

# T<sup>GCI</sup>oday

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2012



A SIGN  
**FOREVER**

**WATERS OF LIFE**  
**IN MOZAMBIQUE**

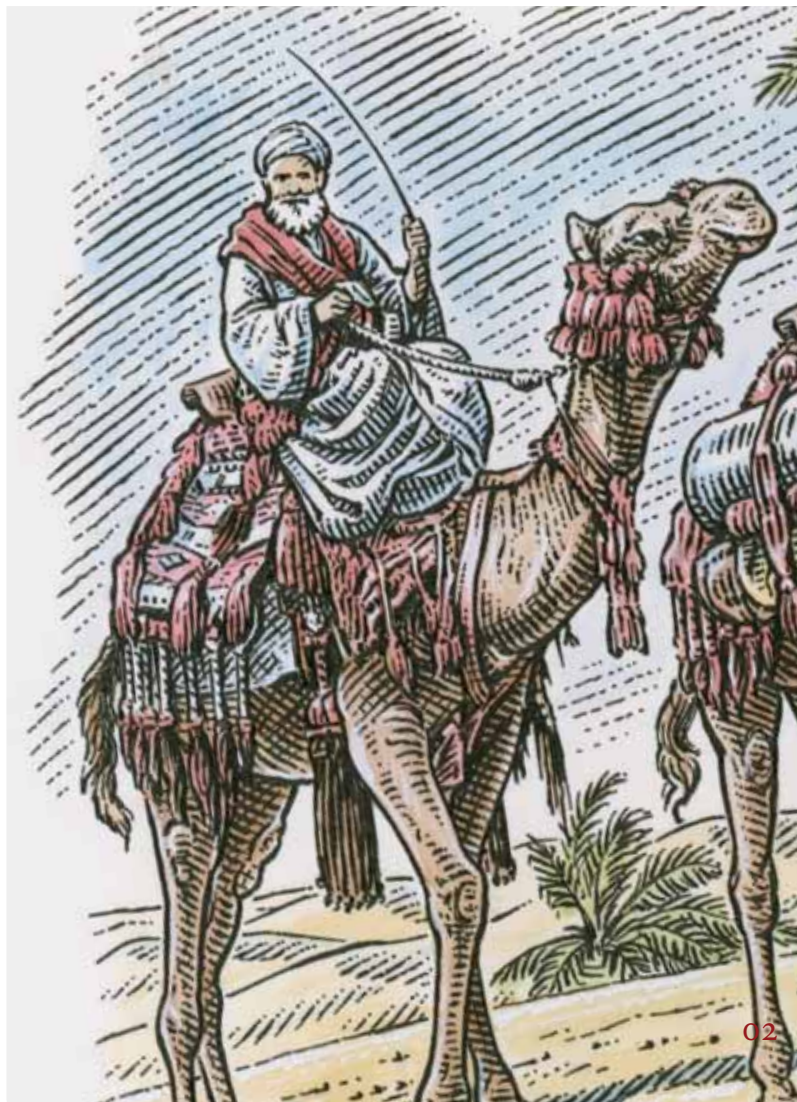
AN UNEXPECTED  
**Lesson**

THE  
**greatest**  
**news**

**THE WORLD HAS EVER HAD**







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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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# The story continues

Each one of us has his or her story. And each person's story is important and significant, no matter who we are or what we do.

Another year is about to come to an end; a new one about to begin. It's natural to reflect on the year that was – our story during 2012, if you like.

I hope you are able to look back on your story over the past year predominantly with gratitude, peace and contentment. I hope your story has plenty of peak moments of accomplishment, satisfaction and joy. Yet all of our stories also inevitably involve difficulties, challenges, disappointments and discouragements. It's the story of being human. Whether it's a matter of health, employment, finances, relationships, stress, loss or grief, or frankly just the everyday pressures of getting by, we all have our burdens to bear, our crosses to carry.

Just as well then that we are not alone. Each of us shares the story – “my story”, if you like – with others – “our story”, together. We are parents, children, siblings, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, friends, colleagues. We are related to others; we are in relationships with others. None of us exists in isolation – we live in a complex web of interactions and inter-relationships.

So “my story” only takes place within the broader context of “our story”. And “our story” informs and helps give meaning to “my story”, and vice versa. And that's a good thing.

Yet, if that's all there is, there's still something profoundly and radically missing.

“My story” eventually goes back to dust. If we disconnect our individual story from the stories of others, we are candidates for becoming self-focused, selfish, boorish, and mentally unwell. But even “our story” can become tribal, competitive, adversarial: us versus them. And much of our human history bears the scars of this kind of thinking and behaviour.

What we need to give meaning, coherence and integration to “my story” and “our story” is “His story”. That is, God's story, or the story of the One who came to show us the Father, the gospel story of Jesus Christ. This story is the one Christians celebrate at Christmas – every day of the year, certainly, but especially during Advent season. This story includes Jesus coming into our world as a baby, as an expression of God's love for the salvation of all mankind (John 3:16). But the story doesn't begin there.

It begins in the heart and mind of the eternal Triune God, who, before the world began, determined in love to adopt all of humanity as his children in Christ (Ephesians 1:5). In delight, he created the universe, and human beings, to be the recipients of his love. He moulded and fashioned the nation of Israel to be the place where the incarnation, the coming of Jesus in the flesh, would play out.



And so Advent unites my story with our story in the context of His story – with the interruption of His story into human history. Not as one more event among many significant events. But as THE event which changes the meaning of all the other events – as THE story, which gives life and meaning to all our stories, to the stories of all people. In Jesus, God has united himself with all humanity. In the resurrection and ascension, Jesus takes us back into the arms of the Father.

We are lifted up, united, brought into participation in the very Triune life of God. Fellowship with God and with one another: that's the story we celebrate at Advent, and that Christians have to share with the whole of creation.

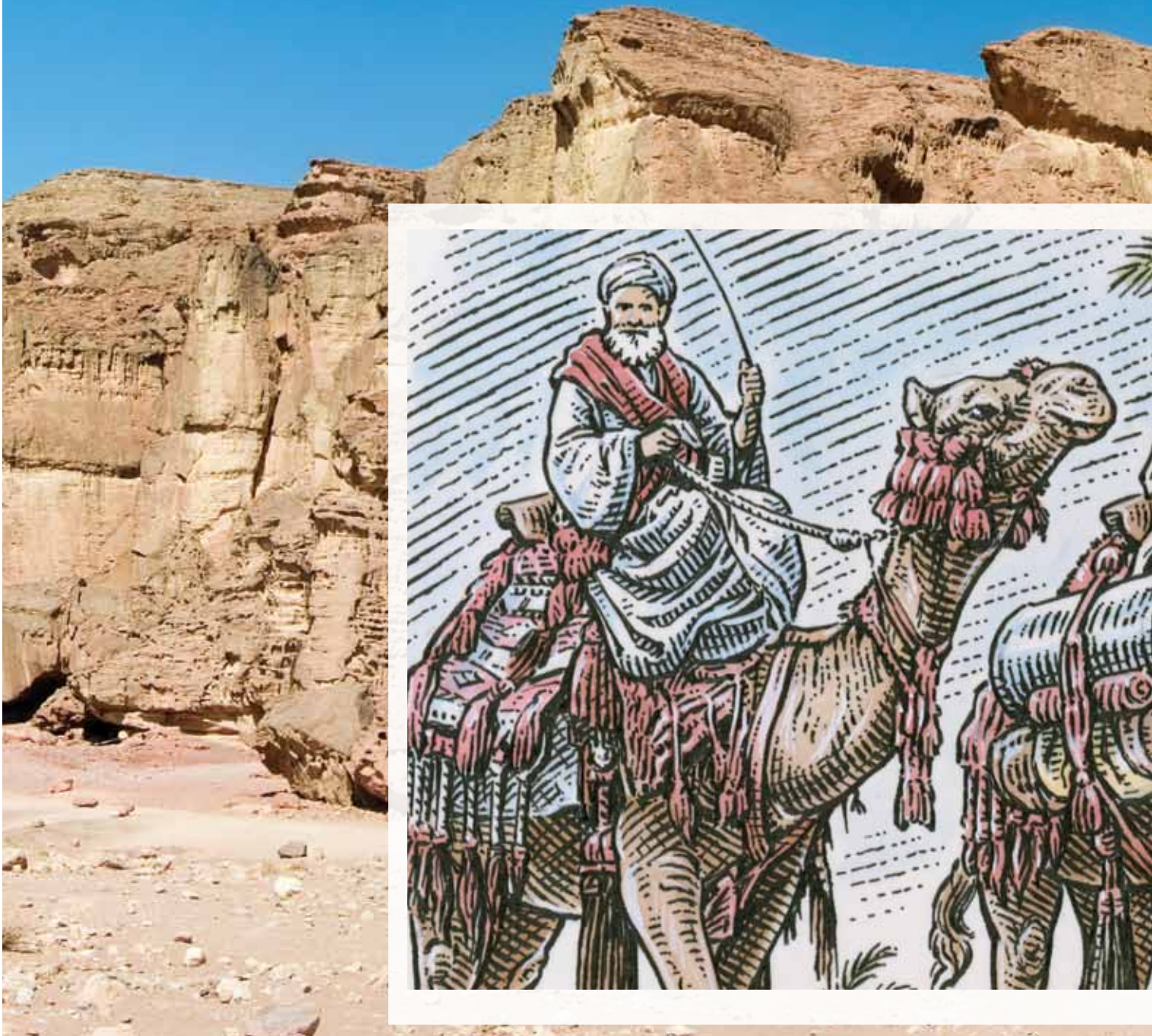
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*PS For more on how His Story gives meaning to all our stories, see our new website at [www.gci.org.au](http://www.gci.org.au). Our team has been busy improving and updating our site. Why not visit it some time soon?*




# Simeon's surprise

by John McLean





# The *greatest news* the world has ever had



**T**HE OLD MAN'S face reflected the local landscape – weathered, lined and creased. He was a good man, prayerful and devout. He lived “in prayerful expectancy of help for Israel” (Luke 2:25-32). He remembered the promises made to Abraham. He remembered God’s costly redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt. He remembered the promises made to the nation then. He remembered the exciting promises made to David. He remembered with profound longing the promises made through the prophets. He remembered the sad tragedy of captivity and exile, and the promises of the subsequent prophets for redemption and complete restoration.

But for four hundred years the prophets had been silent. Troops from the current reigning military powers had used the national territory as a regular route for their marches or their battles. As a buffer state, Israel suffered the ongoing misery, destitution and destruction from the brutal fallout of war – either indirectly from the battles between the current powers, or directly through invasion such as those by Antiochus Epiphanes and Pompey.

Some people had given up hope. Some joined resistance movements. Some tried to be more religious, more worthy of God’s blessing, believing that if everyone kept the law perfectly, Messiah would come.

As Simeon looked around him, he saw the oppression of Israel under the heel of the mighty Roman Empire. Politically and militarily his people were subjected to the rule of Rome and her appointed authorities. And while the temple dominated his nation religiously and economically, he saw the strange cooperation of the Sadducees with the occupying forces, the resistance of the Pharisees, and the various extreme versions of Messianic fervour that regularly burst forth from the depth of hope that burned brightly in the hearts of many religious people. Where was God? Why didn’t he do something?

In his mercy, God had convicted Simeon through the Spirit that he would see “the Messiah of God” – God’s anointed One – before he died. Simeon then lived daily in eager expectation of that hope. Then, one day, “led by the Spirit”, Simeon entered the Temple. He saw Mary and Joseph bringing in the child Jesus. He took the child in his arms and blessed

God: “With my own eyes I’ve seen your salvation; it’s now out in the open for everyone to see”. What a surprising moment; what an unlikely source of help for Israel – and indeed as Simeon points out, help for the whole world to see.

What an unlikely Messiah. A helpless baby. What a surprising source of salvation and hope for all mankind. Yet even so, Simeon’s expectations were about to be exceeded in spectacular ways he could never have anticipated. In the midst of the current strife, mess, confusion, discouragement and stress, in the midst of war and occupation, God focused the hope of his entire, eternal plan in his Son, Jesus. He wasn’t what was expected – even by those who knew the Scriptures best. In place of a glorious military warrior, he was presented as a dependent child. Instead of a conquering king, he came as a servant.

In Jesus Christ all the promises of the Old Covenant would find their complete and ultimate fulfilment. Jesus was the Father’s beloved Son. He called God “Abba”, Father. He was nothing less than the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe (John 1:1-4; Colossians 1:15), entering into the life of his creation. He came from



## *The traditional Christian worship calendar includes Christmas in the **Advent** season*

the inner life of God to reveal God to us – to show us who God was, what he was doing. And it wasn't what most people thought God was like!

This God was not some lonely, judgmental, angry, disapproving being. This God was not someone who was out to punish every mistake and failing. This God was a God of love. A God who in himself, in his Triune communion of Father, Son and Spirit, is and always was love. A God whose love was so great that, from the very beginning, he wanted to share his life of beauty and joy with others, to include his creation within the circle of his life and love as his beloved children (Ephesians 1:5).

In Jesus, we have "redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14). And so very much more. In Christ, we have fellowship, communion with God. We are included

anything he could have hoped or imagined when he held that tiny baby in his arms, had he known the full extent of what he was privileged to witness.

This is the amazing, astounding good news Christians celebrate at Advent season. Why get distracted with dates, commercialism, and a pseudo-celebration of "Xmas" when this is the greatest event, the greatest truth, anyone anywhere can celebrate? It's news that is so good it's hard to believe. An inner voice often tells us it's too good to be true. But the advent of Christ into our world tells us it is so. And that's something that we can't help but celebrate and share.

It's why the traditional Christian worship calendar includes Christmas in the Advent season. It's a central celebration of Christ-centred theology, of living and sharing the good news of the gospel. It's a time to focus

## *As Paul describes him to Timothy, he is quite simply "**Christ Jesus our hope**"*

in the very life of the Triune God. He came "in the flesh", to take on our nature, and in doing so unites the human and the divine in himself. And he takes our humanity back to the Father through the resurrection and ascension – redeemed, cleansed, reconciled. As Paul describes him to Timothy, he is quite simply "Christ Jesus our hope". And the gospel is that message of hope, of reconciliation and salvation, for all mankind. Simeon would have been more astonished than

on giving as the theme of our lives, as it is expressed in the other-centred, lavish outpouring of love expressed by the Father in the Son. It's a time to share afresh Simeon's joy at holding that tiny baby in his hands – amazed and surprised at who that baby was, and all that he is and has done. It's a time to join with the angels (Luke 2:13-15) singing "glory to God in the highest" for the greatest good news the world has ever heard. 🌐





## SPECIAL CARE

**"WE TAKE SPECIAL CARE  
OF OUR CLOTHES, BUT  
WE SOMETIMES FORGET  
PEOPLE NEED THE SAME  
CONSIDERATION"**

# Laundry Lesson

by Tammy Tkach

Laundry is one of those things you know you have to do, unless you can get someone else to do it for you! The clothes must be sorted—dark colours separate from the whites and lighter colors. (Some of us learn this the hard way, like I did in college: I put my new red gym clothes in with my whites and everything came out pink.) Some items have to be washed on the gentle cycle with a different detergent. And we all know what happens when you forget and put a delicate item in the dryer!

We take special care of our clothes, but we sometimes forget people need the same consideration. We don't have too much trouble with the obvious, such as illnesses, disabilities or difficult circumstances, but we can't see inside and know what people are thinking. That's when trouble comes.

It's so easy to look at someone and make judgments. The story of Samuel going out to anoint a new king from all of Jesse's many sons is a classic. Who would have thought God had David in mind? Even Samuel had to learn this lesson: "The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7, New Living Translation throughout).

We have to be careful not to make assumptions with people we've just met, and even with ones we've known a long time. We don't know what they've experienced and have no

idea how those experiences have affected them.

In Colossians 3:12-14, we are reminded of how we should treat one another: "Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony."

The New Testament has many "one another" statements, including Ephesians 4:31-32: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behaviour. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."

How we treat others is important for many reasons. As believers, we are part of the body of Christ. No one hates his or her own body, but cares for it (Ephesians 5:29). We are made in the image of God, so when we mistreat or dishonour others, we are dishonouring God. The Golden Rule isn't a cliché. We need to treat others in the same way we would like to be treated, remembering we all have our personal struggles, some apparent to others, many hidden deep inside, known only to us and God.

Next time you're sorting laundry, take a moment to think of the people in your life and the special consideration each one needs. God already does this for us, treating us as individuals deserving of his own special care. 🌍



# An unexpected lesson

by Lee Berger

**M**Y WIFE, SUE, and I recently attended a different kind of church service, and we learned an unexpected lesson from an unexpected source.

Sue and I are happily ensconced in our local GCI congregation, but we like to visit other churches whenever we can. For many months, we had been seeing plastic temporary signs placed on street corners all over our side of town. The signs said, “Church For the Rest of Us” and pointed to a website for further information. We were intrigued.

We looked over their website and found out the church is designed for people struggling with addictions: drugs, anger, bad sex, depression, eating disorders, alcohol, you name it. This is a church founded by, pastored by and mainly attended by addicts and homeless people. I guess these societal outcasts could be called “the rest of us.”

They met for services on Saturday evening, and we decided to check it out. We parked our car and began walking toward the meeting place—a somewhat rundown former movie theatre. We didn’t see any smiling, energetic parking lot attendants nor any neat-and-tidy greeters outside the doors. Instead, there was an assortment of much-tattooed, rough-looking men and women with unkempt hair and ill-fitting clothes sitting on the curb, leaning against posts and smoking cigarettes. Eyes with dark bags stared at us “normal people,” wondering why we were there. We began to wonder the same thing.

Stepping around the bodies and through the thick haze of cigarette smoke, we entered the building and were greeted by two smiling

women. We found out later one of them was the pastor’s wife. They asked our names, told us theirs, and handed us a printed bulletin for the upcoming church service. As we made our way down the hall to the sanctuary, several other people greeted us cheerfully. It wasn’t difficult to find a place to sit. It was ten minutes before services were to begin and we were the only congregants in the room. Most of the rest were still outside smoking.

On the simple stage, Levi, the worship leader/guitarist was practicing his songs. There was no multi-piece band, no choir, no backup singers, no piano, no organ—just Levi, his guitar and lyrics projected onto a screen. Simple, minimal, real. Kind of peaceful.

Then people began to come into the sanctuary. First, workers checking on the status of various aspects of preparation for church services. They all made it a point to come over to where Sue and I were sitting, in the middle of a row in the middle of the hall, introduce themselves and welcome us. As the rest of the members came in, several more went out of their way to say hello, shake our hands and share a smile. I’ve visited many “normal” churches of various denominations over the decades, and I’ve never been greeted by as many friendly people as at this church for “misfits.”

The service began. The music was meaningful, the sermon was biblical and helpful, and I knew God was present. I spent time looking around and imagining what powerful and discouraging addictions pulled at these men and women made in God’s image. It wasn’t hard to see they have gone through

some rough times in their lives. Some are in various stages of “recovery,” and some are probably still high or drunk or mired in immoral behaviour—even as they gather for church services. But there was a refreshing openness and authenticity among the group, and I can imagine Jesus would feel comfortable hanging out with them.

## “Those in need”

The people I worshipped with that night have little in the way of material goods; some live on the streets or under bridges and carry all their possessions in backpacks or sacks. I guess that’s why I was so shocked by an announcement made near the close of services. “Remember to bring your canned or boxed goods next week for the food drive. In a month, we’ll take our donated food and present it to those in the community who are in need.”

What kind of crazy talk was this? Homeless people and addicts donating food to others “in need?!” Who could have more “needs” than these people sitting in this church? Surely they should keep what little they had, not give it away to others. But they were being taught from the Bible about the heart of God, and God’s heart leads us to give and share—not always from our abundance, but even from our scarcity.

I learned an unexpected lesson that evening—a humbling and inspiring lesson—surrounded by a group of social outcasts excited to be on mission with God. What an amazing picture of the heart of God in outreach toward others! 🌍



# The mystery and miracle of Christmas

**A**T THIS TIME of the year Christians celebrate what Karl Barth has called “the mystery and miracle of Christmas” – the incarnation – the birth of Jesus as a baby. God selflessly empties himself into his own creation, not because he must, but as a free expression of his own unconditional love. He does this because he wants to share his life, the Trinitarian life of Father, Son and Spirit, with his creation. He does this because he wants to be in fellowship, in relationship, with humanity. He does it because, as Barth again says, he has determined not to live without us.

This is indeed a mystery and miracle – the single greatest miracle of all. It is the central miracle asserted by the gospels, that which all other miracles either point to or flow from. Without the incarnation, there is no resurrection of Jesus – no redemption, atonement, forgiveness – no resurrection for all humanity.

It is a miracle that remains a mystery beyond our comprehension – the Creator of all things (Colossians 1:15-19; John 1:1-3) enters time and space to become one of us. Real flesh and blood, bones and sinews. Fully human. But still retaining his divinity, his relationship with the Father in the Spirit. “I and the Father are one”, he says (John 10:30). His contemporary audience had no doubt what he meant. “... he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

In the coming of Jesus into our world as one of us, two

things that just don’t mix are mysteriously and miraculously combined – the physical and the divine, human and God. Jesus doesn’t leave his Father behind. And in Jesus a new relationship, a miraculous union, is formed between God and humanity. The Triune God is “earthed” in the birth and life of Jesus Christ.

Therefore Christ-centred, Trinitarian theology is fundamentally Incarnational. Not the incarnation as one act among many equally important acts, but as the unique, central act in atonement, salvation, sanctification, fellowship and eternal life. More, this Incarnation isn’t just about action, but about **who** is acting – the Eternal Son, who becomes the human face of God, God-with-us. **Jesus** is born, lives, dies, and is resurrected and ascends for us. But most importantly, Jesus is *born, lives, dies* and is *resurrected* and *ascends* back to the Father for us. Not just a good man, but God in the flesh.

Irenaeus said, “Our Lord Jesus Christ...through his transcendent love, [became] what we are that he might bring us to be even what he is himself”. Athanasius put it this way: “He became man that we might be made divine”. As theologian Michael Jenkins explains, he meant by this that *through Christ we share the very life of God*. He is affirming “our real participation by faith in the *character* of God (the self-giving, kenotic, love of other), which is revealed in Jesus Christ.”

This has become known as the great or wonderful or glorious exchange – that he became what we are that we might become as he is. James B. Torrance captures this cogently when he writes, “The prime purpose of the incarnation, in the love of God, is to lift us up into the life of communion, of participation in the very triune life of God”.

Jesus is not just someone who comes along to fix things for us. He is not a “divine spanner” to fix the relationship with God. He is not a divine accountant who balances the books. He doesn’t oversee a business transaction to set us right with God. We are right with God, in fellowship, in **Him**. It’s a “who” question. It’s about relationships, not rules and regulations. It’s about **fellowship**, not formulas.

It’s no accident that Athanasius, who provides the first complete list of the New Testament books we have, and who argues the case for a Trinitarian understanding of God (against Arius), also believed the celebration of Christmas was an important one for Christians. This is, after all, what it is all about – the revelation of the Father (John 14:9), his unconditional love (John 3:16-17; Philipians 2:5-8), and his eternal plan of adoption and fellowship for all mankind (Ephesians 1:5). Christmas eloquently articulates who God is, and the hope for all human beings, even in the midst of suffering and sorrow.

Christmas also stands against the incomplete

views of God that deny or minimize either his humanity (Docetism, Gnosticism in general) or his divinity (Ebionitism). Jesus comes as flesh and blood – as a dependant baby. In miracle and mystery, the Master of the Universe, who created and holds it all together, becomes one of us and takes us into himself, enabling us to participate in the life and love of the Triune God.

The Christmas festival is a celebration of the mystery of the greatest miracle of all – the birth of Jesus, in fulfilling God’s eternal plan of salvation for all humanity. It is a celebration of our fellowship and communion with God through his grace.

This is why Christmas is such an important part of the Christian liturgy. It really is the message of hope and joy for all mankind. A message which has never been needed more than it is now. ☺

**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.

### HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Our 87 congregations in Mozambique are very poor, and communication in rural areas is difficult. A basic bicycle, costing less than \$100, makes a big difference to the effectiveness of the pastors serving their people. GCI's congregation in Indianapolis is partnering with Tim Maguire to provide bicycles. They hope to eventually provide bicycles for each of the pastors serving our 87 churches in Mozambique.

**Would you or your congregation like to help our congregations in poorer nations? Contact the National Office at [info@gci.org.au](mailto:info@gci.org.au)**



**S**OMETIMES WE FORGET what a blessing it is to be able to turn on a faucet and have fresh, clean, cool water gush out. Many are not so fortunate.

I am most often reminded of this on my trips into rural areas of Southern Africa. A 25-liter container and a several-kilometer walk to the nearest muddy stream provide enough water to keep a household alive for another day.

This thought inspired a recent well-digging project in Zambezia, one of the northern provinces in Mozambique. Grace Communion International has about 80 congregations in Mozambique, all of them rural, and none of the villages where the churches are located have easy access to fresh water. Several generous congregations in Canada had offered to finance digging wells in the hope of improving the quality of life of our brothers and sisters in Mozambique.

Accompanied by two friends and trailers loaded with concrete pipes, we headed for Morrumbala, a small village north of the mighty Zambezi river where GCI Mozambique is establishing its headquarters.

We travelled for four days and slept uncomfortably alongside the road or in the front seats of the vans, but the incredible welcome we received when we finally arrived, accompanied by much singing and dancing in true African style, made it all worthwhile. We collapsed exhausted into our tents.

Early the next morning, we three intrepid first-time well diggers arose, hoping beyond hope that our project would be successful and we would be able to assist the village by providing them with easily accessible fresh water for the first time in their lives. Two sites were chosen: one in the village where Pastor Mariano Binzi

(GCI National Leader) lives, and the other on the GCI church property, which is on a crossroads. A well there, where the roads meet, would benefit many more of the local people.

Teams of diggers were assembled, the pipes unloaded, and digging began, with the local chief removing the first spade-full of earth.

Fortunately, the ground was soft and sandy and progress was rapid at first, with the diggers driven by the excitement of the project. As we dug deeper, we used buckets to haul up the soil being removed, and additional rings were positioned to protect the workers and the well from cave-in.

The diggers worked all day and well into the night, always hopeful and on the lookout for any sign of water. Early the next morning a cheer arose as the first well hit water. A few hours later we were doubly rewarded with water in the second well back in the village, just about five meters below the surface.

We departed three days after arriving, with one well completed and the second just requiring another half-meter of deepening to increase the water supply. I knew that life in the village would never be the same again.

I couldn't help but think of the analogy that Christ used: he is the source of living water, and that those who thirst should come and drink of his eternal waters and never thirst again.

The Holy Spirit, the gift that Christ offered to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, is compared to a fountain of water (John 4:10). He imparts growth and gives life. Without a relationship with God, which is made possible through Christ's sacrifice and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we remain spiritually dead and lifeless, living

# Waters of

By Tim Maguire





Standing around the completed well

in much the same state as so many in Mozambique do. They had survived from day to day, unaware that the amazing gift of water was right there with them, but they just could not see it.

Next time you turn on your faucet, think of those who are less fortunate than you and who don't enjoy free access to an endless stream of living water! You will probably never have the chance to dig a well for somebody who needs life-giving water, but there are many who thirst spiritually and don't realize that Christ is near and they need never thirst. Why don't you offer to show them the well of life, where they can drink freely and never thirst again? 🌍



Digging out the circle



Down in the well



Stopped on the side of the road

# life



# Combating Atheism

by Joseph Tkach

**I**N THE LAST few years, we have seen the rising influence of writers and scientists who vigorously preach atheism. They not only express their personal doubts about God's existence, but they campaign with almost evangelical fervour against the very idea of God and religion.

These atheists are highly educated and their arguments are not easily dismissed by most people, even though their arguments have long ago been defeated. It is difficult to logically refute arguments that are unfamiliar to you. Many Christians see this move towards atheism as a threat. We who believe in God feel we must somehow win this argument and prove that God does exist, otherwise the atheists will have won the argument.

But no, they haven't. You see, although I have absolutely no doubt about God's existence, I have also learned that it is impossible to prove it to someone who is determined not to believe. There is ample evidence in the world and the whole cosmos to show the existence of a Creator. As the Psalms say, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1). And Paul wrote to the church at Rome, "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1:20).

These scriptures are often used to prove God's existence, but that is not what they are saying. The wonders of creation provide impressive evidence for those who believe, but they do not give knock-down proof for those who do not. A determined atheist can always find a hole in an argument or a loose brick in the proof. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest thinkers of church history, put it well when he wrote, "To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible."

## Problem

The problem is that you cannot prove God's existence from within natural-

ism—the philosophy held by those who assume that only nature exists. There is no amount of evidence that can be taken from nature and used as proof for the God of the Bible. This is because God is not physically a part of nature; he is transcendent of its origin. You can only "prove" one aspect of nature on the basis of some other aspect of nature. So by studying nature, one can only yield further knowl-

not possible to prove God exists through naturalism, you cannot prove God does not exist through naturalism. The study of nature can only negate claims about nature.

## Atheist or agnostic?

For this reason, many atheists eventually admit that they are actually agnostic. Even Richard Dawkins, in his recent public



edge of nature. But, as the theologians of the early church put it, "Only God knows God, and only God reveals God." At best, nature can give us indirect evidences that confirm the existence of God, but the ultimate reason Christians have faith in God is Jesus Christ himself. Jesus is the Reason, or as the Gospel of John puts it, The Logos.

But, just because we cannot give clear material proof that God exists, it does not mean the atheist has won the argument. We don't need to be on the defensive. What we need is to turn the argument around. It is not our job to prove God exists—it is the atheist's task to prove he does not.

Atheists may cite some scientific discovery, the weakness of religious arguments or the hypocrisy of some religious behaviour to support their case. This should not divert attention away from the central fact they have to prove. They must still prove that God does not exist. And just as it is

conversation with the Archbishop Rowan Williams, acknowledged that he could not say with 100% certainty that God does not exist—he stops short at 99%. If they are honest, atheists cannot dismiss the evidence that the physical, materialistic world is not all there is. They may not come to the point where they accept and surrender their lives to their Creator, but they are no longer sure he does not exist. They simply don't know! They are agnostic, or "without knowledge."

Never forget that the strongest proof of God's existence is first, Jesus Christ and, second, the example of those who have surrendered to God and live their lives in partnership with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Let us do that and let God take care of the atheists in his own good time. He will—because he loves them too. ☺

*Speaking of Life is a regular feature of the GCI website. Watch it on <http://www.gci.org/media/speaking-life>*





# A sign forever

By Gary Deddo

*Signs are important. We could hardly get along without them. We have signs for road safety, for identifying stores, indicating dangers like poison, radiation or high voltage wires, for finding geographic destinations, or merely navigating our way through an airport or sports stadium.*

**S**IGNS WERE ALSO important in the ancient world, including the ancient nation of Israel. The God of Israel gave signs to his people and used them for their benefit. One of the most notable was, of course, the rainbow after Noah's flood. Another was the Sabbath rest on the seventh day of the week. This sign was given to Israel "forever" (Exodus 31:17).

Some have thought the particular sign of the Sabbath rest given to Israel was so important that we are today under the same obligation. After all, some argue, it was given "forever." So why shouldn't this Old Covenant instruction hold for today?

The important thing to recognize here is that what is eternal is called a "sign." Christian pastors and teachers down through history have given great consideration to signs, as we find them referred to in both the Old and New Testaments. It is widely recognized and important to understand that the purpose of a sign is to point to something else, something greater than itself. For example, when no cat is in sight, the word "cat" spoken or written refers our minds to a particular kind of animal. We think of it, even though it's not there in front of us. Much of our ordinary language involves the use of signs to point to something that exists but might not be currently available for viewing. It could be said that signs point to what they signify, to the things themselves.

We find in the Bible that the signs God first gave to Israel all pointed to something greater to come, often to God's invisible character or to his future actions. So the word of the Lord comes to Israel: "I will be

your God and you shall be my people." "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt."

Many theologians down through the ages have recognized a pattern. The signs God gives are often promises. And what is promised is the thing signified. Israel was given the promise of a land. The promise wasn't the land, but it pointed forward to and anticipated its fulfillment, when Israel would enter the Promised Land. The sign was the promise; entering the land was the fulfillment. Furthermore Christian teachers have recognized again and again that the signs given in the Old Testament (or under the Old Covenant) were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus himself was the fulfillment of the sign of the promised Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise of deliverance, of salvation.

Now how does this apply to the eternal sign of the Sabbath? Jesus himself helps us answer. Some of the religious teachers of Judaism in his day accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath. How did Jesus reply? Does he say to them, "Well, you have your interpretation of this sign, and I have mine. The people will have to choose between our two interpretations as best they can." No, that is not what he said. Rather, he



*Perhaps this is why, when asked, Jesus sometimes refused to give another sign. He told them they already had plenty of signs*

signs pointing the way, Chicago should be like a huge flat panel, perhaps with huge, fancy letters, and lights illuminating them, spelling out in glorious brilliance the name “CHICAGO.” If that was what he was looking for, how would you answer? Might you be just a little exasperated?

If you actually produced something like he expected, pointing in some direction, would it be of any use? In fact, if he followed the direction of the arrow on even an impressive and imposing sign you produced for him, where would it take him? Toward Chicago? No. When you have arrived at the city center, an arrow pointing in any direction would lead you away from and eventually out of the city. That sign would actually be misleading! But those other signs still standing outside the city would be of useful service once again. They remain permanently helpful to those who have not yet arrived at City Hall. But they have relatively little meaning once you’ve reached your destination.

The theological signs of the Bible, whether to ancient Israel or those recorded in the New Testament regarding Jesus and the early church, function much like this. The signs pointed to the reality, where the promises God made were fulfilled in person. Those signs stand as permanent, even eternal, pointers to the reality. But once you’ve followed their lead and have met the reality—Jesus himself—they have fulfilled their purpose and are no longer needed. They are superseded by the reality. You could never confuse the sign with the far greater reality of what they pointed to.

Perhaps this is why, when asked, Jesus sometimes refused to give another sign. He told them they already had plenty of signs. No sign will help them recognize the reality when it’s standing there in front of them face to face.

So when we read that God has given us certain signs forever, this is true. They eternally point to the promised reality. But when you’ve met the Lord of All Signs, all others, having done their work, can now only have relative value—value relative to the Reality of their Lord. ☉

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pointed out that he is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28; Matthew 12:8; Luke 6:5). He created the Sabbath. He was there to show them what the Sabbath was really all about. He is the source of our Sabbath rest. In fact, it turns out that Jesus himself fulfills the promise of Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:1-11). He is our Sabbath rest as we are joined to our Eternal Great High Priest. The sign of the Sabbath pointed to its fulfillment in Jesus. He is the “thing” signified.

The entire Gospel of John is dedicated to help us see the radical difference between the signs God gave and the reality they point to, namely Jesus himself. John the Baptist is the sign, not the promised one himself. So he must “decrease” and Jesus must “increase” in significance. Jesus does not just tell us the truth, show us the way or give us life. Rather he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the light of the world, he is the bread of life, he is the water of life, he is the resurrection. He is “I am.” All the signs given by God were meant to lead us to the Son of God incarnate. He is, in his own person, the fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus is both the Giver and the Gift.

We have already mentioned that the purpose of a sign in the working of God is to point us to the reality. Think of road signs pointing out the direction to a big city—say Chicago. Some of them are far away and pointing southward. Some are closer and pointing eastward. There’s no limit to the

number and position of signs directing you. But if accurate and clear, each one gives direction for locating the city of Chicago. No one confuses the signs with the reality, the city itself. But that does not make them of no importance. If you’ve never been to Chicago and don’t know the way, accurate signs are helpful—for finding the destination, not loitering around the signposts.

Now think what happens when you reach the actual city, and perhaps even “city center.” You’re glad for the signs and that they were accurate enough to get you to the city. But once you’re there, say at Millennium Park in Chicago, they are no longer important. The city itself, with its skyscrapers, parks, museums and lakefront, far exceeds anything those signs could possibly indicate about its true grandeur. And consider, of what further use are those signs? Not much, if any at all. Their job was to get you to the city. Once there, they have no further use—even though you remain grateful for them.

Now imagine someone standing smack-dab in city center and demanding that you show him a sign that pointed the way to Chicago. If he didn’t recognize that he was already in the city, would the sign help? Or suppose he protested that he could not possibly be in Chicago, since he saw no signs on the way that were anything like what surrounded him now. Thinking the city would be much the same as the



# Remembering God

by Barbara Dahlgren



There are many positive things about aging. Unfortunately I can't remember what they are. That's my problem. I can't remember much of anything. And what I do remember can be inaccurately influenced by time, bias and suggestion. I am not alone.

Police officers experience this all the time. When eyewitnesses are questioned about whom they saw do the robbery, the descriptions indicate the crime was committed by a short, tall, black, Caucasian with short, long, brown, blond hair wearing blue sweatpants or a brown suit.

**"SADLY, I KNOW I FORGET MANY OF THE WONDERFUL THINGS GOD HAS DONE FOR ME. FORTUNATELY MY SALVATION IS NOT TIED TO MY FAULTY MEMORY. GOD REMEMBERS ME EVEN WHEN I FORGET HIM."**

— ISAIAH 49:15-16

Most of us do not intend to shade the truth, but it happens sometimes. For example, if we tell an embellished story long enough, we may actually think it is true. If we are having difficulty with people, our minds magnify their imperfections. We even believe our fantasized ideas about how much better things were in years gone by.

Such was the case when the Israelites came out of Egypt. They

groaned for deliverance for years because of their unbearable hardships (Exodus 1:8-22, 2:23, 5:7). Then, when God delivered them, they grumbled about how much better off they had been in Egypt.

When they didn't like how God provided for them, they'd recall their distorted view of the good old days. "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt" (Numbers 11:5 Easy to Read Version) and "It would have been better if the Lord had just killed us there! At least there we had plenty to eat" (Exodus 16:3). Yes, they may have had fish, but they also had oppressive slavery under cruel taskmasters. They were oppressed to the point that even their baby boys were killed at birth.

Later God would tell them to remember when they were slaves in Egypt. Remember that God delivered them to freedom (Deuteronomy 5:15). Remember what God did to Pharaoh and to Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:18). Remember how God led them through the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:2).

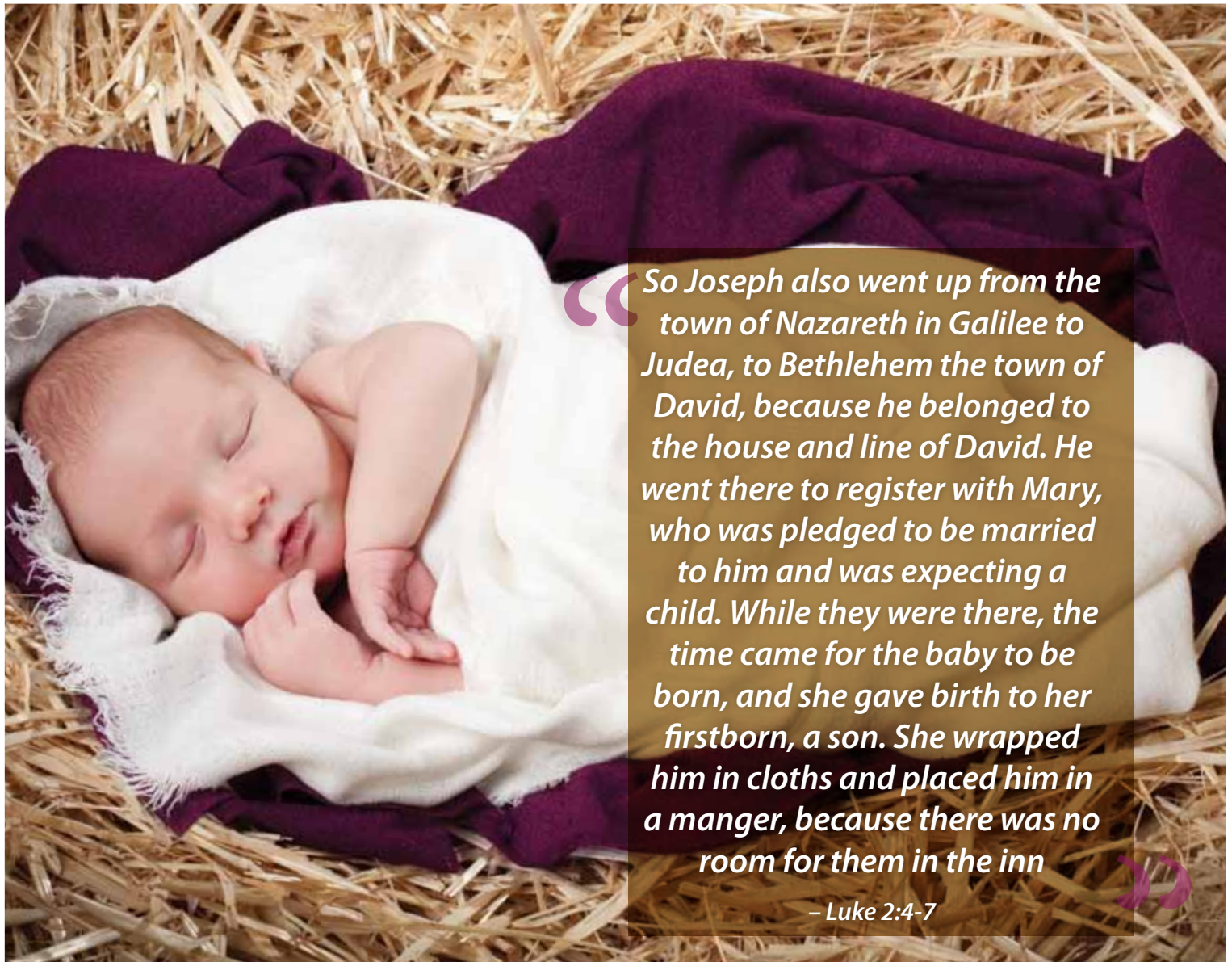
This was more than exhorting them just to remember these things; it was telling them to remember accurately. "Be very careful never to forget what you yourself have seen. Do not let these memories escape from your mind as long as you live!" (Deuteronomy 4:9 New Living Translation)

Human memory is flawed. Life, even the Christian life, is not easy. When times get rough we might imagine it was better before God revealed himself to us. Not true. We forget how lonely, depressed, angry, hopeless or void of purpose we felt without God. We forget all God has done for us.

When my father had Alzheimer's disease, sometimes he couldn't remember much. When coherent he'd say, "I know you are my daughter, but I can't remember your name." Miraculously, however, he remembered God! He found comfort praying, reading the Bible and singing old gospel songs. We'd sing those songs together and he'd look at me and say, "You know, everything that song says is true. God is good!"

Sadly, I know I forget many of the wonderful things God has done for me. Fortunately my salvation is not tied to my faulty memory. God remembers me even when I forget him (Isaiah 49:15-16). But I want to remember. So I continually ask, "God, please help me remember your love, mercy, kindness and faithfulness to me and my loved ones, plus all those little prayers you answered immediately and the ones where you wisely did not give me what I wanted because you had a better plan."

God remembers me—and I want to remember God. ☉



“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn

– Luke 2:4-7

Hmmm ...

*There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the shadow of the valley of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires.*

– Nelson Mandela

*If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven't spent a night with a mosquito.*

– African Proverb

*If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.*

– John F. Kennedy

*Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.*

– Winston Churchill

*The pursuit of truth and beauty is a sphere of activity in which we are permitted to remain children all our lives.*

– Albert Einstein

*When we believe that God is Father, we also believe that such a father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear. We may not understand life any better, but we will not resent life any longer.*

– William Barclay

*If there is one stitch in the celestial garment of our righteousness that we must insert ourselves, we are lost; but this is our confidence—what the Lord begins, He completes... Our confidence must not be in what we have done, nor in what we have resolved to do, but entirely in what the Lord will do.*

– Charles Spurgeon