

# T<sup>GCI</sup>oday

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

MARCH – MAY 2011



Are there  
**trinkets or  
treasures**  
in your wagon?

# Haiti

update: standing  
fast in hope

**Easter's**  
good news for all

Inspiring the  
**volunteer**  
in **you**







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## About GCI Today

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*GCI Today is published by Grace Communion International to celebrate and share the good news of God's love in ways that express practical help, hope and encouragement*

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GCI Today is published quarterly by Grace Communion International ABN 53096 517 190. Level 1, Building 2, 175 Varsity Parade, Varsity Lakes, Queensland 4227, Australia.

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Printed by Beaudesert Times.

# Hope emerges

## *out of a summer of destruction*

What a summer! After years of drought and water shortages, our nation has seen the worst flood in Queensland's history, the biggest cyclone in a century, destructive floods in Victoria, heatwaves, and bushfires in Western Australia. A summer of despair. Just when it seemed it couldn't get any worse, it did. And as this issue was about to go to press we witnessed the devastating earthquake in Christchurch. Our hearts go out to all those affected by this tragedy.

In Queensland, an area the size of Germany and France was covered with flood water. Three quarters of the state was declared a natural disaster. The capital city went under. An inland tsunami on top of the mountain range in Toowoomba surprised everyone. The Lockyer Valley was flooded by a devastating and deadly wall of water, washing away homes, cars, trees, and leaving people dead in its wake. Soldiers sent in to look for the missing, and help clean up, described it as exactly like being in a war zone.

It was estimated that fifteen Sydney Harbours of water fell on South-east Queensland. It is doubtful there has been anyone in Queensland left untouched – if not directly then through family members, friends or neighbours. Trendy inner-city suburbs and remote bush locations alike have experienced the power of the forces of nature unleashed in this land of fire and flooding rain.

"Our toughest hour; our greatest challenge." These were the commonly used phrases. And tough it has been. Horrendous. Heartbreaking. Yet, in the midst of it all, there has also been hope. We have seen the way possessions can quickly disappear. And we have all been reminded of the things that really matter: one another, friendship, kindness, compassion, generosity, service, community. We are, after all, all in this together. We've been reminded that we need one another. While the material may be fragile and fleeting, these are the things that endure.

Rob and Laonie were among friends who operated a food van on the muddy, ruined streets of Brisbane and Ipswich in the aftermath of the flooding, serving the volunteers who are helping clean up, and the local residents as well. One thing became evident, a microcosm of the summer. People enjoyed the cold and hot drinks, and the food, yes. But what they also came for was the conversation, the human contact, a face, someone to listen to them tell their stories. And what stories each person had!

In this issue of *GCI Today* we look further at some of the themes that emerged in the conversation that surrounded this summer of destruction and the hope that emerged. They included the spirit of volunteering, the spiritual dimension to life, the importance of relationships and the things that endure versus the "stuff" that can so easily be taken from us. We hope you find it helpful and encouraging.

**John McLean**  
*Mission and National Director, Australia*



***We have  
all been  
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ORDINARY PEOPLE

# Extraordinary contributions

by Simone Worthing

*As vital as volunteers are in a crisis, they also play an enormous and essential role in the **everyday life** of communities*





**2011 is the tenth anniversary of the United Nations' International Year of the Volunteer (IYV+10) – and this year's theme is "Inspiring the volunteer in you"**

**T**HE VOLUNTEERS CAME in their thousands. Young and old, individuals and families, community groups and neighbours, friends and strangers, all wanting to help those in need in the aftermath of the recent devastating floods in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria.

They filled sandbags, moved households, washed thick mud from homes and possessions, fed evacuees and emergency services workers, and provided a listening ear and emotional support to the distressed.

The offers of help inundated charities both large and small, and websites set up to process volunteers were swamped.

The response of these volunteers encouraged and uplifted, not just those directly affected by the floods, but the rest of the country as it watched events unfold.

"In a crisis, it is people volunteering to help their neighbours which has defined our response as a compassionate, civilised nation," said Tim Costello, CEO of World Vision Australia.

## In a crisis

As the floods and many other disasters have highlighted, volunteers nationwide have always responded in times of crisis, and their work is critical.

They can help take care of immediate needs from providing food and clothing, administering first aid, and reconnecting people with loved ones. Trained volunteers also support professional teams, particularly rescue and emergency crews and other vital services.

Volunteers also offer emotional support to those in shock, traumatised or grieving after a crisis. This is not just through counselling services or support networks, but through just

being there as a solid reassuring presence.

"As soon as I saw the Salvos with their food vans and encouraging smiles, I felt better right away," said one young mother at an evacuation centre in regional Queensland. "I knew we'd lost everything, but their presence was reassuring in the chaos."

Another man welcomed the State Emergency Service, with its many trained volunteers, to his inundated house during the floods in Brisbane. "I knew my house would go under, but my family would be safe because of those guys," he said.

## Regular commitment

As vital as volunteers are in a crisis, they also play an enormous and essential role in the everyday life of communities in areas including community health care, environment conservation, emergency services, education, social justice and sports.

From firefighters and telephone counselors to sports coaches and drivers for meals on wheels, countless men and women around the world give freely of their time and skills every day in support of those who need help, both in times of crisis and on a regular basis.

These volunteers, from all ages and stages in life, play critical roles in the heart and soul of our society. Without their time, effort, and ongoing commitment, many organisations would be unable to operate, and many needs would go unmet.

"We so appreciate the level of help we have received in the aftermath of the floods," said a representative of one major Australian charity. "If we could get even half this level of commitment and assistance on a regular basis, we could really expand our services."

A volunteer coordinator from another not-for-profit agency said that the organisation

is always looking for people who would like to make a commitment to regular volunteer work and who are willing to learn new skills.

"If we can rely on an ongoing commitment, even a small number of hours, we can reach out to many more people," he said.

In 2001, the world celebrated the United Nations International Year of the Volunteer. Jocelyn Newman, Minister for the Department of Family and Community Services for part of that year said: "Volunteers and voluntary organisations build leaders, create and sustain communities, develop people's skills and encourage partnerships – where there is strong and committed volunteer ethos, there is strong community."

Volunteers and communities both need, and benefit from, each other.

## Everyday heroes

Volunteers give their time, their skills, and their positive caring perspective in a huge variety of ways:

Mary is retired and uses her sewing ability to make outfits for children staying at a women's refuge. "I can only make a few each month, but I love knowing that the children have something new and special in their difficult circumstances," she says.

Josh is at university and spends one evening a fortnight speaking English with a migrant family who are trying hard to learn the language. "I've become good friends with this family," Josh says, "and I'm learning some of their language and traditions too."

Ellen works part-time and also volunteers for regular shifts at a children's hospital as a "cuddle carer" – holding babies in need of safe and caring cuddles. "I did the special training for this and really enjoy being able to help the babies and families this way," she says.



## Benefits of volunteering

- Learn or develop a new skill
- Take part in your community
- Motivation and sense of achievement
- Boost your career options
- New interests and hobbies
- New experiences
- Meet a diverse range of people

Source: <http://www.worldvolunteer-web.org/resources/>

David works full-time and also runs a monthly action group against human trafficking for a major not-for-profit organisation. He says that, "It's not much in terms of hours, but we're trying to make an ongoing difference."

Liam is at high school and helps out with his church youth group each Friday night. "I don't do much, but hopefully just hanging with the guys helps them a bit," he says.

Our nation and our local communities could not function effectively without these special people.

## What about you?

Most of us like the thought of volunteering; of selflessly giving our time to make a difference in our community. In times of crisis it can often be easier to sacrifice our time and make the effort to help when the need is so immediate.

It can be harder though, in our busy lives, to find time to volunteer on a more regular and ongoing basis.

Although millions of hours are already devoted to volunteer work each year, the volunteer sector is facing a chronic shortage of workers. And this at a time when people are increasingly looking to voluntary associations to do so much.

So, perhaps rather than waiting for that often elusive "more time" to appear in our schedules, now might be the time to find something we're interested in volunteering for and commit to making a difference.

There are so many ways in which volun-

teers can help: sharing professional skills and experience; at schools, museums, zoos, parks and hospitals; as counsellors, cleaners, companions, gardeners, drivers and cooks; and with charities, foundations, community centres and more.

**For more ideas and information, visit these volunteering sites:**

- <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org> which includes extensive information on state, territory and regional volunteer, resource, and community centres.
- <http://www.govolunteer.com.au> which provides information about volunteering throughout Australia and overseas.



International Year of Volunteers  
10th anniversary  
2011

9-15 May 2011

### NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK

This year's National Volunteer Week theme is "**Inspiring the Volunteer in You**" to align with the United Nations' theme for International Year of the Volunteer (2001) plus 10 (IYV+10).

**For more information go to: <http://www.iyvplus10.com.au/> and <http://volunteeringaustralia.org>**

## Volunteering Australia at a glance

- Approximately 713 million hours are volunteered annually.
- The average weekly number of hours volunteered per person is 1.1 hours.
- The average annual number of hours volunteered is 56 hours.

### Who volunteers?

- 34% of the adult population (5.4 million people).
- Slightly more women (36%) than men (32%).
- 44% of those aged 35-44 years volunteer, the highest participation level of any age group.

### What do volunteers do?

The four most common types of organisation for which people volunteer are:

- Sport and physical recreation
- Education and training
- Community/welfare
- Religious groups

**Source: <http://volunteeringaustralia.org>**

**Simone Worthing** is the editor of the Salvation Army's quarterly *Women in Touch* magazine <http://salvos.org.au/about-us/news-and-resources/women-in-touch-magazine.php> and a writer for the monthly *Pipeline* magazine.



# What's in your wagon – trinkets or treasure?

by John McLean

*It needn't take a crisis to find the true treasures in life*

**N**APOLÉON'S ARMY WAS only a couple of days away from Moscow, about to flood into the defenceless city. In Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a count is rushing to pack the belongings in his palatial home before he flees to his country estate to avoid the approaching invasion. The servants are frantically filling as many wagons as they can find with the count's expensive and prized possessions – rugs, furniture, paintings, clothes, jewellery.

Outside, the streets are full of wounded and dying Russian soldiers with nowhere to go. There is little doubt that they will be butchered when Napoleon's army arrives. More than thirty of the count's wagons have been loaded; still he is filled with regret that he doesn't have time to take everything with him and must leave behind some of the accumulated wealth of a lifetime.

Just then his daughter approaches him and simply says to him that this is not right. They are saving possessions – things – while leaving the people to perish. The count is moved. Deep down he knows she is right. So he orders his servants to unpack all the possessions from his wagons, and to replace them with as many of the wounded soldiers as they can carry. And so he retreats to his country estate saving people rather than possessions.

In recent weeks Australia has experienced the worst natural floods in our history, followed by cyclones, while other parts of the country have had devastating bushfires. Property has been destroyed, homes ruined, lives have been lost. We have witnessed surges of water hurling cars like they were toys, washing some



houses away and wrecking others, uprooting trees, destroying roads, railway lines and bridges. It has been tragic, sad and heartbreaking.

Yet in the midst of it all, we have also seen amazing courage, selflessness, cooperation and service. People, standing in the midst of their ruined homes, facing the loss of possessions, valuables and the work of a lifetime, have smiled, cried, smiled again, and said simply that life goes on. They have pitched in to help strangers and communities. Neighbours who had previously had only a nodding

acquaintance with one another cleared muck from one another's homes together. The "Mud Army" of volunteers embodied the spirit that rose in response to the challenge presented by this devastating natural calamity.

## Impoverished but enriched

In a crisis we know, deep down, that people matter more than things. Indeed, at such times it seems we can be clear and comfortable that family, friends, mateship, community and helping one another are the things that really matter.





## *If the treasure of life is **spiritual, relational**, why not make that our focus and priority?*

loves us, and in his grace wants to share his life with us. It's good news in the midst of all the bad news.

Scientists tell us that we are at our happiest when we are helping others. Interesting, isn't it? Not when we are busy accumulating, acquiring, defending, and protecting the "stuff" of life. When Jesus encourages us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness he is talking about our focus, our priorities, in life. And then he says we won't need to worry about all the other stuff – it will be provided.

He is telling us how to simplify the complexities in life – by prioritising the things that really matter.

If life is truly more than material trinkets and trash, why do we spend so much time and effort dedicated to their pursuit? If the treasure of life is spiritual, relational, why not make that our focus and priority?

At the heart of this is the treasure of a relationship with God. "Your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom," Jesus said (Luke 11:32). The kingdom is relational – sharing the life of the Father, Son and Spirit. Through Jesus, we share in this life, and in this righteousness. (It's not a matter of working harder to become more righteous by ourselves – it's participating in the righteousness of Christ.)

No wonder Jesus's repeated admonition here is "don't be overly anxious", or simply, "don't worry". If our priorities are spiritual, kingdom-focused, we can get on with life – a life of love and service. Through his incarnation (becoming one of us) Jesus has redeemed all of life, so by all means enjoy the physical while we have it, but set our hearts on the imperishable, the permanent, the eternal. Life is more than stuff, possessions. It's about people, grace, kindness and love. It's about enjoying relationship with God and one another.

Why wait for a crisis? As the year ahead unfolds, why not ask ourselves "what's in our wagon?" Trinkets and trash? Or the true treasure of life?

Terry Sweetman, a columnist writing in the *Sunday Mail*, after describing his own experience with the Brisbane flood, expressed it cogently: "Materially we are briefly impoverished. Spiritually we are enriched – now and forever. In exchange for some trinkets and trash devoured by flood waters, we have found some treasures we have forgotten existed ... my pledge is that we will never again neglect the garden of friendship from which we have harvested so much kindness" (January 16, 2011).

In the Sermon on the Mount, probably the best known of Jesus's teaching, Jesus makes the observation that life is more than possessions and eating and drinking. He isn't saying that eating and drinking, and our material possessions, are unimportant, just that there is more to life than these things. He isn't condemning working, earning money, going into business, saving, or building a house. He is saying that there is more to life than these things.

Deep down we know this to be true. In times of crisis the distractions and details of everyday life, the tyranny of the urgent and the pressures of the present seem to fall away and we see just that much more clearly just how true it is – life is more than things. What really matters are our relationships.

### **Happiness through relationships**

God is a relational Being. He is love. And deep down in the human heart there is a need for friendship, fellowship, relationship – a need for love. We know it. We get so busy we forget it, or so distracted by the teeming trivia of life that we are not conscious of it, but we know it to be true.

The story of the Bible is not about a harsh, judgmental God who can't wait to smite us. It's about a God who reveals himself in Jesus as one who endures all the reality of human life along with us – its ups and downs, pain and celebrations. Who



# The *lens* through which we understand the Bible

AS ANYONE WHO has taken a photograph knows, what you see in the photo depends upon where your camera is set. Your camera “sees” through the lens, and what you see in the photo is the result.

Our previous article (Dec 2010 – Feb 2011 issue) concluded with the need to read the Bible through the lens of Jesus Christ. We all tend to “see” the Bible through our own lens. We may vigorously deny this and say we just read what’s there, but the fact remains we see through our particular perspective. We see through our family of origin, education, church experience, life journey. This is one of the reasons there are so many different interpretations of the Bible and particular passages within it.

Sometimes we may “buy” a lens promoted by someone who claims special or inside knowledge. Over the years, various “keys” have been offered as the only correct way to understand the Bible. Often they are portrayed as being only for the few, and unknown by everyone else. If only you have this special secret key, you and the few like you can unlock the hidden meaning of the text. The sad thing is that these notions couldn’t be more inaccurate – as much as they may “sell” in the marketplace.

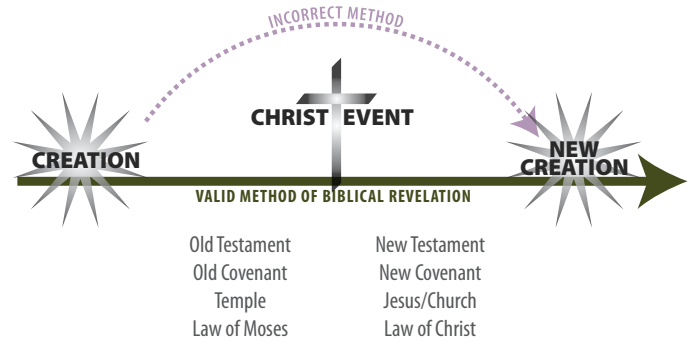
The Bible itself is quite clear about it. Jesus came to become a human being – one of us – to show us who God is. “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,”

he said (John 14:9). “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No-one can come to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well” (John 14:6-7).

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews put it this way: “In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:1-3). (See also John 1:1-14.)

God did indeed speak through prophets and writers before Jesus. Now Jesus has come, the one through whom the universe was made, and he is the “exact representation” of God’s being – the image, the “photograph” even, the exegesis – or, much better, the full, final and complete revelation of the Father. Everything before Jesus was important, but incomplete. Only in Jesus do we find the full story, the full revelation of God.

He is the central focus of the unfolding plan of salvation history – not just another step in that process, but THE step from which we make sense of all the others. Consider the following diagram, adapted from Graeme Goldsworthy’s *Gospel and Kingdom*, and *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*:



“The Christ Event” means his birth, life and teachings, death, resurrection and ascension to the Father. The diagram explains that the Christ Event is not just one event (however important) in the whole history of events. Again, it is THE event in history which changes the meaning and understanding of all other events.

As theologian Thomas T. Torrance puts it, the Old Covenant – the Old Testament – helps provide the furnishing of the mind to prepare for the Christ Event, but the Christ Event is necessary to fully understand and appreciate the old. Therefore we must be careful to read all the text through the Christ Event and not skip to any interpretation that does not come through this event. That is, we don’t simply take something out of the Old Testament and bring it directly into today without first going through Jesus Christ. The question will be:

What does this mean in and through the revelation of the Father through Jesus by the Spirit? We must always be Christ-centred in our reading.

We then find that in Jesus our lives are never the same again. In encountering him, we are drawn into relationship, communion, community. He and the Father dwell in us through the Spirit (John 14:18,20,23). In Jesus’s words, “I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (v. 20). All our lives are “in Christ,” and we are caught up in the mutual indwelling, what is called the *perichoresis* of the Father, Son and Spirit. We now live in, and out of, this relationship with Christ – everything is “I, yet not I, but Christ who dwells in me,” as Torrance paraphrases Paul’s message in Galatians 2:20.

To see and understand the full revelation of the Father through the Son by the Spirit, we need to read all the Scriptures through the lens of Jesus.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** on how to make the most of your Bible reading, you can sign up for the Ambassador College of Christian Ministry online class “Jesus and the Gospels”. Or you can arrange for the class, seminars or training sessions to come to your congregation. Please contact [info@ambascol.org](mailto:info@ambascol.org) or telephone 07 5553 6000.

# Lazarus and the Rich Man:



By J. Michael Feazell

**H**AVE YOU EVER heard that God is incapable of reaching those who do not become believers before they die? It's a cruel and destructive doctrine, and its so-called "proof" is a single verse in the parable known as Lazarus and the Rich Man. But like all of Scripture, the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man falls within

a particular context and needs to be understood in that context.

It is always bad business to base a doctrine on one verse alone, and especially on a verse in a story designed to make a different point altogether. Jesus told the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man for two reasons: 1) to expose and condemn the refusal of the leaders of Israel to believe in him, and 2) to reverse common assumptions about

riches being a sign of God's favour and poverty being proof of God's disfavour.

The underlying revelation in this story is that, in fact, there is one who crosses chasms for the sake of sinners.

Lazarus and the Rich Man is the final parable of five that Jesus told in response to a group of Pharisees and scribes who, being lovers of money and self-importance, were disgruntled over the fact that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them (Luke 15:1 and 16:14). First, Jesus told three parables, The Shepherd Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Sheep, The Woman Who Rejoices Over Finding Her Lost Coin, and The Father Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Son.

In telling these three parables, Jesus wanted the tax collectors and sinners, as well as the grumbling Pharisees and scribes who believed they had no need of repentance, to know that "there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7). But there's more.

## Money vs. God

Jesus moves to the fourth story, the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1-14). Its point: If you love money, as the Pharisees did, you will not love God. Jesus then pointedly told the Pharisees, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight" (verse 15).

The Law and the Prophets stand as witnesses, Jesus told them, that the kingdom of God has arrived and that everyone is urgently piling into it (verses 16-17). His implied message: "Because you prize the things of men, not the things of God, you are rejecting God's urgent summons to enter his kingdom, which can be done only through me."

Then in verse 18, Jesus implied that the Jewish religious leaders have "divorced" themselves from the Law and the Prophets, which witness to him,



# a tale of unbelief

and in so doing have rejected God. (Compare Jeremiah 3:6.)

Then, beginning in verse 19, in the context of the previous four parables, Jesus told the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man.

## A tale of unbelief

There are three characters in the story. First is the rich man (representing the Pharisees who love money), then the miserable beggar Lazarus (representing a class of people despised by the Pharisees), and finally, Abraham (whose bosom or lap was a Jewish symbol of comfort and peace in the afterlife).

In the story, the beggar Lazarus dies. But Jesus surprises the listeners by saying that “the angels carried him to Abraham’s side” (verse 22). That was exactly the opposite of what the Pharisees expected would happen to a man like Lazarus. They believed that people like Lazarus were poor and diseased beggars because they were under God’s curse, and therefore they believed that such people go to be tormented in Hades when they die.

“Not so,” Jesus is telling them. “Your worldview is upside down. You know nothing of my Father’s kingdom. Not only are you wrong about how my Father feels about the beggar, but you are wrong about how my Father feels about you.”

Jesus completes the surprise by telling them that the rich man also died and was buried, but he, not the beggar, is the one who found himself being tormented in Hades. The rich man looked up and saw Abraham far off with none other than Lazarus by his side. He cried out, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire” (verses 23-24).

But Abraham had news for the rich man. He tells him in essence, “All your life you loved riches and had no time for the likes of Lazarus. But I do have time for the likes of Lazarus, and now

he is with me, and you have nothing.” And then comes the verse that is so often torn out of context: “Besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us” (Luke 16:26).

## Here and there

Have you ever wondered why anybody could possibly want to pass from “here to you”? It is obvious why someone might want to cross from “there to us,” but from “here to you” makes no sense. Or does it? Abraham began his words to the rich man by addressing him as “son,” then points out to him that not even those who might want to get to him are able to – because of the great chasm.

But the underlying revelation in this story is that, in fact, there is one who crosses chasms for the sake of sinners.

## The bridge across the chasm

God gave his Son for all sinners, not just for sinners like Lazarus, but for sinners like the rich man, too (John 3:16-17). But the rich man, a symbol of the Pharisees and the scribes who gathered to condemn Jesus, didn’t want the Son of God. The rich man wanted what he always wanted – his own comfort at the expense of others.

Jesus’ condemnation of the unbelief of the Pharisees in this story concludes with the rich man arguing that if someone would warn his brothers, they would not come into the place where he was. But Abraham points out, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them” (verse 29). Jesus had already told them (see verses 16-17) that the Law and Prophets are a testimony to him, a testimony they had rejected (compare John 5:45-47 and Luke 24:44-47).

“No, father Abraham” the rich man responded, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent” (Luke 16:30). Abraham responds, “If they do not listen to Moses and the

Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (verse 31).

And they weren’t convinced; the Pharisees, scribes and chief priests who conspired to have Jesus crucified also conspired to have soldiers lie about his resurrection (Matthew 27:62-66), and proceeded to persecute and kill those who became believers.

## Missing the point

Jesus did not tell this parable to paint us a portrait of heaven and hell. It is a parable of judgment against the unbelieving religious leadership of the time, and unkind, selfish rich people of all times. Jesus uses the common Jewish imagery of the afterlife (that of Hades for the wicked and “being with Abraham” for the righteous) as a literary backdrop to make the point. In this parable Jesus was not commenting on the validity or accuracy of Jewish imagery of the afterlife; he was simply using that imagery as scenery for his story.


Jesus’ focus was not to satisfy our itching curiosities about what heaven and hell are like. His priority is to let us in on God’s secrets (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 1:9, etc.), the mystery of the ages (Ephesians 3:4-5) – that in him, Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, God has always been reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Our preoccupation with the details of the afterlife can only lead us away from the very point missed by the rich man in the story: Believe in the One who came back from the dead.

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**I**T WON'T BE long before the Easter holiday weekend is upon us. It stands in our national calendar as one of the big religious events of the year. Some church leaders will even get a sound bite on the evening news.

For Christians, it's a time of commemorating the death and celebrating the resurrection of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. But many others wonder what relevance the Easter season has in our post-Christian society. Which is a pity, really.

The story of the gospel ("gospel" means "good news") is that in Jesus, God became one of us. He took on our life – real, human life, in all its vicissitudes, with all its suffering, pain, and despair, its joy, hope and delight. It is not the story of a distant God who is indifferent to human suffering, or who enjoys visiting disaster on us to punish us. It is not the story of human beings struggling valiantly but vainly to appease such a God so he will not wipe them out.

It is the story of a Relational Being who creates and sustains out of love and hope, and who extends his fellowship into our lives. It is the story of a Being who creates, not because of any external requirement, but because he wants to include all of creation in his fellowship. It's the story of a Being who becomes one of us so that we might share what he has.

Most people with even a passing grasp of Easter know that Jesus died for us. That is, he took our place. The full message is that he also was resurrected for us and lives for us. That is, he takes our place, or stands in for us at every aspect of our existence. And not just "us", but for all humankind.

He came to exchange all that he is and has with us – with all that we are and have. He came to take our alienation, hurt, separation, our broken and fractured humanity, and exchange it for a new creation – a

new humanity, reconciled and at one with his Father. The hope is not just that he has substituted his righteousness for our sin (although it includes that), but that he has substituted his entire existence for us. In him we are given a new existence in fellowship with the Father by the Spirit. An existence in eternity.

And this is good news for all people. Jesus, the second Adam, brings righteousness and life for all human beings (Romans 5:6-21).

Jesus did not come as a divine book-keeper to carefully balance the accounts in some dusty life ledger. He didn't come as a divine spanner to "fix" a few things that were mechanically wrong. He came as the full revelation of God that we might know him, and through him have access to peace, joy, grace and hope.


There's a big difference between religion and the gospel. Religion is designed to give people a list of things to do to stay on good terms with whatever deity they profess to worship. The trouble is, no one has ever kept their particular list of rules well enough to be absolutely sure their deity is happy with them. People need more than mere religion. What people really need is good news, not a lot of religious talk about how bad they are, emphasising their guilt and sinfulness.

That's what the gospel is – good news. The gospel removes the guilty conscience altogether. It declares you clean and forgiven, and even lets you know that the Holy Spirit is at work healing your mind. Sadly, though, we can often try to turn even this good news into mere religion, imagining falsely that the gospel is just another condemnation of evil instead of God's declaration of a new creation we share together in Christ.

Most of us are so used to having a guilty conscience that when we start believing

***Easter isn't a celebration of religion,  
but of the good news of new life for all***



A photograph of two women in traditional Middle Eastern attire, including headscarves and long robes, standing in a cave. They are looking out of a large opening in the cave wall, where a bright, glowing light emanates, suggesting an entrance to a new world or a source of divine light. The women are positioned in the foreground, with their backs to the camera, looking towards the light. The cave's interior is dark and textured, while the light outside is bright and ethereal.

the gospel about our complete cleansing from sin, we begin feeling guilty for not feeling guilty! It's as though we think God will like us better if we refuse to feel forgiven and clean, if we drag ourselves around burdened by how miserable and hopeless we are. Hebrews 10:19-22 says, "Therefore ... since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience ..."

Those are words of confidence – confidence to be at home in the presence of God, not crushed down with a load of guilt. It's confidence in God himself who loves us so much that he sent his Son to remove our guilt and give us all the privileges of beloved children. It has nothing to do with how good we are or think we are, but with faith in what God has done.

The gospel, thank God, is not religion. It's good news, the good news that God loves you so much that he sent his Son to bear the curse of your sinfulness and rise from the dead so you can be forever at peace with him. More, we can "participate in the divine nature" with Jesus (2 Peter 2:4).

And the point of all this is not just for the individual (although it is that too). It is that this good news includes everybody. It delivers us from mistaking bigotry for zeal, obsession for passion, and judgmentalism for righteousness. It delivers us from thinking that any step in salvation depends entirely upon us. (If it does, even the smallest step, we are in trouble!) Our righteousness, our life, is in Christ. And it enables us to recognise the connection between and among all human beings, created for fellowship with God.

It makes for a happy holiday, and a happy life, now and forever.

# Celebrating the gospel





# Standing fast in hope as Haiti's misery continues

by John Halford

## *Interview with Joseph Franklin, GCI pastor in Haiti*

**I**N 2010, THE small, poverty-ridden Caribbean nation of Haiti was struck with a crippling earthquake, soon followed by a devastating hurricane and a resulting outbreak of cholera, all accompanied by the ever-present political unrest and a general breakdown of social order.

GCI has several small congregations in Haiti and operates a small school in the capital city of Port-au-Prince. We spoke with Pastor Joseph Franklin about how things are going for our members and for the struggling nation.

**Christian Odyssey:** Would you describe that moment at 4:55 pm on the evening of January 12 when the earthquake struck?

**Joseph Franklin:** The earth shook for about 30 seconds. My wife, our helper and I were blessed with the chance to get out of the house. Billy, our younger son, was caught in the street nearby. Thanks to God, he managed to reach home after a few minutes.

We spent two nights sleeping outside.

We live in an area where the houses are not crowded together and have back and front yards, so we were comparatively less exposed to danger. In downtown Port-au-Prince, unfortunately, the buildings are crowded together. When they collapsed, they did not leave any space for people to escape. That was the main cause of such a high loss of life.

From the top of the hill where we live, we could look over the town. It looked like a huge pile of crushed carton boxes. The first estimation calculated the number of deaths at 300,000. That number was far from the reality. It became evident that perhaps as many as half a million inhabitants in Port-au-Prince perished under the debris.

We can predict a hurricane—even give it a name and determine its trajectory. But an earthquake is a different story. You cannot know if or when the earth is going to tremble under your heels. It's sudden and it's horrifying.

**CO:** How are things now, one year after the earthquake?

**JF:** There has not been much improvement. In less than a year we have experienced a hurricane, the cholera epidemic, increasing criminal activity and political unrest. Essential services are still unreliable. Every single institution existing in this country has received its share of the adversities. The general condition has gotten even more agonizing for individuals and for institutions alike. Governments, non-governmental organizations, churches, schools, the university – all are struggling to keep going.

**CO:** Is the situation in Haiti hopeless?

**JF:** It all depends on how you look at it. You can see difficulties in every opportunity or opportunities in every difficulty. Those who still have a vision say that it doesn't make sense to give up, but it makes a lot of sense to stand fast.

By the grace of our faithful Lord, our little local church is strong. In French we often use this proverb: "C'est par la tete que pourrit le poisson." (The fish only





**Although our old church building was shaken, it remained standing.** The interior had to be gutted and refinished. There was only minor damage to the other school buildings. Although the classrooms were not seriously damaged, many children are still afraid to be under solid roofs. Much of the school's classes and other activities take place outside or under tarpaulins. One of the walls that surround the school collapsed. Fortunately no one was hurt. Ours was one of the few schools in Port au Prince not to suffer extensive damage. Many were entirely destroyed. To help children recover from the trauma, and to regain a sense of normalcy, routine activities, like raising the flag every morning, are very important.

rots from the head.)The Body of Christ will stay sane as long as it stays attached to its head, Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, Christians sometimes are tempted to give up in frustration. Frustration is human, but giving way to it may lead to forgetting the abundance of the grace of God. The secret is not letting our frustrations obscure our vision of the kingdom.

David said that when he walked in the valley of the shadow of death, he was not afraid, because the faithful shepherd (Jesus) walked with him (Psalm 23:4).This is especially comforting because verse 6 says that walking with the Lord in the valley of the shadow of death leads to grace and happiness. Who could turn away from the path to grace and happiness? The members have lost belongings, but they have stayed strong in spirit. They have not lost hope. They have

learned to stand on the Lord's promises and to count their blessings one by one.

**CO: Our school was one of the few in Port au Prince to escape major damage. Have you been able to reopen?**


**JF:** Our school's concrete buildings were well built. They were partly damaged, but not as much as the wood building where the church meets. Nevertheless, we have been able to repair the wood building, thanks to financial help from our brothers and sisters around the world made through the home office in Glendora, California.

At the end of March we launched a four-month program for the children of the community around the school. It was a special session of psychosocial assistance to help the children get over the trauma and prepare for when things get back to normal.

The 2010-2011 academic year began on October 11 in spite of the political uncertainty prior to the elections. We opened with 80 children from a list of 134. We expect to have most of the rest of them return for the second quarter.

The situation is still very unstable. We have to take it day by day. But we pray for a peaceful political atmosphere. We trust everything to the mighty hand of God. We ask that everyone in our churches around the world please not neglect their prayers for us in Haiti. The prayers of our brothers and sisters everywhere have already brought forth abundant fruit, and we praise and thank God for them.

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A photograph of three crosses standing on a dark, silhouetted hill against a dramatic sunset sky. The sky is filled with wispy clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and purple. The central cross is the tallest, flanked by two shorter crosses.

“ *He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’* ”

– Luke 24:44-47

Hmmm ...

*Live your life as if you were to die tomorrow.  
Learn as though you were to live forever.*

– Mahatma Ghandi

*Tell me what you pay attention to and I will  
tell you who you are.*

– Jose Ortega y Gasset

*If you want to make peace, don’t talk to your  
friends. Talk to your enemies.*

– Moshe Dayan

*If you are really thankful, what do you do?  
You share.*

– W. Clement Stone

*Songs of all kinds make me feel thoughts  
of God—sometimes directly, more often  
indirectly. This appears to be a universal  
phenomenon. Songs can give rise to the  
sensation that almost all believers say they  
have experienced: the sudden “flash” of  
understanding that this world is not all that  
there is.*

– Roy Williams, God Actually

*Human progress is neither automatic  
nor inevitable ... Every step toward the  
goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering,  
and struggle; the tireless exertions and  
passionate concern of dedicated individuals.*

– Martin Luther King, Jr.