

T^{GCI}oday

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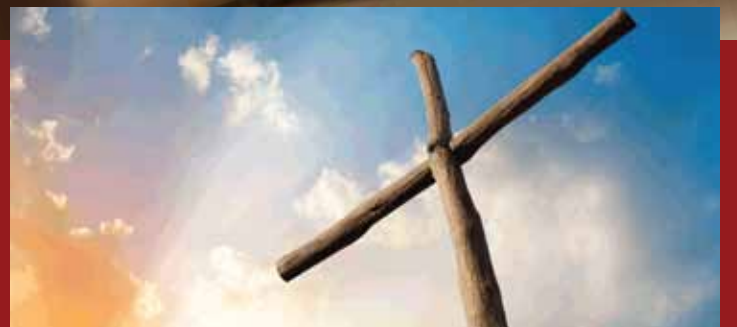


THAILAND SCHOOL KEEPS GROWING

THE GOD OF
HOPE

WHAT ARE YOU
good at?

Jesus Christ's
LAST SERMON





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About GCI Today

MISSION STATEMENT

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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What the world needs now is – hope

Professor Ian Harper, speaking at the recent Christian Management Australia (CMA) Conference in Melbourne summarised the conference's response to the theme, "Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times". What the world needs in these turbulent times is hope.

The conference brings together leaders from business, parachurch, charity and religious organisations from around Australia. It was the tenth year anniversary for the conference, and CEO Gary Williams was acknowledged for his excellent work in consistently presenting such a substantial, inspiring, practical and profitable conference.

CMA has been of great help to us as we registered as a national church in Australia, and set up the new governance and legal structures that necessarily flowed out of becoming a legal entity here. On a continuing basis, CMA helps us keep up to date with the latest issues, changes and professional benchmarks in the religious and not-for-profit sector.

I have been invited to make a presentation at several of the conferences, including the one this year. When I do so, I do so representing our denomination in this national forum – representing you. This is one of the ways we have been blessed to share in the life of the broader Christian community around our nation. It is not something we actively sought, but something that in his grace alone God has opened for us.

We do indeed live in turbulent times – internationally, nationally, and for many personally. The answer is not to panic, to throw up our hands in despair. There is plenty of despair around already – and plenty of voices to inflame and add to the anxieties and apprehensions. All too readily feeding what one church leader called the "culture of complaint, criticism and cynicism".

Turbulent times are not the time to repeat or enact the line from the famous poem "Said Hanrahan", "we'll all be 'rooned"! It's not the time to sit around and wallow in all the problems, angst and desperation. We do not need to feel helpless, hopeless or overwhelmed with fear.

Into these turbulent times shines the light of the gospel – the "hope of the gospel" as Paul wrote in Colossians. The gospel is good news – that we have been reconciled to God in Christ. The gospel is good news because it is about Jesus, the revelation of God in human form. The gospel is good news because Jesus is, simply, "our hope" (1 Timothy 1:1).

"In Christ" we have adoption, union with the Father through the Spirit – we are his beloved children: he has always deeply loved, and always will, and everything that needs to be taken care of has been taken care of. Our present and our future are infused with hope because he loves us and demonstrates that love to us in Jesus. He gifts us to serve others,



and share this hope with all human beings.

The church is to be a beacon of hope in the world. Living and sharing the gospel is about living and sharing our hope in Christ – for now and eternity. It's not about "majoring in the minors", or getting obsessed with dates and possible prophetic speculations. It's about providing practical help and hope in small, ordinary, everyday ways. It's about being a blessing to others (see article on David Bussau on page 2). It's about giving, not getting. It's about humbly serving others, not arrogant self-absorption.

This magazine has as its mission "providing practical help, hope and encouragement". Thank you for your help in enabling us to do that. Thank you for being part of the hope your local church and our national and international fellowship can offer to the world in these turbulent times. What the world needs now is indeed hope – the hope we share in Jesus Christ.

John McLean
Mission and National Director,
Australia



Bernadeta Huki, a client of Opportunity International Australia, with her vegetable farm in Indonesia.

What are you Good at?

by John McLean

Using gifts to serve and how a \$100 microloan saved a family from poverty and slavery.

WHAT ARE YOU good at?" David Bussau asked the Indonesian farmer. David, a successful Australian builder, was living in an Indonesian village helping with reconstruction there. He was struck by the villagers' sense of community and their everyday reliance on God for survival. More, he was struck by their poverty and inability to escape the grinding burdens they carried. Many had been forced to sell their children to the landowners to pay for crippling debts

accrued when there was a bad harvest. They were, quite literally, in slavery.

"My wife is good at sewing," the farmer replied. Why not start a sewing business and sell your products? Impossible said the farmer – we don't have any money for cloth, let alone a sewing machine. "How much do you need?" asked David. They did some calculations, and came up with a figure of \$100. So David advanced his first microloan – for \$100.

Since then, David has worked to

alleviate poverty among some of the world's poorest people through micro-finance. He has started 17 businesses to help others around the world. His various awards include the Ernst & Young Australian Entrepreneur of the Year 2003, ACFID Human Rights Award 2006 and Senior Australian of the Year 2008.

In a candid and revealing interview at the recent Christian Management Association (CMA) conference in Melbourne, the interviewer asked David how he developed his entrepreneurial skills. David's answer: it's a gift, I was born that way. He repeatedly encouraged the audience to be themselves,



Yohana is from Indonesia and runs a small grocery store.



David Bussau AM is a pioneer of microfinance, having founded Opportunity International Australia and co-founded the Opportunity International Network. He has been hailed for his innovative approach to solving world poverty by challenging the conventional wealth distribution model of development, addressing the root causes of poverty through responsible wealth creation.

He approached each relationship thinking "how can I be a blessing to this person?"; not "how can this person help me achieve what I want?" Clearly, Christ-like servant-hood and humility suffused his thinking and actions"

and to use the gifts and strengths God has given each person. "Be yourself. Everyone else is taken," he quipped.

Then, he said, it's all about relationships. He said he approached each relationship thinking "how can I be a blessing to this person?"; not "how can this person be a blessing to me?" or "how can this person help me achieve what I want?" Clearly, Christ-like servant-hood and humility suffused his thinking and actions.

"There is no condemnation in Christ," he reminded the audience. Don't be afraid to make a mistake, or think everything has to be perfect. Just try to make a difference – to be a blessing to others. Sometimes "good enough" is good enough.

David has released most of his 17 businesses to others. "They don't belong to me," he said. They are to serve the needs of others. He wasn't here to accumulate things or impress others, but to help them. Some founders get too identified with the organisations they found, and can't let go. Our identity is in Christ alone.

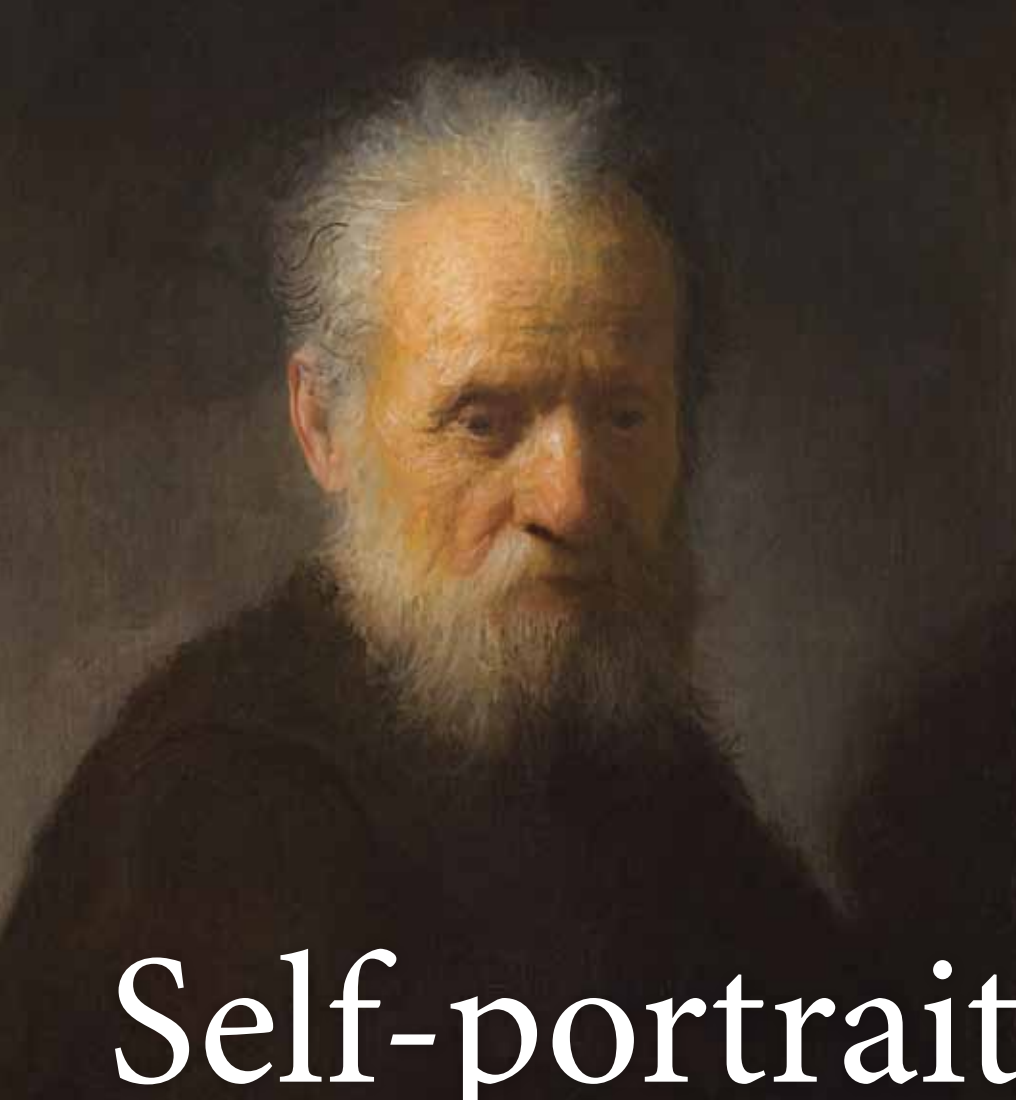
Using your God-given gifts and strengths to humbly bless and serve others. It's the gospel. It's Peter writing to the churches: *Each one should*

use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms (1 Peter 4:10).

And the Indonesian farmer and family? The children have been redeemed, and the family are now out of poverty and run two successful businesses. As now are thousands of other similar families around the world. For a gift used; a servant's heart and a \$100 microloan. 🌐



Sebastian Nahuk, a father of three and client of Opportunity International Australia in West Timor, used to drive a motorcycle taxi for a living, but struggled to survive on A\$2.40 a day. A small loan allowed him to grow a business selling fish door to door, increasing his income to A\$7 a day and enabling him to send his children to school.



Self-portrait

Popular misconceptions can obscure God's own revelation of himself...

by James Henderson

DID YOU HEAR recently that what might be a Rembrandt self-portrait was discovered hidden under another of the Dutch master's paintings? Using advanced scanning techniques scientists investigated a Rembrandt painting titled *Old Man With a Beard*. Much to their surprise, the scan revealed that another painting was underneath—one that might well be an early, unfinished self-portrait of the artist himself. It seems that Rembrandt had begun a self-portrait, then later used the canvas to paint the *Old Man With a Beard*.

The story can help us understand a mistake we make when we try to understand what God is like. Most of us have grown up believing that God is like the first painting—an old man with a beard. That, after all, is how religious artists usually portray him. We think of God as not only old, but also as a distant, rather threatening figure—stern and quick to get angry if we fail to live up to his impossible standards.

But this way of thinking about God, kind of like the painting of the old man that hid the self-portrait underneath, actually obscures what God is really like.

To get a true idea of what God is really like we need to look beneath the layers of popular concepts about God and begin to see the God revealed in Jesus Christ. When we do that, a true and undistorted understanding of God emerges.

The Bible tells us that if we want to know what God is like, we need only look to Jesus Christ. Only then can we find out how God really feels about us.

"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father," Jesus explained in John 14:9 (CEV). Only Jesus shows us what God is really like. Far from being a remote and distant figure, Jesus showed that God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—loves us unconditionally and will never let us go. God is not out there somewhere in the sky scowling at us, ready to pounce and punish. The Bible tells us that it is the Father's "good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32 KJV) and that God is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9 KJV). It tells us that God sent Jesus into the world because he loves the world—not to condemn humanity but to save it.

Once you get past the layers of misunderstanding, the picture of God that is revealed is one of a God who loves us more than we can possibly imagine. "No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand," said Jesus (John 10:29).

Through Jesus we are shown God's true heart toward us—we see him as he really is, not way off somewhere, and neither angry at us nor unconcerned about us. He is right here with us, ready for us to turn to him and receive his loving embrace, just as Rembrandt portrays in another of his paintings, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

Paul told Christians that they are "being transformed into his likeness," meaning Jesus' likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV 1984). Our problem is that we get in the way at times. We use our own colors and prefer our own strokes to God's. Sometimes we can airbrush him out of the picture completely. But, underneath it all, the Holy Spirit is making us into the image of Jesus, who is the self-portrait of the Father. As we grow spiritually, that image should become more apparent.

Don't let other images get in the way of your view of who God is or how God feels about you. Look to Jesus, who alone is the self-portrait of God. ☉

School in Thailand

CONTINUES TO EXPAND

by John Halford



*I would like to update you on the progress of the work of **Chugait Garmolgmut**, a 1986 graduate of Ambassador College, and his wife **Amphorn (Fong)** in the city of Chiang Mai, Thailand. I visited Thailand again in February and helped Chugait and Fong open up yet another school—a kindergarten extension of their flourishing Ambassador Bilingual School (ABS) for grades 1-6.*

THE SCHOOL'S IDEA grew from a challenge from the late Dr. Herman L. Hoeh, who loved Thailand and all things Thai. Chugait and Fong had been raised as Buddhists. Now Christians, they wanted to reach their people with the gospel. They asked Herman Hoeh what to do, and he suggested they start a school based on true values and right living. He gave them \$100 to get started.

They started a small school in their basement apartment, teaching in Thai and English. Many Thais want to learn English, as it is a significant key to a successful career. As more students came to them for education, they were able to expand. ABS is the flagship of a network of bilingual schools in Northern Thailand. Chugait and Fong leased an empty five-story office building on the outskirts of

Chiang Mai. They renovated it inside and out and made it into a bright school for several hundred students in grades 1-6. I helped them formally open the ABS two years ago. At that time, they showed me an empty, semi-derelict warehouse that stood behind the main school. "That's where the kindergarten will be," explained Fong.

And that is where it now is! They have transformed the old warehouse into a sparkling kindergarten and renamed it the "Love Building"—a fitting name since we opened the kindergarten on February 14th. Chugait asked me to say a few words to the large group of parents who had come to the opening ceremony. I told them that in the Western World, February 14 is known as Valentine's Day, when people gave gifts

to those they love. The school is also a gift of love, to the parents, the children and the future of Thailand.

The Thais are tolerant of all faiths, but the vast majority of the people remain staunchly Buddhist. Frankly, much missionary activity in Thailand goes nowhere as the Christian message is presented in a way that is out of context with Thai culture. However, traditional values are beginning to fray as Thailand continues to modernize. ABS teaches Christianity by example, and although making converts is not the focus, Chugait and Fong have baptized dozens of people in the last few years. Today a church of about 70 meets in their home.

ABS now offers an education from kindergarten through middle school. I jokingly asked Fong, "So where are you going to build the high school?" Without hesitation, she



Top-left: Chugait and Fong Garmolgmut with a portrait of the late Dr. Herman Hoeh, who encouraged and inspired them to start the school. **From left:** The author and Chugait Garmolgmut opening the new kindergarten at Ambassador Bilingual School in Thailand. Chugait Garmolgmut with several of the school's children.



pointed to an empty lot next door. “We’ll put it there,” she said, “if that is God’s will.”

It probably is. Psalm 127 reminds us “unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.” It seems that the Lord is building this “house” as the work is certainly not in vain. It is a success story that is attracting the attention of educators and missionaries in Thailand.

How you can help

There is a way you can be part of this success story. Chugait and Fong are not asking for financial assistance. However, the challenge of running a bilingual school in Thailand is the lack of high quality, affordable books in the English language. The Herman L. Hoeh Library, named after their friend and mentor, is in urgent need of books.

Many of us have books that our children and grandchildren have outgrown. If you send us those books, we can get them to Thailand. They do not need to be specifically Christian books, although they are welcome. Any book for grades K-6, ideally with colorful pictures on any subject of an educational nature, would be welcome. They do not need to be new, but they should not be too battered, torn or in any way defaced.

Do you have books that ABS could use? Then email me at john.halford@gci.org and let me know what you have. If you can get them to me, I know how to get them to Thailand. 🌐

Living in the present

by Barbara Dahlgren

Many people live in the past, constantly lamenting what might have been. Instead of accepting what cannot be changed and moving on, they prefer to be held captive by things they can do nothing about.

Others put their lives on hold waiting for the future. As soon as all their preconceived needs are met, they will get their priorities straight and live the good life.

While it’s true we can learn from the past and look toward the future, we live today. God lives in the present. His name is “I am” not “I was” or “I will be” or “I might have been.” God meets our needs daily (Matthew 6:11). Our walk with God is a day-by-day journey. By not living in the present, we can miss what God has in mind for us today.

From a spiritual perspective, we live in the present by being open to God’s presence in our lives every day. We seek a closer relationship with him (Matthew 6:33). We do not let the past drag us down or the worries of the future hinder our daily walk with God. This daily walk with God is vital, but how we walk with him is also important.

“YESTERDAY IS HISTORY, TOMORROW IS A MYSTERY, TODAY IS A GIFT OF GOD, WHICH IS WHY WE CALL IT THE PRESENT.”

– BILL KEANE, CREATOR OF THE “FAMILY CIRCLE” CARTOON SERIES

Let’s use the analogy of taking a nature walk. Since I’m not drawn to nature as many are, I could wander aimlessly down a trail unaware of surroundings. When asked what I saw I might not even remember. Others notice the chirping bluebird, the laughing child, the leaves changing color, a fish jumping in a pond or a vibrant sunset and realize all those things have something to do with God. They are aware and alert to God’s presence all around them. How I yearn for that!

Prayers of those living in the present become more than begging God to give them what they want. They want God’s will revealed to them and his desires to be their desires. They pray throughout the day—some big prayers and many little prayers—of praise, thanks, and requests for immediate help to bring a thought or action back to where God would want it to be (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Studying God’s Word becomes more than just reading a few scriptures (Acts 17:11). They think about how those scriptures apply to their daily lives. They realize the Bible is a living book God uses to speak to them, so they ask God to help them understand it more fully. They want scripture written on their hearts so it comes to mind when needed in a given situation throughout a day.

Meditation becomes more than busy thought. They purpose themselves to think about God, his Word, biblical principles and how Christ would handle situations (Psalm 1:2, Joshua 1:8). They also learn to be still and know God (Psalm 46:10). They dwell on God’s goodness, mercy, love and grace.

This is their walk with God, and they will do this every day, all day long. When they wake up tomorrow they’ll do it again because God’s mercies and love for us are brand new every day (Lamentations 3:22-23). There is something new to be learned about God each and every day, but we’ll miss it if we aren’t living in the present.

God wants all to be saved

A Study of 1 Timothy 2:1-7

PAUL SENT TIMOTHY to Ephesus to correct a few doctrinal problems in the church. He also sent Timothy a letter outlining his mission—a letter that was designed to be read to the entire congregation so that everyone would know that Timothy was acting with Paul’s authority.

Prayer for public peace (verses 1-3)

Paul included some instructions for what should be done in the church meetings: *“I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people.”* The meetings would include prayer, and these prayers were to be positive, unlike the curses that became part of some synagogue liturgies.

But this was not just intercession for church members—the prayers were to be for all, including *“kings and all those in authority.”* Paul did not want the church to be elitist, nor become identified with an underground resistance movement. A parallel may be seen in the way that Judaism dealt with the Roman Empire. Although Jews could not worship the Emperor, they could offer worship to God on behalf of the emperor; they made prayers and sacrifices for him (see Ezra 6:10).

Similarly, Paul wants church members to pray for government leaders. The purpose is *“that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”* The early Christians were persecuted for the gospel, and for proclaiming allegiance to another Lord.

They did not need to provoke officials even more by being anti-government agitators.

This approach has the approval of God himself: *“This is good, and pleases God our Savior.”* Although the word “Savior” usually refers to Jesus, in this case it seems to refer to the Father.

A message of salvation for all (verses 4-7)

Paul then includes an important digression about what God wants: *“who wants all people to be saved...”* Our prayers should not curse or condemn the rulers, because God does not want the worst for them. His desire for them is salvation—but this begins with an acceptance of the gospel message: *“...and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*

Does God always get what he wants? Will everyone be saved? Paul does not address that question, but it is obvious that God does not always get his wishes, at least not right away. Even now, almost 2000 years later, “all people” have not yet come to a knowledge of the gospel, much less accepted it and experienced salvation. God wants his children to love each other, but it doesn’t always happen. His will is that humans have wills of their own.

Paul supports his claim by giving reasons: *“For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.”*

There is only one God, who created everything and everyone. His purpose for every person is the same: all were created in God’s image, to be

a reflection and a representation of God on earth (Genesis 1:27). The oneness of God means that there is unity in his purpose for his creation. All humans are included.

Further, there is one mediator. We all have a relationship with God through Christ Jesus, who became a man and can still be called “man” because he did not abandon his humanity to the grave. Rather, he was resurrected as a glorified human, and he rose to heaven in human form, for he has incorporated humanity as part of who he is. Since humanity was made in God’s image, essential aspects of humanity were in God’s mind from the beginning; it is no surprise that humanity can be given expression within the Godhead by Jesus.

As our mediator, Jesus *“gave himself as a ransom for all people.”* Some theologians object to the plain meaning of this verse, but it fits well with verse 7, and with what Paul wrote a little later: God *“is the Savior of all people, and es-*

pecially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10). He died for the sins of all people, even for those who do not yet know it. He died only once; he did not wait for us to believe before he acted to save us. To use a financial analogy, he paid the debt, even for people who don’t yet realize it.

Now that Jesus has done this, what remains to be done? Now is the time for people to come to the knowledge of what Jesus has done for them, and that is what Paul is trying to do. *“This has now been witnessed to at the proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed as a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles.”* That is what he wants Timothy to be, too. 🌐

Dr. Michael Morrison teaches classes in the New Testament at Grace Communion Seminary. More information about the seminary can be found at: gcs.ambassador.edu.

For reflection and discussion

- When we pray for our rulers, is it for their salvation, or for our own peace and quiet?
- When we realize that Jesus died for our cantankerous neighbors, does it change our attitudes toward them?



SEVEN SAYINGS OF JESUS ON THE CROSS

Jesus shared in our humanity. He set an example for us, suffered for us and was victorious over sin and death in his work on the cross. His victory, both in his death and his resurrection, enables us to be reconciled to God and restored to fellowship with him.

While hanging on the cross, Jesus spoke of:

1. **Forgiveness** (Luke 23:32-34)
2. **Hope** (Luke 23:39-43)
3. **Care** (John 19:25-27)
4. **Loneliness** (Mark 15:33-34; Matthew 27:45-46)
5. **Suffering** (John 19:28-29)
6. **Triumph** (John 19:30)
7. **Reunion** (Luke 23:44-46)

THE BIBLE RECORDS that on that spring day, from a hill outside Jerusalem, Jesus spoke several times. No one Gospel writer records all his sayings. Matthew and Mark describe one. Luke and John each give us three. Together, these sayings constitute a powerful message from our Savior's heart during the hours of his greatest personal agony. They reveal Jesus' innermost feelings as he poured out his life for us.

1) "Father, forgive them"

Only Luke tells us that Jesus, shortly after he was crucified, prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, NIV, 1984 edition quoted throughout).

Nearby were Roman soldiers gambling for his clothes, common people whipped to frenzy by the religious leaders and gawkers who came for the hideous spectacle. The Jewish elders mockingly said they would believe in him if he saved himself (Matthew 27:42-43). On his left and right were two criminals condemned to die with him.

Not everyone at the foot of the cross was hostile to Jesus. Women who had followed him during his ministry and some of his disciples now came forward. His mother, Mary, was mourning the Son whom God had miraculously given her.

Innocent of any crime against God or humanity, Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, scourged and condemned. Now, from the cross, Jesus' thoughts reached above his pain and rejection. Instead of being consumed with his own pain and

misery, Jesus asked forgiveness for those responsible for the evil done to him—by extension, all who ignorantly go the way of sin and death.

2) "You will be with me in paradise"

Jesus next spoke to encourage one of the criminals crucified with him. Both criminals, likely thieves or murderers, early on joined bystanders in reviling Jesus (Mark 15:32). Luke tells us, "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" (Luke 23:39). This man wanted only escape from his pain. The gulf between them remained because this faithless criminal had no desire to know his Savior and repent of his sins.

But a miraculous change occurred in the other criminal. He came to believe. This man was just as guilty as the first. He admitted he deserved to die (verses 40-41). He, too, had mocked Jesus earlier, but now he rebuked the other criminal.

We are not told of any other conversation between this second criminal and Jesus. Perhaps only Jesus' example and prayer, which he overheard, moved him so deeply. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (verse 42). Jesus replied by offering him hope for the future: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (verse 43).

All who surrender to Jesus receive not only strength to face the present, but also lasting hope for the future. There is a future beyond the grave. Eternal life in God's kingdom awaits those who will embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Jesus Christ's

Jesus Christ spent his final hours of human life nailed to a cross. Despised and rejected by the world he came to save, history's only perfect person took upon himself the consequences of our sins.

3) “Woman, behold your son!”

Jesus honored and showed concern for his mother. When it seemed impossible for him to help anyone, he provided for Mary’s care through his trusted friend John.

“When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (John 19:26-27).

4) “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”

For the first time, Jesus’ thoughts were on himself. He cried out, “‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Many have puzzled over Jesus’ seeming doubt. Was Jesus afraid? Had his Father deserted him in his greatest need? Jesus was quoting the first portion of Psalm 22:1, a prophecy of the Messiah’s suffering and exaltation.

We sometimes forget that Jesus was fully human. Yes, he was God in the flesh, but he was also subject to all the feelings of mind and body that any of us feel. Jesus spoke these words after three hours of darkness had covered the land (Matthew 27:45). Jesus hung on the cross alone, where he took our place, to feel the pain and anguish that sin causes.

There, in the darkness and pain, bearing the burden of our sins, Jesus fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered

him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Soon Christ would savor the sweetness of eternal victory over sin and death. His final three statements came in rapid succession.

5) “I am thirsty”

Death drew near. The time of final sacrifice was close. Jesus had endured—and overcome—the heat, pain, rejection and loneliness. He could have suffered and died in silence. Instead, unexpectedly, he asked for help. “Knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I am thirsty’” (John 19:28).

Jesus asked for a drink and received vinegar, fulfilling David’s 1,000-year-old prophecy (Psalm 69:21). “Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink” (Matthew 27:48). The man who had hurried to answer Jesus’ request said: “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down” (Mark 15:36).

6) “It is finished”

Jesus had finished his work on earth. His sixth message was one of triumph: “When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and

gave up his spirit” (John 19:30).

Jesus’ humility rings in his words. His was not a vain, I-showed-you attitude. He did not even say, “I did it.” He claimed no credit. He asked no pity. To the end, Jesus’ mind was on the work he came to do. He announced, for all to hear, “It is finished.”

7) Jesus’ final words

Matthew tells us, “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit” (Matthew 27:50; see also Mark 15:37). Only Luke preserves Jesus’ words: “Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46).

God is love, and Jesus’ ministry showed what love is. He gave himself for us. He preached his last sermon most effectively, by both word and example. In his last seven statements, he affirmed God’s greatness and glory.

God’s work goes on

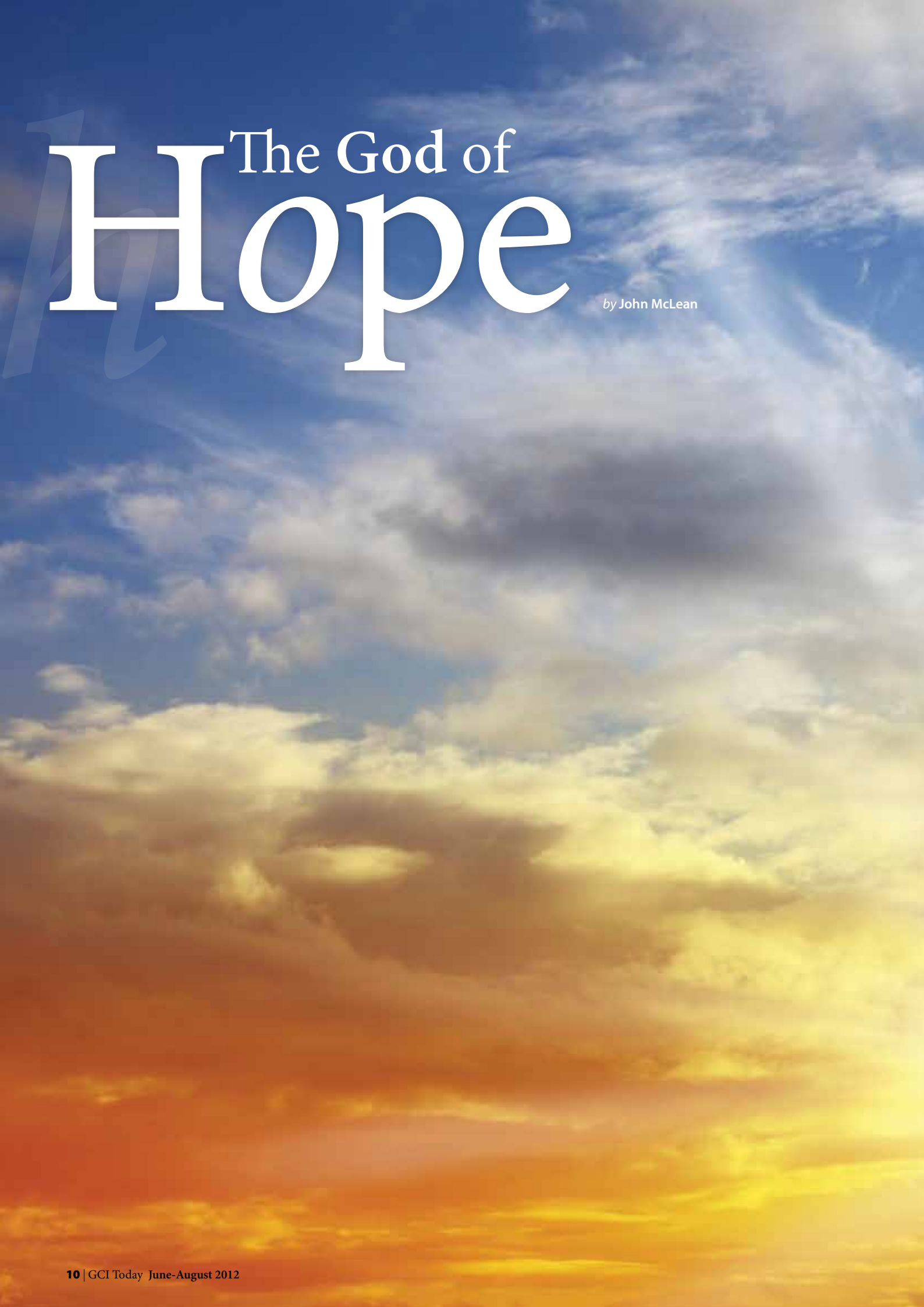
Jesus’ example and words on the cross bore fruit even before his death, when the repentant robber acknowledged him as Lord and appealed for his mercy.

On that Passover so long ago, Jesus finished his own mission as a human on earth. But his work goes on now in his church. Christ’s followers today preach his gospel of salvation. They show his love for fellow humans. And they look for his return as King of kings and Lord of lords.

This is the wonderful message of good news that Jesus Christ preached the day he died for all. 🌐

last sermon

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The God of Hope

by John McLean

*I hope this rain stops soon.
I hope my team wins this
weekend. I hope I pass the
exam. I hope I get the job I
applied for. I hope person X
does (or doesn't) ask me out.
I hope the month runs out
before the money does. I hope
the party goes well. I hope it
rains soon.*

THIS IS OUR everyday vocabulary of hope. We hope today will be better than yesterday, tomorrow better again.

And yet these hopes are often dashed and disappointed. They are really expressions of desires and our wishful thinking. Which is one reason poets and philosophers have often dismissed hope as an illusion, a delusion, or even, in one case, as an evil.

Yet the Bible talks a lot about hope. According to Paul, hope is one of the “big three” that remains of greatest importance in life (faith, hope and love – 1 Corinthians 13:13). The biblical vocabulary of hope, however, is much different from our everyday usage.

God is a God of hope (Romans 15:13). Now wait a minute...God is not a God of wishful thinking. God is. God is existence, life, glory, power, love and grace. And this God is also a God of hope.

He is the source, the agent, the reason for hope. He transcends all our wishful thinking and offers us hope, in and through himself. How? What makes this hope different? What is its foundation? Why is this hope a sure anchor for the soul, not a kite flown in the winds of wishful thinking? Here are three vital dimensions the Scriptures reveal:

1) The hope of the gospel (Colossians 1:23)

The gospel is unalloyed good news. It is the good news that we have been reconciled to the Father in Jesus Christ. It is good news for all humanity – that Jesus came into the world, not to condemn it, but to save it (John 3:16). It is good news for all creation – that Jesus, the Creator, redeems the whole of creation in and through himself (Colossians 1:20).

The gospel is the good news that God is love, and shows this love to us in Christ (1 John 4:16, 7-12). That, as theologian Thomas Torrance says, he has always loved us and always will. Our hope is grounded in the nature of God – love – and the good news that in his love God has created us to be in fellowship with him through his Spirit.

By this Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of adoption, we call God “Abba”, Father. We are adopted as children – brother and sisters, joint-heirs with Christ, to participate in the life of Father, Son and Spirit. God, in his love, has freely created, determined not to live without us.

2) Jesus Christ is our hope (1 Timothy 1:1)

The gospel is personified in Jesus Christ – he is the gospel. So Paul can simply say our hope is Jesus Christ. Or, put another way, if Jesus is not who he said he was, who the New Testament claims him to be, we have no hope. Our hope is not grounded in a process, a mechanism, or a technique – still less in esoteric interpretations, predictive timetables, or secret knowledge.

Our hope is anchored in a person – the person of Jesus Christ. He is not a divine Mr Fixit, a cosmic spanner, or just a messenger to tell us how things are done. We are forgiven, saved, reconciled, brought into fellowship through him. In and through him.

He takes on our humanity that we might share in his relationship with the Father. In his coming as a human, he united that which otherwise cannot be united – he joined his divinity with our humanity. And through his resurrection and ascension, he takes that union back into his life with the Father. So, by grace alone, all of life is now life “in Christ”; all of our hope is “in Christ”.

Our hopes are not dependant on our performance, our being “good enough”. We do not have to live anxiously hoping our prayer, our worship, our service, will be acceptable and sufficient. Our hope is not in the quality of our faith and obedience, but in Jesus’ faith and obedience on our behalf. Our hope is not in how well we have taken hold of Christ, but his hold of us. (If our hopes are in our own efforts, we will indeed have cause to be anxious.) All these things, and more – our joy and laughter, our work, our creativity – all of our lives are “in Christ”.

So Paul can write “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20 translation by T. F. Torrance). Our hope is in the indwelling of Jesus through the Spirit – in his vicarious life on our behalf, where he takes our prayer, worship, service, faith and obedience – our lives – and offers them redeemed, in union with himself, as a perfect offering back to the Father.

Our hope is in the “mystery of the ages” – which is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1: 27). He has conquered death, and given us hope for the future. We experience this hope through our union with Christ now, and look forward to the hope of eternal life in fellowship with God, in his glory, awe and wonder.

3) Hope is lavishly poured into our lives by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13)

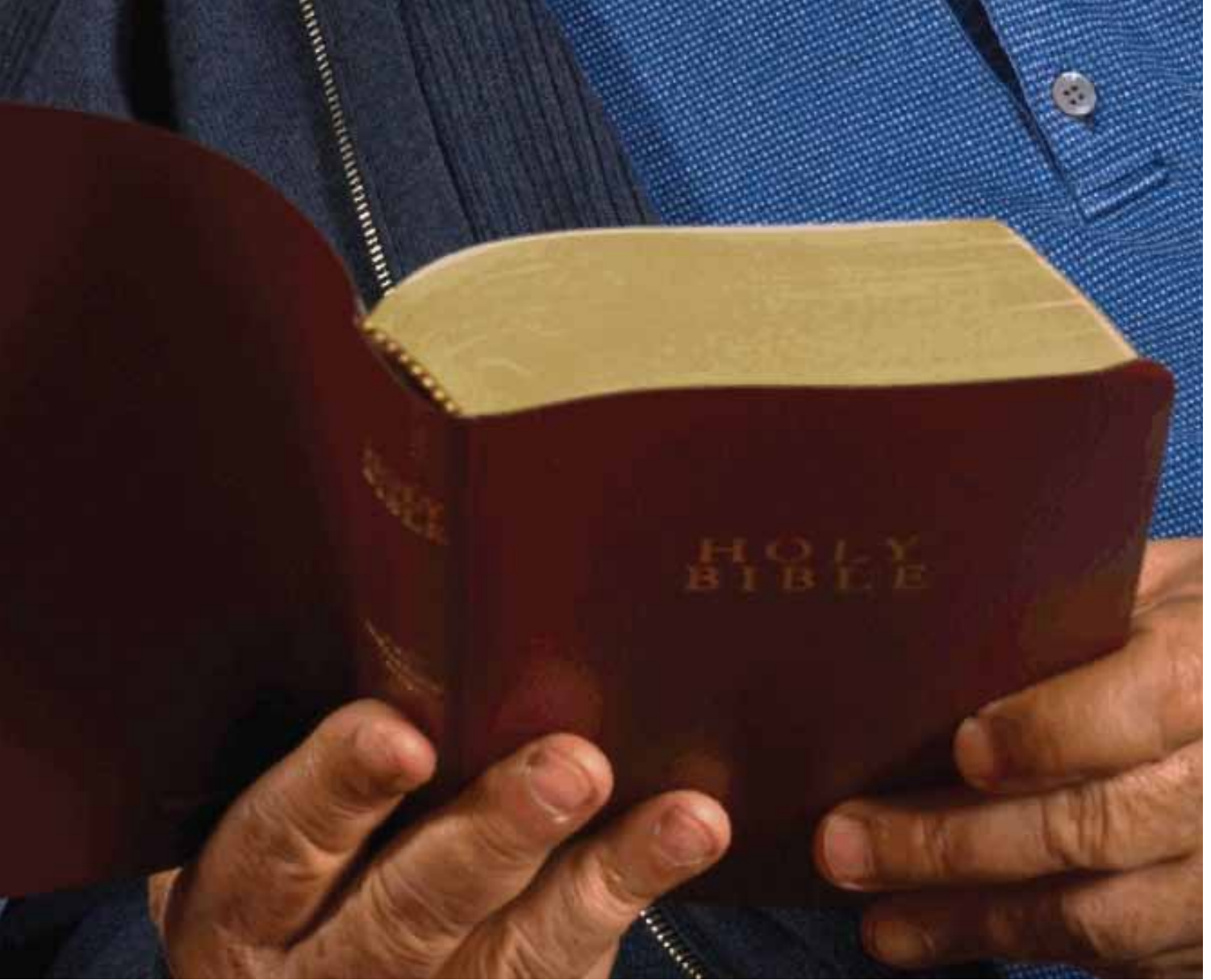
Hope is experienced day by day in faith, and through the indwelling of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This hope strengthens us when confronted with the often harsh realities of life.

Such hope enables us to deal with suffering in constructive ways that produces perseverance, character, and, interestingly, more hope. This hope, from the Spirit, will not disappoint us or let us down, because “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5: 3-5).

God is a God of love. God is a God of hope. Our hope is grounded on the love of God shown to us in the good news of the gospel, Jesus Christ. He pours this love and hope into our hearts by the Spirit. Hope, like love, is at the heart of the life of Father, Son and Spirit. So the vocabulary of this hope is not at all like our everyday hopes and wishful thinking. This hope is divine, eternal, spiritual. Because it comes from the God of hope.

Together, we share this prayer from Paul, expressing the beautiful biblical vocabulary of hope:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace, as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13). ☉



“There she is!”

by Joyce Catherwood

Every time I walked in the door, Dad would clap his hands, look pleased and say, “There she is!” He was always sitting in his not-so-gently worn, green upholstered recliner, surrounded by small tables piled high with Bibles and commentaries.

L YING ACROSS THE arms of his chair was a tray-type contraption he had made to hold his open books. It had a nifty built-in pencil/pen holder. Sticking out of all his books and Bibles were little cards that Dad used as bookmarks. It seems every other page was “book marked” because every other page was important to him. Behind his chair was a heavy,

rusty stand-up lamp that must have been at least 50 years old, with a long chain to turn it on and off.

I don’t remember exactly when he started greeting me with, “There she is!” It’s funny the things one gets used to. Now that Dad is gone, I would give anything to receive that greeting just one more time. In his 90s, my dad was living alone, having lost his life

partner of almost 70 years. His little house was next door to mine. He had put in a walkway from my door to his. He would watch expectantly for me to come down it, which I did several times a day to check on him.

Almost every time I went over, he wanted me to sit down so he could tell me all about what he had been reading, or a “new truth” he had discovered from his research. Sometimes I would take the time to accommodate him. But most of my visits were for the purpose of making him a meal, cleaning his house, washing his clothes or feeding Maggie, the little stray dog he had adopted. I know he was happy to have some company, but what he really

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Don't let them
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"Was my life
worthwhile?"*



wanted was for someone to listen to him. He would talk to anyone, including strangers, and the first question he always asked is "Are you a Christian?" Then, no matter what the reply, he would immediately say, "Sit down, let's talk!"

My dad's education ended with the 6th grade, but that didn't stop him from learning. His mind was bursting with ideas. He was always inventing gadgets or modifying existing machines to make them more efficient. He could fix just about anything. His interests ranged from beekeeping and smoking meat to solar energy. Even into his early 90s, he would follow construction workers or repairmen who came onto his property, asking questions or giving advice ... actually mostly giving advice. As his physical strength ebbed away, he focused more and more on studying his beloved Bible and his well-marked reference books. That suited him just fine, because that was his favorite thing anyway.

Dad never hesitated to make his opinion heard, although never on a grand scale. However, as the years went by, his stage grew smaller and smaller. Yet there was still so much he wanted to say. He needed to be reassured that what he said still mattered. I learned that the need to be validated does not diminish with age. If anything, it increases. In my dad's case, he became house-bound and rarely had visitors. So if I didn't provide a forum for his voice to be heard, then it was as though the spotlights had been

turned off, the curtains closed and the audience had left. And that happened much too often.

I was simply too caught up in all that "needed" to be done for him. Some elderly people have few friends and no family visitors and therefore no way for their voices to be heard. Already constrained by aging bodies, the added frustration of not being "heard" is discouraging and demeaning.

If I could do it over again, I would spend much more time just sitting and listening to Dad. Even if I didn't agree, I would still listen. Even if what he said didn't make any sense, I would still listen.

It is fascinating to consider how God used a devout old man named Simeon to bless the infant Jesus when he was brought to the temple to be consecrated. Simeon had waited all his life for the redemption of Israel. He had been given a special revelation that he would not die before seeing the Messiah with his own eyes. When Jesus' parents entered the temple, Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms, praised God and pronounced a blessing on him and his parents. Scripture says Mary and Joseph marveled at his words. What he said mattered. Simeon could now die in peace, honored and validated.

If it is within your power to provide a listening forum for a senior citizen, I hope you will do so. Don't let them spend their final years feeling useless and in the way, wondering "Does what I say matter to you? Was my life worthwhile?" ●

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE: THE POWER OF THE LOCAL AND PERSONAL

The local congregation is the primary place for dealing with the particulars and people we live with. As created and sustained by the Holy Spirit, it is insistently local and personal.

Unfortunately, the more popular American church strategies in respect to congregation are not friendly to the local and the personal. The American way with its penchant for catchy slogans and stirring visions denigrates the local, and its programmatic ways of dealing with people erode the personal, replacing intimacies with functions.

The North American church at present is conspicuous for replacing the Jesus way with the American Way. For Christians who are serious about following Jesus by understanding and pursuing the ways that Jesus is the Way, this deconstruction of the Christian congregation is particularly distressing and a looming distraction from the Way of Jesus.

A Christian congregation is a company of praying men and women who gather, usually on Sundays, for worship, who then go into the world as salt and light. God's Holy Spirit calls and forms this people. God means to do something with us, and he means to do it in community. We are in on what God is doing, and we are in on it together.

And here is how we are in on it: we become present to what God intends to do with and for us through worship, become present to the God who is present to us. The operating biblical metaphor regarding worship is sacrifice — we bring ourselves to the altar and let God do with us what he will. We bring ourselves to the eucharistic table and enter into that grand fourfold shape of the liturgy that shapes us: taking, blessing, breaking, giving — the life of Jesus taken and blessed, broken and distributed. That eucharistic life now shapes our lives as we give ourselves, Christ in us, to be taken, blessed, broken, and distributed in lives of witness and service, justice and healing.

*From The Jesus Way by Eugene Peterson
(Wm. B. Eerdmans 2011)*



Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God

– 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Hmmm ... *Lord, where we are wrong, make us willing to change; where we are right, make us easy to live with.*
– Peter Marshall

God's power operates best in human weakness. Weakness is the arena in which God can most effectively manifest His power.
– John Stott

All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it.
– Harry Emerson Fosdick

A friend recently told me of being in a church where on a Sunday morning a young couple stood before the congregation and confessed to sexual intercourse, made evident by the ensuing pregnancy. What is significant about this episode is that we rarely demand this type of confession for other sins. Rarely does one hear of public confessions for racism, unethical practices in business, economic exploitation, or cheating on an exam or income tax. The church has at times made sex a stand-apart sin by its forms of discipline and tone of condemnation.
– Dennis Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex*