

Christ Jesus came
into the world to save
sinners 1 Timothy 1:15



Christmas Good News

FREE

December 2024

The story of a Christian martyr changed my life

By Susannah Daubney

The wonderful thing about someone's testimony of how God has worked in their life is that it never really ends. The Lord continues to change and teach those who follow him, far beyond the first days of belief. He has been there for me through many ups and downs, and he continues to encourage and rebuke me when I need it.

I am blessed to say that I grew up in a godly Christian home. Now an adult myself, I love my parents even more for how they brought me up. They taught me the ways of the Lord and showed me that I could not go to heaven based on their own relationship with God or from good deeds alone.

As a child, I feared hell immensely – I couldn't comprehend what hell really was, but I knew that if I wasn't a Christian and had my sins forgiven, I would go there. What made the thought worse was

that my believing family would be apart from me and in heaven. From an early age, I therefore began to seek after God in order to be free from the fear of hell.

Despite being encouraged to read the Bible and other Christian literature, I was a reluctant reader as a child. I was too young to understand deep theology, but I did read biographies and other children's stories. As I became a teenager, my reading was still limited despite being able to comprehend much more. Stubbornness prevailed and I continued to avoid theology books.

I began reading a book called *Only Glory Awaits* by Leslie S. Nuernberg. It is an historical fiction novel about the life of someone called Anne Askew, who was killed in Henry VIII's day for her Christian beliefs. Anne Askew's story was particularly special because the village she called home (South Kelsey) was also my own.

While reading the book, I noted how the author would quote parts of the Bible. One such quote was from Psalm 46:10: 'Be still and know that I am God.' I recall that it was a Sunday in May when I read this. However, I could not sleep that night – I cannot remember the reasoning, but the 13-year-old me was worried about something (I worried about a lot of things). As I was tossing and turning, this verse came back to me, as if addressed personally: *Be still, Susannah*. I cannot fully comprehend what had happened,

but I felt a real change; my mind suddenly felt open to God.

After I told my parents, that Sunday evening in May 2013 became known as my conversion. I made a profession of faith and was baptised about a year later. However, something was wrong: I became more rebellious inside. No, not in the eyes of the world – indeed, to others I seemed well behaved, polite, even something of a 'goody two shoes'. But in my heart and mind I felt far from it.

Would you know what I meant if I said I was fighting an internal battle? The constant 'want' to be in the world, of the world – but also knowing that Jesus Christ was my Saviour and that I needed to love him as he loves me. Notice the want and the need. I need God. I cannot live without him, and I was aware of that as a teenager.

I spent years after 2013 praying that God would fill my heart with love for him. My mind loved him, my mind believed in him, but it wouldn't be a saving love until my heart loved him. This would take a miracle, but with God, nothing is impossible.

It was 2019 when my priorities started changing. I became more interested in church; I wanted to be openly Christian at work so nobody had any doubt as to my faith in Christ. I started speaking about spiritual matters with other Christians and wanted to have fellowship with them. Nothing about these priorities was natural, and

Continued on page 2



Susannah Daubney

This newspaper has
been distributed by
your local church:



Testimonies

The story of a Christian martyr changed my life

Continued from page 1

looking back I can only thank God for steering me on this path.

The covid pandemic happened in 2020, and I was still living at home with my parents

as my apprenticeship was only a stone's throw away. My mum often watched and listened to sermons on YouTube while she was ironing or doing various jobs around the house.

One evening she wanted Dad and me to watch something she had seen earlier in the day; it was a Q&A session from the 2014 G3 Conference in America. Various ministers were on the panel. After finding the Q&A so helpful, I decided to listen to other sermons from the ministers. A man

called Paul Washer I found to be particularly convicting and encouraging.

I fell into a rabbit hole on YouTube and found some of his not-so-well-known sermons. I could understand why they weren't popular. They highlighted our sinful state, and his series through Thessalonians made me feel wretched. I felt like God was using Paul Washer to speak directly to me, telling me what a sinner I am and that I'm not fooling anyone with my pretended 'goodness'.

For several days the reality that I was a sinner and that I needed to be saved dawned on me. And then, on a Tuesday evening in March 2021, I found myself at home in bed listening to another short sermon. I had zoned out thinking about Christ and I started crying, but of happiness!

God had taken my blindfold away and I suddenly understood what Christmas and Easter were all about; I understood why Christ came and died for us, and I immediately felt such deep

intense love for him. *He died for me!* The difference between 2013 and 2021? I hadn't understood sin. I knew it was bad, I knew we all had it, but I never thought I was terrible.

When I understood that every sin, every 'little' sin hurts Christ and is grievous to him, I then fully comprehended how meaningful his death was. He answered my prayer – he filled my heart with love for him. I love God as my Lord and Saviour and I long to live for him every day of my life.

I faced drugs, prostitution, the barrel of gun – but finally found new life in Jesus



By Sharon Dutra

I was born in Los Angeles, California. My father was an alcoholic and a womaniser who was married four times before I reached 18 years of age. My real mother left me when I was about five years old, and I never saw her again.

Every time my dad would divorce, he would put me into foster care, only to pull me out when he would remarry. Subsequently, I was moved from foster home to foster home. I started using drugs when I was 13. I believe that's when I finally realised that I hated myself.

Runaway

Up until this time, I had been able to ignore my feelings of worthlessness and block out my rejection and abandonment issues. But this increasing awareness only led me to run away from home when I was 15. I lived on the streets until I was arrested. And this began my life with the law.

I ended up at Eastlake Juvenile Hall in Los Angeles. I was definitely the minority there and a hot target for the ethnic groups because I was a white girl with long blonde hair. Those were the days when they didn't separate criminals according

to the severity of their crimes: murderers, thieves, and street gangsters were mixed with those who had only run away from home. I gained a whole new understanding of hatred, racial tension, gangs, and fear. I was sent back to that Juvenile Hall many times over the next few years.

I was later transferred to Florence Crittenden, an open-placement girl's home. 'Open placement' just means that I was able to leave the grounds at will. It was against the rules, but there were no bars or walls. During that time, I was travelling by bus from West Los

Angeles to Central Los Angeles to East Los Angeles at night, unaware of the potential danger I was in. Pimps, predators, and gangsters abounded in these neighbourhoods. I look back now and know that God had his hand upon my life even then, protecting me before I even became a Christian.

I was unable to stay in an open placement – I was too restless to stay anywhere for long. After I ran away from the girls' home for the third time, I was re-arrested and sent back to Juvenile Hall. I was a ward of the court by now – my father and stepmother had divorced.

Neither of them wanted me to live with them. The court placed me in a closed facility in Central Los Angeles, called the Convent of the Good Shepherd.

The neighbourhood was so unsafe that we had to move our beds away from the windows on holidays because gang members had shot through the windows in the past. The convent walls were 12 feet high, but I even ran away from there, climbing up onto the roof of the laundry building and crawling up the ivy to escape.

There are many other stories in between these stories, all of which led to increased self-hatred. I was raped on several

Testimonies

occasions, and my anger was overwhelming. My contempt and mistrust of authority, life, and people in general escalated. I didn't realise it at the time, but I was headed for absolute destruction.

Drug addiction

When I was 19, I started working for the California Conservation Corps. One of our responsibilities was to serve meals to the firefighters and prisoners as they fought the major fires. This is where I met Bill, an inmate imprisoned up in Yreka, California. Bill and I wrote letters back and forth for months, and when he was released, we moved in together. We were later married and had two children. At this time, I was drinking heavily and smoking cannabis. For years, I had used every

using drugs. I ended up sharing needles with people who later died from AIDS. Over time, my veins became so scarred from injecting myself that I started shooting up in my hands and feet.

On several occasions, I even had another stoned addict shoot drugs into my neck veins. This could have meant sudden death with even the slightest mistake. The interesting thing is, throughout this horrible time, I wasn't having fun at all – I was just trying to deaden my pain.

Street life

Bill and I divorced after eight and a half years of marriage. We had tried to get sober together, but by that time, we didn't know who each other was without the drugs. After a six-month attempt at sobriety, I left my

projects (government-owned accommodation for low-income residents) at night for drugs, something even the locals wouldn't do because it was so dangerous.

I occasionally scoured garbage cans for food, but I usually just sold my body in prostitution so I could survive and keep up my drug habit. I certainly had a death wish. Twice guns were pulled on me, and once I told the guy, 'Shoot me and put me out of my misery!'

I tried to commit suicide on several occasions, but I couldn't even succeed at that. I was miraculously spared from death on so many occasions. It's funny – when you're 'out there', you just don't realise how 'out there' you really are until you get your life back.

stone 5 pounds (53 kilos). I didn't even realise how sick I'd become. Because of my lengthy criminal record and multiple recent crimes and arrests, I was sent to prison.

At the time, I thought this was the end of my life. However, I realised that I was actually at a crossroads in my life. I needed either to fully choose life or fully choose death. I just couldn't live like this any longer. I am abundantly grateful now that I chose life. I was sent to a Southern California women's prison.

I was placed in the 'receiving unit' before being released to the general population.

I knew some of the women there already – I had run on the streets with them. The prison was organised so that two inmates are placed in a cell that's roughly 6 feet by 10 feet.

Continued on page 4



drug I could get my hands on. But little did I know that Bill was using IV cocaine and speed (amphetamine). It didn't take much to convert me into an IV drug user. I would spend the next six and a half years with a needle in my arm. I had four near-death experiences when I overdosed, twice by the needle and twice when I was smoking crack cocaine.

Needless to say, I lost all interest in working, taking care of my two children, my husband, my apartment – and myself. We ended up living in a tent because we had lost everything. The only important thing now was

family and headed straight for the streets so I could continue in my addiction.

I harboured guilt for this for years afterwards because I helped to destroy that marriage and I abandoned my children just as I had been abandoned as a child. I wasn't able to see them again for a very long time. I never imagined that I would end up living on the street for two years. I was that proverbial 'bag lady' you often see on the street.

I lived in a predominantly black neighbourhood when I was homeless, and I would go up into the

Prison

I had been arrested 13 times by the time I was 31. One morning, I was unlawfully on Fort Ord Army Base in Seaside, California, when six military police cars and the City of Seaside Police Sergeant pulled up to the front of the house I was in and came busting through the door.

I didn't know it then, but this was to be the very last time I would ever use cocaine. I'm 5'8" tall, and when I was arrested, I weighed in at only 8

Testimonies

Continued from page 3

We were on lockdown 23 hours a day for 6 weeks, so there was absolutely no privacy. But God had a plan for me.

Encountering Jesus

My cellmate worked in the kitchen, which gave me the time I needed to be alone. While I was alone in my cell, I finished a book called *Devil's Driver*. The story was about Al Capone's getaway driver, George Meyer. Meyer had killed many people and landed in prison, but he found hope in Christ in that dark prison, and his life changed so much that he began to help other prisoners.

I didn't know I was at a major turning point in my life. I wasn't even looking for God. All I knew was that I wanted to die. My whole life up to this point was useless and the pain was unbearable. I was 31 years old and had nothing but misery and a pathway of destruction to show for it. After I finished *Devil's Driver*, I realised that God was exactly what I needed in my life.

I got on my knees and cried out to God for over an hour. I wept for all the things I had done to people and all of the ways that I had rejected God and hated myself. I cried for all the things I had missed in life – all the lost opportunities. When I got up off the floor, I was literally a brand-new person.

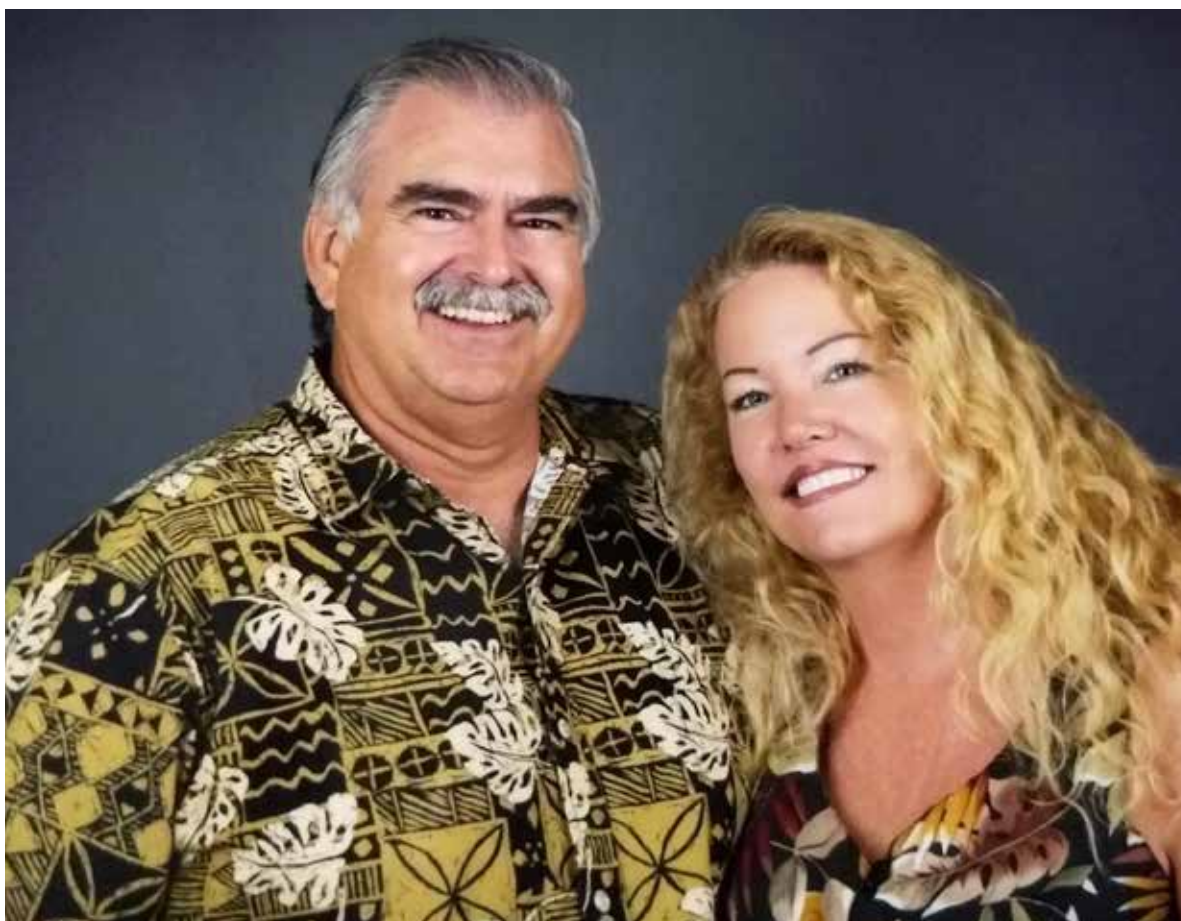
The Bible

When I was placed in general population a few weeks later, I went to church immediately. The chaplain befriended me and bought me a very expensive Bible with his own money. I read it for hours every day. I couldn't get enough of it! It was truth, and I knew it. I had lived believing so many lies in my life that the truth was like a stream of cool water in the desert for me.

The Scriptures spoke wholeness and hope to my heart. They gave my life meaning and purpose and stability. I began experiencing peace and joy such as I had never known. I began wanting something that was very foreign to me – I wanted to help others in prison. I became a song leader and began supporting others who were as broken as I had been. Prison would become one of the best experiences of my life.

Serving prisoners

I was later transferred to a minimum-security prison.



However, out of the 90 women there, I was all alone in my faith. I cried out to God and asked, 'Why would you send me to this spiritually empty place? I need training. I need friends to help me now more than ever!'

God made me aware that in fact it was I who was to be the one who would bring hope to these women. I started teaching the Scriptures, and I learned later that these studies continued years after I left. When I was released, I had to go back to Santa Cruz, California, where I was from. But the only people I knew there were drug addicts and prostitutes!

Again, I cried out to God, 'How could you let me come

back to the town where all I know are drugs and the street life. How will I overcome the reputation I have made there?' God showed me that I was to be a witness to those I had run with. God brought me many people and opportunities to share his love, light, and gospel.

The next best part of my life after accepting Jesus was when I met my current husband, Michael. He was raised in a family of California highway patrolmen! Cops! His family was shocked that he would bring 'someone like me' home, but over the years, God changed their hearts about 'those kinds of people'. God surely has a sense of humour. We have now

been married for many years and we love to help others come to faith.

Fresh starts

I went back to school and earned my Registered Nursing degree. I also started teaching Bible studies for women. God brought me a very unusual group of women to teach. There were those who had been Christians all of their lives and there were also women who had just come off the street.

Some came from addictive backgrounds, and many were single mums. I couldn't find any material that this diverse group could all relate to, so I started writing my own studies. The book I wrote, called *Be Transformed: By the Spirit of the Living God*,

was birthed from this class, because my life had been forever transformed. (You can find out more at betransformedministries.com.)

Your story

You may not even be from a background like mine. But I know that if you are not in relationship with Jesus, some part of you longs for peace, joy, hope, and purpose. There are millions of stories about people searching for these very treasures, but many are disillusioned after time. No matter what you try, what you strive for, or what you believe you want in this life, nothing will ever fill the void in your heart until you surrender your life to Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives life. He heals our wounds. He gives us freedom from fear and bondage to ourselves. New thoughts and ways of relating become ours as we learn to forgive and put others before ourselves. No life is too broken for Jesus to mend. Reconciliation is possible with God and others because Jesus Christ took our sin upon himself on the cross.

His immense act of love literally frees us from the obligation of working to 'pay' for our sins, as so many religions are hopelessly striving to do. I believe that when human beings come into an intimate relationship with the God of the Bible, they develop a true sense of morality. God is all love, but he is at the same time absolutely just. The two work hand-in-hand beautifully.

The essence of my whole life now is to 'serve God by serving others'. My purpose is to share the gift I have received, and what has worked so extremely well for me. You can take it or leave it – it's your free choice. But who wouldn't want joy and life satisfaction? Who doesn't crave a release from intense self-hatred and hopelessness?

And just as importantly, please realise that the choice you make to accept or reject Jesus will decide your eternal destiny. I have finally found what I have always been looking for – indeed, what I believe every soul searches for. Jesus wants nothing more than to have a relationship with you, no matter where you are or where you have been.

I implore you to turn from sin and invite Jesus into your heart today. If you are at the end of your rope, if you are through trying to live life according to your rules, and if you want to experience real peace, joy, and love, now is the time to surrender your life to Christ.

The sentence that changed my life

By Simon Bunce

I am the middle child of Jeff and Jenny Bunce and I currently work for Philips Healthcare as a Product Manager for the X-Ray division. I live in Bermondsey in East London and attend St Helen's Church in Bishopsgate.

I was brought up in Swansea in a Christian family, taken to church every Sunday, sometimes three times! I didn't really get it; I found it boring and there were always other things I'd rather be doing.

When I left home for university I wasn't 'policed' into going to church, so although I made a couple of token visits, I soon avoided it altogether. After graduation I moved to London. I had a new job, new friends, nightlife and parties to enjoy – it was great.

For about ten years I put any thoughts of God and eternity to the back of my mind. I would still worry about what happened to me if I died and every time I got on a plane, anxiety about dying would soon surface. But not thinking about God was easy the rest of the time.

Then came 6 March 2012. Leading up to this day, I had been feeling so completely alone, depressed, and isolated – essentially lost in this world. There had to be more to it. I knew there was something missing; I had no real peace.

I could not find comfort from my friends or family or any human being, really. I needed something more. I knew my lifestyle was only providing me with short-term and self-serving gratification.

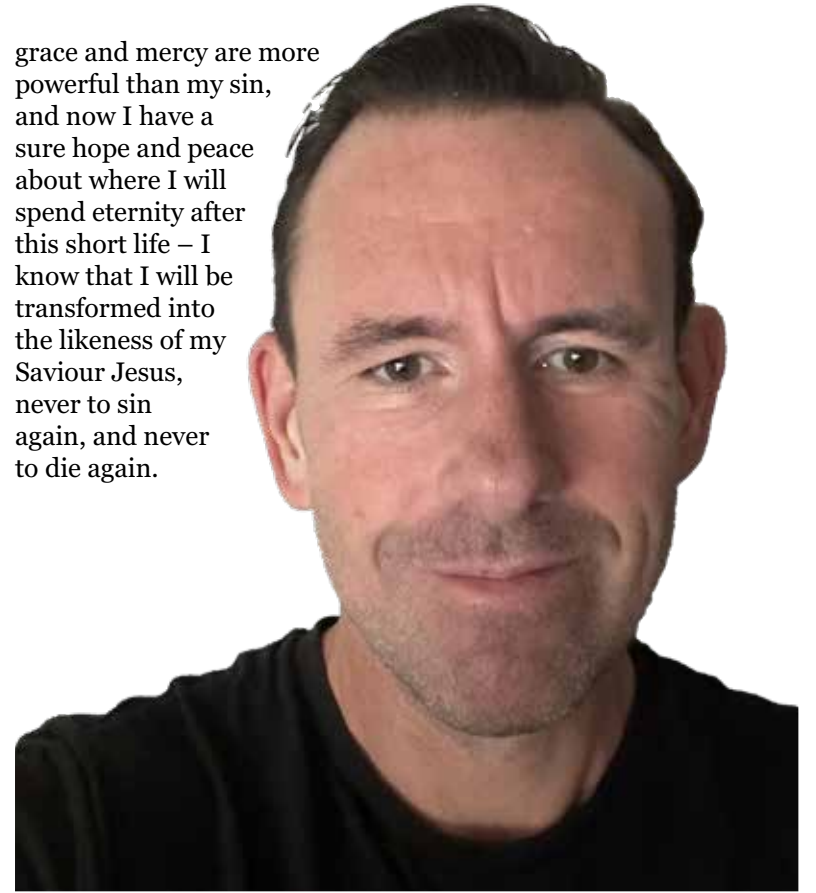
That evening in March I left my flat, picked up *Ultimate*

Questions by a man called John Blanchard (a booklet my dad had given me fifteen years previously) and headed to Shad Thames, to a bar on the river. As I sat and read the booklet, what struck me was the statement that *Jesus loved me*, no matter how I felt or what I had done: Jesus the Creator loved me.

This realisation filled me with hopeful emotions. I prayed to God for help as my life was such a mess, and immediately he answered. My burden 'rolled away' (just like in the story *Pilgrims Progress*). My tears walking home were tears of joy and peace, but also a stark awareness of how sinful I was.

The Christian life has not been easy: every day I struggle with my intrinsic sin. This is an awareness that I did not have before. Thankfully God's

grace and mercy are more powerful than my sin, and now I have a sure hope and peace about where I will spend eternity after this short life – I know that I will be transformed into the likeness of my Saviour Jesus, never to sin again, and never to die again.



Seeing the lives of real Christians spoke volumes to me

By Sue Rawson

'I'm good enough for heaven – if there is one!' That's what I thought until the age of 16. Why? Well, I hadn't murdered anyone and I'd tried my best. This way of thinking echoed what I'd heard during my occasional church attendance as a child. I had been to Sunday School until about 13, but then thought there was plenty of time to think about religion when I was older.

I was brought up in a happy, stable home. To all outward purposes I had everything going for me. I had started on my A-level course, was planning for university, had no worries and an active social life. Something, however, began to gnaw at me inside and I kept thinking there must be more to life than the pleasure-seeking I and others were living for.

God brought a number of events and people across my path and one Saturday afternoon, out with a friend at a 'coffee bar' (trendy for young people in the 1960s!), I came across an invitation placed on the cafe

table. It challenged people to come along to consider the 'real meaning of life'.

I felt drawn to go to this event. My friend felt the same. Little did we realise as we made our way that Sunday evening that this was the first night of an outreach by evangelical churches in the area. There I met young people of my own age for whom God was real, and I saw their lives were different.

Over the weeks my arguments against God were demolished. The lives of those I met spoke volumes: they possessed a real peace, joy, and purpose in life. Attending church with them, I heard for the first time that there is a holy God and that we are all sinners.

It seemed like I heard John 3:16 for the first time: 'For God so loved the world he sent his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.' I came to know that love and forgiveness for myself, and, while that was a long time ago, I can say he has kept me for 55 years until this day.

Life doesn't always work out quite as we planned. I had planned marriage and three children, but that was not in God's plan, and I have proved his way is always the best. I have had a fulfilling career in Social Services, being upheld in difficult circumstances at times.

Life within the church has been a joy. The Christian life is never boring! In recent years, in suffering a cancer episode and in bereavements, I have experienced a peace which is not man-made, but clearly comes from above.

One of my favourite verses is, 'I will guide you with my eye' (Psalm 32:8) and it has been such a comfort to know that nothing happens by chance but, as the hymn says, 'He led me all the way.'



Features

The foolish men



By Jeremy Walker
Pastor of Maidenbower
Baptist Church in
Crawley.



Source: Shutterstock

You are starving hungry. You follow a delicious smell. As the scent grows strongest, you meet another man who has not eaten for weeks. He tells you where the food is handed out, but will not budge from the bench on which you meet him.

You are desperately sick. You hear of medicine being distributed. As you draw near the place, a dying man calls to you from his doorway, telling you where to find the doctor, but then goes back into his house and closes the door.

You are fearfully poor. You hear of a great benefactor who distributes to all who call on him. On your way to his home you meet a beggar in threadbare clothes. He has heard of this generous giver, and points you to his house, but turns away to ask passers-by for a few coins.

These are desperate, tragic cases. The needful remedy is known and near, but there is no interest or appetite. The same thing happened when the Lord Jesus was born. The same thing may be happening as you read this article.

Sad scene

One of the saddest scenes in the narratives of Christ's birth is found in Matthew's Gospel, 2:1-12. The wise men have come from the East – a journey of many miles and months – in order to worship the King of the Jews. This is more than paying political respects: this is religious homage, bowing down before the divine.

Herod should have been delighted, but he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. He gathered his religious advisors, the chief priests and the scribes.

These foolish men *knew who and what Jesus was*. They could identify the child born

as the Christ, the Ruler who would shepherd God's people. They confirmed that God's long-promised Saviour, David's descendant, had made his entrance on the world stage. All the hopes of Israel were being realised.

They thought he would be a king according to the world's ideas; that is why Herod was so agitated. They had no notion of a heavenly kingdom.

Even so, this should have stirred them up. If the Gentiles had come to the brightness of Christ's rising (Isaiah 60:3), should not the Jews have been eager to find him first?

These foolish men *knew where these events took place*. There was little hesitation: it was all kicking off in Bethlehem. God's Anointed One was to be found less than six miles away. If you were hungry, you could go so far for food. If you were sick, you could go so far for healing. If you were poor, you could go so far for money. The direction and location were clear; the distance was eminently manageable; the destination was rich with divine promise.

These foolish men *knew that the events must take place*. There was no guesswork, no uncertainty. God had spoken

through his prophets, revealing what would come to pass. Micah had identified Bethlehem as the place out of which should come forth to God 'the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting' (Micah 5:2).

This is neither myth nor legend. This is divine promise coming to pass in specific detail, with precision and definition. This is real and reliable. Sure promise is giving way to present fulfilment.

These foolish men *knew when it happened*. Herod determined from the wise men what time the star appeared (Matthew 2:7). They could work out when Messiah had been born (this is why Herod later ensured that all the boys up to a certain age in and around Bethlehem would be slaughtered – he was trying to ensure Messiah could not survive).

The men in Jerusalem had not heard of Messiah's birth from the shepherds, who would not have moved in the same social circles as these scholars. The chief priests and scribes were playing catch-up – they had no time to lose, and ought to have seized the moment! The opportunity was present, perhaps even passing. Where is their urgency?

Missing the moment

Here is the tragedy of the foolish men. Even humanly speaking, they should have been determined to steal a march on the wise men.

The chief priests and scribes should be leading the exodus from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to find the King of the Jews. How many of them made it Bethlehem? Not one. Not one of them went to bow the knee to Jesus, the saving Messiah.

That is heartbreaking. The apostle John tells us that Jesus came to his own, and his own did not receive him (John 1:11). They are five or six miles away, after centuries of waiting, and prompted by men who realise how significant this moment is.

It is tragic and terrifying that those who could with such clarity and certainty direct and instruct others concerning the Saviour of sinners and the King of his people had no interest or appetite in going there. The foolish men miss the moment.

The full picture

You know not just the shadow of these things but their fulfilment. What was to the scholars in Jerusalem a pencil sketch is to you a three-dimensional model.

You have not just the promises, but the wonderful birth, perfect life, saving death, glorious resurrection, marvellous ascension, and present reign of King Jesus laid before you in the Bible.

Perhaps you could even tell other people a host of facts about him. You might even be able to say quite clearly that whoever believes in this Jesus, who died in the place of sinners, shall not perish but have everlasting life.

But are you now sitting in Jerusalem or are you on your way to Bethlehem? You can *know* all that the foolish men knew, and so much more, and still not go to Jesus.

How, when starving men passed by for bread, did the hungry simply sit and wait? How, when dying men went for the medicine, did others expiring let them pass by? How, when the poor went to find the riches of heaven, did those who had nothing of which to boast stand around waiting?

The wise men found the infant Jesus somewhere in Bethlehem. They bowed down and worshipped him. They knew enough to see a boy who could sit on his foster-father's lap, an infant who could fall asleep in his mother's arms, and to acknowledge him the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Ask and receive

What do you see? Where will you go? Are you hungry enough to come for food? Are you sick enough to ask for healing? Are you poor enough in spirit to ask the Lord Jesus to save you from your sins?

You do not even need to travel five miles. You can come to him where you are. If you knew nothing when you began reading this article, you now know all you need to know: this Jesus is the Son of God and the promised Seed of David's line. He has come into the world to save sinners like us from our sins and to prepare us for future glory.

I plead with you, do not rest until you have Jesus. You may be able to tell others about him; do not be the one who does not go to find him for yourself. You may be near to him; do not stop until you have found him. You may see all these things about him; do not be the one who fails to bow down in faith, worshipping the Saviour of sinners.

From gang life to Christ's love

By Ronaldo Andre

My name is Ronaldo – a common enough name in the land of football. If the British invented the beautiful game, it was the southern hemisphere that taught the world how to play it! Despite the label, and unlike most Brazilian boys, I have two left feet; footballing prowess passed me by!

My life would differ from other boys my age in additional ways, as I was born into a dysfunctional family. Of seven siblings (born to more than one mother), I was the second oldest, and the only one living with my father.

Our father was an alcoholic. A construction worker, he was tall and heavily built. His name, Zezinho ('Little Joseph'), didn't fit his masculine frame. And it didn't fit his nature. A deeply frustrated man, he may have been good at his job, but he was bad at fatherhood. I learned to dread his return from work.

One of my first childhood memories was of my father coming home, pulling me out of bed and throwing me headfirst onto the cement floor. I lost count of the number of times I was beaten so hard that I couldn't walk. My father would dip my plate in the toilet. 'You're a dog; eat this,' he would command. 'You're nothing and will always be a nobody in life.' I was five years old.

Running for my life

In life it is important to know when enough is enough. That day came early for me. My father, as usual, had come home drunk and with blood in his eyes. This time he hit me with electrical wires, forcing my head against the mattress to prevent the neighbours from hearing my cries.

I managed to raise my face from the mattress to gasp, 'When I'm older, I'll come back for you. I will kill you one day.' My father would never forget those words. My chance to escape came just days later. I had recovered sufficiently to go with him to collect some scraps of wood for the fire (we had no money for fuel).

I waited until he was some distance from me and then I ran. Behind me his angry shouts only fuelled my headlong flight: 'Ronaldo, come back or I'm going to kill you!'



Fake liberty

If I had hoped to find liberty and independence on the teeming streets of Brazil, my hopes ended abruptly with the 11 mile walk to the town centre. Two policemen stopped me; after interrogating me they took me to a house for delinquent children.

It was a university of crime. At five years of age I was valuable to the gangs that worked Brazil's streets. They helped me escape, and in return I worked for them. Petty theft and break-ins became a way of life; I was introduced to cigarette stubs, alcohol, shoe-glue, marijuana.

Rescue

Routinely those who saw me on the streets would abuse me, hitting me or throwing insults at me. After a while you don't feel the pain. And then one day I met a woman who was different. She gave me clean clothes and something to eat. She invited me to her beautiful home and let me play with her child.

She was a Christian. This woman placed me in a Christian children's home – my first encounter with care and love. I was to remain in children's homes until I was 18. And there

'His righteousness transformed me, and it can transform other sinners, trapped like me in sin and despair. What saved me was not the care and love I received in the children's home, but the love of Christ who went to the cross for my sin.'

I would encounter for myself the risen, living, life-changing person of Jesus Christ.

Letting go of hate

God had forgiven me, and I had learnt that if we don't forgive others then God will not forgive us. I also knew that to forgive is to forget. As I grew from a child into a man I prayed that God would give me the chance to tell my father that I forgave him. That prayer was answered. In a city of 12 million inhabitants, in the middle of a crowded street, suddenly there was my mother. No words can describe the emotion of that moment. She held me as though I were a baby again.

At my request she took me to my father. He had not forgotten the vengeful threat I had made 11 years before. Looking at me with contempt he placed a knife in my hands and goaded me to kill him.

By the grace of God I was able to look him in the eyes and say to him, 'I forgive you!' To my knowledge, my father died without admitting his sin. But for me there was freedom from that moment. A load of bricks had been lifted from my back.

Fatherhood

It took many years of God's patient love for me to learn to trust him as my heavenly Father. From that point my greatest dream was to be a father myself – a father who could be trusted.

God has realised my dream. He has given me a wonderful family: Fernanda, to whom I have been married for twenty years, and our three beautiful daughters: Meggie, Emily, and Isabella.

Since 1999 we have been serving as missionaries – in South America, Nepal, and Romania; now in the UK. My life work is to bring to others the life-changing message of forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

His righteousness transformed me, and it can transform other sinners, trapped like me in sin and despair. What saved me was not the care and love I received in the children's home, but the love of Christ who went to the cross for my sin.

He loved me when I was still his enemy. His love still transforms lives, his death guarantees forgiveness to all who ask him. My life is testimony that the power of love is greater than the power of hate.

Features

From darkness to light



By Alan Hill
Pastor of Lausanne Free
Church, Switzerland.

When did you last see a sunrise? Looking east, everything remains dark at first. Gradually, a glowing orange ribbon spreads across the horizon. The light brightens and is then focused in one particular spot. Slowly but surely, the top of a red disc begins peeping above the horizon.

The sky continues to change, as dark skies burn red and orange. Light spreads farther and grows brighter. Day approaches. The rays of the sun soon fall on the fields, the trees, the houses, and the hedgerows. Streetlamps switch off; the birds begin singing; the air grows warmer. Everywhere is flooded with the light. The dark gloomy night is forgotten. There is joy in the air. Daylight has come!

Christmas light

Christmas is all about light coming into a dark world. In the Bible, the Lord Jesus Christ is given many titles, and one of these is 'the light of the world'. To understand why Jesus is called the light of the world, we must understand how dark the world is without him.

What happens when it is dark? One challenge is that you cannot see where you are going. You cannot see any dangers that are in front of you. You cannot see where the good things are that you need. You also cannot see how dirty you are. You cannot see if there is anyone there to help you!

How do you feel if you wake up at night and it is totally dark? You might well feel frightened and alone. This is a picture of life and the 'dark'

world we live in. This world is a dark place to live.

Most people don't know where they are going, or what lies around the next corner, or how offensive they are in God's sight. Most people don't know whom to turn to for help.

Night

There were some people in a field one night 2,000 years ago who, I believe, felt the same. We read in the Bible about some shepherds who were working out in the fields at night. It sounds like fun, but it wasn't. It was dark and they would have been cold. They could not sleep – they had to guard the sheep from attackers.

Imagine the noises that startled them. *Was that a wolf? Was that a fox?* Yet they could not see anything! But I think these shepherds were not just frightened. They were also sad. They were sitting in literal darkness, but they knew the world was in 'darkness' too. They were part of a people (Israel) who were not free because of occupation by the Romans. In fact, only recently the Romans had ordered every person to go back to his town of birth to be registered.

'Christmas is all about light coming into a dark world. In the Bible, the Lord Jesus Christ is given many titles, and one of these is 'the light of the world.'

These shepherds would have also known that they were not 'clean', morally speaking. They knew they were sinners. And sin makes us dirty in the sight of God. The religious leaders gave a bad example and were corrupt. All around, people did not really know what was right and wrong, good and bad. They were also wondering when the Messiah would come. When would God fulfil his promises to Abraham, David, and Isaiah to send a Saviour?

Sunrise

But everything was about to change. Just like a sunrise, it began with a glimmer of light. Suddenly standing before the shepherds was an angel, and he was glowing – glowing because the glory of the Lord shone around him.

The shepherds were terrified, but the angel spoke in a friendly manner: 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

'And this will be the sign to you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths,

lying in a manger.' The angel says a lot in a few words! He has good news. He has good news not just for them but for everyone.

A baby has been born! That is nice, but is that such wonderful news for whole world? Indeed, it is with this baby. He is unique – he is born in David's city; he is a Saviour; he is Christ the Lord. The one promised for thousands of years has arrived!

Have you ever waited a long time to receive something special? There is no more special baby than this. Why? What can this child do that no other child ever could do? He can save us from our sins. Where would they find this special child? In a palace? No. In the best house in Bethlehem? No. Surely the best hotel in Bethlehem? No.

They will find him lying in a *manger* – an animal feeding trough. They would find him surrounded by animals, perhaps in a stable, perhaps just outside. Certainly not in a nice warm room with a fire or a nice warm bed. It was so unusual that it would be the only baby in Bethlehem lying in a feeding trough!



Source: Pexels

Glorious day

The small light that surrounded the one angel suddenly changed like a sped-up sunrise. Suddenly all the sky was filled with angelic beings and they burst into the most wonderful song the shepherds had ever heard: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'

The shepherds' night had been turned into a glorious day! What did the shepherds do? What would *you* do? They left their flocks and went to search for the special baby, the Saviour of the world. And they found it just as the angels had promised.

What a beautiful sight it would have been. There was Mary, and there was the baby Jesus lying in a feeding trough. There in front of their eyes was the most important baby ever born. No less than God become man. The Saviour and Light of the World.

The shepherds were never the same again. They went away telling everyone what had happened. They had only a few hours earlier been sitting in darkness; now they had seen the light of the world, their Saviour, their Lord.

Light for us

Picture being a child finding yourself in darkness in your own bedroom. You are scared. What do you do? You try to find a light! You call out for someone to come and help you! The good news is that mummy or daddy will soon come running to your room, switching on the light and comforting you!

But would it not be wonderful to have a light with you all the time? Would it not be wonderful to have a light in your heart? This is what Jesus promises. He said, 'I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.'

Dark ages

For thousands of years on every continent and in every country we find evidence of men and women living in darkness and doing dark things. By nature we all love the darkness rather than the light. This is why we have to lock our homes, our cars, our offices. This is why we have complicated passwords for our bank accounts. This is why we buy insurance against theft. This is why we have laws, why we have policeman, why we



Source: Pexels

have law courts, why we have prisons.

Ever since the birth of the first child, every parent has learned that their children naturally love the darkness. They do not have to be taught how to do wrong, how to be selfish, how to be mean, how to tell lies, how to steal. And we now know after thousands of years that no amount of education or wealth or social integration can deal with this darkness completely.

Naturally speaking, no one seeks after God or loves God. No one thanks God for the life they had or for the world in which we live. Yet into this dark world, Jesus says, *I am the light of the world.*

The light of Jesus

Jesus is declaring that he is first of all the *source* of light. Everything that Jesus says and does is pure and perfect. God is good and full of light and therefore Jesus is good and full of light. Jesus as God is the only source of spiritual light in this world. All other so-called lights are just shadows. Without the

'If we do follow the Lord Jesus we will no longer be walking in darkness. Spiritual and moral light will flood our lives. We will understand what is right and wrong, what is good and bad. We will understand the world and ourselves.'

light of the Lord Jesus, we're all just the 'blind leading the blind'.

Jesus also came to provide light. Back to a darkened room. There is no light. This means you cannot see what else is in the room. You cannot see any dangers in the room. You cannot see what furniture you might clatter into as you walk around. You also cannot see any good things in the room like a drink of water or some food.

And you cannot see whether something is good or bad. In the dark you pick up a book – is it worth reading? You do not know. This is how it is for us in this world if we do not have the light of the Lord Jesus to guide us. We blunder around in the dark and fall into sin. We fail to see what is good and can help us, like the Bible. We struggle to distinguish between what is good and bad, vulnerable to making wrong choices.

Jesus not only *is* the light and *provides* the light, for he also lights up our hearts. Imagine you are a blind person. You are in a room where there is no light. You cannot see anything. Then someone comes

in and brings light into the room. The room is flooded with bright light. But can you see anything? No. It doesn't matter how bright the light is because you are blind and so you are still in the dark.

This is our spiritual state. Even though Jesus is the light of the world and in the world, it is no use to us unless our eyes are opened. Yet this is what the Lord Jesus, as God, is able to do.

Your choice

We are now confronted with a choice. Are we going to accept what Jesus says? Are we going to accept that he is the only source of moral and spiritual light in the world? If you come to him something wonderful will happen.

Jesus said, 'He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.'

What does it mean to follow Jesus? To follow Jesus means to commit yourselves wholly and entirely to him as your guide and leader. Following is only another word for believing. Following is only another word for obeying. Following is only another word for submitting. And this is what Jesus calls all of us to do. He calls us to follow him wherever he leads.

If we do follow the Lord Jesus we will no longer be walking in darkness. Spiritual and moral light will flood our lives. We will understand what is right and wrong, what is good and bad. We will understand the world and ourselves. We will no longer be in ignorance. We will see how to live on earth, and what to do to please God. We will see the way to heaven and know how to get there.

And something extraordinary takes place within our heart when we come to truly believe in Jesus. We will have the light of life. When we start to follow Jesus, we will be filled with his light; we will be filled with his love. We will also see the darkness in our own hearts – that is, our sin. We will see for the first time how dark our souls have been.

And there is another blessing that flows from this promise. Jesus says we will have the light of life – the light of eternal life. When we die we will ultimately go to a place full of light – the new heavens and new earth. Do you want to know this light? Then open your eyes and look to the Light of the world. Look to Jesus and believe in him.

Features

The one thing we all need

By Linda Dick

My name is Linda Dick, and I am a member of Hope Community Church in Barlanark. I've lived in the scheme of Barlanark in the east end of Glasgow for 47 years. I wasn't brought up in a Christian household, so I had no experience of Christianity before.

I have a son called Scott. My late husband was also called Scott, and you can read his story in a separate article below. My son started going to the local church youth club every week, and because he has Asperger's, ADHD, and dyslexia, being around other people is uncomfortable for him. So, as a parent, I started going along with him.

After I was there for a while, one of the leaders asked if I wanted to help out, so I agreed. Then Scott decided that, as well as going to the youth club, he would like to start going to church on Sundays too. He began attending, and I went with him. With no Christian background whatsoever, going to church was quite uncomfortable

for me. But as a mother that's what I did.

As the months went on, Scott took more of an interest in learning about Jesus. I was really proud of him for that, because he was suddenly taking an interest in something, which he had never done before. In school and other things he took no interest, but he did read his Bible.

Although I was proud, I kept thinking, *what is it that's so intriguing about this book that he'd rather read that than talk to me?* He did try to talk to me about it, but it mostly went over my head.

Later we had a youth group leaders' weekend away, and I was sitting up one night with some of the other leaders. Something – I don't know what it was – but something just came over me and I felt, *I need this, I need Jesus in my life!* Throughout my past I'd been sinning without even realising it, but now I was sitting there realising I needed Jesus. That was what I wanted – I wanted Jesus.

All of a sudden I just burst into tears because it was such an overwhelming experience.



This was an experience like nothing I'd ever felt before, even becoming a mother was nothing compared with the feeling I had that evening. As we sat up that night, the other leaders continued to explain this wonderful truth to me. Learning and growing in knowledge has been my journey ever since.

I've still been going to church, and I got baptised to show my commitment to Jesus. I love being a Christian because becoming a Christian, repenting of my sin, and trusting in Jesus is the best thing that ever happened to me.

I think when you compare the life we had as a family

beforehand to the life we lead now, it makes you assess the area you live in. You walk by people, and you think to yourself, 'Why are you walking that way? Walk towards church.' You think, 'Don't walk to the Off-Sales, don't walk to your drug dealer, walk to church!'

There is one thing we all need in our lives, and that is God. Walk towards church, don't walk away from it. In order to give people that opportunity to hear the good news about Jesus, we need more churches, more people out sharing that message, we need as many churches as possible so that people from Barlanark, Baillieston, and beyond can see their need and see that need fulfilled in Christ.

A good gospel-preaching, evangelising church is one thing that a lot of communities and schemes lack. A place where people can feel safe and comfortable. A place where people can go when they need help. That's why we need people to stand up and go and plant more churches.

I saw that Christians were people with changed lives

By Scott Dick

This testimony was written by Scott Dick, husband of Linda (see above). In October 2022, Scott died and went to be with the Saviour he had recently come to know and love.

I always knew there was a God, but I wasn't brought up in a Christian home, so I never knew anything about Christianity. When my wife and son, also called Scott, started going to church, they began to bring home literature and I'd see their Bibles lying around the house.

I spend a lot of time in the house myself, so I took the opportunity to read some of the various things they brought back. I started picking up little snippets of information here and there. My wife and son were going to church every Sunday, but I'd just be coming back from

a nightshift, so I wouldn't join them.

However, there came a point when I was thinking I really want to go along here too, because I'm seeing the change that's happening in their lives. I was still merely sneaking a quick look at the Christian material they were bringing home, but I was looking for a way in. There was a lot of pride and a lot of ego at play in me, so I was looking to find a way into Christianity without having to swallow my pride and ask.

My wife Linda informed me that the 'two Petes' (who are now my pastors), were getting ordained. Good, I thought, *here's an excuse; there's perhaps an avenue here to find out more.* So we went to church together and we saw the boys getting ordained and I enjoyed that. There then followed an invitation to the launch of their church plant, and I thought, *Yes, I'll do that.* But it



was quite an excited 'yes'! When I went along on that Sunday it just felt very right.

Sometime later, I was driving along the road, and I wasn't even thinking about it, but all of a sudden BANG, the thought came into my head: *Jesus died for me.* Jesus died for me. That turned my stomach right upside down, knowing that Jesus gave his life for me. Wow! I thought, and from then on I just wanted to know more about the love of God and what he's like. It's a passion now: I just need to learn more and more.

There are so many people in the scheme here in Scotland who just don't know. There are so many lost, so many with addictions, so many suffering with mental health problems. How they need to come and know about the greatness of Jesus – what he can do in their lives if they repent and trust in him!

God with us



By Roger Fellows

A minister in Baptist and Orthodox Presbyterian churches in Ontario, Canada.

Do you have difficulty believing in miracles? Jesus' miracles? How about the virgin birth? The resurrection? These certainly require faith. However, I suggest that the most 'unbelievable' thing about the Christian faith is not the miracles, nor the virgin birth, nor the resurrection, but the incarnation. This is the teaching that God came to earth in bodily form (1 Timothy 3:16).

When you see a nativity scene, what impresses you the most? The sweetness? The humility of Jesus? Surely it should be the staggering fact that this baby was God in human form. That is the truth expressed in Matthew 1:23: '...call his name *Emmanuel*, which means, *God with us*.'

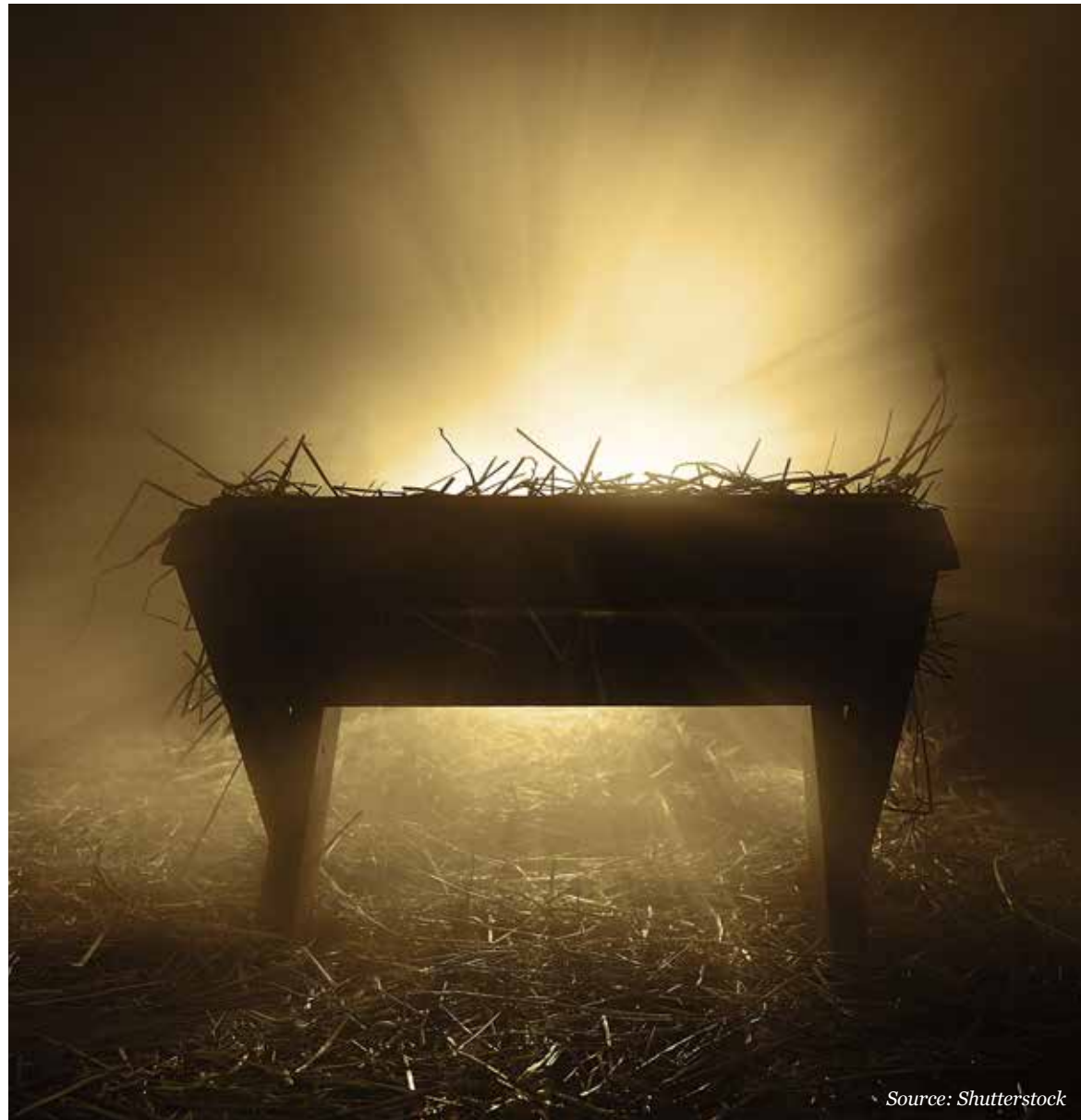
This baby was God

When we speak of God, what do we think of? The Creator, the all-powerful One, the One who is everywhere? All these are realities, but Jesus came into this world not demonstrating these divine attributes. He came as a baby. Can this baby really be God? We might be forgiven for questioning this but for several facts.

Foretold

To begin with, his birth was foretold. Now, several other births were foretold in the Bible (Isaac, Samson, John the Baptist, for example), but when Jesus' birth was foretold, his deity was announced: 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14).

'For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be



Source: Shutterstock

called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting father, Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6). The child was to be God with us: the Mighty God.

How do we know that the child born to Mary was the birth foretold? He must have looked like any other baby. Yet the angel said it fulfilled the prophecies: 'For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:11). We might add that no other baby was born of a virgin. It was a unique birth.

Worshipped

Jesus was worshipped as God. He was worshipped by the angels. The book of Hebrews includes the words, 'Let all God's angels worship him' (1:6). Would God command them to worship one who was not God? That is unthinkable. He was worshipped by the Magi (see Matthew 2:11). They knew who he was. They must have had some communication from God.

The baby was God with us

We think of God above us, around us, but how precious that God is also with us. He is near.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel once turned from God and started worshipping a golden calf (Exodus 32). After this, the Lord threatened to destroy the nation, but Moses pleaded with God to spare them. The Lord relented and agreed to send an angel with them, but declared that he would not go with them. After further pleading, the Lord did agree to go. Then comes Moses' great statement: 'If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here' (Exodus 32:15).

God's presence was all-important to Moses. Does God's presence mean that much to us? Is it vital to us in our daily lives? Is it crucial when we gather as a church?

We can know God's presence because Jesus came into this world. We were once separated from God by our sin: but now we are brought near by the blood

of Christ (Ephesians 2:13). But before that blood could be shed, Jesus had to have blood – he needed a human body, and that is what the incarnation involved.

When Jesus came, he never ceased to be God, but he took on true humanity (Hebrews 2:14-17). He came to us at Bethlehem, and while in one sense his coming was temporary – in that he walked this earth for only a few years – he is still with us. God is with us in Jesus.

The angelic chorus, the manger, the shepherds, the Magi, were all temporary, but God is still with us. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us. Jesus promised to be with us to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). Of course, that necessitated his resurrection.

Implications of the incarnation

If we ask people about the implications of Christmas, most will speak of a time for parties, family gatherings, gifts. All of these things are soon over and

forgotten. Sadly, few will reflect on the birth of our Saviour.

If we take time to meditate upon the implications of God coming in human form, surely our thoughts should be profoundly affected. Let me suggest four implications of the incarnation.

1 If Jesus is God with us, we ought to worship him.

As we have seen, the angels and the Magi worshipped him at his birth. Should we do less? If our first reaction to God becoming man is amazement, our second should be awe, praise, adoration.

This is something not just confined to thoughts about Christmas, but the realisation that God is with us permanently in Jesus. How that should draw us out in worship! Do you worship him? Not just in church services, but in all of life? Do you bow before him, not just at Christmas, but all the time?

2 If Jesus is God with us, we need to understand why he came.

Why did he come into this world? It was to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). All the humiliation involved in his birth was followed by hardship, rejection, and finally death. All that was for us. He came to save the lost.

It was essentially on the cross that he saved his people, but from the cradle, even from the womb, his course was clear, mapped out, inevitable – he was heading for Calvary.

Such love should melt our hearts. It is very personal: Paul speaks of 'the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). How does this affect you? Or is your heart hard and unresponsive?

3 If Jesus is God with us, we must submit to him.

Saul of Tarsus was bent on exterminating the followers of Christ, but everything changed on that fateful day on the Damascus Road (Acts 9). He was stopped in his tracks and thrown to the ground. After Jesus' question, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?', Saul's first question was, 'Who are you, Lord?'

Continued on page 12

Testimonies

God with us

Continued from page 11

When he knew who it was, his second question was, 'What shall I do, Lord?' He was submissive. There was an instant change from hatred to love, from being a persecutor of Christians to an obedient follower.

So often believers seem to be content to do the minimum in the Christian life. They know they should go to church, read the Bible, pray when they go to bed – but often there is not much more.

But in the light of what we have seen, our whole being should be devoted to the Lord:

giving our lives to worshipping him, praising him for his dying love, and yielding our lives to him. If Jesus Christ is Lord and God, there is no other appropriate response. I trust that is your response.

4 If Jesus is God with us, we should practice and enjoy his presence.

We mustn't lose sight of who he is – the Lord of glory – but we can nevertheless know an intimate fellowship with him, the risen Christ. If he is with us, then we are with him. We can walk with him; we can seek his face. We can know his presence – not just in church, but at all



Source: Shutterstock

times, even in the mundane activities of life.

For all eternity he will be with us. What a glorious truth! He is with us when we rejoice in great blessings. He is also with us when we go through great trials and temptations. He is with us when we have confidence in his grace and strength. He is also with us in times of doubt and loneliness. May the Lord help us to practice his presence!

What a wonderful blessing that God in Jesus left the glory of heaven to be with us! What a wonderful blessing that we can know that presence day by day. Is that your experience? Have you responded to his love by turning to him in faith?

I couldn't just inherit being a Christian from Mum and Dad

By Lis Tandy

One of the greatest blessings of my childhood was being brought up in a loving and caring home. My parents not only made me feel valued and cared for, but I also knew that they as Christians prayed for me and wanted me to know their Saviour, Jesus Christ, for myself.

I can't remember a time when I didn't believe in the existence of God. As a young child I assumed that I was a Christian because Mum and Dad were and because I was a generally well-behaved little girl (although my sister could tell plenty of stories to contradict that statement!).

I had friends in church and enjoyed going to the various meetings for children. It was at the age of about eight when God used one of those meetings to show me that having Christian parents and being 'good' didn't mean that I was a Christian myself.

A missionary couple who had worked in the Congo (now Zaire) spoke at the mid-week children's meeting. They described how many Sunday school children had been killed during the uprising in that country. Although this was a terrible thing to happen, they assured us that these children were now in heaven because they had been trusting the Lord Jesus to be their Saviour.

They went on to explain what it means to become a Christian. I

had heard this message so many times before, but now it was as if God was speaking only to me. I realised that if I had been one of those children I wouldn't have gone to heaven – because God is perfect he would not have allowed a sinful person like me into his heaven.

I understood for the first time that I couldn't simply 'inherit' being a Christian from my mum and dad – I had to ask God for forgiveness myself and trust that he would forgive me because Jesus had died in my place, taking the punishment I deserved because he loved me so much. And that's what I did that night.

Was I a changed little girl? Outwardly, probably not very much. But inwardly, yes I was – although I didn't always find it easy to read my Bible and to pray, now I really wanted to and I wanted to live in a way that was pleasing to my heavenly Father.

Being a Christian affects every area of your life. God has blessed me in too many ways to mention here. He has never let me down, although I have often failed him and still do. He has kept, helped, and guided me through all the challenges that life brings – choosing a college, choosing a church, passing exams, failing exams, finding a job, being single when all your friends get married and have children, losing loved ones, discovering ways to serve him.

Jesus is my friend and my brother. He always keeps his

promises, and although I don't always understand why certain things happen in my life, I do know that they are all part of his perfect plan for my life and that they are for my good and his glory.

That God ever loved me at all becomes a more amazing fact as the years go by, but confirms what I discovered at the age of eight – that there is nothing about me that makes me worthy of his love. It is all because he first loved me, and loved me so much that he sent his Son to die in my place.

Because of this I know that one day I will meet those children of the Congo in heaven, and tell them how God used their story to bring me to himself.



The greatest gift



By David Pfeiffer
Minister of Whaddon
Road Evangelical
Presbyterian Church
(EPCEW) in Cheltenham.



What, within reason(!), would be the best Christmas present someone could give you?

Among my side of the family, we have a Secret Santa tradition. My mum acts as the headquarters. To each adult in the family, she assigns another adult. This enables us to spend a bit more money on one member of the family rather than buying lots of little presents for everyone. A record is kept in the headquarters so that when the following year comes round, we are not buying for the same person. The whole arrangement enables us to be a bit bolder in our requests for presents!

So let your imagination run a little further than usual. What would be the present of your choice? A holiday? A deluxe coffee machine? Golf lessons?

What if money was no object? A beautiful 5-bedroomed house with a lovely studio? Enough money to make you financially secure for the rest of your life? A household servant who would cook and clean for you as well as do the gardening?!

The personal gift

The above perhaps reveals some of the things we may daydream about. But I want to tell you, in all seriousness, that there is a gift available to you that far outstrips all those things combined. That gift is not a thing or an experience, but a person: Jesus Christ.

It's very possible that you are not convinced that this is the case. Perhaps you're thinking, 'I'm not so sure that this is such a good gift. It doesn't seem to me that the lives of Christians are any better than anyone

else's. In fact, in some cases, they're worse!'

In one sense, you're right. All over the world there are Christians who are persecuted for believing in Jesus. It's important therefore, that, before I wax lyrical about the greatness of this gift, you're clear on what I am *not* saying.

I am not saying that by receiving Jesus you'll get an easy life. It doesn't mean that you won't suffer. Jesus doesn't promise you freedom from disease, disappointment, or difficult relationships. He doesn't promise great wealth in the here and now. He doesn't promise a life of comfort.

In fact, receiving God's gift may increase your suffering in the here and now. The early Christians faced severe persecution. Christians today all over the world suffer for being Christians.

Jesus said, 'Take up your cross and follow me. He who seeks to save his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will save it.' Jesus is saying that you need to be prepared to give up your life for Jesus. And many Christians in the world have.

Because he's worth it

The question, then, is this: is receiving Jesus Christ really worth it? The answer is *Yes*. Why? For two reasons. First, because of who Jesus is. He is the most glorious person in the universe. He is God himself – eternal, infinite, and unchanging. Perfect in every way. He is

'When Jesus invades your life, he changes you. He begins to turn you into a generous, kind, humble person. You'll still struggle and fail, but you'll be changed.'

just, humble, loving, powerful, compassionate, and wise.

He made everything and is therefore more valuable than it. Everything else derives its value from him. He has an intrinsic worth above everything else.

By believing in Jesus Christ, you receive him. He is yours. He is always with you. You can turn to him at any moment. Even when you are failing and faltering, he never leaves you.

The second reason why Jesus is worth it is because of what he gives. He gives *now* and he will give in the *future*. Through receiving Jesus, you immediately receive the forgiveness of sins. Jesus came to die, to bear the sins of his people, to be punished in their place. Through Christ you have complete forgiveness of sins. You have peace with God. You're accepted by him. God is not against you but for you.

When Jesus invades your life, he changes you. He begins to turn you into a generous, kind, humble person. You'll still struggle and fail, but you'll be changed. In fact, the difficulties of life will be used by God to make you more and more like Jesus, so that even the tough things are gifts.

When you believe in Jesus, you're adopted into God's family. It's a family that stretches throughout time and throughout the world. Whenever you meet another true Christian, you are meeting a brother or a sister.

When you know God through the Lord Jesus, it gives significance to everything you do. When we do something

for someone we love, even if it is menial, it takes on a special significance. Think of changing the nappy of a baby or tying the shoelace of a child. They are small tasks but made precious because of love. As a Christian, everything you do is done for the one who made you and died for you, who loves you with an everlasting love.

The gift that keeps on giving

And then there is what he will give in the future. Jesus is the gift that keeps on giving. Jesus died and rose again. His body no longer suffers decay. It is immune from disease. It is glorious. The sure and certain hope for every true Christian is that they will receive such a body when Jesus returns.

Along with your body, when he returns, Jesus is going to renew the universe. If you belong to his family, you're going to have a special place in it. Have you ever been burgled? You become extra vigilant afterwards, don't you? Think about the protection we need now – burglar alarms and lights, CCTV, keys, insurance, computer protection, life insurance, the police.

Think of it on a national level – the army, the air-force, the navy, the marines, nuclear deterrents. There'll be none of that when Jesus returns. This place is somewhere the doors are not locked.

When heaven kissed earth

And we will see Jesus, a soul-satisfying vision. Now he is in heaven, we on earth. At Christmas, heaven kissed earth. When Jesus comes back, heaven and earth will be united never to be separated. Jesus is easily far greater than any other gift you could conceive. Our problem as human beings is not that we want too much, but that we want too little.

C. S. Lewis put it like this: 'It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.' I urge you: don't settle for mud pies – receive the greatest gift this Christmas: Jesus Christ himself.

Features

‘He will be great’



By Mostyn Roberts
Previously a pastor at
Welwyn Evangelical
Church for over 25
years.

‘He will be great.’ These words are found in the Bible, in Luke 1. Any parent would thrill to have such a prediction made about a baby son. Perhaps you have not achieved greatness, but it is gratifying to think your son or daughter may succeed where you failed.

Kinds of greatness

But what is greatness? In politics, you might think of them becoming Prime Minister, or at least cabinet minister, or (scraping the bottom of the barrel) an MP. In sport, a football star (Premier League, of course); in entertainment, filling stadiums; in science or literature, a Nobel prize winner; in music, a concert pianist; in art, displaying in their own exhibitions. These are the kinds of ambitions we may harbour for our children.

Shakespeare gave the famous advice: ‘Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness and others have greatness thrust upon them.’ We may think of people in public life ‘thrust’ into positions of power and prestige who are manifestly not up to it. We can also think of others who from lowly beginnings have achieved great and enduring things. That’s the kind of greatness we really esteem. But can one be ‘born great’?

Greatness at birth

What kind of greatness can one be born to? Some people do seem to carry a sense of destiny with them from childhood that marks them out early on for great things. The prophecy ‘he will be great’ (Luke 1:32) was made by the angel Gabriel in reference to Jesus before he was even conceived. This wasn’t something simply to be thrust upon him, nor even something



Source: Adobestock

he achieved. He would be great, and that was because of who he was.

Son of the Most High

What does Gabriel say of this child? First, he is ‘The Son of the Most High’. That is, he is the Son of God. He is not only unique, he is equal, as God, with his Father. He is eternal, infinite, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Yes, even as a baby. These qualities and powers may have been concealed, but that does not mean he did not have them. In another Gospel, the apostle John makes this very clear: Jesus was the Word of God, meaning the one who makes God known as a word makes your mind known. He was with God forever and was God (John 1:1).

Truly man

Moreover, he became flesh (John 1:14). This is the beautiful story Luke tells. Jesus’ birth was unique, being born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. Why did this have to be? This birth ensured that he was fully human, a real man. However, the conception by the Holy Spirit meant Jesus was the head of a new humanity, bypassing the flawed and corrupt nature of humanity inherited from Adam.

There was no sin in Jesus. Some people say, ‘Well, if he was not sinful like us he cannot be said to be like us.’ But that is false reasoning. To be free from sin makes one more, not less, human. He was ‘holy’ in a new way. He prepared the way

for God to renew creation and prepare for a new humanity.

King

The baby to be born was also a king. ‘The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David’ (Luke 1:32). David was the greatest king in Israel’s history, but not as great as Jesus. The people over whom Jesus will reign will be God’s people. This means not only believers in Israel but the international church – people of all races and nations who will believe in him. Not only will this kingdom embrace and transcend space, it will transcend time too – ‘of his kingdom there will be no end’ (v. 33).

Great through suffering

There is no one greater than this baby. Mere human greatness cannot begin to compare with the greatness of the Son of God. Everything he was, said, and did was great, for it was God saying and doing it. Jesus had no greatness thrust upon him. In fact, the opposite is true: he had humiliation, suffering, and death thrust upon him. He was born great, but he was also born to die.

In the next chapter of Luke we read of an aged Jew, Simeon, prophesying to Mary that Jesus would be a ‘sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also).’ Mary would know the pain of seeing her son crucified. Not many parents would like that kind of news. Yet this was a major part of his greatness – he was not only great for who he was but for what he

accomplished. To this extent we may indeed say he ‘achieved’ greatness.

Greatness achieved

Remember, his name was ‘Jesus’. That means Saviour. Matthew in his Gospel records another angel telling Joseph (Mary’s husband-to-be) that this would be his name ‘for he will save his people from their sins’ (Matthew 1:21). He would take away the guilt of their sins by dying on the cross as a sacrifice for them.

At various times Jesus spoke of being given a work to do by God his Father, and the night before he died he said in prayer to God that he had ‘accomplished the work that you [the Father] gave me to do’ (John 17:4). That work included the work he would perform on the following day: his death on the cross. This is the irony of Christmas – we cannot speak of the beautiful birth of a special baby without also knowing that his greatness included a cruel and harrowing death. Yet this was not the end.

Greatness proven

Jesus would establish the basis of new and eternal life for his people by rising from the dead. To overcome death is greatness indeed. He was always the Son of God, but his resurrection proved this in a new and powerful way. He had put away his people’s sins, taken the condemnation due to them, and now his resurrection lays the basis for new life.

Greatness to come

Moreover, one day Jesus will return to complete the salvation of his people and the judgment of the world.

Greatness to be worshipped

The proud parent may bask in a child’s greatness. Some parents may even appear to worship such a child. Far better than worshipping even the most successful child, though, is to worship *this* child, Mary’s child. The believer in Jesus Christ receives what no other child can give – sins forgiven, eternal life, enjoyment of his presence, strength and guidance throughout life, and true satisfaction for the soul in worshipping him. Enjoy true greatness this Christmas: worship Jesus. Bow to Christ as Lord and Saviour.

I felt despair and love in the same moment

By Brian Yapura

My name is Brian Agustin Yapura. I was born in the Argentinian city of Salta. On my father's side, there's a mix of Catholicism and paganism – going to mass on a Sunday while also praising Mother Earth (*Pachamama* in Spanish).

On my mother's side of the family, there's a background of evangelical Christianity, though she never believed in the gospel or got involved in church. My parents decided to send me to a Roman Catholic school, meaning I was baptised and confirmed in the Catholic tradition in order to attend.

In my early teens I was very badly behaved at school. Academically I achieved well, but my conduct was far behind. My family had to speak to the headteacher every week because of something or other that I had done. I reached a point where one more incident would get me expelled.

During that time, some friends from a local tennis club shared a book with me about the supposed non-existence of God, written by an atheist author. I devoured it, and started to think that I might not really believe in God. Meanwhile, my brother started attending a church and made friends with an American missionary who had been working in the country for about ten years.

On one occasion, he invited her to stay at our house for about two or three weeks. At the end of her stay, she invited me to a Christian youth camp during the holidays. My family also had holiday plans at my grandmother's house in the rural countryside, but instead I chose the unknown holiday camp.

Being on camp, I thought: *I'll never believe in these things.* But on the second day, and for the first time, my eyes were opened, and through the preaching of the gospel, I understood that God was always there, that I deserved hell, and that I was his enemy because of my sin.

I came to understand why Jesus died on the cross, and how he loved us, and how he gave his life to save us. That moment I felt utter despair was



the same moment I felt more loved than I have ever felt in my life. I spent the rest of that week at camp enthusiastically learning about the Bible.

Church and school

When I returned home, I started going to church, but it wasn't easy knowing that people saw me entering an evangelical church. For the first month, I went, stayed for the service, and then left quickly afterwards. I'd return home almost without speaking to anyone.

Later, I shared the gospel with a friend and invited him to come to church. As he was more sociable than I, I found myself speaking with other people there, and I was invited to other events and made Christian friends.

After the holidays, school started again. But this time

'I came to understand why Jesus died on the cross, and how he loved us, and how he gave his life to save us. That moment I felt utter despair was the same moment I felt more loved than I have ever felt in my life.'

it was going to be different. I knew God's grace. So the first day at school was really interesting. Fairly quickly, my friends offered me at least four ways of pranking people or doing something nasty at school. I just said, 'No, thank you,' over and over again; they didn't understand it much. I was quiet, paying attention, being kind and well-behaved.

After a few months, on a particular occasion, my geography teacher called me to her desk to talk. She used to call me to tell me off about something I'd done. I was confused, thinking, 'What have I done? I don't remember doing anything today.'

And when she saw me, she called my name with the same tone that she used to tell me off, but she quickly got up and smiled at me, asking: 'What happened to you?' I was

relieved because I wasn't going to be suspended! And it was an excellent opportunity to speak to her about Jesus and what he had done in my life. She was both surprised and happy to hear what I said.

Saved to serve

My life changed, but also my dreams and purposes too. I didn't want to do anything but serve the Lord. Before that, my dream was to become a professional tennis player, and if that didn't work out, I'd study to be a lawyer. But after I knew the love of Jesus, I only wanted to serve him, to live and die for him.

I kept playing tournaments, and I made it to some finals, but I went to church on Sunday rather than playing those matches or finals. My desires had changed. With those wishes, I left my home at the age of 18 to serve in the north, in the deep countryside of Argentina, places where there is no drinking water, places where there are no church buildings.

I helped other Christians open new places, preach the gospel to lesser-reached communities, reopen abandoned churches, and more. I didn't have any money with me, just the call from God to go and preach the good news. It was a great experience to use my first years after high school to serve him. But many situations made me realise that I needed more training. And the Lord opened the door to study theology in the Dominican Republic for two years.

Back in Argentina, I kept serving in churches, preaching, training others, and teaching small groups. Those responsibilities made it clear that I needed even more training. And during the recent covid pandemic, the chance to do Bible school online came up.

My first and second year at Cornhill Training Centre was online, and I did it while working part-time as a Spanish teacher and serving at church. Since then, I've learned a lot about handling the Bible correctly. My faith has grown, and my conviction about ministry too. I know and love Jesus more and more, all through the teaching of the Word.

Features

Meeting the King of angels



By Paul Pomeroy
Full-time pastor of
Grace Church, Yate.

The story of the shepherds outside Bethlehem is a well-known part of the Christmas narrative. But have you ever thought about the striking contrast between what they encountered out on the hillside with what they saw in the manger?

Meeting the angels

The shepherds would have been used to long nights watching over their flock. Perhaps they were huddled around a campfire that night, exchanging news of the day's events. Suddenly a bright, heavenly being appears, surrounded by a glorious light! How would you have reacted?

Today, a typical response to unusual events is to whip out our phones and tap 'record' on the camera. What the shepherds witnessed 2,000 years ago was certainly a moment worth capturing, but savouring the unique experience was far from the minds of these shepherds.

Their response was the very opposite of excitement: they were terrified. These men who would have been ready to fend off predators, thieves and bandits for the sake of their flock were suddenly petrified in the presence of a solitary angel.

The glory of the Lord

Why was this? Were the shepherds just shocked at such brightness on a dark night? Did they just need time for their eyes to adjust? No. The reason for their terror is explained. The brightness was in fact the 'glory of the Lord' shining around them. There was a purity, a godliness, a holiness to this brightness. It was a *visible* representation of the *invisible* nature of God, particularly his



Source: Adobestock

majestic righteousness, love, and justice.

For the shepherds – mere mortals like us who were sinful and unworthy – the sight is overwhelming. The contrast between the darkness of our sinfulness and the light of God's purity is vast, and angels carry something of that holy light. It exposes sin and reveals how inadequate we are before God. Angels have great power to act for God. This is revealed in the description of a 'heavenly host' which joins the first angel.

The word 'host' means an army. Angels are like heaven's soldiers who do God's bidding. Nothing less than a mighty army stands before the shepherds on the hillside outside Bethlehem. They know that they are at the mercy of this heavenly force who could bring holy judgment upon them in a moment.

The message

What is the message, then, that the angel brings to the shepherds? It is that someone has been born for them, and that that someone is none other than the Lord (God) himself. We are told that the angel is 'of the Lord'; the glory they have seen is 'of the Lord'; and the one born to them is 'Christ, the Lord'! If seeing the heavenly warrior was terrifying, how much more to see the Commander! If seeing a mere

reflection of God's glory brought the shepherds to their knees, how could they endure seeing the fullness of his glory!

Meeting the King of angels

But who are the shepherds actually invited to see? They are told they will find *a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger*. The Lord of glory; the Lord of that mighty army of angels is – a baby! He is not a great and terrifying figure from the skies; he is not even dressed in earthly glory with dazzling robes and a golden crown.

The angel announces that he is wrapped in some basic cloth and can be found in an animal feeding trough for his bed. This must have been a stunning statement to the shepherds. No wonder they were in a rush to see it.

We read that the shepherds quickly went to Bethlehem, found Mary and Joseph and, of course, the baby in the manger. But now there is no mention of fear, shock, or trembling among the shepherds. The King, the Lord of those majestic angels, is here in front of them as a harmless baby.

What is your typical response to seeing a baby? For most of us it's something along the lines of 'Awww!' as we coo over the wriggling bundle of cuteness. Surely the shepherds

were no different. But what a contrast those expressions of fondness were from the cries of fright they had uttered when the angel appeared to them earlier that night.

The wonder of the gospel

In that irony is the wonder of the gospel. The King of glory, who could rightly come down from heaven to terrify us in judgment, came to us as a helpless baby. The one who could blind us in a moment by his divine glory has appeared in such a way that men could look down upon him lying in the manger.

It is no wonder that the angel said to the shepherds, 'Do not be afraid,' and that the heavenly host could sing of 'peace on earth'. Jesus Christ has come so that we may look upon the face of God and live. This ties in with how Jesus came to deal with the problem of our sin. God's holiness burns in anger against sin, but he chose to bear that terror himself by becoming a man.

The King of angels lowered himself to humanity in order that he might endure the righteous wrath of God against sin upon the cross. This enables reconciliation between man and God to take place; this enables man to be considered acceptable before his Maker. When we look upon God in

Jesus and believe in him, the fear of his judgment is completely removed.

Fullness of glory

One day we will see the fullness of the glory of God. That same baby from Bethlehem is now in heaven and one day soon he is going to return to judge the world. We read in the book of Revelation how, on that day, many will say to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.'

Like the shepherds, the whole world will be minding its own business when suddenly heaven will open and each one of us will be faced with the terrifying glory of Christ.

We don't need to be afraid of that day if we have first looked in the manger. If we have seen Jesus in his first coming and the glory of God in the cross, then we are ready to see his second coming and the glory of God in the judgment of the world.

Are you ready to see the glory of God? Perhaps it makes you feel a little fearful. This Christmas, why don't you join the shepherds and find your fears vanish away as you look into the manger? In Jesus, and in him alone, there is full forgiveness for sin and perfect righteousness for any who will look to him in faith.