



The thief's story

He was the first one to accept the crucified Christ. If he could tell his story...



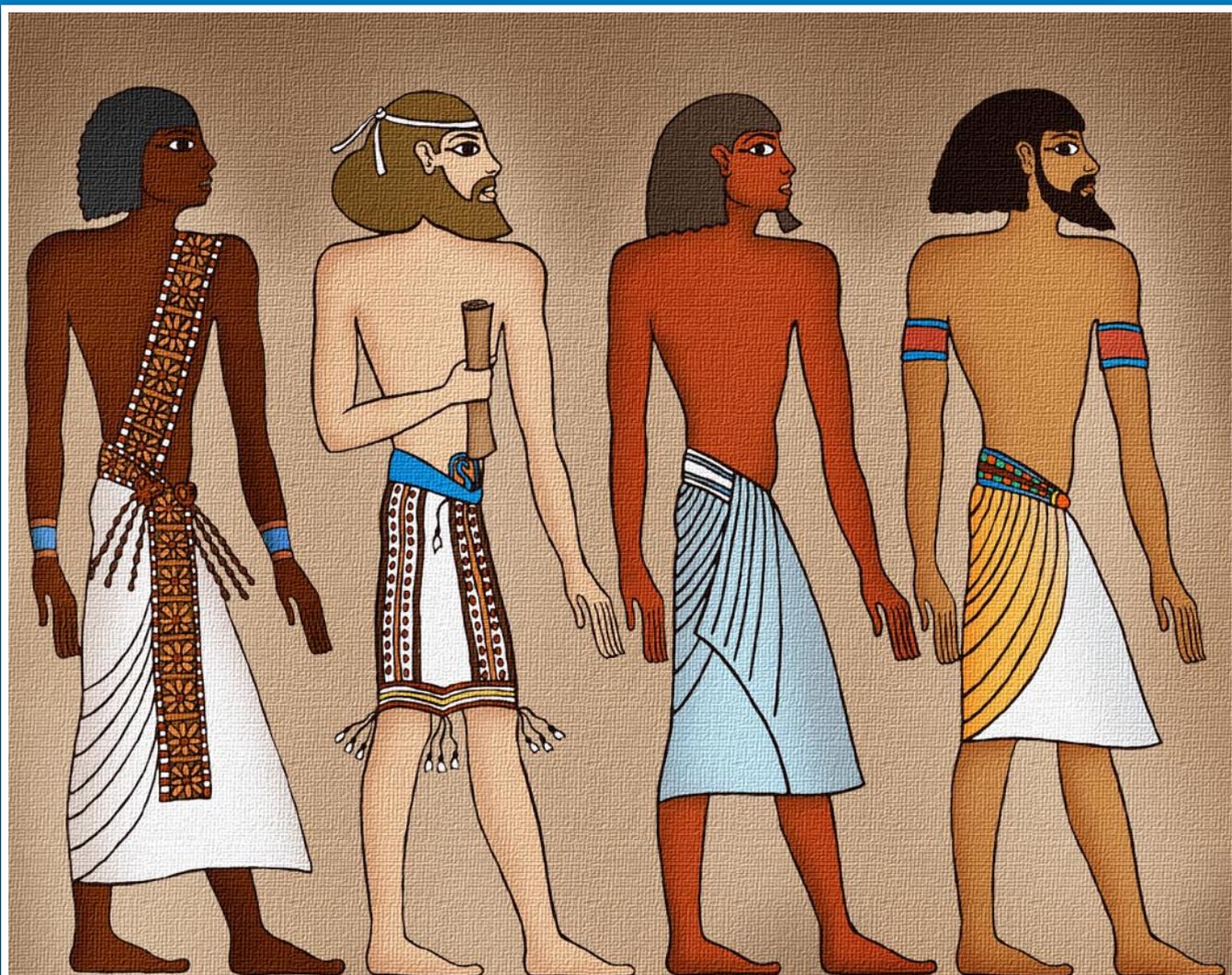
Where are you, Lord?

"I shout at God sometimes, and I know he doesn't mind."

CHRISTIAN Odyssey

April/May 2007

Exploring Life and Faith



IS THE BIBLE JUST A WHITE MAN'S BOOK? 5

Letters to the Editor

I really appreciate the new look. It is much easier to read. Hope it can be permanent. Now if only we can get out of the 14,000 circulation rut.

EN, Missouri

We don't look at it as a "rut" so much as a challenge—and circulation is increasing. Generous donations like yours allow us to steadily increase the circulation even more.

The December-January issue of *Christian Odyssey* was tremendous, as each article was filled with something each one of us could do. I would like to suggest one more thing we could do daily and not cost one red cent. Mr. Thomas Morrell stated: "The first great gift we can bestow on others is

a good example."

JS, email

Do you allow articles to be reprinted? I would like put an article from *Christian Odyssey* into our organization's free newsletter. If you do allow for article reprints, is there anything specific that you require?

UN, email

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Thank you very much for the article of Mr. Paul Kroll on Wilberforce—for relating his accomplishment, which could really inspire us. I hope you could also feature his belief on the Sovereign God, so it could also add to our enlightenment.

EN, Philippines

Letters for this section should be addressed to "Letters to the Editor." Send your letters to Worldwide Church of God, PO Box 5005, Glendora, CA 91740-5005, or by e-mail to john.halford@wgc.org.

The editor reserves the right to use letters so addressed in whole or in part, and to include your name and edit the letter for clarity and space. We welcome your comments.

I've Been Reading...

Forgive and Forget, by Lewis Smedes

Reviewed by Mike Morrison

Lewis Smedes wrote a very practical book on forgiveness. He does not hold out impossible ideals for us or make us feel lousy for our inability to be perfect forgivers. He just explains that it's really for our own good—if we don't forgive, if we let the anger and resentment churn within us, we are letting the offender captivate and control our lives.

It is normal and right to be angry when someone does something to hurt us. But if our anger leads to vengeance and violence, it helps no one. And if it stays within us, it hurts us even more. But if we didn't hurt, there would be nothing to forgive. So the process of forgiveness begins with hurt. And it involves hate when we blame a person for the pain we experienced and we wish that they would experience some pain of their own.

So in an ideal world, we explain to the offender the pain that we experienced and the offender's role in causing that pain; then they feel some of our pain and give credible promises that they will not do it again. Friendship is restored, and we give scarcely a thought to the previous pain.

But, as part 2 of the book notes, this is not an ideal world. Sometimes the person who hurt us is dead or gone; sometimes we do not even know the stranger who got away with murder. There is no way to restore the relationship because there never was one to start with.

Other times, the offender doesn't care about our pain—and may

have even intended to cause it. The person will not repent, or promises to do something worse if given the chance. Some offenders continue to cause harm regardless of whether they are forgiven, and no reconciliation is possible. What do we do with our thwarted desire for justice? Do we let it stew in us, thereby giving the offender even more power to inflict pain? Or can we somehow let it go, give it up to God, and move on with our life?

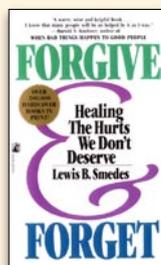
Many people find it difficult to forgive themselves. Perhaps they were repeatedly punished by a parent and somehow feel that they must have deserved it. Some people find it difficult to forgive God for what he did or did not do. Smedes deals with the difficult cases in a practical way.

In part 3, his chapter titles lay out the ways people forgive: slowly; with a little understanding; in confusion; with anger left over; and freely or not at all.

We take a risk when we forgive—a risk that the person may hurt someone again—but we also take a risk when we do not forgive. We can forgive without setting ourselves up for danger, without inviting the person to repeat the bad behavior. For those who have been deeply hurt, who want to forgive and yet find it horribly difficult, this book will help.

"Forgiveness is God's invention for coming to terms with a world in which, despite their best intentions, people are unfair to each other and hurt each other deeply. He began by forgiving us. And he invites us all to forgive each other" (pages xv-xvi). ●

Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve, by Lewis B. Smedes, HarperSanFrancisco, paperback, 176 pages, \$13.95.



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5 Is the Bible just a white man's book?

It is time to expose and bury forever one of history's most damaging and unfair distortions of Scripture.

9 Moving mountains in Appalachia

What makes one small congregation think they can change their city?

11 The thief's story

He was the first one to accept the crucified Christ. If he could tell his story...

16 Lost in New Orleans

A few desperate hours and a lifelong lesson in love.

18 Modern slavery—the unheard cries

Did you think slavery was abolished? Think again.

20 Where are you, Lord?

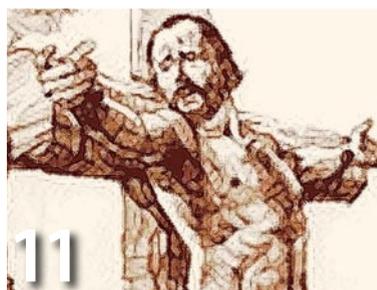
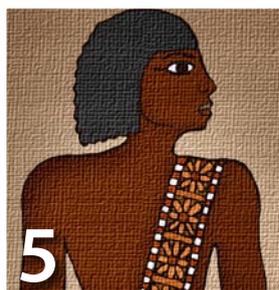
"I shout at God sometimes, and I know he doesn't mind."

21 WWJD?

But what did he do?

Features

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 2 Letters to the Editor | 17 In Other Words |
| 2 I've Been Reading... | 19 Bystander |
| 4 Editorial | 22 Bible Study |
| 8 One Pilgrim's Progress | 24 Hmm... |
| 14 Church History Corner | |



It isn't just about how he died

By John Halford

I didn't see Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" when it first came out, and I still haven't. I don't want to. Hearing that the movie is grisly, sparing us no detail of the crucifixion, is enough for me. People say it leaves an indelible "special effects" impression of how Jesus died. And I wonder if that is really such a good thing.

Crucifixion was a brutal business, and that anyone would deliberately put himself at risk of the cross for others is, of itself, an impressive demonstration of love. But the fact that Jesus was crucified is, to some extent, just a detail. If he had been born a Roman citizen he would have been beheaded. If he had lived in another time or place he could have been hanged, stoned or shot. Today we would have electrocuted him, or strapped him to a gurney for a lethal injection, probably after spending several years on Death Row.

My point is that the graphic details of crucifixion focus primarily on making us feel sorry for Jesus, and therefore on wanting us to feel that we "owe it to him" to accept him after all he went through. That is the effect many people say the movie had on them. But it seems that the emotion it stirred up was temporary. The movie was touted as "the greatest evangelical tool for 2000 years," but it has had a minimal impact on church attendance. So maybe wallowing interminably

(Hebrews 1:2) became human for us and died at all that demonstrates most dramatically the depth and meaning of his sacrifice. For Jesus to face death in any way and in any form was so utterly foreign to all that he is.

"In him was life," John's Gospel tells us. "And that life was the light of us all." C.S. Lewis, in a discussion about what it meant for Jesus to come and live as a human being, wrote: "The Eternal being who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man, but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab" (*Mere Christianity*, chapter 5).

For about 30 years the Creator and Architect of human life shared in its limitations. Then he allowed his life to be ended in a brutal display of cruelty. For three days, the one who was life lay in a cold dark tomb.

I have a friend who has been for many years in a maximum security prison. He has become used to it, and manages to live a productive Christian life. I love and respect my friend, and visit when I can. But the thought of spending even one night in his environment is frightening. It helps me understand just a little bit the sacrifice Jesus made.

I wonder if instead of focusing on the depth of Jesus' sacrifice by remembering *how* he died, perhaps it is the fact *that* he died that underscores the depth of

his love for us. He made our burden his so that he could make his joy ours. He shared our experience, including death, in order to destroy the power of death over us.

Jesus did not ask us to remember his death by dwelling on the grisly details.

Instead, he gave us a simple ceremony. At the end of what we call "The Last Supper," he took some of the leftovers and established the simple ritual that we call communion. "Do it in remembrance of me," he said.

Communion: the word means "to join with." To join with others—a reminder of our commitment to love as we have been loved. To share, serve, tolerate and regard our neighbor's needs as highly as we do our own.

Communion is not an empty religious ritual. Nor is it an outburst of emotion after exposure to some masterfully wrought special effects. Communion is something Christians do again and again. But it should never become routine. Each time we accept the symbols of Jesus' body and blood we commit ourselves to him and to all that he stands for. ●



"The graphic details of crucifixion focus primarily on making us feel sorry for Jesus."

in the blow-by-blow details of Jesus' scourging and crucifixion is not as persuasive as some had hoped.

Besides, Jesus and his Father want us to follow him because he lives, because as one of us he not only died, but was raised from the dead and dwells in the joy of perfect communion with the Father and wants to share that joy and communion with us. He's not looking for your sympathy; he's looking for you to come home to the love of your heavenly Father and your older Brother. That's why he took away our sins—to give us life, to call us home—not to garner our pity.

Maybe it is simply the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, the One through whom all things were made and who upholds all things by the word of his power

Is the Bible just a white man's book?

By Dan Rogers

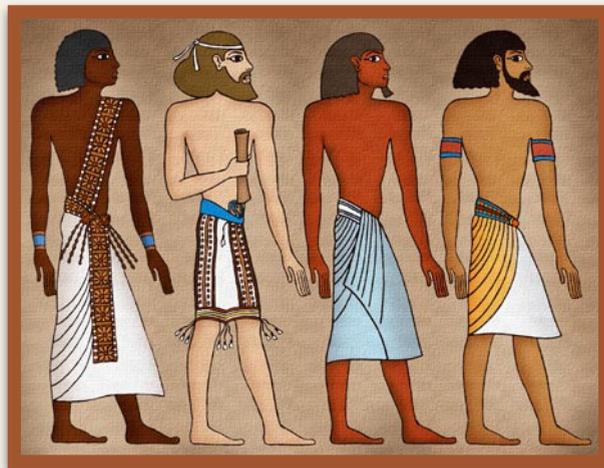
“What an incredibly politically incorrect thing to ask,” I can almost hear some say. “What are you thinking, even considering such a question?” I had better give you a little bit of background.

Back in 1992, I took a class at Emory University in Atlanta called Introduction to the Old Testament. As I read the various required textbooks for the course, I saw something I had not noticed before. Many Old Testament scholars, particularly European scholars of the 18th, 19th and early 20th century had written their books and commentaries on the Old Testament from the perspective that there were no people of color mentioned in the Scriptures.

Puzzled, I began to look into the topic more deeply. I studied intensively for about a year, attending lectures and interviewing scholars. I began to realize that this was a particularly difficult and controversial subject, and it has caused much hurt. Thankfully, times have changed, but some of the wounds remain. So let's look at it, and put to rest once and for all this biased and unfair distortion of the Bible.

Let me apologize in advance for some of the terms that I will need to use as we discuss this topic. They are not the terms we would prefer today, but they are terms that historians, ethnologists and Bible commentators of past centuries, and even the 20th century, have employed to explain their ideas about the origin of blacks. These ideas, steeped in racial prejudice, were alleged to provide a biblical justification for black slavery and the subjugation of black peoples.

When I first read about these concepts, they brought tears to my eyes. As a white person in a predominantly white country, I also began to gain a better understanding of and a greater appreciation for the black experience in the United States.



Is the Bible a book by a white God for white people? Of course not. God is spirit and does not have “color” in our human and earthly sense. There is nothing in the Scriptures to indicate that people are excluded from God's saving grace on the basis of ethnic origin or skin color. God is “not wanting anyone to perish” (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus is the Savior of all peoples. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the majority of European artists and Bible commentators painted and described all biblical characters, including God, as white. This had the effect of excluding blacks from being a part of Scripture and has led some people of color to question the Bible's relevance to them.

“When it comes to the alleged absence of black people, we encounter a web of cruel deceit that makes a mockery of the true biblical record.”

Exclusion was only one side of the problem. Where the presence of blacks in the Bible *was* admitted, primarily among uneducated whites, outrageous myths and fables abounded. This was especially true among white Christians living in the southeastern United States prior to the Civil War. These denigrating tales were believed to support the racist (and unbiblical) notion that the

Bible supported a white subjugation of black people.

What do we mean by “black”?

There are several difficulties surrounding any discussion of this sensitive topic. Some are obvious; others are less so. Not least is the question, what do we mean by “black” people? In America today, we mean African-Americans—those with African ancestry and dark skin color. But is that how the people who lived when the books of the Bible were written would have thought?

There are differences between ancient and modern concepts of what “black” means when it is applied to people. For example, in the table of nations in Genesis 10, the word used to describe the people descended from Ham in the ancient Hebrew, Akkadian and Sumerian languages is related to the color black. But what does this mean? Our traditional understanding of the Old Testament is influenced by the ancient rabbinic method of interpretation, known as *Midrash*. These interpretations sometimes take precedence over the literal meaning of the text being interpreted. They also belong to another time with other socio-economic conditions and concerns. When ancient rabbinic literature mentions black people, does it mean ethnically “Negro” or just people of generally darker skin?

Let me give you a modern example. In a congregation I once pastored were two families with the surnames

ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians picture some people as black in color. But this was a highly stylized art form, and may have nothing to do with their actual skin color.

Some black people are much fairer in skin color than some we classify as “Caucasians.” There are also social and legal definitions, based on the percentage of African or “Negro” blood people have in their ancestry. It was not so long ago that certain states had laws that stated that someone was a “Negro” if the person had even a single black ancestor. Physical appearance did not matter.

These are some of the difficulties of trying to determine if people in the Bible are what today we consider black. It is therefore irresponsible to draw superficial conclusions either for or against a black presence in the Scriptures. But this did not stop scholars and theologians (who surely should have known better) from suggesting that *all* people in the Bible were white, and that the Bible record excludes the Asian and “Negro” races, a conclusion that is not true.

But suppose it were true? What difference would that make? The Bible account focuses on what we now call the Middle East, and in particular the rags-to-riches-to-ruin story of ancient Israel. It is specific to geography and to a historical period. Other people are mentioned as they pertain to the unfolding of that story. So Eskimos (or Inuit) are not included, nor are Koreans. Yet no one seriously believes that they are excluded from the human race.

“The Bible does not focus on skin color as any form of criterion. All have sinned, all have fallen short of the glory of God, and all are recipients of his grace through Jesus Christ.”

Black and White. The Whites were black and the Blacks were white. Mr. Black, who was white, used to talk about his lovely white grandchildren who were Blacks. And Mr. White talked about his lovely black grandchildren who were Whites. Imagine what someone a thousand years from now would think if they read that.

Just because some people are called by a term meaning “black” does not necessarily prove they were what we now call black. Of course, it does not mean that they were *not* “people of color” either. In ancient times, just as folks did in the old frontier societies of our country, people often were given names that reflected their personality, where they were from or their appearance. But names like “Slim,” “Tex,” “Kid,” “Smitty” or “Buffalo” tell you nothing of a person’s ancestry.

Some ancient writers say that the Egyptians and Ethiopians were black. But what do they mean? How “black” were they? Were they merely darker than those doing the writing? The wall paintings and hieroglyphics of the

But when it comes to the alleged absence of black people, we encounter a web of cruel deceit that makes a mockery of the true biblical record. Only when you understand this can you begin to get a glimmer of what it has been like to be black in America.

Several views

Among those who have accepted the presence of black people in the Bible, several different views as to the origin of blacks were postulated. Let’s look at some of these.

The pre-Adamite view argues that blacks, particularly so-called “Negroes,” are not descended from Adam. This view appears to have its origin in the works of such authors as Paracelsus in 1520, Bruno in 1591, Vanini in 1619 and one of the most prolific writers, Peyrère, in 1655. It reached a high level of development with the 19th-century scholar Alexander Winchell in his book, *Preadamites; or a Demonstration of the Existence of Men Before Adam*, published in 1880.

These writers (all of them white), argued that blacks belong to a race created before Adam and from among whom the biblical villain Cain found his wife. Cain, by marrying one of these pre-Adamic peoples, the reasoning goes, became the progenitor of all black people. Therefore, it was rationalized, black people, especially “Negroes,” are not actually human, because they did not descend from Adam but from some pre-Adamic creation, having entered the human race only by intermarriage, and that with a notorious sinner. As non-humans, therefore, they did not have souls, but were merely beasts like any other beast of the field. And since the Bible says God gave humans dominion over the beasts, it was concluded that these soulless creatures exist to do work for the humans.

This preposterous theological premise was preached in churches across the United States, particularly in the Southeast, to reassure people that slavery was not only acceptable, but the very will of God, rooted firmly in a “proper” understanding of the Bible.

The Cainite view argues that Cain was born white, but after his unacceptable sacrifice and the murder of his brother, Abel, he was turned black as punishment and became the progenitor of all black people. According to some of the rabbinic *Midrashim* (in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud), because Cain offered an unacceptable sacrifice, the smoke from this unacceptable sacrifice blew back on him, turned him black and caused all of his children to be born black. In another Talmudic story, a rabbi says that God beat Cain with hail until he turned black. Stories vary, but it became a common Euro-American belief that God cursed and marked Cain by turning him black.

The Noahite (or old Hamite) view can be traced to writings suggested in the Talmud and later adopted by Jewish and Christian interpreters (especially among white southerners in the pre-Civil War United States). In this view, Ham violated God’s supposed prohibition against mating on the ark. Because he could not resist, he was turned black. Yet another teaching was that Ham and/or Canaan were turned black as a result of Noah’s curse in Genesis 9:24-27. In this view, because God cursed Canaan, that curse was to go on all of Canaan’s descendants and the curse was, first, that they would all be turned black, and second, that they would be servants to white people. Again, we see here a blatant attempt to interpret the Bible in a way that justifies the institution of black slavery.

The New Hamite view is a 19th-century view that holds that Hamites were all white rather than black with the possible exception of Cush. (Cush is a Hebrew term that means “black one.”) Scholars, particularly in 19th-century Germany, said that even if Cush were black in color, he must be regarded as a *Caucasoid* black. Why? Because, in their view, Negroes were not within the pur-

view of the writers of the Bible. Even some modern biblical scholars hold this view. For example, Martin Noth, considered to be one of the most respected Old Testament scholars of all time, states on page 263 of his book *The Old Testament World* (Fortress, 1966) that the biblical writers knew nothing of any Negro people.

Understandably, there has been a reaction among black theologians and black people to these ideas. Some have tended toward the opposite extreme, arguing that *everyone* in the Bible was black. Dr. Charles B. Copher, professor of African American Studies at Interdenominational Theological School in Atlanta, says this view is patently outlandish. He believes that this notion is an overreaction that can lead to another kind of extremism.

The Adamite view. The Adamite view is the orthodox Jewish, Christian and Islamic view. It is based (for Christians) on Acts 17:26, which states that God made all people from one original bloodline, or one source. This, we emphasize, is the *only* view that is consistent with the true message of Scripture. Nevertheless, these other hideously distorted ideas have been promulgated, and some still have a degree of influence even today.

So what?

So, where does that leave us? Feeling slightly nauseated, I hope, over the amazing ability we have to delude ourselves and bend the word of God in any direction that suits our purposes.

The overall and surely indisputable message is that God has created us *all* in his image and has included all members of the human race in the saving work of his Son. Nowhere does the Bible give any indications that black people, or any people, whether “of color” or not, are outside the embrace of his love. But the fact remains that people have believed and taught this error, and sadly, it has been a teaching that still affects the way many of us think about each other, and perhaps even ourselves. The Bible does not focus on skin color as any form of criterion. All have sinned, all have fallen short of the glory of God, *and all are recipients of his grace through Jesus Christ.*

But what about the question of whether black people are mentioned in the Bible? Admittedly it is difficult to build a definitive case, based on textual evidence, to prove beyond all doubt that black people are mentioned in its pages. But why should we have to? Let’s turn the question around. There is no evidence whatsoever that black people—or any people for that matter—are excluded from the purview of the writers of the Bible. Let us put the burden of proof on those who would teach otherwise.

The fact is, we do have evidence that some of the people mentioned in the Bible were black. We’ll look at that evidence in part two, which will appear in our next issue. ●

To be continued...

Loaded Bibles and made-up minds

By Mike Feazell

All of us bring our biases, prejudices and preconceived ideas to the Bible, like it or not.

Not long ago, I was listening to a smartly dressed Christian lady seeking recruits in a Sunday School class for a new Bible study program she had helped launch.

"We don't push any agenda," she explained. That sounded good, I thought. It would be nice to study the Bible with people who have nothing to prove, no agenda to push. I kept listening.

"You've probably been in Bible studies where people argue over this biblical interpretation or that biblical interpretation. Well, as you know, that's how heresies get in. So we just study the Bible and don't get into any arguments or controversies over doctrine."

That's a noble approach, I thought. Maybe they agree ahead of time that when a point of disagreement comes up, they will just identify it, move on and focus only on non-controversial issues. I kept listening.

"We just let the Bible lead, and that settles all the arguments and prevents heresy," she explained.

Well, after that, all I could hear was, "There are no cats in America, and the streets are paved with

independent churches, reformed churches and reorganized churches—all split—neatly, or not so neatly, categorized somewhere within mainline Protestantism, mainstream Christianity, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism, et al., and sporting theologies ranging from conservative to liberal to orthodox to neo-orthodox to liberation to natural, et cetera.

So we speak of the Methodist "family" of churches, or the Baptist "family" of churches, or the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Adventist, Reformed or Congregational "families" of churches. There is even a Mennonite "family" of churches. (And we're only talking about North American churches!) And what do all these "families" have in common? You guessed it. They can't get along. They disagree over some point or points that have convinced them that they are the faithful ones, in distinction to the rest of the "family," not to mention in distinction to the rest of Christianity.

The real essentials

We hope, of course, that we all agree on the real essentials of the faith: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins and rose again for our salvation. After that, it gets sticky as to exactly what the essentials

"All of us bring our prejudices and pre-conceived ideas to the Bible. We might do our best to control them, but we cannot entirely eliminate them."

cheese" (from Papa Mouse's song in the animated film, *An American Tail*), because I happen to know that there is no such thing as a Bible study that "just lets the Bible lead." All of us bring our biases, prejudices and pre-conceived ideas to the Bible, like it or not. We might do our best to control them, but we cannot entirely eliminate them, so we do well to at least be aware of them.

Feuding families

There are many things that Christians do not agree about. That is, after all, why there are denominations, sects, non-denominational churches,

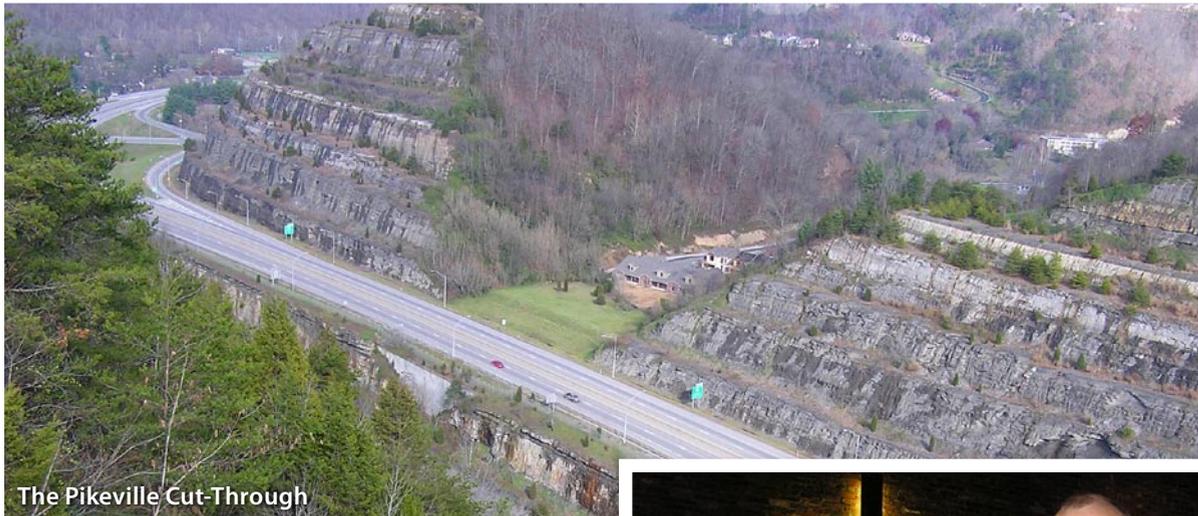
are, and worse, exactly how they should be worded. I'm sure some will take great exception to my wording two sentences back.

In my experience, "We stand on the Bible" is just another way of saying, "We use the Bible to promote and defend our sectarian views." People who want to learn from the Bible don't come together with loaded Bibles and made-up minds. They come together with open hearts and humble spirits, not to argue, but to listen. Regardless of what church family we might be signed up with, we can still learn from one another in healthy, respectful discussion, under the word of God, as loved children in God's family. •



Moving mountains *in Appalachia*

By John Halford



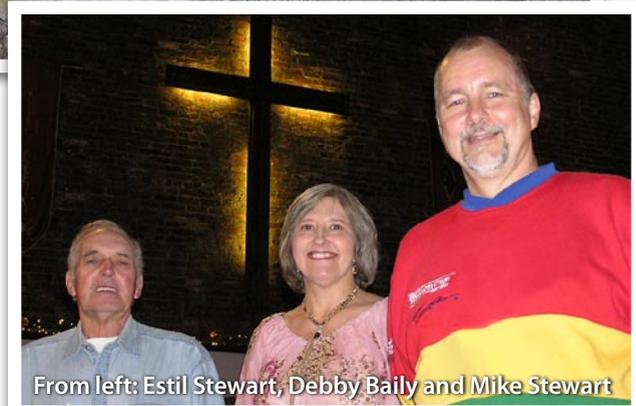
The Pikeville Cut-Through

Pikeville, Kentucky, had a problem. Flat land is scarce in the Appalachians, and this horseshoe-shaped city had to share its narrow valley with the Big Sandy River, three major roads and a railroad. Hemmed in by the mountains, Pikeville was dusty, congested, and susceptible to flooding. With nowhere to go, it was also held back in economic development.

In 1960, a far-sighted local politician, William C. Hambley, decided to do something about it. He reasoned that if the river, the roads and the railroad could be rerouted, Pikeville would have room to breathe. The problem was that Peach Orchard Mountain was in the way. So, through many years of perseverance and influence, Hambley brought more than 20 federal, state and local agencies together in what is one of North America's most spectacular engineering feats—the Pikeville Cut-Through.

The New York Times has called it the eighth wonder of the world. It is more than 1,300 feet wide, 3700 feet long and 573 feet deep. A total of 18 million cubic yards of earth were removed and used as landfill, creating 400 acres of usable land for the city's expansion.

The dust, congestion and flooding are now in the past, and Pikeville was recently listed as one of the 100 Best Small Towns in America.



From left: Estil Stewart, Debby Bailey and Mike Stewart

Moving church mountains

It still has problems, though. This part of Appalachia is plagued by poverty, and many of its people suffer with serious physical and spiritual needs. There are many agencies and churches, but the need is for them to work together to tackle the problems, something government agencies and churches aren't very good at. Pikeville's Grace Fellowship Church is working hard to change that.

Grace Fellowship's pastoral team, Debby Bailey and Mike and Estil Stewart, are dedicated to bringing the city's churches together to serve the community. "Churches must be involved in the community," says Debby. "God wants us to be a church that cares for the community, not just for ourselves.

"In the past we were very legalistic and exclusivist," explains Debby. "We kept to ourselves—and slowly we were dying. Then, along with our entire denomination [The Worldwide Church of God], our eyes were

opened so that we could see God's grace. God transformed us from legalism to a congregation founded on his grace and his love. We are a church that has been shown God's grace and we are a church that shows God's grace." We began to look outward—to how we could share that grace and love with the community.

However, the previous reputation was a barrier that kept many people from believing the church had changed. So they decided to shed the last vestiges of the past and change the name to Grace Fellowship. Prior to that time they had the opportunity to move to the old Weddington Theater in the downtown area. Since the move, the once dwindling congregation has more than doubled in size. "We are the same people we always were," says Estil Stewart. "We just have a new name, a new meeting place and new mission."

Reaching out to youth

One of Grace Fellowship's major accomplishments has been the annual July Jam. In an early attempt at community outreach, Mike and Debby organized a retreat at Pikeville College. Debby remembers that it was successful, but not particularly well-attended. Her husband, Eddie, suggested that perhaps they were aiming at the wrong age group. Pikeville's younger generation needed help.

"I knew at once that he was right," says Debby. She knew some of the local youth pastors. They wanted something for Pikeville's young people, more and more of whom were becoming spiritually lost. And so they began

"We are a church that has been shown God's grace and we are a church that shows God's grace."

to plan a series of free public concerts with a Christian theme, to be held in a local park.

"We knew we could not do this by ourselves. We needed to partner with other local churches," Mike Stewart explained. Grace Fellowship realized they had to tear down the walls that they and other churches had built over the years and begin to work and pray together. That was easier said than done. Getting the various groups to work together was a barrier that was in some ways even more formidable than Peach Orchard Mountain. Churches talk about unity, but they guard their "turf" very carefully. In this part of the world, partisan feelings have especially deep roots, and the divisions often go back a long way. (This is the region of the famous Hatfield-McCoy feud.)

"For a couple of years we felt we were wasting time," Mike remembers. "But we began working with Pikeville United Methodist church to organize the Christian Rock concerts, to be known as July Jam (Jesus Unconditionally Loves You. Just Ask Me!).

"For first couple of years it was just two churches—the Methodist church and ours. We worked hard together. We did not get a whole lot of participation from other groups. But it has grown. Our intention was to reach out to the youth, but what surprised us was the number of families who came."



Today at least nine local churches are working together to make July Jam a success. In 2006, the concert moved to the prestigious 7000+ seat Expo Center and was officially recognized as being the Innovative Project of the Year.

This year, some of the concerts will once again be held in the Expo Center. But Friday evening will consist of local Christian Rock outside in the park.

Pikeville's Grace Fellowship Church shows what can happen when a congregation decides to look at possibilities instead of problems. "I love coming here," one visitor said. "These people are real. There is nothing fake about them."

Members are quick to point out that one of the reasons for their success is the work of the strongly unified ministerial team. Estil and Mike Stewart and Debby Bailey all have a different approach, while working together in cooperation and mutual respect. (Following a change in policy, last January Debby became the first woman in her denomination to be ordained an elder.)

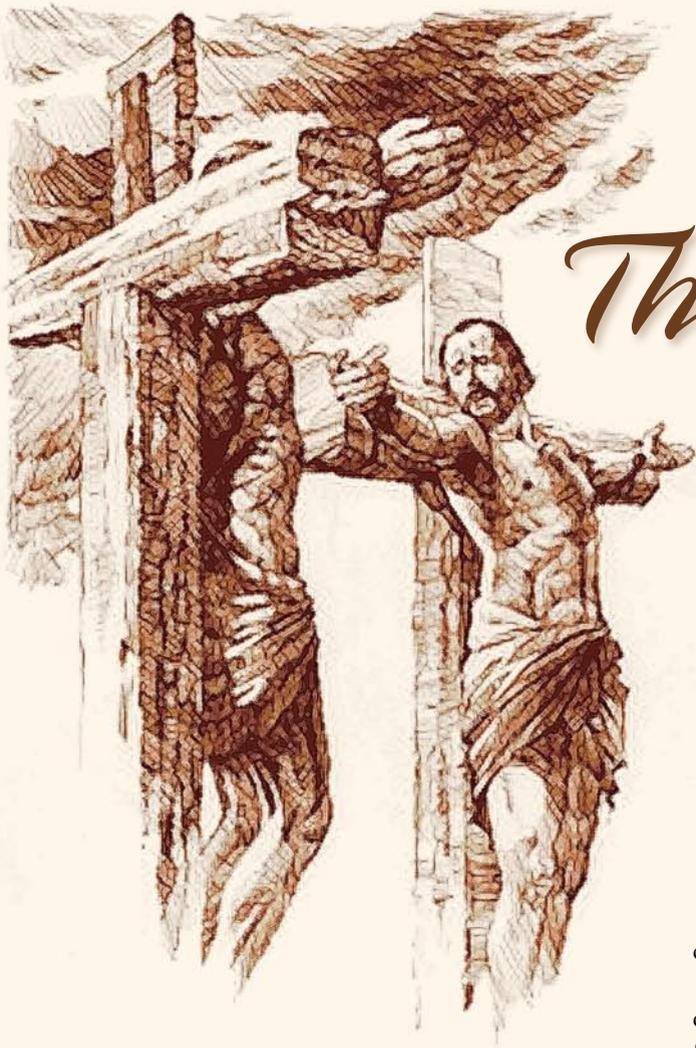
At a time when many small congregations are considering closing their doors, Mike, Estil and Debby have some advice: Don't be sure God's answer is to close the doors. He may want you to stick together as a group. God has placed you in the community for a reason. There is a niche. Don't tell God what it is; ask God to show you what it is. Then get out of the way and see what he brings you. ●

July Jam 2007

July 20 & 21. Friday night, Pikeville City Park;
Saturday Night—Eastern KY Expo Center

Bands expected: Friday night, local bands; Saturday night, Kutless, KJ-52 & Stellar Kart

More information: www.JulyJam.com



The thief's story

"Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left." (Mark 15:27)

By John Halford

could do was tweak the mighty Roman nose occasionally, but Pontius Pilate was afraid of any trouble in Judea, and was determined to crush us.

They caught us just before Passover. It was our fault. Barabbas had led many riots, and we had always gotten away. But perhaps we had become too confident. The Romans brought extra guards to Jerusalem during religious festivals, and we were caught.

They captured two of us along with Barabbas. We did not expect mercy. There was only one punishment for the likes of us—crucifixion. And there would be no delay. Things were always tense in Jerusalem during the Passover season, and the Romans wanted Barabbas out of the way before the festival began.

"We'll have a good crowd for you," the guards had taunted. "They'll all come out to see Barabbas hung up." Then they left us, chained to the wall in the dark to await our fate.

The guards came for Barabbas in the middle of the night. I heard footsteps and then a scraping sound as they unbarred the door to our prison. Several soldiers burst in and seized Barabbas.

"You're a lucky man," said one, unlocking the chain. "The Governor is letting you go." They hauled him to his feet, and kicked him into the corridor.

"Does that mean...?" I asked.

"Not you. You two are still for the cross. We poor soldiers have to do something to earn our keep, don't we?" said the guard. "Don't worry. It will still be a good show. We are going to hang you up with the King of the Jews."

"Herod?"

"No, someone called Jesus of Nazareth, who thinks he is the Messiah."

Our cell was deep in the prison, but we could hear the noise of a riot in the courtyard. People were shouting Barabbas' name. Barabbas must have heard it too, but he said nothing. He did not seem to be afraid. Barabbas never showed fear, not even now, when he was soon to be crucified.

None of us knew his real name. Barabbas meant "son of the father," and the mystery only added to his popularity. He was a thief and a murderer, but he hated the Romans, and he never missed an opportunity to cause them trouble. So, in spite of his crimes, our people thought of him as a hero. Some even followed him.

I was one of them. Life with Barabbas had been exciting. We didn't think of ourselves as criminals. We were patriots, fighting to free our nation from the Romans. We were known as "zealots." All our little band

The door slammed and the cell was again dark. I heard a curse and a rattle of chains as Demas settled back to sleep. He, like Barabbas, seemed resigned to his fate. I knew I would get no more sleep. The last day of my life had begun.

I had heard of Jesus of Nazareth. He was a wandering preacher who talked about the “kingdom of God.” Nothing much seemed to have come of it. Some said he could do miracles. There was even a rumor that he had raised people from the dead. I saw him once. He was talking to a crowd about love and forgiveness. I didn’t take much notice.

He had a small group of followers who believed he would lead them against the Romans. He seemed more concerned with annoying the Pharisees. Jesus seemed to be just another religious fanatic, and the Romans were usually tolerant of the likes of him. So what had he done to get himself crucified?

But a condemned man does not dwell long on such things. I had my own problems to worry about. In a few hours I was going to be crucified—nailed to a cross and left to die.

On the road to Golgotha

The guards came for us in the morning. I had seen people crucified, and I knew what to expect. They would fog us, then parade us through the streets to Golgotha.

Demas was the first to be beaten. He was dragged to a stone pillar in the prison yard, and his hands tied to an

I collapsed, but the soldiers dragged me to my feet. A centurion pointed at two beams of wood leaning against the wall. They were the crosspieces that the condemned had to carry to their execution.

Two soldiers picked up one of the beams and dropped it across my bleeding shoulders. They tied my wrists to the beam so that I could not drop it. It weighed as much as a man, and the rough wood bit into my torn back. Somehow I stayed on my feet as the guards led us out of the prison and into the street.

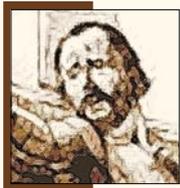
A crowd was already forming. I saw a man, or what had once been a man, surrounded by soldiers. He was bowed under the weight of a beam like ours. I realized it was Jesus of Nazareth.

What had they done to him?

Every part of his body was covered with bruises and cuts, and his eyes were swollen shut. On his head they had placed a crown made from thorn branches. He seemed already half dead as he stood quietly while the crowd jeered and mocked him.

The guards—there were four for each of us—formed up and ordered us to move. Jesus was first. I was behind him, and Demas was last. The guards seemed nervous. If Barabbas had been with us, there might have been a rescue attempt. But surely no one would risk their lives for us. And most of Jesus’ supporters seemed to be women.

Behind me I could hear Demas, defiant to the end, cursing the crowd, the guards, the Emperor, and even God. Had the man no fear? But it was Jesus who was the center



“Jesus showed no bitterness, nor any anger against anyone, not even those who accused him. He surely was a good man—why was God allowing this to happen to him?”

iron ring above his head. Two massive soldiers stood on each side of him, each holding a whip made from strips of leather in which were embedded sharp stones, bits of broken glass and nails. The whips were already soaked in blood—we were not the first to feel them that day.

Demas cursed and screamed as the soldiers began to beat him. Then he fainted, but they did not stop. I thought they would kill him—victims often did not survive the Roman scourge. But the soldiers knew what they were doing. This was only the start of our punishment.

They took down Demas, and tied me in his place. I am not a stranger to pain. I had been in many fights, and my body had scars to prove it. But nothing I had ever suffered prepared me for those first blows. I heard myself scream and the soldier grunted with satisfaction. The other man waited a few seconds—it seemed like hours—then he hit me too. And so it continued until I too fainted. I revived as they were untying me from the pillar.

of attention. As he stumbled along the narrow streets, the spectators mocked him. But he said nothing. He even tried to comfort some of the women who were weeping.

I wondered if perhaps he was out of his mind and had no idea what was happening to him. He seemed to be more like an unsuspecting animal being led out to slaughter than a man being driven to a horrible death.

Jesus had obviously been a strong man, but the beatings must have weakened him. Our miserable progress was halted several times as he fell down under the weight of the crosspiece.

The guards kicked him and screamed at him to get up, but he could go no further. The centurion pointed to a big man in the crowd and ordered him to pick up the crossbeam. The man shrugged, put the heavy wood easily on his shoulder and joined the procession.

Eventually we arrived at Golgotha, where a little way up the hillside there were several poles in the ground.

Crucified

Two guards tore my clothes off and then kicked my legs out from under me. A soldier holding a hammer and a bag of rough nails looked down at me, grinning. He placed a nail over my wrist, and smashed it through my flesh into the wood. I screamed. He quickly nailed my other arm the same way, and then moved across to Demas. Finally they gestured to the man who was still holding Jesus' cross to drop it on the ground. Then they nailed Jesus to his crosspiece. He moaned, but I heard no curses.

One by one the soldiers dragged us over to the upright poles. Jesus in the middle and Demas and I on either side. We pleaded and cursed in fear and pain, but Jesus still said nothing. Using ropes they hauled me up until the crosspieces dropped into a slot in the upright pole, leaving me hanging by my wrists. Then, bending my legs, they smashed another long nail through my ankles and into the wood. Jesus was next, and then Demas. Finally, a guard fixed a board with our names and crimes written on it to the pole above our heads. Mine said simply "robber," but on Jesus' board they had written "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

And so began our last hours in this world.

After the first shock of hanging from my wrists, I fainted. But I came to with a terrible pain in my chest. Hanging from my arms made it impossible to breathe, and I felt myself suffocating. So I pushed myself up on the nail holding my legs, so that I could at least fill my lungs. But soon that pain became unbearable, and I had to sink back down. There was no relief. This would go on, hour after hour, maybe for several days until exhausted, tormented by the heat, thirst and biting insects that were even now feasting on my blood, I would die.

I cursed my fate, the Romans, the guards and the crowd of people who had come to enjoy my suffering. But through my pain, I realized their taunts and insults were not aimed at me. All the attention seemed to be on Jesus. As he hung beside me, twisting and writhing as he fought for breath, his tormentors kept up a stream of insults: "He saved others, but he can't save himself." "If you really are the King of the Jews, come down from the cross and we will believe in you."

Then I heard him say clearly, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." He *was* mad! They *did* know what they were doing—they were killing us in the worst way they knew, and enjoying it. I wanted to see them thrown into the deepest pit of hell—not forgiven.

Some women and one or two men gathered at the foot of his cross did not join in the insults. A middle-aged lady seemed particularly upset, and yet more under control than the others. She was probably his mother, and the young man looking after her was perhaps his brother. Relatives were allowed to attend an execution, if they did not interfere.

None of my relatives had come to see me die. I had been a disappointment to them for years, and they finally disowned me for their own safety when I joined up with Barabbas.

I thought of my own mother. She was a good, God-fearing woman, and it wasn't her fault that I had chosen a life of crime. She had done her best to teach me our Jewish faith. "Fear God, my son," she told me long ago, "and when you die you will live forever in paradise." But to a young man, paradise seemed a long way off, and I had chosen the excitement of a life with a gang of thieves. We justified our crimes by claiming we were fighting for the liberation of our homeland. Now we were paying for it, hung up to die with this failed "King of the Jews" who had claimed he could save Israel, but couldn't even save himself.

Demas, hanging on the other side of Jesus, was cursing him. I began to do it too—Jesus' calmness was infuriating. He was suffering as much as we were. Why not show it, instead of "forgiving" people for doing this to us? Who did he think he was?

Who did he think he was? He was accused of being the King of the Jews, the Messiah, and the Son of God. The religious leaders who had come to watch him die were particularly happy to see him powerless. Why? What threat was he to them? In his preaching he often exposed their hypocrisy. But they had won—and he was being crucified. And he seemed almost at peace, although he was, like us, in agony, struggling for every breath. Yet he showed no bitterness, nor any anger against anyone—the crowd, the soldiers or even the leaders who had accused him. He surely was a good man—why was God allowing this to happen to him?

The rescue

The taunts of the crowd provoked another outburst of anger from Demas: "If you were the Messiah you could get us down from here."

You fool, I thought. Leave him alone. In a few hours we would all be facing the judgment of God. At least Jesus knew God. He had called him "Father" when he asked forgiveness for those who had nailed him to the cross. We might need his help if we were to escape hell. Maybe he could ask God to forgive us, too.

I called across to Demas: "Don't you fear God? We are getting what we deserve. He has done nothing wrong." My words only provoked more blasphemy and scorn from Demas. But Jesus suddenly raised his head, and looked directly at me. Although his face was covered with bruises and blood, I saw a look in his eyes. What was it?

Gratitude for a kind word? No, it wasn't that. Sorrow that he was a failed Messiah who could not help

Continued on page 15

Augustine

“Father” of the Western Church

By Paul Kroll

Augustine (354-430) has been called the most significant Christian theologian “since New Testament times.”¹ He was born Augustinus Aurelius in the North African town of Tagaste, in today’s Algeria.

His pagan father, Patricius, was a Roman official and his mother, Monica, was a devout Christian. They sent their brilliant son to a prestigious school in Carthage at age 17, where he studied rhetoric. The teenage Augustine took a young woman as a concubine, whom he kept for 15 years. She bore a son, Adeodatus, “given by God.”

Dabbling in philosophy

Augustine adopted Persian Manichaeism when he was 19. The philosophy failed to answer his nagging question about why evil exists, so he cast it aside after nine years.

At age 29, Augustine decided to move to Rome. His mother, Monica, vexed by his lifestyle and interest in pagan philosophies, determined to chaperone him. He eluded her, sailing away secretly.

Augustine won a position as professor of rhetoric at Milan’s imperial court. He dabbled in the skeptical philosophy of the Academics and then adopted Neoplatonism around age 32, which would infuse itself into his theology.²

Augustine’s mother caught up with him at Mi-

Conversion and baptism

Augustine’s conversion occurred in the summer of 386. In his *Confessions* he describes his tearful prayer in a Milan garden setting, beseeching God to purify his unclean thoughts and habits:

“I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or a girl—I know not which—coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, ‘Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it.’”⁴

Augustine ran to the bench where he had left the book of Romans. “I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eye first fell: ‘Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof’ [Rom. 13:13].”⁵ Augustine explains that when he read the passage “there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.”⁶

After prebaptism study and counseling, the 33-year-old Augustine and his son were baptized by Bishop Ambrose on Easter evening, April 24, 387. He mentions this baptism in a meaningful sentence in his *Confessions*, “And we were baptized, and anxiety for our past life vanished from us.”⁷ He progressively left his old life, his career in rhetoric and his concubine partner.⁸

Soon after his baptism, Augustine was struck with a double tragedy. His devoted mother died unexpectedly and so did his precious teen-age son, Adeodatus.

After a period of deep grief, Augustine sailed

for North Africa in August 388. He hoped to live an ascetic and contemplative life studying the Scriptures and writing theological expositions. His expectation was quickly dashed. While attending church at Hippo in 391, he was put on the spot by Bishop Valerius, who openly prayed that “someone”—think Augustine!—would come to shepherd the congregation.

Augustine was virtually drafted into the priesthood by bishop and laity and ordained in 391. Four years later, at age 42, he was ordained co-bishop of

“there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.”

lan, imploring him to attend the congregation of the illustrious Bishop Ambrose (340-397). Dutifully, Augustine acquiesced. Ambrose was able to decisively answer Augustine’s objections about the Bible and the Christian faith.

Augustine now began an ambivalent struggle against his fleshly pulls. This conflict is poignantly summarized in his plea to the Lord in his retrospective spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, “Give me chastity and continency, only not yet.”³



Hippo. The elderly Valerius soon passed away and Augustine became full bishop.

He would also continue to write extensively throughout his life. Augustine authored more than 100 major Christian treatises, 200 letters and 400 sermons, covering important areas of Western Christian theology. Luther, Calvin and Roman Catholic theologians each appealed to Augustine's writings during the Protestant Reformation, leading to his being thought of as the "forerunner of the Reformation."⁹

For more than four decades Augustine wrote, combated heresies and dealt with church and pastoral problems. He died on August 28, 430 as the Vandal siege of Hippo was in its third month. ●

¹Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (HarperCollins, 1984), pages 216, 212.

²Some theologians, Karl Barth and Thomas Torrance in particular, believe the influence of Platonic dualism is a major structural fault in Augustine's theology. Torrance says he heard Barth go so

far as to refer to his theology as *süses Gift!*—"sweet poison" in German! On the other hand, Torrance speaks of Augustine's *De Trinitate* as among a class of "supremely great" works of Christian theology. See *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, Thomas F. Torrance, pages 4-7, 122, 138, 156, 172, 185, 189, 194, 197.

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by E. B. Pusey, in <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/Pusey/book08>.

⁴ William C. Placher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, page 105, "The Confessions," Bk. 8, Chap. 12.29.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by E. B. Pusey, in <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/Pusey/book09>.

⁸ At this time Augustine betrothed himself to a young girl at his mother's encouragement, but his affianced bride was too young for marriage. He then took another concubine for a short time.

⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, pages 1017-18, 1020.

Thief...

Continued from page 13

me? No, it wasn't that either. It was a look of—I can only describe it as compassion, confidence and authority. It was the way my father used to look at me when, as a child I expected punishment, but found forgiveness and acceptance. This was no madman who had lost his mind. Although he seemed to be as helpless as we were, Jesus' look showed me that he was in control. And even though he was sharing my fate, he seemed to be reaching out to me.

What was he trying to tell me? Jesus was not afraid to die. But then, he could look forward to the approval of God when this torture was over. And then I understood.

He was offering to help me. This man who asked God to forgive his torturers would ask for forgiveness for me too. And somehow, I knew I could trust him.

I heard myself say, "Jesus, will you remember me when you come into your kingdom?"

He tried to smile, and although his voice was hoarse, and he had to struggle to get out each word, he said clearly: "I tell you the truth. Today you will be with me in paradise."

We tried to smile at each other—and I knew at that moment that I was going to be all right. Although every muscle and joint in my body was still racked with pain, and every breath was torture, I was not afraid anymore.

The end

I don't remember much of the next few hours. It became harder and harder to breathe. The day became

very dark, like when the sandstorms came in from the desert. Most of the crowd went home.

Jesus died first. I heard him cry out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Demas was mostly quiet now, but he still found energy to blaspheme and curse the guards, so I knew he was not dead.

The end, when it came, came quickly. The guards decided not to leave us hanging on the crosses during the Passover night. So as dusk approached, they found a board to use as a club to break our legs.

I saw the guard hit Demas just below his knees, and heard the bones break. The guard then looked up at Jesus, and saw he was dead. He stabbed him with his spear to make sure, and blood and water gushed out. Then he came to me. I felt my bones break, and then I could no longer push myself up on my legs to breathe.

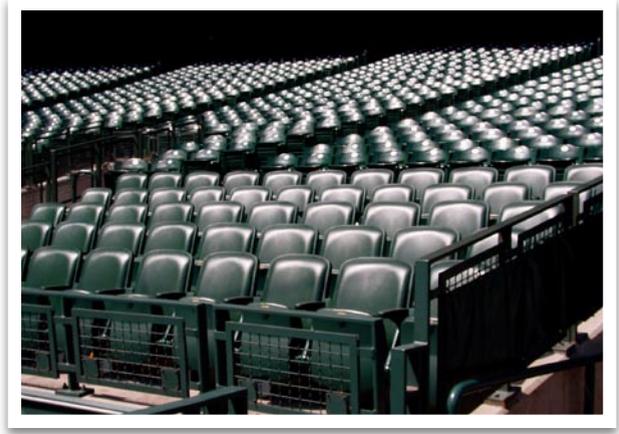
It would not be long now. I raised my head to look for the last time at the city that had been my home, with its wall and the temple. I turned and looked across at the body of the man on the cross beside me. I tried to remember what he had said just before he died: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." I tried to say that too. And as I felt life slipping away, I knew that whatever came next, I was going to be safe. ●

Author's note: In trying to tell the story of the crucifixion from the point of view of the repentant thief, I have side-stepped many issues that have preoccupied theologians for centuries. They are genuine questions, and worthy of discussion. But let's not allow them to obscure the lesson of the story of the first human being to look to the crucified Jesus for salvation. You don't have to be good enough. You don't have anything to offer. You don't have to qualify. You just have to trust him to forgive and to save.

Lost in *New Orleans*

By C. Baxter Kruger, Ph.D.

When I was 12 years old, my parents took me and my two brothers and my best friend to New Orleans to see the Minnesota Vikings play the Saints. Being from a small town in south Mississippi, I considered the chance to go to New Orleans a great treat in itself. But given that the Vikings were my all-time favorite football team, this trip was one of the highlights of my youth. The three hours it took to drive to New Orleans seemed to me an eternal day. But we finally got there, and my dad parked the car. We took a trolley to the old Tulane stadium. It was a magnificent afternoon, and the game was everything I had dreamed it would be, including a Viking rout.



Twelve years old, New Orleans, Tulane Stadium, and it was getting dark. I was a long way from being street-smart, but I knew to the roots of my soul that I was in trouble. At some point it dawned on me to find a policeman, but there were none. I could not find another person, let alone a policeman, and I walked around that entire stadium at least three times.

“As I sat there, lost and alone, my 12 years of life flashing before my eyes, the stadium lights suddenly went off!”

After the game, we were walking down the exit ramp when I looked over the rail and saw three busses lined up, and I recognized the huge men boarding the busses as the Viking players themselves. Without thinking, I ran down the ramp and somehow made my way to the players. I actually shook hands with Carl Eller and was inches away from Alan Page and Wally Hilgenberg. And I got to touch Coach Bud Grant's hat. Needless to say, I was in heaven.

Then one by one, the busses began to drive away. I remember watching them roll alongside the stadium and turn left, out of sight. When the last bus was gone, I looked around and there was not another person in sight, not one. The greatest of all fears seized my little heart. I suddenly realized that I had no idea where my parents were, and worse, that they had no idea where I was. Sheer panic gripped me. I did not have a clue as to what to do. My heart was racing so fast I could not even think.

By this time I was frantic and crying my eyes out. There were plenty of houses around, but I was not about to go to one for help. The only thing I knew to do was to try to find my way back to the car. I thought of the trolley that we had taken to the stadium, but which one? North and south were meaningless to me on the streets of New Orleans, and I had no idea which direction to go anyway. I did not even remember any street names. But I had some money in my pocket, so I found a trolley car and got on and told the driver that I was lost. He told me to get in the back of the trolley and keep my eyes peeled, and if I saw anything, to pull the cable and he would stop.

As the trolley made its way around New Orleans, I jumped from one side to the other, pressing my face against the cold windows, hoping, just hoping, that I would see something that I recognized—a tree, a building, a street, a parked car, who knows—maybe even my parents. But it did not happen. I rode that car all the way around its circuit until it got back to the stadium. Not knowing what else to do, I got off and walked around the stadium all the way back to where the busses had been. Alone and scared to death, I sat down under an oak tree in a pile of leaves. I remember

fiddling with a stick and crying, but there were no more tears. It was pitiful.

But things got worse. As I sat there, my 12 years of life flashing before my eyes, the stadium lights suddenly went off. I have never experienced darkness like that. Nearly 30 years later, I can still see the darting, haunting shadows of that place and still smell the concrete and hear the leaves rustling in the cold wind. I don't know how long I sat there, but it seemed like hours, certainly longer than the eternal ride to the stadium. It was so dark. I was so alone and cold.

And then suddenly, the stadium lights came on, and before I knew what was happening, I was on my feet running around the stadium. Someone had to have turned the lights on, and I was determined with the fire of the universe to find that someone. And then it happened. Over the noise of my footsteps and the pounding of my fears, I heard the most blessed sound in all of New Orleans, the most blessed sound I had ever heard in my life. One shouted word.

"Baxter!" It was my father.

No one had to tell me what to do. No one had to tell me what that word meant. No one had to tell me how to apply the word to my life. My name, shouted by my father, spoke the hope of a thousand volumes. As with a great geyser in Yellowstone National Park, the unbearable tension was instantly relieved. The overwhelming fear, the frantic searching took a left turn like the busses and were gone. And in their place arose the simplest and most

wonderful of all things: security, assurance, rest.

This story is a living picture of how Christianity works. It is not about rules and regulations or frantically trying to save ourselves. Christianity is about being found. The Christian life is about hearing Jesus' Father speak our names, because in hearing him speak our names, we experience something that we could never create or maintain for ourselves—unearthly assurance.

The question is, Why is it so hard for us to hear Jesus' Father call our names? After all, he's been speaking to us all our lives, and nothing thrills the Father more than to see us live our lives out of this baptism of unearthly assurance. The problem, as you might imagine, is on our end; it has to do with our own mindset. But more on our fallen minds next issue. For now, here is a prayer for us:

Lord Jesus Christ, beloved, eternal and faithful Son of the Father, share your own ears with me. Give me your eyes, your mind, your fellowship with your Father, that I may know him with you and live and work and play in the freedom of the Holy Spirit. •



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In Other Words

Now wash your hands

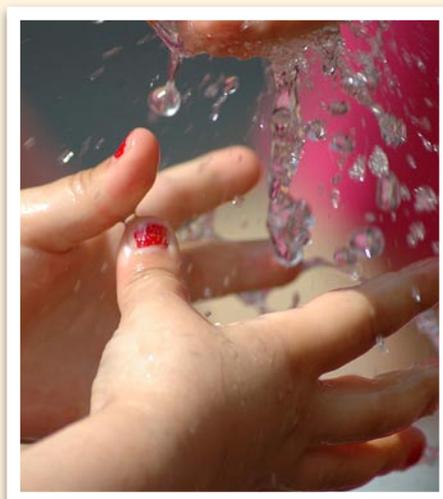
By James R. Henderson

Do you lend a helping hand? Togetherness is a strong tradition in African society. The idea is that no one stands alone, uninvolved and isolated from others.

The Xhosa tribe of South Africa has a proverb that illustrates the tradition. It is, "Izandla ziyahlambana," which means "the hands wash each other."

Have you ever tried to let your right hand wash itself without the assistance of the left hand? It's hard, isn't it? Our hands are designed to wash each other.

Taking care of each other is a foundational Christian value. We are to "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).



It's easier said than done.

In today's selfish world, it seems that we are far more concerned about what others can do for us than we are about what we can do for others. The idea of sacrificing our time or effort for someone else seems terribly old fashioned; yet Christ teaches us that we should serve others as he serves us.

Next time you wash your hands, and you see your right hand wash your left and vice versa, why not pause for a second and let this action, which seems second nature to us, remind you of your Christian values. "Dear friends, since God

so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11).

Modern Slavery

The Unheard Cries

By Curtis May and Neil Earle

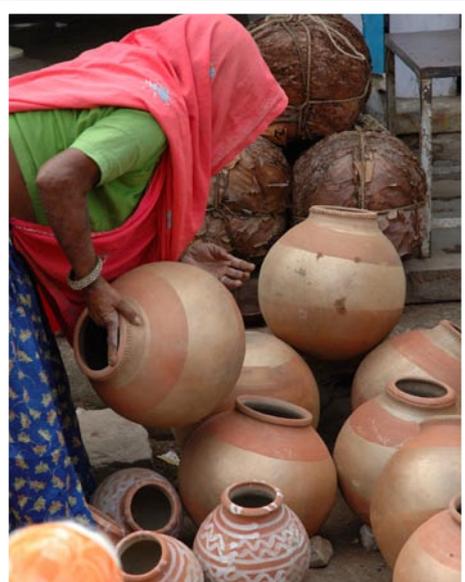
Mention the word “slavery” and what comes to mind? Probably Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Or perhaps the long struggle of men and women such as William Wilberforce to end Britain’s transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

Unfortunately, the systematic abuse of human persons bought and sold for the profits of their service—legal and otherwise—is still very much with us. Consider these facts:

“I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors.”

- There are 27 million human beings trapped in some form of human trafficking or cruel and abusive labor practices today, half of them children under the age of 18.
- 800,000 human beings are bought, sold or forced across international boundaries for exploitative purposes every year.
- Unscrupulous child labor “employers” abuse an estimated 126 million children around the world.
- In the United States, attorneys from the Department of Justice have prosecuted “slave trade” activities in 91 cities and in nearly every state.
- Between 1998 and 2000, more than 50,000 women and children from Latvia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Thailand, China, Russia and Mexico were brought into the United States to work as sex slaves.¹

These shocking facts fly in the face of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery. Slavery has morphed, learning to fly under the radar, but the misery it creates is unchanged.



People in poor or war-torn countries are often lured with fake visas and passes into a foreign country by an unscrupulous “employer” who controls them through propaganda, mental or physical abuse or the threat of being handed over to the authorities.

Modern slaves are not invisible. They could be as close as the back room of your favorite restaurant or the construction site you pass every day.

In August 1995, Californians were shocked to learn of 72 garment workers held for seven years in a roach-infested apartment complex behind a wire fence in a thriving suburb of metropolitan Los Angeles. The workers, mostly women from Thailand, were promised high-paying sewing jobs in the United States. On arrival their passports were confiscated and they were forced to work 16-hour shifts for 70 cents an hour in a suburban garage with no ventilation and behind shuttered windows. The slaveholders established a commissary where a bar of soap sold for \$20 and a bag of rice for \$10. There was seemingly no escape.

New definitions/old problems

Thanks to an alert citizenry, the Southern California case made the headlines and became a case study in modern slavery—working under mental or physical threats and/or abuse, dehumanization, physical constraint and restriction. Today “bonded labor” is quite common in the twilight zone of human misery. This refers to hapless individuals being conned into taking loans, perhaps to pay for medicine for a sick child. People sign on to pay the debt and never get out of servitude for the price of food and shelter. David Batstone estimates there are at least 15 million bonded slaves in

Martha

By Joyce Catherwood

(Luke 10:38-42; John 12:1-7)

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

The world refugee crisis has made the problem worse. European Union agents find themselves awash in the flood of 120,000 women and children trafficked from Africa or the former Soviet Union. Ninety percent end up coerced into Europe's proliferating sex industry. Handsome profits are made from unpaid servitude, perhaps as much as \$9.5 billion each year.

It is reminiscent of the words of Ecclesiastes: "I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive" (Ecclesiastes 4:1-2).

Get involved

The good news is that concerned voices—Christian and otherwise—are beginning to rise up against these abuses. Modern-day abolitionists have been active in everything from starting micro-enterprises to creating sustainable jobs for ex-slaves or discreetly researching overseas projects connected to their companies, suppliers or subcontractors. Some businesses have been persuaded by anti-slavery advocates to formally pledge zero tolerance for human trafficking and to enhance or institute anti-slavery laws.

David Arkless of *Manpower*, the world's largest private employer, is one of them. He was so shocked by the extent of modern-day exploitation that he launched a one-man campaign to get the world's top corporations to sign the Athens Declaration against human trafficking.

To get started in this humanitarian outreach, contact www.antislavery.org, the world's oldest international human rights organization. Christian groups involved include the Salvation Army (www.salvationarmy.org), Sojourners (www.sojo.net) and various agencies of World Vision (www.worldvision.org).

With the help of these and other groups, Christians can organize, advertise the problem, set up a booth in the back of the church, write letters, and make some noise in their communities.

Sometimes we read history and sometimes we are called on to make history. Our choices will be noted by future generations, just as Christians today are inspired by the Wilberforces and abolitionists who went before them. The words of Christ are a call to action: "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). May we answer the call! ●

¹ **Sources:** David Batstone, *Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade and How We Can Fight It*; Kevin Bales, *Disposable People*; John McKay et al., *A History of World Societies: Volume B*, pages 610-611.

Mary was really beginning to get on my nerves. There was so much to do. I had invited Jesus to our home and was in the middle of preparing an elaborate meal. But my sister was not the least bit interested in helping me. Instead, as usual, Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, with all the men, listening intently to everything he said. I thought, what if I did that too? Who would prepare the meal? Who would see that everyone was served? Who would see to the needs of the guests?

I was tired, and I could barely keep up with everything that needed to be done. I'd been at the market at dawn, purchasing the freshest meat and produce and searching for special spices. Nothing was too good for our beloved friend. Now, as I hurried around making sure everything would be ready at the appropriate time, I grew more and more irritated with Mary. Finally, I couldn't hold it in any longer.

I marched into the courtyard where Jesus and the others sat in the shade of our olive tree and blurted out, "Lord, don't you care that this sister of mine has been leaving me to serve alone? Tell her to help me!" I gave Mary a hard look and then turned back to Jesus, hoping he'd set her straight.

As I look back on it now, I realize Jesus had every reason to react negatively to my curt interruption and snippy attitude. But he didn't. Instead he said in his soothing voice, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about so many things, but only one thing is worth being concerned about; Mary has chosen it and it shouldn't be taken away from her."

I was so embarrassed, but not by Jesus' discreet response. No, I had managed to humiliate myself by my own impetuous and inconsiderate outburst. As I held back the tears stinging my eyes, I knew that Jesus cared deeply about me, and that he more than appreciated my hard work.

I suppose I was jealous of Mary. She always seemed to reach out with her heart, and people sensed her love and knew she cared. For me it was different. People appreciated my hospitality and fine meals, but it was always hard for me to stop and give people my undivided attention, my personal time.

Only a few days before Jesus' arrest, I prepared another special meal for him. I didn't know he would soon die, so I was surprised when Mary unabashedly honored Jesus by anointing his feet with expensive perfume. And yes, she did interrupt my carefully planned meal. But at least this time I did something right by holding my tongue. Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, said something about it, but Jesus told him to leave Mary alone and praised her for doing such a beautiful thing.

I think Mary intuitively sensed Jesus' death was near, and that he needed honor and reassurance from his friends. If, like Mary, I had been quietly listening to Jesus during his visits to our home instead of always thinking the meal was the highest priority, I might also have understood what Mary understood.

Later, as details emerged of his cruel and brutal crucifixion, and then of his glorious resurrection and ascension, I was sorry that I had not understood sooner what Mary had understood all along—that knowing Jesus was the one thing worth being concerned about. Now, like Mary, I have chosen it too. ●

Where are you Lord?

By Michael Houghton

I had words with God this morning.

Not the usual kind of words. These were blunt, direct words.

I was not happy with the way things were going, and finally, after several years, I had to ask God whether he had a plan in mind for me or not.

I was standing in the shower, well, actually in the bathtub under the showerhead. I was not feeling very well. I had been able to turn off the water without falling, but I was not sure I could step over the edge of the tub to the floor and still remain upright. Since being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease a few years back, I have fallen frequently, and it seems that I am always nursing a sore neck or bruised knee or shoulder.

I looked around at all the hard bathroom surfaces—sink, commode, counter, cupboards, floor. I knew I was probably going to fall again, and I knew it was going to hurt. The frustration of anyone living with a long-term degenerative illness welled up in me like Mount St. Helens, and I blew.

I didn't ask God why I was ill. Instead, I screamed, "What possible glory can there be for you in this?"



“Every time you reach out, Jesus is there with you. And every time a helping hand reaches out to you, it's Jesus behind it.”

I waited, hoping someone would miss me and come to check on me. Then I screamed again. "What in the world is your plan here?"

Almost instantly I thought of the promise Jesus made when he said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Without even thinking of how much more effective a bolt of lightning might be when the target was standing in water and soaking wet, I heard myself shout, "How can I even know you are there?"

It's pretty rare to see the Lord with your own eyes, unless maybe you're one of those guys on television. And how often does God show up and give you a few

words of encouragement, or take your arm and help you out of the tub? And when was the last time Jesus came to your house with food on the day that you were just too tired to get up and spread peanut butter on a piece of bread? Or washed your clothes when you didn't have a ride to the laundromat or the strength to load a washer? Or read you some Scriptures as you drifted off to sleep?

How *can* we know if God is there? How can we know we're not alone in our trials?

Well, I made it out of the tub somehow, but the question continued to haunt me through dinner and into the evening. Suddenly, it began to occur to me that when Jesus fed the five thousand, disciples were there. When he raised Lazarus from the dead, disciples were there. When he healed the lepers and blessed the little children, disciples were there.

My musings were interrupted by my four-year-old granddaughter, who walked over to my rocking chair and laid her sticky cheek on the back of my hand and smiled up at me. When I felt the warmth of her sweet touch, I looked down and she said, "Poppy, I am sorry you are sick." Tears flowed from my eyes, as I realized that Jesus had just answered my question. That's how I know he is there.

He travels with his disciples. Wherever they go, there he is. The hand that sends the card is guided by the Lord. The hands that prepare a casserole and the ones who deliver it are guided by the Lord. The friend who shows up to sit with you and just listen while you vent; he or she is guided by Jesus too. And when my granddaughter smiles, Jesus is bringing his love to me right along with hers.

He travels with you, too. Every time you reach out to those around you, Jesus is there with you, ministering to those who need him. And every time a helping hand reaches out to you, it's Jesus behind it.

Paul wrote in Galatians 6:14, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." We are all Christ to each other when we meet each other in our need.

I still shout at God sometimes, and I know he doesn't mind. But no longer do I have to wonder if he's even there. ●

WWJD?

By Kerry W. Grubb

Two minutes ago I Google-searched the expression “WWJD.” 3.6 seconds later: 805,000 hits!

WWJD, the acronym for “What would Jesus do?” is such a popular saying that it’s become big business. The same search on eBay yields a merchandise mountain consisting of “WWJD” charms, neon lights, wristbands, T-shirts, crocheted bookmarks, towbar cover-plugs, bracelets, necklaces, pendants, key chains, checkbook covers, pocket diapers (yes, you read it correctly!), rings, swap cards, sew-on patches, fridge-magnet construction kits...

It’s amazing the number of clever trinkets we can buy to remind ourselves to ask what Jesus would do, and it’s ironic that so few people have even the foggiest idea what Jesus *would do*—because they have no idea what the Bible tells us he *actually did*.

In the developed world, it seems, we are awash in “things.” Renowned author Eugene Peterson wrote:

“Our culture has failed precisely because it is a secular culture. A secular culture is a culture reduced to thing and function. Typically at the outset, people are delighted to find themselves living in such a culture. It is wonderful to have all these things coming our way without having to worry about their nature or purpose. And it is wonderful to have this incredible freedom to do so much, without bothering about relationships or meaning. But after a few years of this, our delight diminishes as we find ourselves lonely among the things and bored with our freedom.

“Our first response is to get more of what brought us delight in the first place: acquire more things, generate more activity. Get more. Do more. After a few years of this, we are genuinely puzzled that we are not any better” (*Subversive Spirituality*).

With so many distractions and sensory impressions bombarding us, perhaps we do need reminders at every turn to ask “What would Jesus do?” However, without intending disrespect to WWJD merchandisers, it’s a pity that our culture so readily reduces the profound to the profane: the weighty to the trivial. Even the

question itself has succumbed to the marketing and sales culture of “things” with the letters WWJD neatly emblazoned so as to readily attract Christian coins into hungry cash registers.

Whether you wear the wristband, stick a magnet on the fridge or carry the pocket diaper is not really the point, is it?

Not every situation in our 21st-century culture has a precise biblical precedent. Like it or not, there are countless circumstances in which we have to work out for ourselves “What would Jesus do?” The best way to do that is to get to know him, to become familiar with what Jesus *did* do—to understand what his relationship was, is, and continues to be with our Father in heaven. We need to get to know Jesus better by walking with him, talking with him, and spending time learning about him in the Scriptures as we put into practice what he taught.

If we want to declare our affinity with Jesus with a bracelet or a pendant, no problem!

But the most valid demonstration that Jesus Christ is the center of our lives is not popping a WWJD magnet on the fridge, it’s handing our lives over to Jesus so he can live in us. If we’re serious pilgrims walking with God, Jesus Christ is our functional Lord and Master all day, every day. What he says goes. What he *said* still goes. The serious Christian has a serious commitment to knowing him, learning about him, understanding his teachings, and trusting him to be Savior and Lord in everything.

“Take up your cross and follow me,” Jesus beckons. You know, really, it’s not so much “What Would Jesus Do?” as “Who *is* Jesus?” and “What *did* Jesus do?” He is the Son of God, and he did everything that needed to be done so you could stand blameless before him as a beloved child. A thousand wristbands and closet full of T-shirts can’t compare with even one precious moment with a dear friend, and there is no friend dearer than Jesus.

That’s why we need to get to know him. The better we know him, the more we’ll trust him, and the more we trust him, the more we’ll let him live in us. And that’s what Jesus wanted to do all along.



KerryGubb is an Accredited Training Practitioner and certified Human Resources Professional with the Australian Institute of Training and Development and serves on the board of the Vocational Education and Training Industry Group (Australia).

Victory on the cross

A study of Colossians 2:8–21

By Mike Morrison

Paul warns the believers in Colosse: **See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (2:8).** The Colossians probably knew what Paul was talking about, but it is difficult for us to be sure.

From what he says in verses 21-23, the “philosophy” taught a variety of restrictive rules, or self-abasement. Verses 11 and 16 suggest that it included Jewish customs such as circumcision and sabbaths. In Gal. 4:3, Paul uses “basic principles of the world” to refer to Judaism. The Jewish historian Josephus uses the word “philosophy” to refer to different schools of Jewish thought.

In several cities, Paul struggled against people who tried to mix Jewish ideas into Christianity, and it is likely that this was also going on in Colosse. People had added human traditions to Judaism (Mark 7:8), and were trying to add them to the gospel. Paul is

- **having been buried with him in baptism**
- **and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (2:11-12).**

Our baptism indicates that we were buried with him (Romans 6:3-4); our faith in God unites us with his resurrection; and with a repentant life, we fulfill the symbolic meaning of circumcision. Through Christ, we have the spiritual status of being circumcised. It is done *in him* and *by him* because of our union *with him*.

Enemies are defeated

Paul tells us what we were apart from Christ: **When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature... God solved this twin problem: He made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins (Colossians 2:13).** When we followed the desires of our flesh, we were spiritually dead and cut off from God—but in Christ, the sins

that separated us have been forgiven, and because they are gone, we live with Christ.

In verse 14, Paul describes this forgiveness: **having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was**

against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. “Written code” comes from the Greek word *cheirographon*, which often refers to a note of indebtedness. We are forgiven and given life because our debts (our sins) were cancelled by Christ. They were transferred to him on the cross, and paid in full.

The forgiveness we have in Christ is a strategic victory for us: **And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (2:15).** Here Paul refers to the parades that victorious generals had—after disarming their enemies, they would take many of the conquered people as slaves, displaying them as booty from the conquest (see photo).

To most observers, it would seem that any crucified person had been conquered and publicly humiliated. Paul reverses that image, proclaiming that Jesus was the one who really won the battle. Because his death freed us from our debts, the “powers and authorities” lost the power they had over us. We owe them nothing,



“We are forgiven and given life because our sins were transferred to Christ on the cross, and paid in full.”

telling the Colossians that they shouldn’t fall for it. It might sound good on the outside, but it is empty on the inside.

Christians have something far better: **For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (4:9).** Christ is fully divine, and he has (present tense) a human body. Through his incarnation, Jesus has brought humanity into the presence of God, into the life of the triune God. Jesus is not a halfway point on a pathway to God—he is all that we could ever hope for.

It is not only Christ, but we also **have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority (2:10).** Our salvation is complete in Christ. When we are in him, we are brought into divine life. We do not need anything else.

Paul explains how thoroughly we participate in Christ:

- **In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,**



The Arch of Titus in Rome commemorates the Roman victory in the Jewish war (A.D. 66-70). This replica, in a museum in Israel, shows the Temple Menorah and Jewish slaves displayed as trophies of the victory. Photo used by permission from Beth Hatefutsot, The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora.

and they are exposed as powerless imposters.

Because of Christ's victory, Paul writes: **Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day** (2:16). Since we are fully forgiven and fully qualified in Christ (1:12), we should not let anyone question our salvation due to our "failure" to obey rules about diet and days.

The false philosophy criticized the liberty that the Christians enjoyed, and Paul is saying, Pay no attention to their objections. You don't have to obey those rules because you have been given everything you need for salvation in Christ. You are forgiven, and that philosophy has no authority over you.

Those rules may have had some value before Christ came, but are not needed now: **These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ** (2:17). The dietary rules and sabbaths, like circumcision, symbolized a reality that we now have in Jesus. When we have the fullness, we don't need the silhouette.

False humility has no value

Paul said, "Do not let anyone judge you about diet and days." Now he gives a parallel admonition: **Do not let anyone...disqualify you for the prize** (2:18). No one can actually disqualify us, of course—Paul means that we shouldn't let anyone make us think that we have to keep special rules in order to qualify.

This unnamed person **delights in false humility and the worship of angels**. The rules may look humble, but in actuality, they arrogantly claim that Jesus did not do enough for us. This person probably does not worship angels directly, but may claim that certain behaviors will help people join the angels in their worship of God.

Paul reveals more about the false philosophy when he writes: **Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions** (2:18). The person (like various Jewish writers of the time) probably said he had visions of heaven, and although he offered humility, he was actually full of pride.

His focus had taken him away from Christ: **He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow** (2:19). Growth comes from Christ, not from secret information and special rules. This person is not helping the body grow.

Paul now uses another argument, building on what he has already written: **Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?** (2:20-21). When Christ died to "the basic principles of this world," we died to those regulations, too. Those petty rules have no authority over us. Our victory does not come from our ability to keep rules—it comes from Christ on the cross. ●

Questions for discussion

- What deceptive ideas endanger Christian faith today? (v. 8)
- Does my union with Christ change the way I view myself? (vv. 11-12)
- If God forgave all my sins, why does the Lord's prayer include a request for forgiveness? (v. 13)
- What powers used to hold a grip on me? Does my life now show that I am freed? (v. 15)
- Has anyone ever tried to tell me that I wasn't qualified for salvation? (v. 18)

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Hmm...

Those who follow Jesus are called to live by the rules of the new world rather than the old one, and the old one won't like it. Although the life of heaven is designed to bring healing to the life of earth, the powers that presently run this earth have carved it up to their own advantage, and they resent any suggestion of a different way. That is why the powers—whether they are in politics or the media, in the professions or the business world—bitterly resent any suggestion from Christian leaders as to how things ought to be, even while sneering at the church for not “speaking out” on issues of the day.

**N.T. Wright,
Simply Christian, p. 137**

He is no fool to give up that which he cannot keep for that which he cannot lose.

**Jim Elliot, missionary
martyred in Ecuador**

Stress is what happens when we try to impose our will on life.

Karl Schmidt

Sacrifice in the Bible means that we give to God the best we have; it is the finest form of worship. Sacrifice is not giving up things, but giving to God with joy the best we have.

Oswald Chambers

The question is always how do we create Bibles that people will pick up and use but that will not be too gimmicky. If you get too trendy, you've turned the Bible into a widget.

**Kevin O'Brien, director of Bibles
at Tyndale House Publishers**

Life is tragic to him who has plenty to live on and nothing to live for.

People seldom get dizzy from doing good turns.

How to Kill a Church or Sunday School

- Don't attend.
- If you do attend, always be late.
- If it's warm, or cold, or rainy, don't think of going.
- When you attend, find fault with everybody and everything.
- Don't accept an office, as you may be criticized.
- Get sore if you are not appointed on committees, but if you are, don't serve.
- If the chairperson asks you for an opinion on some matter, tell him/her you have nothing to say.
- After the session, tell everybody how it ought to be done.
- Do nothing you can get out of doing.
- But when the willing work overtime to keep things moving, howl that the thing is run by a clique.
- Hold back your dues, or don't pay at all.
- Don't bother about getting new members.
- Let George do it.

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The advertisement shows a group of people sitting around a table, reading and discussing copies of the magazine "Christian Odyssey". The text is overlaid on the image.