, and 10 days after he recommitted his life to God, he and his wife split up and never reconciled.

"It was like a dagger to the heart," Jared remembers.

He feels he had not yet submitted entirely to God at that point. "I didn't pray 'Your will be done' because I was afraid of what His will would be," he admits. As his misery deepened, he began experiencing terrifying nightmares and panic attacks.

Finally one weekend at church he knelt at the altar and surrendered everything, including his hopes for reconciling with his wife, to God.

"It was painful," Jared shares. "All the hopes and dreams that I had, I gave up on. But I knew that I could trust Him, that I could give Him my whole heart and that He wouldn't hurt it."

That was the day Jared experienced peace and joy that was "incredible. I drove to work laughing and smiling and singing. I didn't tell anybody because they would probably think I was medicated or crazy but it was real and it continues today. I wake up every day with peace.

"I have such hope now. I know if I died a year ago it would have been a different story. To God be the glory that He called me back."

Jared has since remarried and says his wife Kristen is the best gift God has given him. "God showed me mercy and gave me another chance," he beams. "He will do the same for anybody."

See Jared's blog and YouTube channel called The Pilgrimage Way.



Lara Silva (centre) as Eden, with Mary Magdalene (played by Elizabeth Tabish, left) and Tamar (played by Amber Shana Williams) in *The Chosen*, series 3. **Below:** Lara with Shahar Isaac, who plays her husband Simon Peter.

Choice role in Chosen series

Actress Lara Silva (33) has come a long way from skipping along dirt roads as a child growing up in Brazil to now acting in the award-winning and record-breaking *The Chosen* television series. She says she owes it all to a series of life-changing decisions she made in her early 20s.

Lara never knew her biological father and her mother left her in the care of her grandmother and moved to America when she was three, promising to return for Lara when she had a stable home for her to grow up in. Three years later she returned. In that time, she had met the man Lara now considers her father, though her parents divorced when Lara was 10.

"Because my mum became a single mum she struggled between jobs to get food and a roof over our heads," Lara tells students at The King's Academy. "I remember sometimes having to search around the house for some spare change when we didn't have food to eat... I had to grow up really fast."

Lara started working at 14 at a hamburger place so she could pay for her phone and extracurricular activities.

After high school, Lara went to college for science so she could

become a nurse, but "after two semesters I really felt lost and confused and completely drained... I was so unhappy and felt so misplaced... I just made my own decision abruptly to leave which eventually led me to feel like I was a loser and a quitter and it made me feel even worse about myself."

Lara started working in restaurants but depression plagued her.

"One of my best friends and roommate at the time asked me one of the most important questions which is: 'What were you doing when you last felt truly happy?'"

She eventually realised it was when she was at a performing arts school in elementary school. He friend encouraged her to try and get back into it. Lara searched online for local acting classes but doubts soon crept in.

"I thought, 'What am I doing? I'm too old to start. I'm not going to make it! This is crazy!'"

Despite the doubts, Lara showed up for her first acting class and immediately knew she was in the right place.

Around the same time, Lara was dating a man who was a Christian and invited her to attend church with his family. The relationship didn't work out but when it was time for Lara to move away to pursue her acting career, he came to see her and say goodbye.

"He asked me another one of the most important questions of my life: 'You're moving to another state by yourself, going after what seems an impossible dream for some, don't you want God's guidance and peace in all of this uncertainty?... With tears rolling down my face I said, 'Yes, I do want that!' and I said the most

important prayer of my life (similar to the one on page 11) and I was saved."

Lara got a Bible and says it and her relationship with God became her compass and roadmap for life.

Two years later, when Lara was 26, she packed up everything she owned and drove to Atlanta, where she started working in a restaurant and met her future husband. She also met a Christian girl who was filming a movie in Atlanta. When the movie wrapped, Lara's friend moved to LA, where she found work in a casting office. She learnt about a new series about the life of Jesus and His disciples called *The Chosen* and encouraged Lara to audition.

She auditioned for the role of Mary Magdalene, but when director, Dallas Jenkins saw it, he decided Lara would better fit the role of Eden. Eden is the wife of one of Jesus' disciples, Simon Peter. She doesn't appear in the Bible but has been created for the series.

"Eden is an incredible woman of faith," Lara explains. "She loves her husband Simon Peter and the Lord fiercely. She's standing by Simon, encouraging him to trust in the Lord, all while exuding grace, strength and sometimes a little sass... she has inspired so many women and men around the world. I've gotten so many messages telling me how Simon and Edan depict how a marriage should be and that I'm '#wifegoals'! I never ever expected that and I never expected that the role that I was playing would mean so much to people... it feels amazing to be a part of a faith-based show, especially being a Christian myself... I'm using my talents to tell a story. Sometimes I find myself getting on my knees and praying before I have an emotional scene because sometimes, take after take, you feel tired and your eyes are dry and you don't know if you can get there but with God's strength that's how I've been able to get through these emotions. I realised I cannot pursue this and I cannot do this without the help of God."

The Chosen, the third series of which has recently been released, is available to watch for free on the *The Chosen* app.



YOUTH TRUTH

My faith grew from my doubts

For many people, no matter what they believe, doubt can creep in and threaten to derail their faith. Question after question arises until it seems there is nothing left to hold onto. Is it possible to overcome doubt despite unanswered questions?

Bobby Conway found that it was and that in fact his season of doubt was a positive in his life.

Age 19 was the first turning point in Bobby's life. Prior to this he describes himself as "insecure, angry, confused, uneducated, promiscuous, a boozier, addictive, foolish, rebellious, and a decent baseball player," according to his website bio.

Then his college baseball teammate took Bobby to hear a Christian speaker called Greg Laurie.

"I resonated with Greg – a recovering pothead, laid back, and a blue jean-wearing Bible-teaching evangelist," he says on his website. "His message resonated and soon afterward I was following Jesus."

Bobby's newfound faith was strong and he never imagined he would wrestle with doubts in his faith in the future.

"Typical of that honeymoon season falling in love with Jesus, I had a great zeal for the Lord," Bobby shares with Pastor Jason Jimenez in an episode of the *Challenging Conversations* podcast.

"But the further I kept growing in this Christian faith, and the deeper I kept going into it as it relates to studying philosophy and apologetics, I started to bump into some questions that I had a hard time resolving."

Bobby pored over books to try and find immediate,



Bobby Conway and his wife Heather.

simple answers to his complex queries, but there often weren't any.

"For every book that I tried to read to chase down the answer to my doubts, I would collect 10 more questions and more doubts, and the snowball kept growing."

When Bobby started Bible College, he hoped his theological questions would finally be answered. But the doubts remained and he felt exhausted from all the different questions.

Even after graduating seminary and becoming a church pastor and apologist (someone who defends the Christian faith), he still secretly battled doubts. He recalls crying out in prayer, "God, I'm struggling to believe this. I'm wondering if You are there. Please know that my heart hates these doubts."

His doubts caused Bobby so much distress that he became depressed and suicidal. He felt like a hypocrite.

"I ended up in counselling. I ended up on antidepressants. I was suffering because I didn't know how to live. I thought: 'What if I've been duped?' I gave myself to this Christian worldview. I threw myself all in it, prepared myself for ministry, and now, my brain is producing questions

and removed his doubts. He now looks back at his time of deep doubt as positive and beneficial to his life as an apologist.

"[I had] got to a point when I was in that agony that I had to imagine how to live again. If I wasn't going to be a Chris-

tian, where do I go? And so I would envision, 'Well, what if I was an atheist? What if I was an agnostic? What if I was a Buddhist? What if I was whatever?' I would think about what it would be like to live in that worldview and what type of questions and doubts I would inherit. And then, I would just try to resolve those, and when all was said and done, it was like I broke out, and it was like Christianity seemed like the greatest, and the strongest, and the most beautiful and the most wonderful worldview of them all."

"It was like, 'Wow, God, You didn't leave me, You didn't abandon me. You really were there,'" he shares. "It meant so much to me because I just felt like I fell in love with Him again."

Bobby realised that his relationship with God had become a Q+A session with God, instead of a friendship.

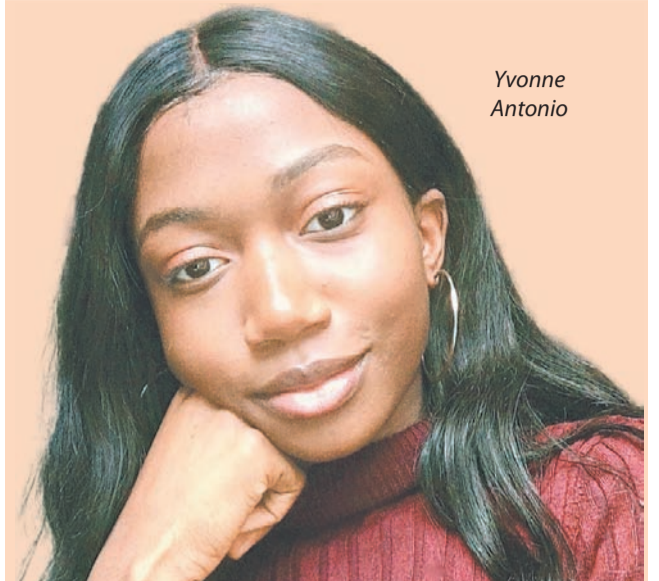
"My heart got detached from the process," he admits. "I lost my way in the journey. Doubt is not a Christian problem. It's a human problem. In the absence of certainty, there is always going to be room for doubt. The question is which worldview best closes the doubt gap. All of a sudden, I was able to realise that, 'Why do I always feel like I have to be on the defensive as a Chris-

tian? The atheist has to give answers, too.' We're not alone in this endeavour. It was just so freeing."

Bobby is married to Heather and they have two adult children. He has a YouTube chan-

nel and website called One Minute Apologist and has written four books including *Doubting Toward Faith: The Journey to Confident Christianity* and *Does God Exist?: And 51 Other Compelling Questions About God and the Bible*.

“I was suffering because I didn't know how to live.”



Yvonne Antonio

I AM FINALLY FREE!

BY YVONNE ANTONIO

Growing up in Belgium, I dealt with a lot of bullying over my skin colour. Throughout middle and high school, I battled deep, deep insecurities. Though I struggled to find my own sense of self-worth, I got attention from boys; as a result, I was led to believe that my worth came from my sexual appeal. I became consumed with lust, which resulted in a host of problems, including a preoccupation with pornography and masturbation.

Throughout all of this, I always had this nagging feeling that I was doing something wrong. At the time, I believed in the general idea of God, but I didn't know much about Him and I was certainly not following Jesus. This lack of a relationship, paired with my need for human validation, resulted in major loneliness. After a while, I fell into a depression. I'd stay in my room for days on end and, eventually, I began considering suicide.

It was around this time that I came across a bunch of sermons and testimonies on YouTube. I listened to one, then more, then many. My interest in Christ's Gospel increased to the point where, one night, I found myself Googling "How can I give my life to Jesus?" I found a prayer online. As I read over it, I felt the sudden urge to go into my family's living room.

When I got there, I was greeted by an immense peace – "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). I declared Jesus my Lord, out loud, and resolved to follow Him. Immediately, my suicidal thoughts disappeared. They literally disappeared, just like that! I was shocked, to say the least. I'd heard that Jesus was capable of such healing, but I was in awe that He'd done it for me.

Though many of my battles disappeared overnight, I continued to suffer from a masturbation addiction. I also still craved external validation. Unsurprisingly, I soon found myself in a relationship. He was a believer, but of course, things didn't work and we ended up breaking up. I grieved the loss for a while ... then, the Lord showed me that I'd been worshipping my boyfriend instead of Him. "You were so focused on being a good girlfriend that you turned from me," He said. "You need to be My child first." I was so convicted. It was true; I'd been fully focused on my boyfriend – even my attempts to overcome sin were rooted in a desire to be good enough for him.

I repented of this idolatry and, a few months later, I got baptized. This was a turning point for me as the symbolism of being literally washed clean enabled me to accept the newness given to me by Christ. I'd long been in a cycle of falling into sin, shaming myself for the sin, feeling condemned and defeated, then repeating the sin. But, once I finally accepted that I'd already been cleansed and freed as a result of Jesus dying on the cross, I found myself able to walk in freedom from my sin.

The more time I spent in prayer, worship, and reading the Word, the stronger I became. People think that they'll grow closer to God by trying to refrain from sin, but they've got it backwards; if you remain close to God, He Himself enables you to refrain from sin. I am living proof of this. Though I still struggle, lust's hold on me has been loosened – not as a result of my own efforts, but by God's grace (undeserved love), alone.

Throughout my walk with Christ, this has remained clear: if He is our first priority, everything else falls into place. Don't look to man for your salvation and sanctification – and that includes yourself. It simply won't work. Look to God, only. Focus on Him and His Word – for He is "from where [our] help comes" (Psalms 121).

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



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YOUTH TRUTH

I felt ugly and unwanted

Jessica Roldan knows firsthand the pain that shame and regret brings. As a teenager, she rebelled against her parents' values and the faith she held so dear as a child. The further she walked away, the more she realised that living her life her own way left her feeling hopeless. Thankfully, she says, it's never too late to come home.

Jessica grew up in a Christian home and attended church with her parents, brother and sister every Sunday. She describes herself as a thoughtful and serious child, enjoying theological discussions when members of other religions knocked on her door.

When she was about 18, she had her first boyfriend, but her parents put an end to it as they felt it wasn't the best decision for her at the time. Jessica actually agreed with them but she also longed to be cherished and desired and had enjoyed the attention from her boyfriend.

"Here was someone who actually paid attention to me, who thought I was pretty, and told me so," she shares. "Nobody else gave me that kind of attention."

Not knowing what she wanted to do with her life at the time, she also felt directionless. She adds that there was a lack of communication between her and her parents.

"I never felt the freedom to be able to tell (my parents) what was going on inside. So, at a time when I didn't have any friends, didn't feel confident enough to look for any, and didn't have anybody I could really talk to, I naturally began to slip downhill."

Feeling ugly and unwanted, Jessica sought affirmation from men and fell into a promiscuous lifestyle.

"I experienced enough ugliness to know the meaning of shame and regret," she admits. "I was just looking for someone that would like me."

Jessica also had a growing sense of disappointment in God. She pictured how she thought her life should have turned out – meeting her future husband, marrying and moving into a home together – and none of those things had happened.

"I was expecting God to conform to the script that I had written for Him, instead of trusting in His timing. When things didn't turn out the way I had envisioned, I blamed God."

Jessica also began to question the faith she had grown up in. She had doubts about whether God really existed and if the Bible was truly His Word and could be trusted. She questioned whether Jesus was the Saviour of the world and if He really died and rose again.

"So feeling directionless and disappointed with my life, and full of doubts about the Christian faith, I was getting to the point of hopeless-



Jessica Roldan

ness," Jessica shares.

When she became pregnant, some people around her suggested she get an abortion – but that wasn't an option for her.

"I knew that what had begun to grow inside of me was my child, not just a lump of tissue," she attests. "I loved my baby right from the start."

As she worked through the questions she had about God and the Bible, she realised the creation around her pointed to a Creator.

"You don't see a beautiful painting of a flower without thinking to yourself, 'Somebody had to paint it.' In a similar way I can't look at a real flower and think to myself, 'Oh it just got there by chance.' No, if the real flower is there, Somebody had to make it – Somebody smart, Somebody loving, Somebody who loves beauty and order and who wants to make me happy by giving me something beautiful to enjoy. I looked around and I saw that everything points to God and then I started to study about the Bible and how we got the Bible and I realised that the Bible can be counted on as a reliable witness to the truth."

The Bible's many prophecies about Jesus that have been fulfilled also confirmed to Jessica that the Bible was the Word of God and that Jesus existed, died for our sins and rose from the dead. But that was just the first step.

"I was hungry and thirsty for what I knew could only be found in Jesus, the Son of God, but I was hesitant to come back to Him, because of my sin. I knew that I had failed Him," Jessica admits.

Then she read a book that had been sitting on her shelf for years called *When Godly People Do Ungodly Things* by Beth Moore, about how people walk away from God and how they can return to Him.

"My doubts about the Bible and Jesus had been, in part, a false front I had erected in order to hide the ugly truth – I had wanted to make my rebellion seem reasonable. When I admitted my wrong to God, the tension of being constantly in opposition to the truth was released."

Jessica recognised her sinfulness, confessed it before God and asked for His forgiveness.

She and her boyfriend also started attending church, where they were welcomed with warmth and kindness. Her boyfriend also accepted Christ as his Saviour and several months later they were married.

"Our past does not have to define us," she says now. "We have the freedom to choose a better path and discover a new identity, in Christ."

Jessica now aims to live a life completely for Jesus. She lives in central Arizona with her husband and nine children, whom she homeschools. She enjoys writing for her blog theheavenlyhearth.com and making videos for her YouTube channel, Truth at Home.

SELF-HELP WAS NO HELP

BY JOSH SWANSON

Though I was raised in the church, I never believed. No one around me had answers to the tough questions I asked, so in middle school, I left the church entirely. I became not only an atheist, but an anti-theist. In my mind, religion was simply a means of comfort, Christianity was just another religion, and believers were brain-washed sheep.

I was certain that this earthly life was all there was, so I aimed to make the most of it. In high school, I got pretty heavy into partying. This continued into college, but there, the partying was accompanied by severe homesickness, loneliness, and depression. My new friendships felt empty; we often just smoked weed, then parted ways. I spent a lot of time alone and it was during these times that I'd do my "self-help" thinking. I'd spent hours meditating on my flaws and coming up with improvement plans. Looking back, recognising that I was flawed was a key turning point; I was onto something, but my efforts were futile. Something was missing.

One night, like usual, my friends and I got high, then went our separate ways. I was alone in my dorm room, thinking about life, when I heard commotion downstairs. It sounded like the police were present, yet, for some reason, I felt pushed to throw on my jacket and go scope it out. I expected to find a chaotic scene, but when I got downstairs, I found nothing but silence. I was weirded out and didn't want to return to my room, so I went for a walk.

I eventually settled in at a picnic table. There, I realised that it was freezing outside, but because of my coat, I wasn't the least bit cold. I didn't have much growing up, so this coat, which was gifted to me by an uncle, really meant a lot to me. I was sitting there, expressing gratitude, from a totally secular standpoint, when I was suddenly enveloped in this overpowering, indescribable feeling of warmth, comfort, love, and total acceptance. In that moment, God revealed Himself to me, an anti-theist. I felt Him say "I'm here" and that I didn't have to try so hard to fix myself. I immediately and suddenly believed that my own efforts were in vain, but that this Person I had encountered could and would help me.

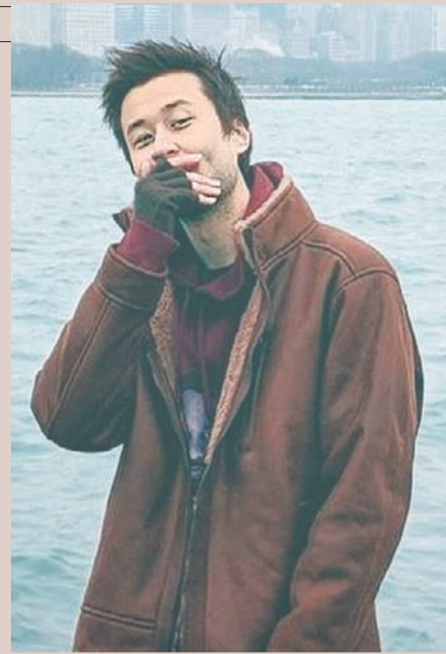
Then, as crazy confirmation, this beautiful leaf fell before me. It was a curled, slightly broken maple leaf. By the influence of the Holy Spirit, I understood that this leaf was me; whereas I saw myself as a broken thing, worthless unless fixed, God – who knew every detail of every one of my flaws – cherished me nonetheless. Closeness to Him did not require that I first be fixed; rather, He says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness" [2 Corinthians 12:9]. All of the answers I'd been searching for became crystal clear in that moment. I was so insanely overwhelmed; I sat there for a while, bawling my eyes out.

By the time I headed back to my dorm room, it was about one o'clock in the morning. As I approached my building, I ran into two of my friends. When they asked what I was up to, it all became very, very real. I knew that this was a crossroads. Would I be ashamed or would I proclaim my newfound faith? "I just became a Christian," I said. They were almost as shocked as I was!

I now knew that God was real and, though I used the term "Christian," I wasn't really sure which faith tradition, if any, was true. I didn't want to just default to Christianity. After reading everything I could get my hands on about a variety of faiths, I relaxed into what I knew was true: Jesus was Lord. The historical evidence, especially as it relates to the resurrection, was overwhelming.

On top of that, all of the other traditions depended on man's own ability to overcome sin and gain spiritual enlightenment – something that human brokenness simply doesn't allow. Christianity is the only tradition predicated upon grace alone. It was obvious... Jesus was the only way. And this truth couldn't be reconciled with any other faith system. I began to walk with Christ. That was seven years ago. Since, my faith has only continued to grow. This growth has nothing to do with my own righteousness or my own efforts; like every other child of God, I am dependent on God's grace – the same grace that chased me down and brought me out of darkness and into His marvellous light.

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



Josh Swanson

“Our past does not have to define us.”

“All of the answers I'd been searching for became crystal clear.”

Getting some perspective

BY KARL FAASE

IN THE middle of cancer treatment journalist Anie Rigas, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald, wrote this:

"I used to complain about my uneven eyebrows. Now I have none. I used to wish I could lift heavier at the gym. Now all I want is to be able to get out of bed without my whole body hurting. I used to hate waking up to an alarm. Now I wish I'd sleep



STOCKPHOTO

long enough to hear an alarm, instead of being woken by a hot flush." None of us knows what tomorrow, next week or next year will bring. We can't always choose our future, so being

grateful for the present is really important. Whatever you are doing today, cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Thank God for what you have, none of us knows what's ahead.

Astrophysicist's atheism upended

Former atheist Sarah Salviander, is a research scientist in astronomy and astrophysics at the University of Texas. She was born in the United States but brought up in an atheist household in Canada.

"My parents were socialists and political activists who thought British Columbia would be a better place for us to live, since it had the only socialist government in North America at the time. My parents were also atheists, though they preferred that label in favour of "agnostic". They were kind, loving, and moral, but religion played no part in my life. Instead, my childhood revolved around education, particularly science. I remember how important it was to my parents that my brother and I did well in school," Sarah recounts.

"I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when science fiction was enjoying a renaissance, thanks largely to the popularity of *Star Wars*. I remember how fascinated I was by the original *Star Wars* trilogy ... it got me thinking about space in a big way."

Sarah was also particularly fond of the well-known astronomer Carl Sagan's space series *Cosmos*: "The combination of these influences led to such an intense wonder about outer space and the universe." At the age of nine, Sarah knew she "would be a space scientist someday".

"In retrospect," she continues, "It's amazing that for the first 25 years of my life, I met only three people who identified as Christian. My view of Christianity was negative from an early age, and by the time I was in my twenties I was actively hostile toward Christianity. Looking back, I realised a lot of this was the unconscious absorption of the general hostility toward Christianity that is common in places like Canada and Europe; my hostility certainly wasn't based on actually knowing anything about Christianity.

"I had come to believe that Christianity made people weak and foolish; I thought it was philosophically trivial. I was ignorant not only of the Bible, but also of the deep philosophy of Christianity and the scientific discoveries that shed new light on the origins of the universe and life on Earth."

Sarah focused her energy on her studies and academic pursuits, "I became very dedicated to my physics and math courses. I joined campus clubs, started to make friends, and, for the first time in my life, I was meeting Christians." These Christians she met, however, came across as "joyous and content. And, they were smart, too."

She mentions her surprise when she discovered that her physics professors, whom she admired, were Christians, "Their personal example began to have an influence on me, and I found myself growing less hostile to Christianity."

Sarah prospered in her field, notably in the study of big bang cosmology.

"I had joined a group in the Centre for Astrophysics and Space Sciences (CASS) that was researching evidence for the big bang. The cosmic background radiation — the leftover radiation from the big bang — provides the strongest evidence for the theory, but cosmologists need other, independent lines of evidence to confirm it.

"My group was studying deuterium abundances in the early universe. Deuterium is an isotope of hydrogen, and its abundance in the early universe is sensitive to the amount of ordinary mass contained in the entire universe. Believe it or not, this one measurement tells us whether the big bang model is correct."

She was "astounded by this, blown away, completely and utterly awed. It seemed incredible to me that there was a way to find the answer to this question we had about the universe. In fact, it seems that every question we have about the universe is answerable.

"There's no reason it has to be this way, and it made me think of [Albert] Einstein's observation that the most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it's comprehensible.

"I started to sense an underlying order to the universe. Without knowing it, I was awakening to what Psalm 19 tells us so clearly, *"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."*

She then read *The Count of Monte Cristo*: "It's more than just a revenge story, it's a philosophically deep examination of forgiveness and God's role in giving justice. I was surprised by this, and was starting to realise that the concept of God and religion was not as philosophically trivial as I had thought."

Sarah soon came to the view that belief in God is unavoidable. She was "walking across that beautiful La Jolla campus. I stopped in my tracks when it hit me — I believed in God! I was so happy; it was like a weight had been lifted from my heart.

"I realised that most of the pain I'd experienced in my life was of my own making, but that God had used it to make me wiser and more com-



Sarah Salviander now has an active online and speaking ministry to address how Christianity and science "completely agree".

passionate. It was a great relief to discover that there was a reason for suffering, and that it was because God was loving and just. God could not be perfectly just unless I — just like everyone else — was made to suffer for the bad things I'd done."

“I realised that, remarkably, the Bible and science agree completely.”

Despite her radical transformation from atheism to belief, Sarah felt she stagnated in her faith.

"For a while I was content to be a theist and didn't pursue religion any further. I spent another very enjoyable summer with CASS, and then during my last year at EOU I met a man I liked very much, a computer science student from Finland. He'd been in the special forces in the Finnish Defence Force, and was just about the most off-the-wall character I'd ever met. But he was also a man of strength, honour, and deep integrity, and I found myself overwhelmingly drawn to those qualities."

This man, like her, had grown up in an atheist home but later had "come to embrace God and Jesus Christ as his personal saviour in his early twenties through an intensely personal experience."

After they were married, Sarah finished her degree and they had a year apart when she had to move to Austin, Texas for her graduate work in astrophysics.

One day while browsing a local bookstore, she came across a title called *The Science of God* authored by the Jewish physicist Gerald Schroeder: "I was intrigued by the title, but something else compelled me to read it. Maybe it was the loneliness I was feeling, and I was longing for a deeper connection with God. All I know is that what I read changed my life forever."

She thinks of Schroeder as a unique individual: "He is an MIT-trained physicist and also an applied theologian. ... His work proved to

me that Genesis 1 was scientifically sound, and not just a "silly myth" as atheists believed. I realised that, remarkably, the Bible and science agree completely."

Sarah then read the gospels of the New Testament.

"I found the person of Jesus Christ to be extremely compelling. I felt as Einstein did when he said he was 'enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene'. And yet I struggled, because I did not feel one hundred percent convinced of the Gospels in my heart.

"I knew of the historical evidence for their truth. And, of course, I knew the Bible was reliable because of Genesis. Intellectually, I knew the Bible to be true, and as a person of intellect, I had to accept it as truth, even if I didn't feel it. That's what faith is. As C. S. Lewis said, it is accepting something you know to be true in spite of your emotions.

"So I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour."

Sarah still struggled with her faith saying that she "sometimes worried" about it. During this period, she had a cancer diagnosis and an unpleasant course of treatment.

"Not long after, my husband fell ill with meningitis and encephalitis, and it was not clear if he would recover; we didn't know if he would be paralysed or worse. It took him about a month, but, thankfully, he did recover."

Sarah and her husband then went through the loss of their child.

"At that time, we were expecting our first child, a baby girl. All seemed well until about six months, when our baby stopped growing. We found out she had Trisomy 18, a fatal chromosomal abnormality. Our daughter, Ellinor, was stillborn soon after. It was the most devastating loss of our lives. For a while I despaired, and didn't know how I could go on after the death of our daughter.

"But I finally had a clear vision of our little girl in the loving arms of her heavenly Father, and it was then that I had peace. I reflected that, after all these trials in one year, my husband and I were not only closer to each other, but also felt closer to God. My faith was real."

Sarah reflects: "I don't know how I would've coped with such trials when I was an atheist. When you're 20 years old and healthy, and you have your family around you, you feel immortal. I never thought about my own death or the potential deaths of loved ones.

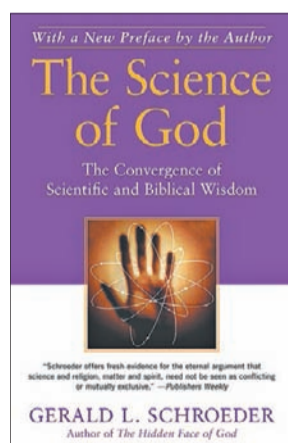
"But there comes a time when the feeling of immortality wanes, and you're forced to confront the inevitability of not only your own annihilation, but that of your loved ones."

Sarah concludes: "The only way we are free is if the universe and everything in it was created, not by some unconscious mechanism, but by a personal being — the God of the Bible. The only way our lives are unique, purposeful, and eternal is if a loving God created us."

This article is from jamesbishoplog.com. It has been abridged.



The Story of the Cosmos - a book to which Sarah contributed a chapter.



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BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Becoming a peacemaker

BY ROB FURLONG

You don't have to look very far in our world today to see how lacking we are in peace and peacemakers.

Right now, as you read this, there are 22 wars being waged around the world, on five separate continents, resulting in the deaths of 120,151 people in 2022 alone. Some of these conflicts have been going on for decades.

Closer to home, many of us have no peace in our personal lives or relationships. Perhaps a friend at school has turned against you or you are no longer speaking to a relative because of an argument neither of you can resolve.

Many people perpetually live their lives with a profound sense of deep sadness, emotional hurt and estrangement from God and people.

Whether it be in our world, or our personal lives, more than ever we need to experience and practice what Jesus taught about peace and being

a peacemaker.

Through His life and teaching, Jesus brought "peace on earth" – and He showed how peace in our relationships with God and others can be a reality in our lives and our world.

Last month I spoke about being a peacemaker and I suggested that one way you could do this was by committing yourself to the "Peace Declaration" I had written. Because I want peace to be more than just a nice sentiment on a piece of paper, I am going to focus on the theme of peace this year.

How can we have peace with God?

How can we experience peace in our relationships with others and how can we actively promote peace in them?

You see, I want you to know God's peace deep in your soul.

Being a peacemaker begins with me.

What this means is, if I'm serious about being a peacemaker with others and the world, then I must begin by making peace with God.

People who have peace with God are described by Jesus as being "blessed" people – people who are aware of their need before God – and who demonstrate the following characteristics:

- They know they are spiritually bankrupt. To be "poor in spirit" means they know their attitude toward God doesn't measure up and their relationship with Him is broken. As a result, they turn to God and ask Him for His mercy.

- They grieve over their sin. They "mourn" and are in deep grief over the blackness of their own sin against God, as well as the sins of the world.

- They are dependent on God. When Jesus describes blessed people as being "meek", He is not calling them weak. A meek person is someone who knows they are strong, but God is stronger. Instead of living life in their own strength, they choose to live in dependence on God. A meek person submits themselves completely to God and His care.

- They long for a righteousness they



don't have. Blessed people want to be like God. They know they are not good in themselves, so they ask God to fill them with His goodness.

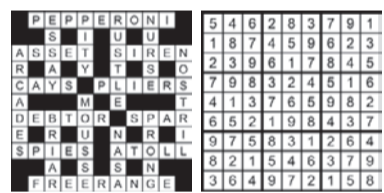
The Apostle Paul wrote, "Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

When a person realises their sin has broken their relationship with God and there is nothing they can do to repair it; when they confess their sin to God, ask for His forgiveness and rely only on the death and resurrection of Jesus to bring this about – that person has peace with God.

God's promise to you is that His Son, Jesus, can bring peace to your life and your relationships, and you can be a peacemaker in our world.

God offers us peace in exchange for our anger, resentments, and fears – He offers you His peace, freely, today.

Blessed are those who realise their need of God because that is the beginning of peace in their lives.



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: Please send me: Bible Some 'starting off' literature Information on a helpful church

I have prayed this prayer.

* Please tick and write clearly *

Name _____ Phone _____
Address _____
Email address _____

Challenge Literature Fellowship, PO Box 978, Cloverdale WA 6985
info@challengenews.org

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

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, serials and kids' shows - Good. app	
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	

HOLINESS is not really a concept bandied about much in our culture today. If the term is used, it would most likely be negatively, as in "Stop being so holier-than-thou!" Meaning, "stop being so self-righteous", or "stop judging me for my bad behaviour".

'Holiness', as far as our culture understands it, is something we think we ought to avoid in order to make others feel better about themselves. Even exercising a free choice, like not drinking alcohol, not swearing or not sleeping with someone can be construed as some sort of super-spiritual behaviour depending on the company, and elicit an accusation of being too 'holy'.

In the Bible, however, the word 'holy' in the Hebrew language means 'things belonging to God'.

Things and people are 'made holy' by dedicating them for use by and for God.

When God shows up somewhere, like in the Jewish temple or at Moses' burning bush, He transforms that space into a holy place. Even coal shovels and candlesticks can be holy, because they are set aside for use in God's service.

Other words that convey that special use for God's purposes are 'sanctified' or 'consecrated'.

The New Testament calls Christians "a holy people".

Looking around at those who follow Jesus that you know, you might disagree. But the point is that they are not holy because of what they do, they are holy because they belong to God and God is using them for His purposes.

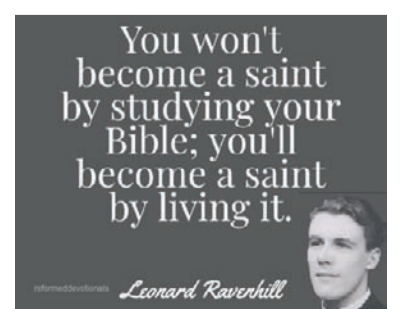
Christians should indeed act in a manner that is upright and sin-free, but that comes out of the identity of holiness that God has already given them by forgiving their sin and accepting them as His children, not out of a striving on their part to become 'good enough' for God.

The Christian God, Yahweh, is perfect, sinless and all good. God's standards are high and holy. Apart from Jesus' atoning [paying the debt] sacrifice on the cross there is no way humans could meet them.

However, with Jesus as both Saviour and Lord of their lives, Christians are empowered to live holy lives — not sanctimonious lives, but lives full of humility, love, kindness, patience and self-control.

You too can be holy and live holy, no matter how you have lived up to this point. You can change the script of your life by committing yourself to God by means of a simple prayer such as the one on this page.

"I shall pass through this world but once. Any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."
— Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond





STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

In 2017, Sheffield policeman Phil Roberts was crowned Britain's Strongest Man.

Winning this competition was no mean feat. The 32-year-old had to beat his opponents in events such as flipping a 400 kg tractor tyre, lifting a car and pulling a plane. At 1.9 metres tall and weighing 133 kg, he was built like a mountain.

Yet while he was as physically as strong as they came, emotionally Phil was as weak as a child.

"It looked on the outside that I had everything, but I didn't feel fulfilled," he says on the YouTube channel Life Stories. "I felt empty."

Emptiness had plagued him ever since he was 22, when his best friend hanged himself. Until then Phil had been a casual churchgoer, but this tragedy caused him to turn his back on God.

"I couldn't understand how a good God could allow that to happen and that's when I decided I was done with God and would live my life my way to the full — or at least what I thought was to the full," he says. "I can't say I'm proud of the next 13 years."

Those were the party years, the hard drugs (cocaine, heroin, lots of steroids) and hard drinking years. He even got engaged and bought a house with his fiancée but was unfaithful to her and they broke up.

By this time Phil was a police officer, but had become disillusioned with the job and chalked up the most complaints of anyone in the South

Yorkshire Police Force.

Where did it go wrong, he asked himself? "I went from wanting to help and protect the vulnerable to being one of the most violent men in the force. I left a trail of disaster behind me and slipped into depression."

Phil tried to pick himself up by throwing himself into weight training and competing in novice strongman competitions.

Bolstered by some early victories, he went all out to win the major titles, which resulted in his 2017 win. This launched him into the glamorous world of women, sports cars, penthouse apartments and lucrative sponsorship deals.

But still this brought him no lasting joy — instead he describes his success as hollow. His use of hard drugs, which included copious amounts of steroids, continued.

In 2019, Phil decided to defend his title. By this time, he weighed 152 kg. "I was having the worst competition I've ever had. I was so big and so uncomfortable because I put on that weight very quickly.

"The steroids and recreational drugs I was taking put my body under huge pressure — it's by the grace of God that I didn't just pop."

The last event of the competition rolled around — the Atlas stone lift, in which competitors have to lift five huge round stones, increasing in weight from 100 to 160 kg, and place them on five high platforms.

He got through the first four but

slipped while lifting the final and heaviest stone. It dropped. The 160 kg rock crashed onto Phil's shin bone, which broke with a sickening crack.

"I knew instantly it was bad," he says. "It sounded like a massive branch breaking off a tree."

When surgeons told him his injuries were so severe he could lose his leg, Phil's world disintegrated.

"I went from being one of the strongest people on earth to the vulnerable little boy I was growing up. I was terrified," he shares.

"All I could think of was that I would lose my business and my livelihood. I realised everything I'd built my life on, things that never gave me real happiness or joy in the first place, could vanish overnight."

However, Phil had some friends who were Christians. They reached out to him during this time and invited him to a Christian men's retreat.

"At that point I was so desperate I said I'd take anything, so I went, but this time I wasn't my confident cocky self. I was in pain; my leg was being held together by this massive cage. I was miserable."

While he was there, one of the speakers approached Phil and said to him: "Why don't you give this God thing a go? Give Jesus a chance."

Willing to try anything, he said to himself: "Yeah, why not give Jesus a go?" It really was as casual as that!

He says slowly but surely things started to change. "I didn't know

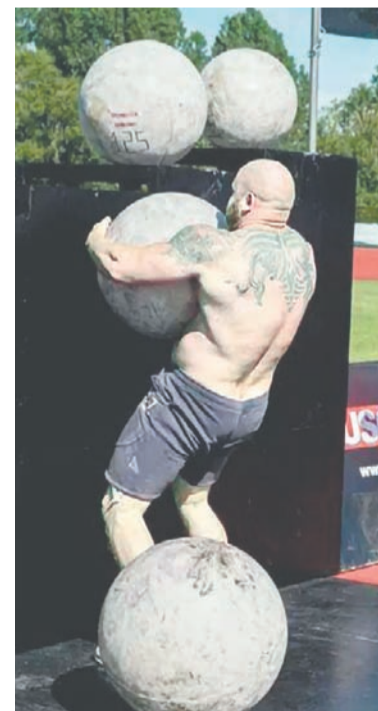
much about God at all. I thought He was cruel and Jesus was just some kind of nice guy.

"I knew I had to change — I wanted to change — but I was kind of straddling the Christian life and the old life. But God was so gracious; He was so patient. He gave me grace [undeserved love]. He is a loving father, the best Father ever.

"I can genuinely say today that on reflection the day of the accident was the best day of my life, though not at the time, of course. But it was when I realised that all these things that you've spent so much time and effort on can be taken away from you in an instant.

"God has given me the purpose and meaning I've always looked for."

Right: Phil Roberts doing the Atlas stone lift.



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